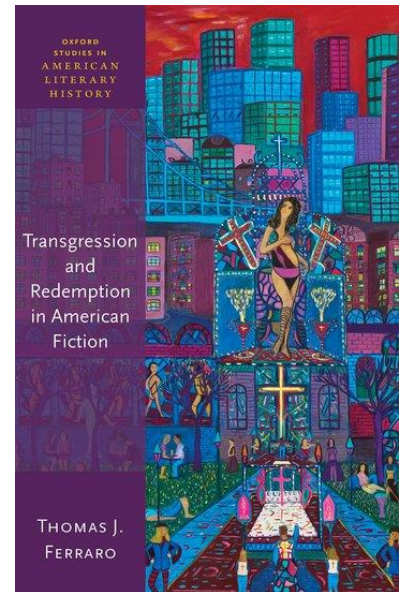


Thomas J. Ferraro

Transgression and Redemption in American Fiction

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Review by Chiara Patrizi



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There are academic books that spur readers to think about and look at literary works from an ‘ex-centric’ standpoint with regards to the established theoretical framework that surrounds them. These are also the books that compel us to go back to those novels, poems, stories as slow readers, searching for clues and tunes we might have not considered previously. Surely, that should be the aim of all scholarly efforts, and yet it does not happen so often to encounter a study that prompts us to examine literature with a truly different set of eyes. Were we missing something? What? Where? Did we eventually agree with the author’s thesis? Regardless, to confront oneself with such studies provides the motive and provocation that are necessary to push academic research forward. Indeed, if we are with them, there we find a new path just opened and to be further explored; if we are not, we feel impelled to go back to the literary texts again to search for the evidence that can sustain our disagreement.

Thomas J. Ferraro’s *Transgression and Redemption in American Fiction* (2020) is one of those books, and its flamboyant and beautifully crafted cover immediately alerts readers to its unorthodox and thought-provoking content, leading them to a journey across modern US fiction as seen through the lens of Marian Catholicism. Ferraro joins those scholars of Catholic Studies who in the last decades have sought to explore Catholic matters in US literature and culture—from Paul Giles’s *American Catholic Arts and Fictions* (1990) and John Gatta’s *American Madonna* (1997) to Robert A. Orsi’s *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (2004) and Una M. Cadegan’s *All Good Books Are Catholic Books* (2013). His contribution to that critical discourse, and to American Studies at

large, is a volume that discloses the implications of Mediterranean Marian Catholicism in Protestant America by exploring the interplay of sex, violence, and sanctity in its fiction. Ferraro's prose is elegant and engaging, elaborate and colloquial at the same time; it captivates the readers' interest from the very first pages thanks to the author's effortless ability to move through and dialogue with a large and diversified body of scholarly criticism.

The volume focuses on the investigation of classic authors and works, as well as lesser known texts, tracing a pathway through the "radiant womanhood" (83) that, in these texts, emanates from "sexually self-determining [...] unfaithful if not promiscuous" (6) women and illuminates men, too. The latter are "caught in those self-same magical circles of female wantonness, or caught up with the alternative, alternatively dangerous glamour of other men" (6) and their "violent intimacies," in turn, enchant women.

Perhaps eerily but certainly not surprisingly for a study that examines modern US fictions as "melodramas of beset sexuality" and "martyr tales of forbidden love" (13), and in which Catholicism serves to understand the implications of the interaction between transgression and redemption within the Protestantism not only of US literature but of American Studies, Ferraro's enquiry starts from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). He argues that the protagonist of the novel—possibly the US classic most representative of the Protestant understanding of those same, apparently contrasting, themes of sin and grace—embodies the quintessential Marian Venus in a Protestant world. And embodiment is a key term in the volume's economy, for it marks a fundamental caesura between the symbolic Protestant mind and the analogical Catholic one.

