

# MIDAMERICA XIV

*The Yearbook of the Society  
for the Study of Midwestern Literature*

Edited by  
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To the memory of  
William B. Thomas  
(1906-1987)

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## PREFACE

*MidAmerica XIV* breaks with tradition to publish for the first time an original work of Midwestern literature: Sylvia Wheeler's "A Whole Bible," winner of the Midwest Poetry Award for 1987, founded by Gwendolyn Brooks and awarded at the Society's Midwest Poetry Festival, May 14-16, 1987.

Also included is Bruce P. Baker's "Nebraska's Cultural Desert: Willa Cather's Early Short Stories," the essay awarded the Midwestern Heritage Award for 1987. The award was also founded by Gwendolyn Brooks and presented at the symposium "The Cultural Heritage of the Midwest," held concurrently with the Festival.

Distinguished honorees of the Conference were Andrew Greeley, novelist, of Chicago, winner of the Mark Twain Award for distinguished contributions to Midwestern literature, and Ray Lewis White, of Illinois State University, winner of the *MidAmerica* Award for distinguished contributions to the study of Midwestern literature.

The wide variety of other essays included in *MidAmerica XIV* is not only indicative of the breadth and depth of interests of the Society's members, but the essays reflect the many interests of the late William B. Thomas, to whom this volume is inscribed. Bill, who died on November 10, 1987, was a novelist, essayist, man of letters, and a founding member of the Society; he encouraged and supported the Society from the beginning, and even after his death he remains a Society benefactor in his bequest of his personal library to the Society.

December, 1987

DAVID D. ANDERSON

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## A WHOLE BIBLE

SYLVIA WHEELER

*Both grandfathers came from the old county in the 1840's. They  
had tree claims and houses made of mud.*

—Dave Hucholz: Wagner, South Dakota

Mud, mud, mud, wasn't a damn board above it.  
If they wanted doors they had to cut them  
out with a knife; no saws then. Man, oh man,  
oh man, what an awful life! That's all I have to say.

No one out here but the squaws and you could smell  
them for miles from the skunks they'd eat. Never  
changed their clothes 'till they wore out. Lived  
in those goddamned tepees, and how the hell  
they kept from freezing to death, I don't know.

No game whatever in the world, just fowl.  
Nothing grew for the deer to eat. What meat  
there was was salted so bad, they had to soak  
the salt out first. Then they smoked it too much.

1871, we moved out here from west of Tyndall.  
No covered wagons in those days — the only  
thing I remember was Custer used to travel  
with covered wagons. No such a thing  
as a house in those days — call it a corn crib.  
It was built of fence boards, just rough fence,  
a double wall with dirt in between boards,  
see, to keep the cold out when we could. And  
we had nothing to burn whatever in the world.  
I tell you, I tell you, I tell you.

Only what grass you could cut and wad together  
and burn in the stove, but in 2, 3, minutes  
the stove would be cold and you could go to bed  
that way. I could lay in that bed and sleep  
and look up and see the stars when I was sleeping  
and goddamned nearly freeze to death laying there.  
Jesus Christ, cold!

No such town as Wagner then. No roads, nothing  
whatever in the world out here. We didn't  
even have a plow to dig a hole in the ground.  
No such thing as anyone digging a well.  
No tall grass of any kind. Was all buffalo grass.  
No such thing as hay. No machinery  
to put up hay. It's a wonder we lived  
through it, I tell you, I tell you!

Dad drove cattle out here on foot from Tyndall.  
Man, oh man, oh man, just any kind  
of cattle, just as long as they had horns  
on them. Drove them day and night until he  
got through the Indian reservation.

Most of the cattle died from the drought.  
It was so dry you could walk the Missouri  
river and it wouldn't even wet your shoe soles.  
No such thing as a railroad here those days.

Later, when they laid those rails by hand, 10  
or 12 men would get ahold of this rail  
and plunk it ahead on the rough grade then  
drive up the length of the rail and plunk down  
another one. No celebrations when the rails  
was in. People were too goddamned tired  
to celebrate. Oh, Jesus Christ, a penny  
was a gold piece alongside what money  
has got to today. We really aren't  
the land we homestead, I'll tell you.

What did we think of it?

Why, we didn't think of it.

It was here, we was here, and we had to stay.

University of South Dakota

NOTE

Based on The Oral History Tape Collection, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD.

## NEBRASKA'S CULTURAL DESERT: WILLA CATHER'S EARLY SHORT STORIES

BRUCE P. BAKER

For many years Willa Cather's novels set in Nebraska have been praised for their evocation of the era of the pioneers, a time of splendid heroism and achievement symbolized by the famous plow against the sun in *My Antonia*. On the plains of the great Midwest, sturdy and creative men and women joined themselves with the fertile soil and brought forth a kind of new Eden wherein fallen man seemed to be able once again to unite with the raw material of the earth and create something beautiful and enduring. For example, in Cather's rhapsodic tribute to the pioneer spirit in *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra Bergson transforms "The Wild Land" in part one into the rich, fruitful fields of part two. It is important to note that Cather does not seem to portray Alexandra's success as merely an Horatio Alger rags-to-riches *exemplum*. Rather, her triumph is not so much a material as an artistic one; in a very real and significant way, Alexandra is a creator, an artist who has shaped out of often unwieldy material an orderly and beautiful work.

But Cather had not always viewed the Nebraska of her formulative years as a place wherein the artist, be it a Thea Kronberg or an Alexandra Bergson, could work out their destinies of creative artistry. Quite the contrary, for in much of Cather's early written response to the Great Plains, Nebraska is portrayed as a cultural desert, a setting often hostile to those of artistic bent, a place indifferent if not actively hostile to man's creative spirit.

Cather's first published story, "Peter," which appeared in a Boston literary magazine, *The Mahogany Tree*, on May 31, 1892, portrays exactly that situation: old Peter Sadelack, a sensitive,

artistic immigrant to the "dreariest part of southwestern Nebraska" finds himself unable to endure his new life on the plains. The piece is often very explicit; much is said, little is suggested. Cather comments: "[Peter] drank whenever he could get out of [his son] Antone's sight long enough to pawn his hat or coat for whisky. He was a lazy, absent-minded old fellow, who liked to fiddle better than to plow." Peter is desperately homesick for his native Bohemia and particularly for the opportunities he had had there for artistic expression.

Cather uses the symbol of Peter's violin in order to enhance the story's theme and intensify the emotion: that beautiful instrument represents not only his dearest possession but also those values to which Peter has always been dedicated. The first two sentences in the story point up the conflict between father and son and characterize their respective points of view: "'No, Antone, I have told thee many times, no thou shalt not sell it until I am gone.' [His son Antone replies,] 'But I need money; what good is that old fiddle to thee? Thy hand trembles so thou canst scarce hold the bow.'" In a flashback we learn that Peter was once a second violinist in Prague until partial paralysis of his arm brought those days to a close. Then come the last two paragraphs in which Peter "pulled off his old boot, held the gun between his knees with the muzzle against his forehead, and pressed the trigger with his toe."

Before going to the old sod stable, however, Peter had attempted to play his violin for the last time: "His hand shook more than ever before, and at last refused to work the bow at all." Peter's decision is irrevocable, Cather thus suggests rather obviously, for his "life," his playing of the beloved fiddle, is already over. Hence immediately before pulling the trigger, Peter breaks his violin over his knee and comments: "[Anton] shall not sell thee, my fiddle; I can play thee no more, but they shall not part us. We have seen it all together, and we will forget it together."

Peter himself thus personifies the violin in a speech which makes explicit the symbolic function of that instrument: Peter and his violin are one, both are broken, and the music which they have made together is now over. The style of "Peter" is, of course, rather heavy-handed by Cather's later standards, but in this first story Cather not only anticipates the suicide of Mr.

Shimerda in *My Antonia* but also deals symbolically for the first time with a motif which appears in many of her other stories: the plight of the sensitive immigrant in an environment which does not yet value beauty and creativity.

Mildred Bennett calls "Eric Hermannson's Soul," which appeared in *Cosmopolitan* magazine for April 1900, Cather's "first important story." As the title indicates, this narrative is concerned with Eric Hermannson, "the wildest lad on all the Divide," his "conversion" during a prayer meeting, and his reaction some two years later to the visit to the Divide of beautiful Margaret Elliot. Cather divides the story into three sections, the first dealing with Eric's conversion during a prayer meeting led by Asa Skinner, a "converted train gambler" who is now "servant of God and Free Gospeller." Asa feels that "the Lord had this night a special work for him to do" and directs his "impassioned pleading" to handsome Eric. Section one is at once a remarkable transcription of a frontier revival meeting and an introduction to the central symbol in the story, Eric's violin.

Like the violin of Peter Sadelack, Eric's instrument represents his love of beauty and the importance of music to this passionate, young immigrant who has tried to capture some joy in life in spite of the barrenness of life on the Nebraska plains. The symbolic function of Eric's violin is fully explicated in this first section of the story; Cather again leaves little to the imagination and even less to suggestion. "In the great world beauty comes to men in many guises, and art in a hundred forms, but for Eric there was only his violin. It stood, to him, for all the manifestations of art; it was his only bridge into the kingdom of the soul."

For Asa Skinner and the Free Gospellers, however, the violin is clearly an abomination to the Lord and the symbol of Eric's sinful ways; again Cather explains rather than suggests: "Tonight Eric Hermannson . . . sat in [the] audience with a fiddle on his knee, just as he had dropped in on his way to play for some dance. The violin is an object of particular abhorrence to the Free Gospellers. Their antagonism to the church organ is bitter enough, but the fiddle they regard as a very incarnation of evil desires, singing forever of worldly pleasures and inseparably associated with all forbidden things."

By the end of section one, however, Cather succeeds in suggesting through these established symbols much more than is

merely said. In the final sentence of this section Eric Hermannson is "saved" as he symbolically destroys what has been for him "his only bridge into the kingdom of the soul": "He took his violin by the neck and crushed it to splinters across his knee, and to Asa Skinner the sound was like the shackles of sin broken audibly asunder." Thus Cather suggests through the symbolism of the broken violin and the final simile in this sentence that the "saving" of Eric Hermannson's soul has in fact been a *losing* of it. The irony is clear: Eric has lost the only thing which helped make life worth while; his "soul" is destroyed at the very moment when Asa Skinner feels that it has been saved. Thus, like the harshness of the Nebraska land and climate itself, the narrow fundamentalist religions of the frontier have further intensified the spiritual and cultural sterility of early life on the plains.

Of all Cather's early stories, perhaps it is in "A Wagner Matinee," one of the seven stories in *The Troll Garden* (1905), that Cather most dramatically explores the plight of the sensitive and artistic person who finds himself in a restrictive if not oppressive environment. In the first paragraphs Clark, the narrator, awaits the arrival of his Aunt Georgiana, a woman whose early life as a music teacher in Boston had been drastically changed by her elopement with Howard Carpenter and their subsequent life on the Nebraska frontier. After their marriage, the Carpenters had homesteaded, "built a dugout in the red hillside," and struggled for some thirty years in their effort to survive; during that time, Georgiana "had not been further than fifty miles from the homestead." But now she is coming to Boston to attend to the settling of a small estate left her by a bachelor relative, and Clark dreads seeing "what was left of my kinswoman." Her "misshapened figure" and stooped bearing are, it would seem, outward symbols of what Clark refers to as her "martyrdom." He observes that his aunt appears to be in a "semisomnambulant state" and wonders if his plan to take her to the Wagner matinee was ill conceived: "I began to think it would have been best to get her back to Red Willow County without waking her."

