

WILLIAM STYRON'S *SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE*:
A FULCRUM AND FORCES

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When discussing American fiction since World War II, it is usual to note works which illustrate disillusion, rebellion, anti-heroes, isolation, the decline of community, the grotesque and abnormal, the failure of fiction in the face of fact, the subversion of history, existentialism, black humor, vivified violence and sex, the validity of myth and God, the uselessness of myth and God and man, apocalyptic moments, and the superiority of style over meaning (Bradbury, Hassan, Karl, Klein). The list is not exhaustive. Criticism has followed, and sometimes even created, a similar progress, although currently it has reached a stage in which it seems to invent itself and be an independent art. William Styron published his third major work, *Set This House on Fire*, in 1960; and attention to the novel was immediate and wide ranging. The variety and volume of responses sprang from both an expanding set of critical approaches that were themselves in search of a main direction and a performance by Styron that implied a direction but equally invited expanding approaches. Criticism and the novel were both in search of the new novel. Styron's work is therefore here described in terms of a fulcrum and forces to indicate that an investigation of even the selected elements here considered will verify that the novel encompasses much that was past, current, and still coming in the style and meaning of fiction.

In the matter of plot, *Set This House on Fire* is rather straight-forward. In the early 1950s, a young American lawyer named Peter Leverett, upon quitting his position in a U.S. »government relief agency« (20) in Rome, accepts an invitation to the town of Sambuco to visit an acquaintance, Mason Flagg. Spoiled, wealthy, overtly sexual, suspected of incest with his mother, and trailing an ex-wife and a string of mistresses, Flagg is essentially friendless. He is in Sambuco »for 'a long spell of writing'« (21) and during his residence has gained nearly complete mental and physical dominance over another American named Cass Kinsolving. An aspiring painter whose hopes outstrip in abilities, Kinsolving with his wife and children has been living in Europe in an attempt to gain inspiration lacking in America. He has gravitated to Sambuco as part of a downward slide of his hopes and his ability to control his drinking. Kinsolving's one remaining joy centers on his restrained love for the Italian peasant girl Francesca Ricci from the town of Tramonti and a desire to preserve the life of Francesca's disease ridden father. On his first night in Sambuco, amid these people and a film making entourage which has arrived, Peter Leverett finds himself enveloped in chaos. In little more than

twentyfour hours Flagg rapes Francesca, Francesca is again raped and then murdered by a local idiot, Kinsolving believes Flagg has killed the girl and therefore he murders Flagg, and finally Kinsolving's local policeman friend Luigi allows him to go free by manipulating the official explanation that Flagg assaulted and killed Francesca and then committed suicide.

To deliver this plot and the possible meaning of such action, Styron employs Peter Leverett as first person narrator. Leverett retells the events in a manner which details how his vague and uneasy feelings about Sambuco led him to seek out Cass Kinsolving in order to understand just what had happened. Together, punctuated by long flashbacks from each, the two men discuss and clarify for each other what the story is that Leverett finally begins to tell as the book opens. From very near the beginning, Leverett thus states the events in Sambuco were »a murder and rape which ended, too, in death, along with a series of other incidents not so violent yet grim and distressing« (4). Furthermore, midway through the book, Leverett and the reader know from Kinsolving's own lips that he has murdered Flagg; yet why and how he has done so and who did kill Francesca are not revealed until the tale is nearly ended. In his interesting chapter »Narrative Structure in Styron's Novels,« John Kenny Crane charts four, ever deepening levels of flashbacks and links Styron's technique to Bergsonian concepts of time and memory (128—64). These many flashbacks, even parts thereof, are also recongized as prime examples of the poetic power of Styron's prose to delineate scene and action but as well are blamed for the failure of the novel as a whole to hold reader interest, fulfill characterization, or effect a satisfactory denouement. Even many with praise for the novel suggest the detail and number of the flashbacks make the book far too long. Few readers or critics fail to note the similarity of Leverett's narrative role to that of Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*; or Styron's Faulknerian overtones; or, via the author's interest in French literature, links to Proust, Flaubert, and others (Crane 103). Considering Styron in the context of 1950s fiction, David L. Stevenson classifies *Set This House on Fire* a blunted novel: »for all the . . . brilliantly sketched detail . . . the book is . . . curiously organized as a series of teasing and tentative minor revelations, a series of slow steps around, rather than toward, the central revelation of the action . . . the basic defect . . . is that its materials are everywhere 'unnovelized'« (268—69). Such judgements of course reflect a 1960s desire for the past habits of the novel and were supported by Styron's Fitzgerald-Faulkner links and the fact that the author's origin allowed him candidacy in a proposed new generation of »Southern« writers whose technique — the Gothic and the grotesque — was nevertheless barely beginning to be understood. Indeed, as Stevenson also points out, new authors after World War II had not at first faced criticism »truly conscious of a peculiarly unstable world of event and disintegrating value with which the contemporary writer must cope« (272).