Ferraro's declared aim is "to prepare the way for bearing witness, in honor and in fear, to the Catholic dreamwork of the modern American Protestant canon, in so far as we most often now conceive it" (2), a commitment he undertakes, with regard to methods and motives, "[u]nder Emerson's Eye" (2) and as a self-professed scholar of Lawrence, W.C. Williams, as well as of Sedgwick and Paglia and, of course, Fiedler. As the title of the volume suggests, and as Ferraro explains, it is indeed Fiedler's work (*Love and Death in the American Novel* [1960]), that has sparked questions that were fundamental to the development of the project. In fact, Fiedler

classified *The Scarlet Letter* as the one adultery novel of classic American literature (mostly white, male, and formally experimental) during its heyday, the long middle of the nineteenth century; and a most peculiar one at that, not only because the adultery has already happened and, in retrospect, given Dimmesdale's affect and temperament, remains somewhat hard to believe, but also for reasons that Fiedler peculiarly underplayed, leaving us to do the reconstructions. I began to think that by the early twentieth century *The Scarlet Letter* had morphed from the exception that proved the rule to the master composition that inspired all manner of subsequent themes and variations: the prototypical narrative of self-making as a

direct function not only of the familiar parameters—race, class, and gender—but also, and at least as much as, of sex, violence, and faith. (5)

Following this critical intuition, Ferraro tracks down Hester's Pagan-Catholic daughters (48; 188) and, especially, Hawthorne's legacy of a mythopoetics of redemptive radiance in/through/of transgression, of "violative love and chivalric self-sacrifice" (155) in modern American fiction. The second foundational spark of this volume is attributed to Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), a novel that Ferraro presents as *The Scarlet Letter's* inventive rewriting, as well as a writers' favorite, but which, somehow unexpectedly, ended up almost forgotten (Willa Cather, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, just to name a few, all considered it among the best American novels ever written). The chapter dedicated to Frederic focuses on the novel's trinity of Catholic characters—with the female protagonist, Celia Madden, leading the trio—hinging on the way they represent the Pagan-Catholic 'interferences' in Protestant America.

Having thus established the premises and the antecedents regarding the 'hidden-in-plain-sight' presence and influence of Catholicism on US fiction and criticism, the other chapters focus on the close reading of five major novels and a selection of shorter works dated between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Starting from Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) as a story of beset *female* sexuality (70), Ferraro then moves to examine Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) as a Marian-Catholic *fabula* for grown-ups (95). The other chapters explore the development of a sexual persona in Willa Cather's "Coming, Aphrodite!" (1920) and the hidden signs of the transfigurative force of incommensurable love in Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), as well as presenting Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) as a much unexpected location for the interplay between sacred and secular within modern literature. Finally, the last but absolutely not least novel analyzed is Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), in which Brett is introduced as the ultimate Marian-Venus persona.

The chapters dedicated to *The Awakening* and *The Sun Also Rises* are particularly innovative and enlightening, not only with regards to Ferraro's specific aim and to Catholic studies, but also for what concerns the canonical criticism on the two novels, to which *Transgression and Redemption in American Fiction* contributes with a countercurrent framework that advances a new perspective to read and study them.

Ferraro interprets *The Awakening* as a story in which liberation from gender oppression occurs and is pursued through sex, art, and religion—namely, the Pagan-Catholicism of Creole New Orleans, in which the bodily incarnation of the divine is made possible precisely through the

sexual. Though Ferraro is certainly not the first nor the only one to argue that Chopin's novel is more than 'just' a story of self-determination and anti-Victorian protest, he may be the first to detect a Pagan-Catholic imagination at work there. The indications of such presence he locates in the novel are many, the last and more explicit being the famous ending (Chopin 1899, 654). In it, it becomes apparent that Edna Pontellier is not only a worshipper of the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite, but, as Sandra M. Gilbert also pointed out, that "in a sense [she] 'becomes' the powerful goddess of love and art into whose shape she was first 'born' in the Gulf near Grand Isle and in whose image she will be borne back into the sea at the novel's end" (1984, 20)—an image that, we must remember, has little to do with Protestant intrinsic obsession with symbols and much to do with Catholic analogical perception.