But they make their way to the first balcony, and as the orchestra plays the *Tannhauser* overture, "Aunt Georgiana clutched my coat sleeve. Then it was I first realized that for her this broke a silence of thirty years; the inconceivable silence of

the plains." As the program proceeds, Cather skillfully juxtaposes Aunt Georgiana's imaginative return to the world of the arts and Clark's return to the prairie on which he has been reared. Clark reminisces: ". . . I saw again the tall, naked house on the prairie, black and grim as a wooden fortress; the black pond where I had learned to swim, its margin pitted with sundried cattle tracks; their rain-gullied clay banks about the naked house. . . ." The repeated words are "naked" and "black," adjectives which summarize Clark's attitude toward the Nebraska of his youth.

The ultimate questions which this story ask are ones which, no doubt, emerged from Cather's knowledge of life on the plains of Nebraska: what does the frontier do to the innately sensitive, artistic personality? Is it possible for such a person to survive in the nakedness of such an environment? Clark finds his answer: "Soon after the tenor began in 'Prize Song,' I heard a quick drawn breath and turned to my aunt. Her eyes were closed, but the tears were glistening on her cheeks, and I think, in a moment more, they were in my eyes as well. It never really died, then—the soul that can suffer so excruciatingly and so interminably; it withers to the outward eye only; like that strange moss which can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again."

As the concert comes to a close, Cather uses an image derived from the plains to suggest Aunt Georgiana's inevitable return to Red Willow County: "the men of the orchestra went out one by one, leaving the stage to the chairs and music stands, empty as a winter cornfield." Georgiana's cry expresses her emotion: "I don't want to go, Clark, I don't want to go!" The story closes with Clark's perceptive observation: "I understood. For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curved boards; naked as a tower, the crooked ash seedlings where the dishcloths hung to dry; the gaunt, molting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door." Aunt Georgiana must return to all this—and to her martyrdom. Thus in the last paragraph of the story, Cather uses setting as symbol in order to convey the sterility and bleakness of the scene. The unforgettable picture of the "unpainted house," the "black pond," the "crooked ash seedlings," and finally the "gaunt, molting

turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door," suggest powerfully the toll which life in Nebraska has taken upon the innately sensitive, artistic person who finds himself there.

Thus Cather's later reputation may well have been based in part on her ability to gain more perspective about the Nebraska of her youth, but in many of her early short stories, and especially in "Peter," in "Eric Hermannson's Soul," and in "A Wagner Matinee," Nebraska is portrayed as a cultural desert, a setting antagonistic to the inherent artistic needs of the human spirit.

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## THE SAFE MIDDLE WEST: ESCAPE TO AND ESCAPE FROM HOME

MARGARET D. STUHR

The Middle West fills a special niche in the American imagination. Regardless of whether they have even been there, people seem to have peculiarly strong feelings—both positive and negative—about the region. Borrowing Henry Nash Smith's terms, the Middle West continues to be both "garden" and "desert" (138). Always quintessentially American, the middle states are thought to reflect both the best and the worst of our national culture. On one hand, we celebrate the Middle West as our national heartland. Say "Middle West" and images of hard-working Grant Wood farm folks from pioneer stock, friendly small town Main Streets, and wholesome, if slightly naive, salt-of-the-earth types spring to mind. Yet another Middle West is the Rodney Dangerfield of America. Scorned as the butt of regional jokes, this is the Middle West of endlessly flat and endlessly monotonous prairies peopled by small-minded hicks and grasping, anti-imaginative Babbits who don't know the difference between corn and culture.

This paper will define and describe a single cluster of feelings about the region which captures the tension between the idealized and the vilified Middle West. It is what I call the mythology of The Safe Middle West. The images center on the simultaneously boastful and apologetic attitude which a number of Midwesterners have about their home, clarify why the region has both attracted and alienated its native sons and daughters, and provide an organizing pattern for the curiously ambivalent views and expectations of the region which non-Midwesterners so frequently express. Its focus is two interpretations—one favorable and one critical—of the adjective "safe."

First is the sense in which describing the region as "safe" is high praise, especially when seen in figurative and literal opposition to an often unsafe and threatening East. Its heritage of rural, land-based values coupled with our enthusiasm for the ideal of the noble yeoman farmer has linked the Middle West with a solid and appealingly innocent set of values. It is the reliable breadbasket and the morally pure Bible Belt. Its inhabitants are friendly and virtuous folk, and so the region is identified as a place of warmth and security. One is reassured by the tranquillity, well-defined ethical code, and stability of life in the heartland. In this view, then, the Middle West is "safe" as is a comforting asylum to which one eagerly returns from chaos, secure as home, family, and inherited values are to a child. Not surprisingly, presidential candidates from Lincoln and Bryan to Hoover and Reagan have made much of this prevalent view of humble and decent beginnings in America's interior. This Middle West fulfills our national fondness for a sentimentalized memory of solidly American values in the "good old days."

But there is a darker side to this view. If the region is often thought to be an especially good place to come from, it may not be an equally satisfying place in which to live. For if one might choose to live in the Middle West because of favorable associations, one might also choose to remain there as a cowardly retreat from the unknown and the challenging. The region is "safe" in this negative sense the way old friends and familiar activities look safe and appealing to a child who perceives himself threatened by new people, strange places, bewildering ideas, and confusing experiences. The region's long-standing inferiority complex and its inhabitants' often apologetic admission of the cultural dominance of the East make it easy to understand how many Midwesterners grow dissatisfied with their home. As ambitious Midwesterners grow up and try to pursue their dreams of financial success and career achievement, they feel they must leave. To stay would be to reveal a lack of drive, a preference for the easy life, or a cowardly reticence to try to develop one's full potential. So in droves, away Midwesterners go to the big city—humming the lyrics to *New York, New York*: "If I could make it there, I could make it anywhere."

Even then, after escape from the region, complete and simple rejection of the Middle West is unusually difficult in the

mythology of The Safe Middle West. For even if one could escape from the bleakness and limitations of the region, one might feel guilty for leaving family and friends behind. A person might consider departure as the "safe" path, as the easy choice, and believe it more admirable or courageous to stay and struggle in the Middle West. And if guilt doesn't get the Midwesterner, then disillusion with the new, unknown world does. Exiled Midwesterners question their earlier decision to leave and nostalgically recall their Midwestern homes and childhood, sometimes wishing they could escape back to the region. In time, many do return, and then the cycle begins again. For many, the sense that they are missing the rich possibilities of life resurfaces, and they long to flee once more. Some do, of course, but even those who do not usually agonize about whether they should or defensively justify their choice of a home in the Middle West.

This recurrent pattern of comings and goings lies at the heart of the dynamics of The Safe Middle West. It is a pattern easily identifiable in many aspects of today's culture. Television and movies are replete with such Midwestern natives who aren't satisfied with where they live. For example, Betty White's character on NBC's *The Golden Girls*, sweet Rose Nylund, finds life in Miami a bit much and repeatedly reminisces, in glowing terms which never fail to aggravate or bore her eastern roommates, about her genial farming days in St. Olaf, Minnesota. In the political arena, ambitious Midwestern presidential hopefuls, such as Bob Dole and Gary Hart, stir emotion by enthusiastically recalling their Midwestern homes and create photo opportunities by returning for a brief visit. Indeed, it was not until Gary Hart realized many Americans were bothered by his silence about his Ottawa, Kansas, childhood that he made a recent pilgrimage home. What a striking example of the fundamental ambivalence at the core of The Safe Middle West when Mr. Hart spoke tearfully about his uncomplicated childhood and replied to a fourth-grader who asked him whether he would ever return to Ottawa to live "Yes, . . . not totally. . . . I wouldn't rule it out" ("Hart Is Where The Home Is," 27).

Beyond politics and the media, certainly the ambivalent feelings behind a cycle of departure and return are evident in the lives of a wide range of Midwestern writers and artists—Sinclair Lewis, Booth Tarkington, Grant Wood, Frederick Jackson

Turner, Zona Gale, Ruth Suckow, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. And the lives of a good many fictional characters—Guy Pollock, in Lewis's *Main Street*; Jim Burden, in Cather's *My Antonia*; Rose Dutcher, in Garland's *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*; and Dan Oliphant, in Tarkington's *The Midlander*—exemplify the strong pull to and away from the region I have been describing. In fact, the balance of this paper illustrates the ambivalent feelings and the departure/return motif in the lives of three famous Midwesterners: an important writer, Hamlin Garland; a fictional character, F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway; and a film character, *The Wizard of Oz*'s Dorothy Gale. Understanding these three as illustrations of the dynamics of the mythology of The Safe Middle West will not only foster understanding of particular works but also illuminate the climate in which these Midwesterners were and are viewed and encourage connections among what might otherwise seem completely dissimilar lives.

For Hamlin Garland (1860-1940) probably more than any other Midwestern author of the twentieth century, the decision to live in or out of the region proved both an enduring cause of personal anguish and a rich source of literary subject matter. A number of his most famous fictional works revolve around the comings and goings and resulting frustrations of Midwestern men and women. But what most fully illustrates the idea of The Safe Middle West is the way in which Garland himself, not his characters, felt driven away from and pulled back toward the Middle West in two ways: as the geographical area in which to live and as the subject matter of his writing.

Usually considered his best, early writings such as *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) and *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895) rely on gritty Midwestern settings and champion regional realism. But having achieved some recognition with them, Garland was determined to move beyond the region; his middle period writings, from about 1900 to 1916, involve mostly romances set in the Rocky Mountains. Yet, as readers and critics ignored those works, Garland felt his fragile success slipping away; he reluctantly returned to the Middle West, writing mostly sentimental reminiscences, convinced that Midwestern memories would please the public. Thus, we have the Middle Border series and several personal memoirs, seven volumes written between 1917 and 1934, in which Garland devotes significant detail to his own

decisions about living in or out of the Middle West. According to Donald Pizer, an elderly Garland finally discovered the Middle West was his richest literary subject and that his depiction of it was "inseparable from his rebellion against it and his guilt towards it" (ix).

His youth spent in impoverished frontier communities in his native Wisconsin and Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota, Garland's struggle to become a literary success is in broad outline the story of the young man from the provinces who leaves to make good in the big city. To him, the very idea of a Midwestern artist was a contradiction in terms. The Middle West was not the place for artistic talent to be developed, and Garland, never a modest man, thought he had a great deal. Yet as he describes repeatedly in *A Son of the Middle Border*, almost immediately after fleeing to Boston in 1884, Garland questioned whether escape had been the right choice. Visits home generated intense pangs of guilt and self-accusations of disloyalty as he worried about the grim life of his remaining Midwestern family. Garland's guilt about leaving home was compounded by the fact that his father was a stubborn pioneer who had struggled to come West, and with some shame Garland referred to his own eastern migration as "back-trailing." Indeed, when he moved back to Wisconsin in 1892, he emphasized that he was returning only for his elderly parents' sake, to settle them in West Salem while he pursued his career in Chicago. Not surprisingly, he was soon frustrated by his life there, bitterly disappointed that Chicago had not turned into the literary center he had wanted it to be. Perhaps he could escape again once he was free from duties to his parents.