Those critics inclined to meet new authors found in Styron's novel more than enough to juggle. In a 1960 issue of the journal *Critique* containing several articles devoted to Styron, Richard Foster calls Styron's work »an orgy of commercialism« designed to mesh perfectly with the plots, stars, and »self-excitation« of contemporary Hollywood films (59). »There is nothing good about [the novel]. Nothing true,« Foster states. »But it has immense interest . . . as a symptom and a symbol . . . In this age of the pre-fabbed or artificially inflated literary reputation we must . . . throw . . . Mr. Styron back

into the hopper» (67—70). Typical of critics more favorably inclined to the novel was Charles Fenton, whose article »William Styron and the Age of the Slob« places Styron's work in the forefront of accurate portraits of the American 1950s. Another positive view more devoted to stylistic matters came from Marc L. Ratner, who singles out Styron's »combination of satire and the tale of horror« which thus makes the novel »a Gothic tale in which the grotesque is used for moral and satiric effect« (70—71). Furthermore, Melvin J. Friedman, discussing Styron's numerous references to literature, music, and myth, joins the detective story aspect of Leverett's narrative and the numerous references to Oedipus in the novel to form links with the French *nouveau roman* and works by Robbe-Grillet, Claud Simon, and others. He especially concentrates on parallels between Styron's novel and the »Oedipus-detective metaphor« of Michel Butor's earlier *Passing Time* [*L'Emploi du temps*] and Butor's preface to the French translation of *Set This House on Fire* [*La Proie des flammes*] (18—36). There, Butor describes the novel as »an allegory of the American condition« (Ratner 88—89), a concept echoed in several tones by other critics. Indeed, »the American condition« as Styron depicts it, and the sometimes vicious attacks on the United States his characters pronounce but do not always hold to, brought both direct and oblique suggestions that Styron's work was anti-American (Crane 112—14). Confusing the issue is Styron's naming of characters. Does he mean readers to breeze by or in a Jamesian manner ponder the man Kin-solving (Crane 141), whose first name may have derived from Sinclair Lewis' marital study *Cass Timberlane*. What then of Mason Flagg? Is his name derived from the verb, or does it deliver him as the ugly American? And what of Peter Leverett, and other characters?

Whether for, against, or confused by the novel, commentators usually center their discussion on the core character Cass Kinsolving. Neither well educated nor especially talented, declared uncured by his Navy psychiatrist and in 1945 turned back to society with a copy of Sophocles in hand, it is Kinsolving who creates the conflicts, performs the acts, and forces whatever resolution there is in Peter Leverett's story. Employing a comment from the character himself — »a man just like me, maybe, who had dreamed wild Manichean dreams« (275), John Kenny Crane finds Kinsolving representative of the dualism in man that creates »beauty on the one hand« and »the filthiest evil on the other« (101). Several critics also note Kierkegaardian thought behind Styron's rendering, and indeed the author has loaded down Kinsolving with a large burden of possible reference points. David Galloway states that Kinsolving's continual if hazy quoting from *Oedipus at Colonus* indicates Styron made his character a modern Oedipus who in Camus' terms is thus »an example of absurd man« (104). Galloway points out »the most significant reason for the failure of modern authors to create tragedy in its classical fullness is simply that tragedy demands . . . a belief in a moral order superior to the individual« (99). Styron had drawn his title from a sermon by John Donne (»To the Earle of Carlile . . .«) which speaks of the horror of being separated from God; and Kinsolving's fevers and visions of the duality of good and evil — what he says »started on the day I was born« but »ended with Mason« Flagg (249) — certainly indicate the kind of moral order and torture of soul Donne subscribed to. Moreover, at one point Kinsolving tells Leverett that when Flagg raped Francesca he felt Flagg had also raped him: »At that very moment when through Francesca I had conceived of life as

having some vestage of meaning, he tore that meaning limb from limb» (444). So Kinsolving breaks Flagg's hold by killing him and in doing so begins a new life. Here, in both verbal and physical configuration Styron has made a most modern, ironic, and nearly shocking parallel to an additional Donne metaphor, in *Holy Sonnets* XIV, where the poet implores God:

Yet dearly' I love you, 'and would be loved faine,
But am bethroth'd unto your enemy:
Divorce mee, 'untie, or breake that knot againe,
Take me to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.

But that Donne's God — »a moral order superior to the individual« — is not what Kinsolving achieved is made very clear by Styron. »I wish,« Kinsolving tells Leverett concerning Flagg's death, »I could tell you I had found some relief, some rock, and that here on this rock anything might prevail — that here madness might become reason, and grief joy, and no yes. And even death itself death no longer, but a resurrection« (500). Rather, Kinsolving declares that between being and nothingness, he has chosen being »in the hope of being what I could for a time« (501).

Whether, and in what sense, Kinsolving is redeemed becomes then a major question for critics. Some aver that »being« commits Kinsolving to the horror of the modern world and his responsibility in it, and they believe that after Sambuco his quiet residence in South Carolina where Leverett finds him is an escape from such obligation. Others, tending to the traditional »fortunate fall« concept of Hawthorne and Melville, believe Kinsolving's acts have made him appreciate life and therefore try to live it (Crane 106—09). On both sides of the debate weighs the Italian policeman Luigi who is credited for both letting Kinsolving go free and enlightening him. Ready to be punished, Kinsolving must be told »'In jail you would wallow in your guilt.... For the love of God... Consider joy... Consider the *good* in yourself! Consider hope!« (497—99). Thus Kinsolving goes unpunished by law but is only free to live his life with knowledge of his crime. Certainly Luigi lies for his friend, and were Kinsolving to confess he would compound his crime by destroying Luigi. But what most critics pass by is that Luigi exhorts Kinsolving to something he already knows. He has discovered, in the Conradian sense, how to live immediately upon killing Flagg and well before Luigi acts in the event. Shortly after murdering Flagg, Kinsolving drunkenly returns to his apartment and encounters Leverett. His salutation is the chronological beginning of the detective motif which is the vehicle of Leverett's narrative: »You caught me red-handed.... Thought I could sneak in here and tend to my own business, unbeknownst to man or monster. Only I forgot all about you. I guess I'll have to put you out of the way like they do in the flicks. You know too much, buddy« (237—38). But genuinely glad to see Leverett amidst his fatigue and confusion, Kinsolving also confesses a wish to die: »'Longer'n I can remember,' he said in a whisper, 'I been hungering for my own end.... Now there's a justification.... Tell me that ten million times I got to die, to find beyond the grave only darkness, and then be born again to live out ten million wretched lives, then die again and so on.... But tell me that *once* in ten million deaths I'll find no darkness past the grave, but *him*, standing there in the midst of eternity, grinning... ready for the fury of these hands, then

I'll... be done with living in half a minute. Oh, I should not have let him off so easy! Oh!... I should not have let him off so easy!» (240). Kinsolving has already understood that Flagg should have lived to suffer the crime Kinsolving thinks he committed just as Kinsolving now knows he must do for the crime he has himself committed. Significantly, this episode ends Part One of the novel; and the second part opens with lines from Roethke: »I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow./I learn by going where I have to go« (243). Therefore, most critics see meaning in the novel going as Kinsolving goes.