Similarly, when looking at *The Sun Also Rises* through Marian Catholicism and its Pagan origins, the novel is turned upside down with regards to the traditional criticism on Hemingway—and perhaps even to Hemingway's own understanding of his work (187). As "a devotee of America's radiant figurae" (187), in fact, Ferraro's reading of *The Sun Also Rises* allows the redeeming value that he sees *in* Brett, in the love *of* Brett, and in love *for* Brett (187) to come to light, through an analysis that has in the identification with and celebration of the female protagonist its starting points—and in which Jake's take on Brett is instrumental since, according to Ferraro, it is him, "not the critics, who gets Brett right" (188). The three-way—bad pun intended—redemptive value originated by Brett's persona makes her "the grandest of Hester's daughters" (188), in a novel in which sex, violence, and sanctity are truly inextricably tied to one another to conjure a transfigurative narrative that is both a melodrama of beset sexuality and a martyr tale of forbidden love at its highest. As Ferraro explains,

In Fiedler's broadest terms of love and death, Hemingway takes us full circle, then, enacting a Provençale-ization of the American imagination so thoroughly that incommensurable violative love is proven incarnate in embodied passion but cannot, in this fabulous version, be domesticated—by woman's dictate as much as by man's fate, which is what affords female promiscuity to abound. (189)

Thus, in Ferraro's interpretation of the novel, the full potential of female sexual radiance is unleashed through Brett, who is therefore cast as a Goddess-Woman, as transcendent and divine as she is carnal and ultimately all-too-human. *The Sun Also Rises* appears then to summon all the works previously examined by Ferraro in a climax of beauty, spirituality, and pain that culminates in the most transgressive and at the same time redemptive tale of passion—in the double meaning of ardent affection and religious suffering.

What Hawthorne and Frederic had been only shrinkingly hinting at, the fact that “sexuality can be both transgressive and redemptive” (61), eventually finds its most complete expression in *The Sun Also Rises* through Brett’s character. After all, writing again in Fiedler’s shadow, Ferraro reminds us that, at the end of his investigation, albeit paradoxically, “the only ‘happily ever after’ hetero-coupling we get is the final one, between Jake and Brett, whose dance-passion of impassioned togetherness is based in Jake’s wound and Brett’s promiscuity, the sine-qua-non of once-and-future betrayal-and-reconciliation” (216). And yet, the “Coda” of the volume suggests a partial plot-twist: after having enthralled its readers to follow him in his search for the specter of Pagan-Catholicism in US modern literature, Ferraro announces to be “itching to return to the movies and pop music—which might be where, as I have long suspected, the Marian-Catholicizing of America really happens” (216). The truth is actually more blurred and ‘impure’ than it may seem, since to Ferraro literature and popular music in the US are mutually necessary to each other, as well as to American mythopoetics, as two syncretically interweaved elements of the same cultural imagination, just like transgression and redemption.

Indeed, from the very beginning and more explicitly in the “Coda,” the volume is strongly interdisciplinary in its scope and references. The huge amount of criticism mobilized might appear overwhelming at first, but Ferraro’s sustained and thorough close reading balances and ultimately minimizes such risk. The tight dialogue with the primary texts provides readers with a literary landscape to be carefully explored while following the author’s argument. This structure allows *Transgression and Redemption* to reason and speculate, together with its audience, while it unveils how and where these fictions are revelatory of a Marian-Catholic influenced mythopoetics of US literature that is never subdued to theory, but precedes and shapes it. The contribution of this volume to literary criticism exceeds the relatively small and emerging field of Catholic Studies and is particularly valuable for the way it summons religion, gender, ethnicity, and transnational perspectives in a way that subverts established cultural mindsets surrounding American Studies. In this regard, *Transgression and Redemption in American Fiction* not only “puts a little sugar in the bowl” of the novels it dissects, but also of American (Protestant) Studies at large, troubling the water of the dominant theoretical frameworks to allow novel and stimulating conversations to emerge.

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