Rare passages in these memoirs, however, do suggest the appealing security and shelter he found in his Midwestern home. In *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, for example, he confesses that for him, as well as his family, Wisconsin was a haven which provided a "sure refuge in a time of trouble" (337). Consider also that he continued to live on in the family homestead two years after his parents had died, kept the property for a long time, visiting periodically until 1938—strange behavior for one desperate to escape. And even after he had moved back to New York in 1916, Garland revealed in *My Friendly Contemporaries* that he still worried greatly whether his two daughters would be

comfortable in the East and whether New York would be a suitable upright moral environment for them (114).

Garland's late autobiographical series must be understood, then, as special pleading, as the reflections of a somewhat disappointed man who was never as good as he thought he was and who, to some extent, blamed the Middle West for his lack of success. He used certain parts of the mythology of *The Safe Middle West* to rationalize his own literary shortcomings. By claiming throughout his autobiographical writing that family loyalty and guilt made it hard for him to live outside the Middle West but that his literary powers and opportunities were stronger in the East, Garland managed to ignore or avoid the possibility that his lack of success might have been due to a lack of talent rather than to a Midwestern residence. Unable to frankly admit the appeal his Midwestern home had for him and feeling that ambition demanded escape to the East, Garland found himself in an always frustrating situation, or at least such is the picture the dynamics of *The Safe Middle West* allowed him to paint for his readers and the critics.

A second example, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) offers a similarly rich fictional expression of the escape to and from the Middle West. As the narrator of the novel and the only one of several Midwestern characters who admits to viewing the region both positively and negatively, Nick Carraway is at the heart of the discussion of the artistic expression of the myth of *The Safe Middle West*. In large measure the story Nick tells from a vantage point back in the Middle West, two years after the events in East and West Egg, is an account of how and why he discovered that he preferred living in the Middle West. Twenty-nine years old in 1922, Nick had left his Midwestern home to settle in West Egg, a move he had thought would be permanent. Restless after having fought in World War I, the Middle West of his childhood no longer seemed warm and appealing, so Nick had headed East. Although he doesn't stress it himself, mentioning first desire to learn the bond business, Nick's departure from home is also an escape from what he perceives as the Middle West's too well-defined and restrictive morality. Nick admits, for example, that he had felt pressure at home to marry a Midwestern girl with whom he had wanted a far less formal relationship. Initially, he finds the

sophistication and loose morality of the East, represented by his liaison with the dishonest Jordan Baker, enticing—just the change he had sought.

The sum of his experiences that summer, however, causes him to change his opinion of the East. Lies, deception, irresponsibility, and, finally, the deaths of Myrtle Wilson and Jay Gatsby open Nick's eyes to the flimsy morality behind the facade of cosmopolitanism which makes the East seem especially appealing to Midwesterners like himself who feel life is passing them by out in the heartland. At the novel's opening Nick had been repelled by what he perceived to be the certainty and limited possibilities of his life in the Middle West; at the novel's close, he has come to appreciate the safer if slower-paced world of the Middle West, a world of clarity and order. He wants, he says, a world at moral attention and acknowledges that even when the East excited him, it was always haunted, always "distorted beyond my eyes"; "Careless people," Nick calls Tom and Daisy, who "smashed up things and creatures" and then retreated into their money (177-80). They made the mess, and it is he, the Middle Westerner, who "cleans up," taking care, for example, of Gatsby's funeral. Nick thinks back home either his own character will be more stalwart or the moral derelictions and transgressions of those around him less serious.

In contrast to Garland, Nick Carraway readily admits to viewing the Middle West as a haven of safety, to escaping back to the region gladly. Garland spent much effort explaining his Midwestern residence as the requirement of a dutiful son, seemingly afraid that readers would see his return home as a sign of psychological weakness. The critics' response to Nick Carraway's move to the Middle West confirms, I suggest, Garland's fears. Although Nick himself may be pleased to be home, many of Fitzgerald's readers have wondered whether his return reflects Nick's own inadequacies more than it does any positive attributes of the heartland or any deficiencies of the East. Specifics vary from critic to critic, but a good many agree that Nick has chosen an unhealthy retreat from complexity by going home. According to these readers, in leaving the East and going back to the Middle West, Nick is taking the easy way out of an uncomfortable situation (Lehan 174 and Ornstein 142). Perhaps like Garland, who tended to blame the Middle West for his own

lack of literary success, Nick blames the East unfairly for his own unhappiness and thereby rationalizes his return home, possibly a little afraid that a thirty-year-old man's return home might be interpreted as a sign of immaturity or defeat.

The pervasiveness of the images of The Safe Middle West in which any meaningful achievement requires ambitious, mature adults leave explains, at least partially, the prevalence of such interpretations of Nick. That such readings would be as common if Nick were returning to a family home in California or New England seems doubtful to me. The Middle West may be perfect for childhood, so goes this mythology, but not for a productive and satisfying adulthood. As further explanation of this point and as the third and final example of this two-part view of the region, consider briefly probably the most well-known Midwesterner to fit the general pattern of departure and return: Dorothy Gale, the little girl from Kansas whose adventures have been fixed in the American imagination by Judy Garland's portrayal of her in MGM's 1939 classic film, *The Wizard of Oz*.

The run-in with nasty Miss Gulch, a fight with her aunt and uncle over Toto's fate, her plaintive song about a world "somewhere over the rainbow," and her discussion with Professor Marvel about the excitement of big cities—all this makes it clear that Dorothy views her Midwestern home as a place from which to escape, much as Garland and Nick had viewed theirs. The first shot of the lush and colorfully exotic landscape of the land of the Munchkins, in stark contrast to the gritty black and white of the Kansas farm world, only emphasizes that Dorothy's dream of escape has apparently been realized. Like Garland exploring the literary heritage of Boston or Nick experiencing the wealth and sophistication of Gatsby's parties, Dorothy is at first delighted by the strangeness of her new world. For instance, she appreciates the attention lavished upon her and quickly plays to an admiring audience of Munchkins, embellishing the truth about how she came to land among them. But also like Nick, if Dorothy at first relishes the surprises which her escape to this bewildering land brings, she comes to change her mind. For Nick, the turning point comes in a matter of months caused by the reality of death; for Dorothy, it happens in a matter of minutes after the sudden arrival of the Wicked Witch and her

threats of evil. Not only does Dorothy long for a more secure world in which she does not have to worry about her survival or be surprised by talking trees, flying monkeys, or charlatan wizards, but she also feels a guilt similar to Garland's about how her family, especially greying old Aunt Em, is doing. Thrilled to learn finally that she can escape to, not from, her Midwestern home, Dorothy assures the scarecrow, the woodsman, and the lion that Oz "could never be like Kansas" and clicks her heels to depart.

So the closing scene has Dorothy in her own little bedroom being taken care of in the security of her home. Because the film seems to say that the familiarity of friends and family will make her happy, Dorothy might not seem a good example, as were Garland and Nick, of people for whom life in the Middle West is problematic. But in her lack of agonized soul-searching over her departure from Oz and in generations of viewers' instincts that going home is the "right" choice for her, the chords of *The Safe Middle West* resound. We applaud her decision to return to the comfortable safety of home and her past because she is so young; we question Nick's going home because he isn't. Dorothy is intelligent and warm, but finally only a child (and a female one at that), without particular ambitions or career goals. We allow her, not Nick, to be the immature child running away from what is strange and unexpected. Should Dorothy find her farm life stifling in several months or several years, she might well crave some of the power and prestige that were hers in Oz and run off for real, to California or West Egg. And if she found the going tough there and decided to return home, would we so readily applaud her decision? Probably not. A youngster may be forgiven for wanting to flee from the dangers of "lions and tigers and bears," but a grown-up should welcome the hunt and relish its excitement.

Dorothy's story powerfully dramatizes what lies at the foundation of *The Safe Middle West*: the deep connection between the innocence of childhood and the Middle West. On the level of an individual, fleeing—whether to Boston, New York, West Egg, or Oz—means growing up, stretching oneself, and choosing the unknown over the known. In this way, the age-old tradition of moving away from home and parents as a sign of maturity has become associated with an entire region. Even further, the

mythology of *The Safe Middle West* extends beyond an individual Midwesterner's attraction to his own roots to our nation's collective imagination. For the choice between a symbolic rural Middle West and a symbolic urban East is, finally, the choice between clinging to the past or embracing the future. While many of us Americans routinely expect, almost demand, that native Midwesterners glorify their home, we also almost take it for granted that they will and should move out—and on. The tension inherent in such a pattern of departure and return mirrors our country's growing pains—our wistful nostalgia for what we see as our simple agricultural past and our fears about our increasingly industrial and technological future. The mythologizing of *The Safe Middle West* poignantly dramatizes the conflict between confronting our future and retreating into our past.

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## LEARNING THE LAND: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SENSE OF PLACE IN THE PRAIRIE MIDWEST

ELIZABETH RAYMOND

When explorer Joseph Nicollet first reported on the James River country in Dakota, in 1839, he was not favorably impressed. Among the records of his trip was a recipe for an "effervescent draught" of tartaric acid and bicarbonate of soda, prescribed to relieve the listlessness induced by prolonged exposure to monotonous prairie scenery.<sup>1</sup> His distinct lack of enthusiasm for the vast stretches of grass and sky merely confirmed the negative verdict of earlier explorers of the interior grasslands. Thus Stephen Long, in his 1821 report to the Secretary of War, characterized his trip across Nebraska in no uncertain terms: "In regard to this extensive section of country, I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence"<sup>2</sup> And Stephen Kearney, crossing Iowa from Omaha to Minneapolis in 1820, clearly agreed:

A very great portion of the country in the neighborhood of our route could be of no other object (at any time) to our gov'n't in the acquisition of it, than the expulsion of the savages from it . . . for the disadvantages [lack of timber and water] will forever prevent its supporting more than a thinly scattered population.<sup>3</sup>

Yet this countryside is the same that is described scarcely 100 years later, by novelist Paul Engle, in terms approaching apotheosis:

The power of the land was growth. Nowhere in the world was there so much nourishment in every acre for so great an area. . . . There were no mountains or rocky foothills, no desert of sand, no

fertile soil sterilized by too little rain, no great stands of timber. It was all good pasture, black fields for corn, oats, hay, with now and then a family-size woodlot. Every inch contributed to the sustenance of the men, women, and children who worked it. It was a land given to the single, great purpose of diminishing hunger.<sup>4</sup>

To some extent, the radical differences in these evaluations of the prairie landscape are historically determined. Long and Kearney thus accurately described the uselessness of the grasslands in a day and age before steel plows to break the sod, windmills to pump the water, or railroads to economically supply the missing lumber and market the crops.