There is a configuration for *Set This House on Fire* which is somewhat contrary to many established critical positions but at the same time includes a number of them within its boundaries. This alignment supposes that Peter Leverett's story is his because he is the protagonist, in the sense that he is as ordinarily human as most who occupy the earth. True, within historical American fictional constructions, Leverett has more viewed than suffered, he is more Fitzgerald's Carraway than Hemingway's Lt. Henry; but like each and all on whom those narrators were modeled, Leverett no less has need to speak to us. Much has been made of Leverett's self portrait at what could be called his »post-Kinsolving« period when he begins his narrative. He is »white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, Virginia breed, just past thirty, in good health, tolerable enough looking... orderly habits, more than commonly inquisitive, and strongly sexed« (4—5). To these specifics he adds his suspicion he shall »remain at that decent, mediocre level« of his ancestors, a view he calls realistic rather than cynical or self-abasing. He believes his destiny is not »as satisfying as the role of composer« he once thought of playing; but there is consolation in the fact that »in America no one listens to composers« and his profession »the law, in a way that is at once subtle and majestic and fascinating, still works its own music upon the minds of men. Or at least I hope to think so,« he adds (5). He hopes so because he is carrying his message at his level to us who are on the same level but perhaps less informed. Louis D. Rubin has posited that the construction of the novel causes Leverett to become Kinsolving, thus creating the major structural defect of making readers do »what in terms of plot logic we should not do: we give [Kinsolving] Peter Leverett's experience« (178—79). Yet Kinsolving has said Mason Flagg was not the start but the finish of his torment. What Peter knows and tells about Flagg does delineate the man before Kinsolving and he clash in Sambuco, but only after the clash. Leverett and Kinsolving do together try to discover »What made [Flagg] such a swine?« (391), but Kinsolving knew Flagg was »scum« before Leverett arrived and his inquiries concern the man he has already killed. Therefore, it is not so much that Leverett and Kinsolving exchange places or become one person as it is a matter of degree or depth of action and involvement for each man. For all Leverett's fascination with Flagg, between his adolescent awe when they were in school and their final meeting in Italy, Leverett has seen Flagg for only a week in New York. During that week he responds to Flagg's lies about wartime adventures in Yugoslavia by shouting »You think I'm a moron? You think I wouldn't eventually somehow learn what's true?« (171). And in Sambuco when Flagg's pursuit of Francesca brings him to scream at Leverett, the narrator replies »Go to hell!... Do you think I'm some lousy *contadino* — some peasant you can push around?« (123—24, 175—76). Certainly Leverett has had the same stirrings as Kinsolving. Both are lured and vulnerable to Flagg. Both resist. That duality has so bedeviled the artist Kinsolving, those visions and dreams, that seclusion from

the sight of God which Donne warned of — Leverett too has had these. What drove Kinsolving forward to murder Flagg drives Leverett to seek to know what Kinsolving has already done. It is a lesser but parallel drive; and by learning the story he tells us, Leverett does and learns what Kinsolving has, but in a more reasonable context. Just as Kinsolving cannot revivify the Oedipus myth, Leverett can no more be expected to revivify Kinsolving's act than as a Christian he should be expected to reenact Calvary. Contrary to Marc L. Ratner's belief that Peter Leverett's »moral and intellectual outlook is that of his illustrious namesake Peter Rabbit,« that »nostalgia and bourgeois Romanticism inhibit his development toward awareness,» (74—75), it is clear the newly informed Leverett is acting only as the modern everyman can after such knowledge. Kinsolving may be bound within »the moral significance of the struggle of the artist to free himself from the claims of the affluent, antihuman society« (Ratner 74) which Flagg represents, but Leverett has landed below his once imagined role of composer. Surely, as for most of us, a murder is in neither his past nor his future (that generality may not apply should one become a critic). Especially not in one's future is the Sambuco murder, where Kinsolving has killed Flagg in revenge for a murder he does not know was committed by Saverio, an idiot whom society has not properly restrained. It has been argued that Leverett »must be rescued... lest he unwittingly participate in the creation of historical evil« because he is the kind more dynamic men bent on evil »can feed upon unless something occurs which can make him ask the questions about life most men fail to ask« (Crane 110). Kinsolving's overt but futile act as Galloway's »absurd man as tragic hero«, the illegality of Luigi's freeing Kinsolving, and Kinsolving's final knowledgeable peace at home again in America are the occurrences and questions Leverett and we too have not risen to meet. But they make Leverett once he has finished with Kinsolving become our composer and suggest to us the truth of his statement that the law as he has seen it »works it own music«. Kinsolving had asked him »,Do you want to get the facts now? Or the truth?« »,The truth,» [Leverett had] managed to say, somehow, straightening up« (249).