However, these contrasting prairie images imply changes in environmental perception as well as mere technological advances. They are evidence of a dynamic interaction between people and landscape over time that can best be described as "learning the land." This subtle process, by which people gradually assessed the prairie landscape and then reached some accommodation with it, can be explored using the literature from the region as evidence. In order to do so, I will concentrate on a specific portion of the prairie that I have defined as the Prairie Midwest.

Long considered America's "heartland," the boundaries of the Middle West are exceptionally flexible, often defined simply by contrast with other regions. In the words of critic Barry Gross:

The suspicion persists that what goes on at either coast is the extreme, the perverse and bizarre, the grotesque and the Gothic, unreal and worse, unAmerican. The belief persists that the middle represents the heart and the center, the norm against which the extreme East and the extreme West are measured as abnormal, aberrational.<sup>5</sup>

In order to characterize the Prairie Midwest geographically, rather than by contrast to other regions, I have used the same trio of features suggested by Walter Prescott Webb in his now classic study of the Great Plains: topography, vegetation, and rainfall.<sup>6</sup> The Prairie Midwest, like Webb's more western plains states, is a large area of level, treeless, relatively featureless land. However, *unlike* the more arid plains west of the 100th meridian, the

prairie was originally covered by tall native grass plants, reaching as high as 6 to 8 feet.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in most years, it receives sufficient rainfall for traditional humid methods of farming.

The Prairie Midwest is further distinguished, on the basis of social and cultural factors, from the prairie states of the Old Northwest, east of the Mississippi River, and from the border states of Missouri and Kansas. Although these regions share the geographic characteristics of abundant rainfall and an indigenous tallgrass prairie, they developed differently. The pervasive influence of industry in the Old Northwest, and of the bloody divisions of the Civil War in Missouri and Kansas, made them each culturally distinctive. Thus the examination of sense of place in the Prairie Midwest is limited to those areas where the impact of the landscape is least likely to be modulated by other influences. It includes the prairie portions of the five states of Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, North, and South Dakota.

Within this delineated region, insights derived from cultural geography and environmental perception theory suggest that there is a unifying regional sensibility, based on the common experience of a distinctive geography. Above all, the Prairie Midwest is a region of great spaces. Its fertile black earth extends toward the sky in every direction, to create a full 360° horizon. Virtually every visitor to the prairie has remarked on its expansiveness in terms similar to those recently employed by Paul Gruchow to describe the Cayler Prairie in northwestern Iowa: "There is no place to hide on the Cayler. This was the feature of the prairie landscape that overwhelmed so many pioneers, the realization that it was so exposed, so naked. There was something relentless about the scale of it."<sup>8</sup>

The most common analogy for comprehending so much seemingly featureless and undifferentiated space is the sea, and, indeed, the waving prairie grasses are frequently compared to waves on the ocean. In the midst of such oceanic openness, however, the observer is challenged to find or make a place suited to the more modest human scale. The dual problem posed by the Prairie Midwestern landscape, then, is to find some way of psychologically comprehending it, in addition to physically conquering it. Solving those twin problems then constitutes the foundation of regional identity.

One cultural geographer has observed that the Middle West is unlike all other American regions in its effects on newcomers. While other well-defined regions, such as New England or the South, preserve and reflect the culture of the first group to settle them, the Middle West has quite the opposite effect, instead homogenizing the dissimilar peoples who come to it.<sup>9</sup> This observation is borne out by the literature of the Prairie Midwest. Collectively, writers of fiction and nonfiction alike paint a picture of regional self-consciousness centered on confronting and coming to terms with the landscape. Discerning some meaning or moral in the blankness of the prairie becomes the burden of a surprising variety of regional writing, even that which does not specifically focus on agriculture, where commentary on the land might naturally be expected.

The common focus of Prairie Midwestern literature on the landscape is not simply coincidence, nor is it the product of some crude environmental determinism. Instead it can be seen as a reflection of regional experience, and of increasing environmental knowledge over time. The process by which settlers come to learn and appreciate the land is gradual and interactive. According to the model proposed by cultural geographers, images of any unknown natural world are initially shaped, as were those of explorers Long and Nicollet, by the preexisting ideas and categories of experience that naive newcomers bring to it.<sup>10</sup> Gradually, however, these images are modified through more extensive experience of the new environment. They come to reflect a variety of different environmental perspectives.

Thus residents perceive the region differently and more fully than newcomers, who can only compare it to places with which they are already familiar. Travellers who stay only a short time see different things than settlers, who come to know the land over many seasons and in a variety of moods. The latter may be in a better position to appreciate both complexity and subtlety, but familiarity also blinds them to regional peculiarities that may be especially striking to the outsider. Environmental actors, engaged in shaping and controlling the land, understand and view it differently from those whose function is more passive.

In addition to this variety of environmental perspectives, there is the matter of evolution of the landscape. Settlers inevitably make physical changes in the environment. In the case

of the Prairie Midwest, especially, these changes are dramatic and pervasive. Within two generations after Nicollet's journey, the open prairies had been replaced by farms. Rectangular fields, row crops, and section line roads demarcated and tamed the previously endless and uniform space. The cumulative effect of such alterations is to create a new environment, one significantly different from that encountered by the first travellers. Thus the abundant agricultural breadbasket hymned by novelist Paul Engle is clearly not the same physical space as the relatively featureless desert perceived by the earlier explorers. The interaction between human beings and the environment has created a new and different landscape.

The altered landscape that is created by human occupation and modification in turn promotes changed expectations among the residents. Modern Iowans, for example, expect the countryside to be farmed as a matter of course. They would undoubtedly be aghast at the explorers' dismissal of their land as doomed to remain eternally unproductive. As environmental perception theory suggests, then, knowledge of a place over time alters the context for human perception of it. It is the concretion of various historical images of the prairie that cumulatively produces a distinctive regional image.

In the Prairie Midwest, that image centers on human reaction to and compromise with a landscape generally recognized as unique primarily in its apparent lack of beauty or promise. The regional myth revolves around heroic human intervention in the environment, the series of individual modifications that combined to produce from such seemingly discouraging land the modern breadbasket of America. The literature of the region is full of tales of environmental hardship faced and overcome— from the prototypical pioneer story of hardworking homesteaders threatened successively by grasshoppers, blizzards, and dust storms; to the depression tales of farmers losing everything they have but stubbornly cling to their land. The dignity of the residents lies in having survived against these overwhelming odds, in having made out of the forbidding prairie a modern-day Garden of Eden.

Evidence for this process of environmental image building is primarily literary in form.<sup>11</sup> Nonfiction sources include diaries and journals of prairie travellers and settlers alike, and cover the

settlement period from 1840 to 1890, thus antedating most of the prairie fiction. The latter begins with Hamlin Garland's *Main Travelled Roads*, published in 1891. As a body, these works reveal an evolving regional image that is based on pride in the achievement of abundance, of the dependable agricultural surpluses for which the Prairie Midwest is noted.

Such pride takes time to develop, however. As the examples of Nicollet and Kearney suggest, initial reaction to the prairie environment is almost uniformly negative. In *My Antonia*, Willa Cather phrases it gracefully: "There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material of which countries are made."<sup>12</sup>

A mid-nineteenth century settler from New York records his disappointment at somewhat greater length, but no less emphatically:

What a dreary waste back in the early sixties was the country west of the Mississippi River! Miles upon miles of unoccupied land with not a tree to break the monotony of the undulating plain. The only timber in Iowa was a fringe along the river bank and here and there a grove. . . . On the plains of Nebraska there was no timber. The Lord evidently had no idea anybody would settle there.<sup>13</sup>

Once settlers do venture out onto the prairies, however, they begin to divide the space, to tame the prairie's wildness by breaking the sod and making the land productive. They struggle to make the undifferentiated space into meaningful land, into productive farms. Hamlin Garland, who lived through the process himself, describes its collective impact in *A Son of the Middle Border*:

Day by day the settlement thickened. Section by section the prairie was blackened by the plow. . . . Strands of barbed wire replaced the winding wagon trails, our saddles gathered dust in the grain sheds, and groves of Lombardy poplar and European larch replaced the towheads of aspen and hazel through which we had pursued the wolf and the fox.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the earliest prairie residents take pride in the tangible, physical evidence of their labors. Again and again, the nonfiction accounts glory in the maturing of arbors initially planted and sustained at great effort. They catalogue the grain elevators and towns that grow up at important crossroads, the

arrival of railroads that link them to distant markets, and the first local institutions that mark their settlements as "civilized." A typical nineteenth century journal from the Prairie Midwest is more likely to comment on the first church building or post office in town than on the details of cultivating or financing on the farm.

One Dakota pioneer ironically notes this propensity to glory in any progress when he observes, "Whenever anything like a real building goes up in a little town on the prairie, with their collection of shacks, it is always called 'the best building' between there and somewhere."<sup>15</sup> As Nebraska novelist Wright Morris perceptively notes in *The Home Place*, something about the insistently horizontal prairie landscape seems virtually to demand such marks of human occupation:

There's a simple reason for grain elevators, as there is for everything, but the force behind the reason, the reason for the reason, is the land and the sky. There's too much sky out here, for one thing, too much horizontal, too many lines without stops, so that the exclamation, the perpendicular, had to come. Anyone who was born and raised on the plains knows that the high false front on the Feed Store, and the white water tower, are not a question of vanity. It's a problem of being. Of knowing you are there.<sup>16</sup>

The achievement of these settlers, as chronicled in the writing from the region, is thus twofold. They strive in order to transform the raw landscape physically—to change the boundless, initially foreboding prairie into productive cropland. They also struggle psychically in order to give the landscape scale and meaning. Thus abundance becomes a regional symbol, and the Prairie Midwest becomes the fabled Bread Basket of America.

Hamlin Garland measures the full extent of their alteration in a memorable phrase from *A Son of the Middle Border*. There he delights in a magically transformed prairie, no longer disorienting, but now domesticated and welcoming, "free land [that] needed only to be tickled with a hoe to laugh into harvest."<sup>17</sup> And when Norwegian immigrant, and later judge, Andreas Ueland lovingly summarizes the process in his autobiography, his sense of personal achievement is manifest:

I see farms to the right and left with comfortable dwellings and big, red barns, sheltered in groves of planted trees. I see herds of cattle, horses, hogs and sheep burrowing for food or shelter into huge straw piles left from the fall threshing. . . . I pass through towns with fine buildings for dwellings and business. I reflect that when there wasn't yet a wagon road where I now ride in a Pullman, Norwegian and Swedish immigrants came here in canvas-covered wagons pulled by oxen, and where they found no human trace on the ground they unhitched, built log or sod houses for shelter, and out of the wilderness made what I now see.<sup>18</sup>

Such expectation of eventual environmental triumph is ubiquitous in the literature of the Prairie Midwest. Historical experience of the land's continuing bounty—despite serious and continuing challenge by factors such as rural poverty, blizzards, tornadoes, drought, and the collapsed markets of the Great Depression—produces a certain bedrock faith in the sanctity of this regional devotion to agriculture, to the systematic production of surplus.

There is no wilderness ethic in Prairie Midwestern writing. Despite occasional laments for the passing of the wild prairie flowers, as in Herbert Quick's *Vandemark's Folly*, this landscape is presumed to be put to its highest and best use in farms.<sup>19</sup> Even modern environmentalists such as Paul Gruchow, who movingly celebrates the wild prairie ecology in his *Journal of a Prairie Year*, seems nonetheless to acquiesce in its agricultural use:

Then came mornings toward the middle of November when farmers working their fields could be seen in the crisp, clear light of dawn, the full moon going down behind them and the sun coming up ahead of them, both heavenly bodies in perfect alignment. It was, like the harvest, a sign of the continuity in things. The sun and the moon, in coming and going together, affirmed a truth of the harvest, which is that every beginning is the child of some ending.<sup>20</sup>

Gruchow's association of the harvest with various natural cycles suggests his begrudging acceptance of the instrumental fate of the prairie—land that is destined to be farmed in order to sustain human life.

Productive agricultural land, bearing in its square fields and section line roads the clear imprint of human occupation, is the fundamental article of Prairie Midwestern faith. Although Gru-

chow may not wholeheartedly approve of it, he cannot deny its extent:

It was on the open prairies that the prodigious work of humans insisted upon itself as the dominant fact of life. . . .

The rivers in the new landscape were the highways, and they ran straight and true from east to west, against the grain of the continent . . . They set in concrete a new order founded not in the nature of matter but in the ground grass of a surveyor's scope.<sup>21</sup>

In general, human influence on the prairie is seen to be beneficent. The regional pride is summarized by patriarch of an Iowa family in Ruth Suckow's depression-era novel, *The Folks*. Himself a banker, this man has lived and raised his family in town, yet his roots in the farm country run deep. While visiting the farm where he was raised, which is still in the family, he speculated about its fate after his death:

The rich smell of the country surrounded him. It wasn't like those desert places, not wild. . . . The smell of the cultivated earth held peace. There ought to be peace and plenty for everyone. . . .

Well anyway it was good land. His father hadn't made any mistake about that. It was good land, and they had owned it for awhile, worked it, and received its benefits. The belief in the goodness of his native soil lay underneath the tottering structure of business faith, religious faith, everything. Whatever folks might do with it, the land was here. That was good. If folks treated it right, it would not let them starve.<sup>22</sup>

Suckow's trust in the land is clear. It is echoed by Willa Cather, by Paul Engle, by Ole Rolvaag, by Andreas Ueland, and reluctantly perhaps, even by Paul Gruchow. Human tenure on the prairie is not harmful; the cultivated land does not lose fertility, it doesn't blow or wash away. The land, which was foreign and forbidding when the first settlers came to it, will remain beautiful and productive long after their descendants have died.

It is hardly surprising that the phenomenal abundance of the Prairie Midwest is lovingly described by writers who manifestly approve of the region's agricultural destiny. Yet even less sanguine Prairie Midwestern writers, those who chronicle the darker aspects of environmental change, implicitly confront this same faith in environmental beneficence, even if they do not

share it. Thus in Frederick Manfred's *This Is the Year*, the protagonist, Pier Frixen, loses his farm to foreclosure in the final scene of the novel. His efforts to make sense of the loss are both tragic and heroic:

Ae, he had tried to catch his anchor into the soils, had tried to get his roots down so deep that neither the wind nor flood, heat nor cold, could ever tear him out again . . . and had failed.

Did a man have to die before he became a part of the old lady earth? Did a man's land work easier after it had been sweetened with the dust of his blood and brains?<sup>23</sup>

For Frixen, as for many others in Prairie Midwestern literature, the struggle is to reach a proper accommodation with the prairie environment. Significantly, Frixen loses his farm in part due to his own neglect, which causes the erosion that eventually destroys much of his valuable topsoil. His failure to adequately learn the land produces disaster. Manfred's theme is clear: simple love for the land is not enough. One must respect it and learn it as well as appreciate it.

Wright Morris suggests a similarly bleak vision in his 1980 novel, *Plains Song*. Cora, a Nebraska homesteader, spends her entire life immersed in the repetitive chores of a farm wife. At great personal cost in extra time and labor, she manages to plant a windbreak and cultivate a green lawn around the house. Keeping the yard in proper order then becomes a great joy in her life. Yet after her death at an advanced age, the arduous work of her entire lifetime is destroyed in one afternoon by a bulldozer, so her heirs can plant soybeans:

This pitted field of the stumps of dead trees was all that was left of Cora's farm. All that was left of the trees, planted by Orion and Emerson, that had led all the way to the pasture . . . "Nobody wanted it," said Caroline. "There was nothing worth saving."<sup>24</sup>

Yet despite the melancholy of this epitaph—"nothing worth saving"—Morris makes it clear that the struggle to shape the land out of the raw earth has sustained Cora. From the time she determines to build the yard her life has purpose, and the chores have new significance: "Without clearly grasping why, Cora had felt dispersed, her workday too short to deal with the endless chores of the farm, but once she had determined her own

domain she could see what each day had accomplished."<sup>25</sup> If Cora's environmental legacy is spurned in all its symbolic richness by her heirs, shaping the land has nonetheless been of profound importance in her own life.

Such ongoing struggle to come to terms with the land is the central feature of regional writing. Almost all Prairie Midwestern works, whether they extoll the beauty of productive farms or recount the heartbreak of failed farms, seek in some manner to make the prairie signify. In this process, the land itself comes to have a sacred dimension, apart from its potential for profit or comfort. As Douglas Unger puts it in his novel, *Leaving the Land*:

... family farmers are willing to work eighteen hours a day if need be and not just for money, but to hold onto the land. There is an immortality given to the earth, a sense of expansive dream passed from immigrant homesteader through generation after generation of his children in a self-perpetuating vision of the meaning of freedom and wealth. Unit farm managers punched their time clocks after eight hours and drove home.<sup>26</sup>

Family farmers, by contrast, do not. They stay on the farms not only physically, by maintaining their residences; but also symbolically, by sustaining a collective sense of connection to the earth they work. It is this additional factor of personal care for the land that makes it meaningful to them.

Per Hansa dies at the end of *Giants in the Earth*, but his son goes on to enjoy the prosperity that the father had only dreamed of. Andreas Ueland takes pride in the changes that have come to Minnesota not only for himself, but retroactively, for generations of immigrant forebearers as well.

Their pride in having learned the land, in having persevered and made it profitable, goes beyond materialism. Although the productivity and abundance of Prairie Midwestern farmland is clearly at the root of the regional complacency expressed in this literature, it is not the sole source of regional identity. There is a dignity and pride that is obtained through the common experience of survival in the oftentimes challenging prairie environment. The relationship is perhaps most succinctly described by Alexandra Bergson in Cather's *O Pioneers!*: "We come and we go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while..."<sup>27</sup>

Properly understanding the prairie is precisely the point of the numerous environmental images in Prairie Midwestern writing. The quest takes the reader from initial images of a hostile and undifferentiated prairie landscape, characterized by a fearsome vastness and openness, in the direction of fuller knowledge. The modern prairie, as revealed in this writing, is more complicated. It presents fewer physical threats, perhaps, but there are new psychological and economic exigencies to be faced. Thus, although no single, monolithic vision of the Prairie Midwest emerges from this literature, it does, in fact, give voice to a distinctive regional identity. Prairie Midwestern sense of place, in my view, is in the most literal sense "down to earth."

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#### NOTES

1. Lloyd McFarling, ed., *Exploring the Northern Plains, 1804-1876* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1955), p. 183.
2. Quoted in Harlin M. Fuller and LeRoy R. Hafen, eds., *The Journal of Captain John R. Bell* (Glendale California: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1957), p. 282.
3. "An Expedition Across Iowa in 1820," *Annals of Iowa*, 3rd series, 10 (January, April, 1912), 357.
4. *Always the Land* (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 150.
5. Barry Gross, "In Another Country: The Revolt From the Village," *MidAmerica*, 4 (1977), 108.
6. William Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931).
7. For an ecological history of the region, see John Madson, *Where the Sky Began: Land of the Tallgrass Prairie* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982) and Betty Flanders Thomson, *The Shaping of America's Heartland* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).
8. Paul Gruchow, *Journal of a Prairie Year* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 21-22. I am indebted to Tom Scanlon of the University of Minnesota for calling Gruchow's work to my attention.
9. Raymond D. Gastil, *Cultural Regions of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), p. 208.
10. For an introduction to the subject of environmental perception, see David Canter, *The Psychology of Place* (London: The Architectural Press, 1977); D. W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Gary T. Moore and Reginald G. Colledge, eds., *Environmental Knowing* (Stroudsburg, Pa.: Duden, Hutchinson & Ross, 1976); E. C. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976); Yi Fu Tuan, *Topophilia* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974), *Space and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

11. Physical changes in the landscape can also be studied as evidence for this process of building regional identity. See John B. Jackson, *American Space* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), and Hildegard B. Johnson, *Order Upon the Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
12. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), p. 8.
13. G. Smith Stanton, "*When the Wildwood Was in Flower*" (New York: J. S. Oglivie Publishing Co., 1910), p. 65.
14. (New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1917), p. 144.
15. Oscar Micheaux, *The Conquest: The Story of Negro Pioneers* (Lincoln: Woodruff Press, 1913), p. 346.
16. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 76.
17. *Op. cit.*, p. 62.
18. *Recollections of an Immigrant* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1929), p. 37.
19. "Breaking prairie was the most beautiful, the most epochal, and the most hopeful, and as I look back at it, in one way the most pathetic thing man every did, for in it, one of the loveliest things ever created began to come to its predestined end." Herbert Quick, *Vandemark's Folly* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1922), p. 228.
20. *Op. cit.*, p. 107.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-11.
22. (New York: Literary Guild, 1934), p. 720.
23. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1947), p. 611.
24. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 200.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
26. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), p. 208.
27. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1913), p. 308.

## EDITH THOMAS AND HAMLIN GARLAND: CANAAN AND ROME

BERNARD F. ENGEL

When Adrienne Rich in 1972 went "Diving into the Wreck"—the title of her best-known poem—she found, as a good Hegelian Romantic and reader of the current pop psychology, that the Twentieth Century self is repressed, suppressed, depressed, is, indeed, a wreck. As a 1970s feminist, Rich determined that this self is an incipient androgyne, whelmed by the oceanic swells of gender prejudice. The habit of perceiving bifurcation where unity might be desired is, in fact, hale if not always hearty. Among readers and critics, it is common practice to postulate two categories of literary art, inventing divisions that are too simple but, like most simplicities in this baffling world, continually popular. Henry James, looking back on his early novel *The American*, recognized that real life is more complicated than the division between the energetic and new, and the placidly traditional presented in his story (Spengemann). People and their cultures indeed escape our categories. But we continue to hear of realism and anti-realism, the novel and the romance, the conventional and the modern, measured verse and free verse—all categories that are too narrow but that appeal because they seem to provide paths through the maze and, like virtuous behavior in Heaven, cost us saintly types nothing.