In support of Leverett as protagonist and to indicate further Styron's several depths of association and meaning, it is possible to trace a seldom noted theme of *Set This House on Fire* as it forces itself into and fuses with the larger scope of the work. It is a theme no American fiction after 1945 ever completely ignores. Leverett explains he »had not been in the war (the one before Korea)« (19—20). With that post-war attitude prevalent, through no fault of their own, among Americans whose land combat did not soil, the non-participant Leverett found his post-war relief agency job in Rome less than vital. On his journey to Sambuco, his car accidentally hits the motor scooter of Luciano di Lieto (Light of Joy), an accident-prone youth whose past injuries include the missing right eye which caused him not to see Peter's car. This encounter with di Lieto »brings [Leverett] directly into the circle, the moral forces of responsibility« (Ratner 76). For the next several years Peter has sent money to the hospital where di Lieto lay in a coma; but some time before his narrative begins, Leverett learns di Lieto has regained consciousness, become engaged, and yet again seriously injured himself. Among the crowd that gathered when Leverett hit di Lieto is di Lieto's mother, who hysterically accuses Leverett of being one of the »Swedes« who came during the war »Bombing and sacking our home... Raping! Stealing!«

(35). Leverett hysterically shouts in return, »I didn't bomb your house!« (35). The scene is full of comedy and stereotypical characterizations of Italians, but it is as well a serious event. As Leverett later tries to tell Kinsolving's wife, then Flagg's mistress, then Flagg, he could not avoid hitting di Lieto. But he has done so. And as he tells di Lieto's mother, he didn't bomb her house during the war. Yet in a way he has. When Leverett finally finds a sympathetic listener in Sambuco, the conversation is again in terms of World War II. The movie director Alonzo Cripps, a man aloof from and quite unlike the rest of the film group, empathizes with Leverett because »during the war... [he] was in a jeep that hit a child... didn't kill the boy but broke him all up« (109). Similarly, Mason Flagg has brought to his Sambuco residence a mass of American goods — including the medicines Kinsolving needs to attempt to cure Francesca's father — and from food to machinery the items have been bought wholesale at the post-war Army PX in Salerno. Leverett is impressed by the display but sufficiently combines his former government responsibilities and his growing sense of involvement to ask »show did you get PX privileges?« (178). Furthermore, when Kinsolving takes Leverett amid the poverty of Francesca's village, he tells Leverett »Seems like you boys could have spread some of that aid or assistance or whatever you call it down here« (206). Styron makes clear that the war has not caused the conditions; indeed, he spends some effort to indicate that the condition of peasants is perpetual and that should some rise they would probably cast no humanitarian glance at those remaining behind. In that sense, Leverett can subscribe to Flagg's view that the United States would quickly go broke supporting every needy foreigner (409—10). Nevertheless, in Leverett's mind the acts and subsequent obligations of World War II are fused with Kinsolving's pursuits. The war was unavoidable, as was Leverett's accident with di Lieto; both took place. Leverett therefore becomes aware that in a way he *has* bombed di Lieto's home, especially when war is understood in the basic terms of Flagg's murder. Alonzo Cripps' empathy for Leverett's distress is based on having experienced the war, on having the kind of ironic knowledge yoked to innocence by fiat that caused members of America's Eighth Air Force in Britain to place at the entrance of their base a sign reading »Through These Portals Pass the Highest Paid Murders in the World«. For God, for country, for ideology, indeed even for freedom, historically one has killed one's fellow human. In the long run what matters is not the validity of the idea for which either side died at Bastone or Anzio or Drvar; it is rather the deaths themselves, which Styron reduces to symbolic primitiveness in Kinsolving's murder of Flagg: »But he rose, with a stone in his hand, and [Flagg] rose with a knobby club... and [Kinsolving] drove the stone again and again, and still once more into the skull... *Children!* he thought, standing over the twitching body. *Children! by Christ!* All of us!« (464—65). Thus, a part of what haunts Leverett about Sambuco is the deeper, uninitiated innocence and real guilt of the just war of 1939—45. Leverett's nightmares and visions are in part the legacy of the war — of all wars — and his search through Kinsolving's mind and experience bring to him, and he to us, that truth. He therefore opens his narration with a guidebook description of Sambuco but, since he is speaking after the events there, concludes our introduction to the town in a diction he would not have used before Sambuco: »But the affairs of war have left the place intact, almost unnoticed, so that its homes and churches and courtyards, corroded as they are by poverty, seem... proudly, even unfairly, preserved, like someone fit

and sturdy among a group of maimed, wasted veterans. Possibly it was just this remoteness, this unacquaintance with war and with the miserable acts of violence which are its natural aftermath, that made the events of that summer seem to everyone so awesome and shocking» (4). By the close of the novel, readers know both Sambuco and Leverett have become post-war veterans.