Considering the complex change in the Midwestern American ethos that is obvious after the Civil War, readers have pondered such supposed causes for it as the shock of the war itself, with its rending of the fabric of what had been thought the indissoluble Union; the rise of industry and the city; the replacement of the dream of agrarian independence with the reality of wage labor under often horrifying conditions; the

spread of rapacity in politics and business; or the turning of cycles that are mysteriously inevitable. Everyone, it seems, recognizes that change took place, but there is little agreement on why it happened and what constituted its fundamental spirit.

A more useful analysis of causes has been suggested by Robert Detweiler and Glenn Meeter, whose bifurcation is at least more profound than the socioeconomic, and is not yet worn to the jejune. Following Martin Buber's *Two Types of Faith* (1951), these editors propose a basis for literary categories in the primary religious faiths of the western world, what Buber distinguishes as the faiths of Abraham ("Canaan") and of Paul ("Rome"). In the theologian's view, "Canaan" arose during the migration of groups of people into a promised land, a migration led by God for divine purposes. God reveals himself in everyday events, especially, of course, in those of historical significance, as he leads his people toward a community of righteousness. There is an obvious association of "Canaan" with the Puritan hope to establish a City upon a Hill, the hope that, transmuted into the political and economic realms, became characteristic of Americans before the Civil War.

The faith of "Rome," on the other hand, arises when people and nations see themselves as under the control of bureaucratic, even alien and demonic, forces, with the old moral law regarded not as a means of salvation but as a device to hold them in bondage. It is not that whatever powers may be have no purposes, but that these purposes concern only individuals, who are to be freed from bondage to the psychological and social situations they find themselves in; the individual looks not toward persevering in honored ways to the past, but toward formation of a new self, idealized as free, authentic, autochthonous, democratic.

The ways of "Canaan" are associated with a realistic view: this world being God's creation, confidence in it is "natural." The ways of "Rome" are associated with anti-realism, with search for the supposed controlling forces that one wishes to alter or shuck off. (American literary realism of the post-Civil War decades is essentially not a version of "Canaan," but a step toward naturalism with its interest in discovering the forces that supposedly keep us from developing our individual selves.) Simple though this scheme may be, it is useful because it relates American

developments to seemingly universal beliefs. And it provides a non-invidious way of dealing with differences in the post-Civil War literary scene, differences too often taken to arise from a sharp division between supposedly contemptible popular writing and literary art.

To test the applicability of "Canaan" and "Rome" to Midwest literature of the late nineteenth century, one might consider such representative writers as Edith Thomas, one of the better known poets of the era, and Hamlin Garland, who though best known for his prose also wrote a considerable number of poems.

When a friend asked Thomas (1854-1925) what she had found lacking in Ohio, where she grew up and began her career as a poet, she answered "salt." Today's reader may find slight savor in Thomas's own verse. Jesse B. Rittenhouse, editor of her *Selected Poems* (1926), perhaps overstates her popularity in remarking that in New York it enabled her to "conquer a city." But it did evidence itself in the acceptance of the reams of verse that she ground out for periodicals and reprinted in her numerous books. Thomas was a skilled craftsman in metrics, and had a shrewd eye for the marketable. As an experienced professional she had read the classics, at least in English versions, knew the work of her contemporaries, could employ such devices of rhetoric as parallelism and repetition, knew how to give a light touch, and used a variety of meters and rhyme schemes. But her thought and imagery were conventionally vague, her subjects and themes those that poets had been using for at least 75 years, and her diction "poetic" almost to the extreme. It is perhaps unfair to choose her as a representative of "Canaan," but by her day this understanding had in fact become outworn in literary circles despite its persistence in popular writing.

A favorite uncle had provided Thomas with books while she was a child, and took her to New York in 1881 (Rittenhouse 3-25). She met Helen Hunt Jackson, who, it appears, expected her to be a pest but instead was pleased with her and became her counselor. Thomas returned to Ohio for two years in the middle 1880s to nurse her mother, but by 1887 had taken up permanent residence in New York. The poems in *Lyrics and Sonnets* (1889), most of them written while she was still in Ohio, show her characteristic aim, to supply reassurance and consolation. In

"The Dreamer," a dying woman is saved from despair by "pitying Sleep"; in "The Breathing Earth," the coming of spring is promised not by the senses but by a "healing essence"; in "The Palmer," the speaker assures readers that no effort is needed to get into heaven—one need only lift up her heart; in "At Death's Door" the dying speaker sees "the great Door swung still and wide" and has a transcendent view she cannot put into words. The supernatural intervenes ceaselessly to ease human griefs, commonly explaining that misfortunes are not as severe as they seem, and promising bliss in the hereafter.

One of Thomas's favorite themes is lassitude, a relaxed, even somnolent feeling, the opposite of the era's fashionable strenuousness. The suggestion of this easeful mood is that troubles are never as great as they appear, that surcease is available at the moment. In "Apollo the Shepherd," the god advises the reader to rest with him instead of ambitiously heading for the king's court; in "Sea-Bird and Land-Bird," the speaker watches as her beloved flies far out to sea and voices her joy as he then washes ashore, the point seeming to be that it is best to avoid the "passion" that leads to adventurism (here, one assumes, the disapproved venturing is sexual).

Thomas could write with humor, as in "St. John's Eve," which has fun with the European legend that once a year those who wear fern seed are invisible; and in "Ponce de Leon," which, playfully suggesting that the explorer may still live, ends with a bit of deliberately wrenched rhyme: "Where Time's harm is well undone, — / Here's to Ponce de Leon." Thomas used the topic of the caged bird, frequently employed by earlier poets of the century to comment on the condition of women. But, as in "Migration," she drew from the bird a religious rather than a feminist message—as the bird longs to fly away, so people desire to go to heaven. From time to time she touched on themes that could be philosophical, but she never treated them as questions that needed rethinking, finding, as in "The End of the World," that the answers of received religion were sufficient (here, the "wise" smile because they are past hope and fear—that is, they know that God's in his heaven). Her diction was often in the supposedly (sometimes, genuinely) archaic mode: in "Snowdrops" she used "I ween," "betwixt," "frore"; many poems employed "thou," "thee," and -eth verb endings. Her reading of

Keats, Arnold, and Swinburne, among others, showed frequently in imitative lines. In the separately published poem *Heaven and Earth* (1889), her vagueness brought such verbiage as "Upon a morn of Heaven / A clear reveille blew / All round the fadeless boscage / The mellow echoes flew;"—presenting not only the fancy "boscage" but also the picture of heaven's inhabitants standing reveille.

Yet despite the freight of routine sentiment and expression, Thomas did sometimes write with a degree of intensity on themes other than the consolatory. As with other women, her accomplishment is not always well represented by editors. Even her friend Rittenhouse chose to emphasize not her occasional recognitions of reality but her polished verse using the manner and often the topics of the Greek Anthology. Despite the use of couplets and the touches of antiquated diction, the fact of injustice in the universe is presented directly, without flourishes, in the poem "Left Out," a piece that recognizes how

Something loveliest of its race  
Perisheth from out its place,  
For the lack of freshening care,  
While the rain pours elsewhere.

And, though the voice of Longfellow lies in the background, the feeling is convincing in "The Deep-Sea Pearl," which, after declaring that though the speaker did not receive love as others do because she had a "secret wound," says that the wound at last grew a pearl; this gem, too, remains secret:

The diver may come and go,  
The tides, they arise and fall;  
The pearl in its shell lies sealed,  
And the Deep Sea covers all.

In our era those seeking to explain "The Deep-Sea Pearl" would no doubt interpret the wound as sexual.

It is easy to dismiss Thomas because her subjects and themes and her ways with a poem were those of 1001 Romantic and sentimental predecessors. She took the existence of an American mission for granted, and believed that God's eye is upon each citizen. But she was of some minor historical importance as one of the first women to succeed as a professional poet. Neither her

readers nor she herself, moreover, were guilty of simple-minded acceptance of things as they are. Though they did not give them open recognition, they knew doubt and fear: the need for consolation betrayed a major lack of confidence in the hyper-patriotism and "civil religion" that were voiced by the lovers of strenuosity who dominated official positions. Lacking Whitman's power to observe the actualities of American life, and his willingness to voice doubts directly, and lacking also Dickinson's ability to plumb the spirit, the poets of "Canaan" in the late century were too constrained to yawp, too easily solaced to plunge into the depths of experience. But their verse of consolation, like the funereal verse of their predecessors (and some of their contemporaries), shows inarticulate recognition that realities were not in line with socially approved assertions. In an age when people read to pass the time, instead of staring at images on a screen, Thomas's work was acceptable. In an age when everyone agrees with Pound that the poet must "make it new," and when only poets and a few professors read verse, almost all of them "seriously," one does not expect her reputation to revive. But, minor though her accomplishment is, it cannot be limited to the category of "Canaan" alone.

Garland (1860-1940), who grew up on farms in Wisconsin, Iowa, and South Dakota, was an advocate of the strenuous, even at times a primitivist, and was drawn to both imaginary and real-life derring-do. Though he is sometimes alleged to have been a mere "back-trailer"—his term for those who, finding life on the farm too difficult, retreat to the city—he was rather a restless seeker, interested in truths he suspected were hidden from the everyday eye. Contemplating the cramped lives of farm families on the Middle Border—the prairie from Wisconsin west through Minnesota and the Dakotas—he blamed the economic system that most Americans accepted as a given, even as progress. In search of the indefinable ideal, he read avidly in the libraries of Boston and began attending seances. His eager investigation of spiritualist claims continued throughout his life, though they led him, he wrote, only to "a state of doubt" (*Forty Years of Psychic Research* 385).

The interest in what he thought may lie behind the everyday led him to take part in the Alaska gold rush. He wrote in *The Trail of the Gold-Seekers* (1899) that he had gone by horse and

foot from central Canada to Skagway in 1898 as "not a gold-seeker, but a nature hunter" (8). The nature he hunted was partly human: what allured him was the "picturesque" he found on this "last great march" of America into a wilderness. But he wanted also "to forget books and theories . . . and social problems, and come again face to face with the great free spaces . . ." His speaker reports in "The Toil of the Trail," one of the poems interspersed in *The Trail*, his triumphant feeling that on the trip he has "touched the most primitive wildness again," has found himself as free as the eagle and proven that "No mountain can thwart me, no torrent appall." A Huck Finn born fifty years late, he had returned to an America neither agricultural nor urban, a wilderness land important not for possibilities of development but for its offering of one last chance for the spirit to live untamed, to meet and perhaps conquer stern physical challenge and to experience a heady freedom from all restraint, an earthly counterpart to the spirit life he sought. Though he resembled Jack London in finding Alaska both a test and an inspiration, he came to mine not for gold but for renewal, for reassurance that under the accumulations of custom a love for freedom remained in the national psyche.

Yet Garland was not wholly a man of "Rome." He resembled most Midwesterners in seeing New England as the cultural ideal: the regionalism and "veritism" he argued for in the essays of *Crumbling Idols* (1894) were meant to urge that the Middle Border develop itself as a new Athens not greatly distinct from existing Boston. Though his best writing is in his prose accounts of the hardships of life on the post-frontier farm, as in the stories of *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), he published poems from time to time throughout his life. In his verse his writing is frequently imitative, sometimes awkward, and monotonous in its metrical regularity and near-constant end-stopping of lines. Yet he deals with observed subjects, and he often lets his exuberance shade into the wistful, as in the ending of "Anticipation": "I must journey where the trees grow tall, / And the lonely heron clamors in the rain." Though the model for such work is the traditional, Garland frequently, as in the ending to "The Gold-seekers," echoes the insistence of Kipling, the arch-priest of "Rome," that "manly" struggle is worth the doing even though it may bring no material reward:

But this out of all will remain,  
 They have lived and have tossed;  
 So much in the game will be gain,  
 Though the gold of the dice has been lost.

Other poems in *Trail* show a contention between the pulls of the wild and the civilized, but, as in the paired "The Freeman of the Hills" and "The Voice of the Maple Tree," may lapse into an alternation between the offensively loud and the archly sentimental. Both notes appear in the concluding verse "Here the Trail Ends," four stanzas of unrhymed, strongly rhythmical lines of varying lengths that merge the notion of saying goodbye to the horse that carried the goldseeker with the myth of crossing the river Styx. The desire for escape and the note of pathos both arise, like the pity in the stories of *Main-Travelled Roads*, from the feeling that somehow in the Midwest Americans have again fumbled a great opportunity, have made their prairie and plains into fields that are more infernal than Elysian.

The primitivism that admires the struggle of man with the supposedly elemental forces of nature perhaps is a source for the sympathy with the Indians that Garland expressed in verse as well as in fiction. Among the poems interspersed in the stories of *Prairie Folks* (1899) is "The War of Race," a piece that is weak in its imagery (the Indian is "on the sand"—a location apparently chosen for rhyme rather than for sense) but strong in its implication that "small" white men leave the Indian no choice but to fight. Other poems in *Prairie Folks* show Garland imitating Riley's tricks of misspelling to suggest rural pronunciations as he celebrates April ("Then It's Spring"), sympathizes with the farmer's wife who leads a graceless existence of toil that sends her to an early grave ("A Farmer's Wife"), expresses equal sympathy as he notes the pathos of the grandfather who, despite his years of unrewarding labor, finds in his old age that his son's wife does not welcome him in her home ("Paid His Way"), and honors Civil War soldiers and the veterans of that war. Often, as in "An Afterword" and "Settlers," Garland shows awareness that it is better to end a poem with one more detail of the circumstances than to tack on an obvious moral or explanation. In "Fighting Fire," he effectively limits his picture of a prairie fire to the impression of the action obtained by someone on a passing train—the line of red on the horizon, the threatened grain, the

murky light, the four men who approach with shovels, the smell of burning hay, and the wall of smoke that suddenly clouds the view. Like the passenger, the reader does not know how the event comes out: what is important is not a narrative, but the impression of forces in action. At his best, as in "Pioneers," Garland is the observer who implies respect, even awe, as he contemplates the inarticulate but determined courage and labor of the men and women whose accomplishment in the end is only that they "fertilize the sod with their own life / As did the Indian and the buffalo."

They too are an elemental force, undirected, seemingly without significant purpose, moving blindly onward in struggle against nature that though beautiful to the eye is indifferent to their effort, yields nothing easily, and in the end reclaims them. There are easier lives, as Garland shows in his frequent contrast of city people with farmers, but, he also knows, everyone comes to the same end. It is not a message of despair but of recognition, a recognition Thomas and other writers of "Canaan" could not make because their ethos insisted on progress in this life and on hope for a paradisiacal hereafter. Garland is neither anti-patriotic nor anti-religious. Believing, as Charles Sanford has noted, that Americans have suffered a "dispossession from paradise," he voices the moral indignation of Midwesterners who, raised with edenic expectations, became bitter at realization that the land speculator, the harshness of nature, and the work ethic had turned dream to nightmare (Herrscher). Like most fiction writers and poets, Garland of course does not attack myths directly: instead, he presents a world in which edenic notions are irrelevant, even unreal.

Like most classification systems, the pigeonholes "Canaan" and "Rome" are too narrow to account for all the strivings and squirmings of active human beings. But comparison of Thomas and Garland suggests that the categories work as one would hope: they help understanding and explanation. Thomas does indeed assume that Americans have been led by a friendly God to found a world superior to that of the past. With such leadership, their society cannot be greatly wrong. Garland, in contrast, is what American critics have been pleased to call a realist—that is, not one of the Washingtons and Jeffersons who, taking short views, are seldom perturbed at seeing the human

cussedness they expect all people to have, but one of the literary visionaries who become embittered by our apparent inability to reenter Eden. Society being in error, Garland considers that its claims are constraints that cripple that development of the self which is the goal of the romantic. The pigeonholes, after all, have permeable walls: despite the differences, Thomas and Garland both express belief in a special American mission. Thomas thinks Americans are already close to the golden shores; Garland thinks, like Whitman, that what we seek is as yet unfound.

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"NATURALIZATION" AND BONDING IN  
DREISER'S "NATURALISTIC" REPRESENTATIONS  
OF *SISTER CARRIE'S* WOMEN

LAURA NIESEN DE ABRUÑA

Interpreting our ambivalent reactions to *Sister Carrie's* women is facilitated by using Barthes's concept of "Naturalization," by which he means the process whereby ideology converts the cultural into the "natural," or into what is perceived as natural. In the case of women, discourse that is conventional and historical is made to appear "natural," or, as Naomi Schor defines it, "always already and forever after true" (127). In Dreiser's fiction this process is coterminous with his attempt to "naturalize" naturalism, so that his own ideology will appear not as metaphor but as mimesis that is also "forever after true." Dreiser, then, does two things: he filters the life of turn-of-the-century Chicago through his own perspective—the ideology that "naturalizes" naturalism—and then uses this ideology to determine or naturalize once again his vision of an early twentieth-century "working girl," Carrie Meeber, into his novel. *Sister Carrie* asks its readers to accept as truthful and probable a picture of both a city and a woman.

Dreiser's ideology posits, according to June Howard, a harsh yet beautiful universe made up of forces indifferent to man and inscrutable (41). Human desire is one of these inscrutable forces, although desire is also the most sensitive characters' response to their world. Carrie Meeber is a projection—not of a locus of scientific determinants—but of a nexus of desires, a dynamo whose energy Dreiser prized as the characteristic ingredient of success. In his infatuation with desire, Dreiser followed Balzac, the most influential nineteenth-century romantic of energy and the will, whose *Peau de Chagrin* (1831) reflect an obsession with

desire as life and with its diminution as death. Both authors saw human life as determined by a individual's energy and its expenditure.

A major difference between them is that Balzac saw a personal but finite limit to everyone's energy. As metaphor of this entropy, he used Rastignac's animal skin (*peau*) which contracted with its owner's each desire. Dreiser's romanticized belief about desire was that it could be virtually never-ending for the very, very successful. Carrie is that successful, because her energy and desire are constant; whereas Hurstwood's level is always waning toward death. Dreiser's intention is understandable, yet the reader remains, to some degree, ambivalent about Carrie because he fails to naturalize his theory of desire; Carrie does not seem very real or very interesting. Moral judgments leveled at Carrie, as well as the litany of complaints about her materialism, coldness, and her talentless success are neutralized once we see her as the failed metaphor in Dreiser's attempt to naturalize his theory of desire.

A more productive question is why Carrie fails not only as a metaphor of desire but as metaphor of woman. I do not intend another censure of Carrie for her treatment of Hurstwood. There are other questions that remain unsolved relating to Dreiser's ability to engender his women characters at all. His clumsiness is obvious: We might ask why Dreiser empties his women characters of identity, emotional life, or power of introspection. Carrie is curiously unable to exist affectively and has limited feelings toward Minnie, Drouet, Hurstwood and even Ames, whom Dreiser portrays as the obvious mate for her. She lives at a distance from her sexuality and enjoys immunity from the biological fact of pregnancy—despite years of sleeping with Drouet and Hurstwood—and even from ambivalence about motherhood. Even if we are to attribute Dreiser's reticence to contemporary prudishness about sex, we are not convinced that children could not have appeared in the narrative. Coping with children would surely have been the fate of many women like Carrie living in 1900. More curious still is Dreiser's denial of a single thought on the subject passing through Carrie's mind, when he could so easily have shown her as having an attitude of some type.

Something, or many things, have become distorted by Dreiser's attempt to naturalize Carrie as a woman, although few critics trace these problems to Dreiser himself. They prefer to criticize Carrie as a "vain and empty-headed woman" (Matheson 82) whose desires are selfish. Few readers have understood the nature of her desires or their causes. Leon Seltzer, however, helpfully suggests that Dreiser did not himself realize the full meaning of Carrie's desire as a need for love and "emotional relatedness" (192). Her longing will never be satiated, because she is herself incapable of loving. Seltzer traces this problem to Carrie's inability to form relationships with others. Her connections with Drouet, Hurstwood, and other women are unstable because based on self-interest and circumstances rather than an independent bond.

Nancy Chodorow's theories of bonding, set out in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, can go far in explaining the inability to form strong connections that is represented in characters like Carrie Meeber. Chodorow uses psychoanalytic insights to explain differences between male and female personality structures. Her discussion of human identity goes beyond the models espoused by male identity theorists Eric Erikson, Heinz Lichtenstein, and Normand Holland, because she investigates gender differences in identity formation while not assuming a male paradigm. According to Chodorow, young women develop a capacity for empathy more easily than young men, and are less threatened by it; thus, independence is harder for women to attain. Unlike the male self, the young female self is defined not through independence from the mother but through bonding with and identification with her. The young woman consequently defines the self through social relationships. In Chodorow's theory, the nature of adult female identity arises specifically from the mother's relationship with her daughter. The mother must allow symbiosis first, and separation and individuation later. Any problems in the process will interfere with the daughter's ability to bond with others when she is an adult.

Although Carrie's story begins after she leaves Columbia City for Chicago, Dreiser gives us much evidence of problems in identity formation and family bonding. For instance, when Carrie leaves home, she feels few regrets. Her mother seems to have played so small a part in her life that Carrie thinks of her

only once and only on that first train ride. The trip itself is an emotional watershed for Carrie, although she does not realize it, because she hated the dull and trivial life of her family and their city: "The threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken" (3). Despite one twinge of homesickness, a nostalgia ironically inspired by the swinging of dead tree branches (76), Carrie views her home as the very least desirable of imaginable alternatives. She prefers even a Chicago winter to the thought of a homecoming which, Dreiser says, aroused ". . . all the antagonism of her nature" (65). Although there is no evidence of physical or psychological abuse in her family life, Carrie had not experienced any emotional closeness there, or surely her life in Chicago would have been more connected in her mind, and in the reader's, with her past in Columbia City.