There remain many other facets of Styron's novel which appear, fuse, and reappear only to suggest but equally confuse traditional literary responses. In the gamut of *hetero* and *homo* and imitative sexual episodes alone. Styron more than overloads our minds. If, for example, he swings far afield for the the Donne-ravish-Kinsolving- rape analogy, he moves in an equally opposite direction to detail Kinsolving's sexual initiation. Early in World War II when a youngster, believing his first conquest is going to be an equally young street evangelist. Kinsolving suddenly realizes the object of his desire is more than experienced and willing. Her name is Vernelle Satterfield. Again escaping most critics is the fact that in 1941 there occurred an event which allowed American males who were at the time about Kinsolving's age — including Styron — to fill hours of fantasy. The film star Errol Flynn was accused of statutory rape by a young girl who had willingly boarded his yacht. Her name, bruited in media across the nation, was Peggie Satterlee (Higham 157—214). If such is symptomatic of Styron's technique, how then to weigh Leverett against Kinsolving? In describing the moments just after his car struck di Lieto, Leverett says: »What followed immediately afterward seemed to be only a grotesque fantasia of events lacking sequence or order, in which I am able to pick out mostly random impressions, as of scenes from a movie film dimly remembered« (30). Later, when the news of Flagg's death has spread in Sambuco, Leverett recalls: »I lingered long enough outside to watch the movie folk go. There escape was hasty and frantic: no military unit forced into sudden retreat could have made such a determined exit from the scene... Not one of them had any kinship whatever with tragedy... for in less than a minute they were all past sight, leaving the street... as quiet and serene as it had been... a thousand years before« (231—32). Just as Leverett's pre-Sambuco experience with the war might have been primarily via the movies, is it possible his Sambuco existence is likewise a magnified and technicolored moment, in which both the Oedipal Kinsolving and the excessive Flagg are merely hyperbolic images worthy of their symbolic names? Perhaps, then, in a valueless and random world the old verities of action and suffering are no more permanent than the deceptive images of the cinema screen. That is certainly very much the state of Leverett's mind concerning Sambuco as he seeks out Kinsolving in order to be told not facts but truth. Yet Leverett does seek him out, Flagg and Francesca are really dead, and Kinsolving is truly a murderer gone free despite the entrapping implication for Americans that after all it is only the Italian criminal justice system that has been subverted. Furthermore, in a post-Sambuco letter to Leverett, Kinsolving does remark: »Have not incidentally had a drop of beer, even, going on to 2 years. It make Sophocles much easier to read« (9). And lastly, when Leverett stops talking, in an epilogue to the book readers are left to see, as did Leverett, that letter from a Naples hospital which reminds them that by sending money for the haphazard di Lieto's care, Leverett has at least for a time fulfilled Jesus' pledge »as ye have done *it* unto one of the least... ye have done *it* unto me« (Matt. 25:40).

In the final balance then we must see Styron's performance is made of much that is both real and imaginary, both factual and literary. Though hardly what forward looking criticism approved in the 1960s — it was by then unfashionable to let the old eagle spread his wings — Styron seems to have perpetuated T. S. Eliot's waste land and reiterated with full contemporary scope the poet's famous line »These fragments I have shored against my ruins« (L. 431). Therefore, just as I dare take Peter Leverett at symbolic value and see him as the lever between his narrative and us who are below and outside fiction, I also offer *Set This House on Fire* as a fulcrum for the vying literary forces since 1945.

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(Note: several of these references are works which provide extensive comment and bibliographies concerning criticism of *Set This House on Fire* and also consider Styron's biography and other extant works, thus condensing the material of many journal articles into a few volumes which may be more accessible outside the continental United States.)

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