Major problems in family bonding are also clear in Carrie's relationship with her sister Minnie Hanson, a "commonplace woman" (11) who gives her sister no more than a "perfunctory embrace of welcome" (11). On her part, Carrie has come to the Hansons not to live with "home folks," but because she is "dissatisfied at home" (15). Minnie is dominated by the stingy and taciturn Sven, who views Carrie primarily as a boarder. They extort as much of Carrie's salary as possible and are willing to cut her off when she falls ill and loses her job. When Carrie leaves Minnie's flat, the older sister has an anxiety dream, in which she imagines her sister going down into a coal pit and then being swallowed by water. But these sisterly feelings are inspired by "wonder and anxiety" rather than "sorrow or love" (74), and they seem a projection of Minnie's belief that anyone who shuns the round of conservative toil will end in the abyss. Sven concludes their discussion cynically: "Now she has gone and done it" (74), implying that they need not feel any further concern for a "fallen woman." They make no attempt to find her; and Carrie thinks no more about her sister or their parents except as something ossified and past. When Drouet leaves her, and she is awakened to Hurstwood's marriage, Carrie thinks again of Minnie and of her home in Columbia City, but ". . . looked for no refuge in that direction" (251). She associates her sister's life with poverty and is revolted by the idea. Even at the

height of her success in New York, Carrie remembers her sister's life as dull and depressing.

The quality of Carrie's relationships with her family or others does not appear to concern her. Yet Dreiser frequently describes her as "sad," or "lonely." She often looks as if she were ready to cry. The adjective "melancholy" characterizes her even in her Waldorf splendor, where she refuses to amuse herself with the "mashers" who seek her company and perhaps her money. She eventually withdraws from all men, because Drouet and Hurstwood, at worst, have used and deceived her, and at best have hampered her freedom. The men she has met in the theater are no more interesting to her than her two lovers. Still desirous at the novel's end, she is dissatisfied with a life that should have gladdened her, given her early cravings for money, rich foods, fine clothing, and a superior residence. Mrs. Vance, once the object of Carrie's envy, is satisfied with these objects. Dreiser credits her restlessness as evidence of the dynamic yearning that will lead her toward beauty and knowledge. He misinterprets her motivation since her sadness is more probably caused by her loneliness, which Dreiser emphasizes. Ames gives perhaps the sharpest analysis of her character, which he says is "not exactly gloomy. . . . There's another word—melancholia, sad. I should judge you were rather lonely in your disposition" (481). The sadness is caused by her inability to trust or love anyone, even Ames or her roommate Lola. Chodorow's insights into female identity formation help account for these problems by linking such behavior to poor familial relationships, especially between mother and daughter.

While we applaud Dreiser's Carrie as a brave inversion of the sentimental novelist's heroines destined for marriage; and we admire her ability to survive, as well as the independence he ascribes to her, there are other parts of her character that are disturbing. It is difficult to defend Carrie's early materialism and later callousness toward Hurstwood; just as it is hard to accept her as a representation of woman. Chodorow's psychoanalytic theories of bonding and Barthes's theory of naturalization show that Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is as much described by absence as presence.

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## THE ETHNIC NEIGHBORHOOD IN CHICAGO FICTION: MAITLAND TO MOTLEY

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No native son or daughter of Chicago need be told where the city's streets divide one ethnic group or neighborhood from another. Division Street, Studs Terkel once suggested, may be found almost anywhere in the city. More recently, in *Chicago: City of Neighborhoods*, Dominic Pacyga described the city's ethnic history this way: neighborhoods like those on the city's "Near West Side" have "always been divided along ethnic, economic and racial lines." Though one ethnic group might displace another—though a "Ukranian Village" might succeed a "Polish Downtown"; though the names along a street might change from German to Polish and Jewish and then to Hispanic—lines of division within the city endure with an almost uncanny constancy.<sup>1</sup>

The ethnic neighborhood seems so conspicuous a feature of the city's life and so inevitably built into its social structure that its presence in Chicago fiction often escapes critical scrutiny. Which is not to say that readers of Dunne, Farrell, Algren, Motley, or Bellow overlook the Irish, Polish, Italian, or Jewish neighborhoods in particular works. The most inattentive readers sense their importance. A host of studies, moreover, has revealed the ways in which individual works and particular writers use the ethnic neighborhood to condition character, inform particular narrative sequences, and shape a rhetoric of memory and experience. Readers and critics agree that the ethnic neighborhood exists and existed as a fact, as historic reality, and as an imaginative construction. Check any list of recent scholarship on Bellow. We have not, however, placed the fictive ethnic neighborhood under a unifying perspective. My essay's too short, the

literature too various, to attempt this through a comprehensive, comparative study. Concentrating on James Maitland, Hobart Chatfield-Taylor, and Willard Motley, with a side-glance at Nelson Algren, should reveal a convergence and divergence of perspectives focused on one point: on Chicago's ethnic neighborhoods as a melting-pot, on the myths of ethnogenesis linked to the mingling and fusion of ethnic and racial groups.

### I. Maitland and Chatfield-Taylor: Next-door to Babel

James Maitland's sensational tale of murder, sexual intrigue, and the supernatural, "The Witness from the Dead," begins oddly enough with an extended catalog of Chicago's ethnic neighborhoods. When he published it in 1879, as one of the *Suppressed Sensations; or Leaves from the Notebook of a Chicago Reporter*, the city's ethnic neighborhoods had no common name and no fixed meaning. In struggling to describe these neighborhoods, Maitland deals out one synonym after another: "centres," then "territory," "colony," "quarter," and finally "neighborhood."<sup>2</sup> He makes clear that he is naming what, for him or his readers, seemed new and unnamable:

Most of the . . . numerous nationalities congregated in this most cosmopolitan of Western cities, naturally, and of their own choice, gravitate around separate and almost distinct centres. . . .

Thus the North Side is largely German; the explorer of Halsted street will find the Hibernian element predominating . . . ; and the traveler by a Milwaukee avenue car passes through a . . . territory in which a large majority of the residents are of Scandinavian birth. . . .

The scene of this brief story . . . is laid in a Polish colony in the northwestern part of the city, in the vicinity of Elston road. Possibly a condition . . . found nowhere else in the Union exists here. The people are chiefly of the lower orders from Warsaw, Cracow, and . . . Czersko. . . . Bred up in almost total ignorance, and looking upon their priests as their only governors, they are for the most part bigoted and superstitious. (139-40)

Maitland does not define these communities so much as he isolated them in a realm beyond common experience and understanding. He magnifies their exotic remoteness and their inhabitants' mysterious existence.

Thus, he implicitly invites his reader, in the customary style of escapist and "sensation" fiction, to take a vicarious journey to heathen lands. Assuming the voice and the persona of an honest reporter, he tells in full and loathsome detail a true "story" that had been "suppressed." Since the foreign-born live in "separate and almost distinct centres," foreign countries within the city limits, they can be said to inhabit a *terra incognita* where only an "explorer" dare travel. In such a place, on the lawless streets of Chicago, a woman might plausibly return from the dead to bear witness against her faithless and murderous husband—as his ghostly character does in "Witness . . ." Maitland, like Shang Andrews, E. P. Roe, Charles King, and many other Chicago writers of the late nineteenth century, grinds immigrant and ethnic characters in the mill of popular conventions and prejudices. He helped construct a typology of immigrant character out of conversion narratives and "sensation" fiction.

What commands attention, in all this bricolage, is the sharpening consciousness of Chicago's ethnic divisions. Maitland's perfunctory catalog of ethnic groups signals this new consciousness. For many popular writers, Chicago's emerging ethnic neighborhoods, in their separateness and their imagined remoteness, lay behind mysteriously drawn barriers and boundaries. These were barriers and lines of division that—in their view—the foreign-born and their children created and maintained. The sharp, precise and sometimes impassable limits that Algren's, Motley's, and Farrell's immigrant and ethnic characters confronted at the edge of their own neighborhoods did not yet exist—or, rather, their attempts to leave the ethnic neighborhoods did not provoke recognition. The popular writers' map of the city's ethnic communities and divisions was necessarily limited to an Anglo-American perspective: that is, a distanced and outside view.

We can see that perspective in clear resolution in a forgotten Chicago novel, *Two Women and a Fool* (1895).<sup>3</sup> Though its dilettante author, Hobart Chatfield-Taylor, cannot be classified with Maitland as a pulp-maker, he built his fiction and his vision of the city's immigrants and ethnic neighborhoods out of much the same Anglo-Saxon mythology that informed sensationalist tales. In *Two Women and a Fool*, he sends his hero Guy Wharton to Halstead Street, through the multi-ethnic neighborhoods Motley was to make his own in *Knock on Any Door* (1947).

Wharton is a *Flaneur*, a man with artistic tastes and, we are to believe, a decadent manner and morality. Yet, for all his artistic sensibility, he cannot distinguish one immigrant neighborhood or immigrant type from another. He does not seem to see—much less lyrically catalog, as Motley and others later did—the neighborhoods and people he encounters on Halsted and Maxwell Street. Neither the myth of the melting pot nor the precise striations of ethnicity in the city seem to hold any meaning for Chatfield-Taylor or Wharton.

His hero's wanderings, figured largely as a descent into a luridly lighted or darkened nether world, come to an end at Hallim Hall. This is a barely fictionalized Hull-House. To get there Wharton walked from his downtown club, passing through the immigrant neighborhoods of Chicago's West-Side. At Hallim Hall he first stares uncomprehendingly at a "nationality map." The map represents the ethnic divisions of the surrounding neighborhoods; and, so far as can be told, recreates one of the maps Jane Addams and her staff had charted for the *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895).<sup>4</sup> Wharton asks Dorothy Temple, the socialite and settlement house worker he is courting, what "the little squares of green, blue, and yellow" on the map mean. Hearing that they make up "a map of the slums," colored and keyed "to the nationality of the inhabitants," he flippantly dismisses the multi-colored map and her explanation (159-60). For him, and presumably Chatfield-Taylor, Chicago's emerging ethnic neighborhoods have already melted into an incomprehensible "jumble," a colorless map of chaos (149).

For the fictionalized settlement house worker, as for the Hull-House residents, such a "nationality map" represented neighborhood communities and the particular concentrations of one and another Eastern or Southern European group on the city's West Side. This gathering of the foreign-born and various ethnic groups—a "nation of nations" in the popularized biblical phrase—had another significance in nineteenth century sermonical literature and in its political rhetoric. It prefigured the rebirth of the foreign-born and an America where, in words of a much quoted biblical text, there are "no more strangers and foreigners. but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19) Chatfield-Taylor answered this rhetoric with his own allusions and righteous references to a biblical authority.

He turned to the story of Babel. He has Wharton assert that in Chicago "the crowds which swell the streets by day are but a jumble of contradictory ingredients who mix but do not assimilate" (149). In *America*, the nativist weekly he edited between 1889 and 1891, Chatfield-Taylor regularly invoked Babel, using it to prefigure and predict social and political chaos for America: the immigrant "invasion" would "make of the American people a Babel-tongued horde of creatures who no more resemble a nation than 500 pebbles are like to a stone structure."<sup>5</sup>

Against the "nation of nations" biblical text and other melting pot rhetoric, Chatfield-Taylor mustered the nativist belief that the "new immigrants" would dispossess the "native American stock." That point is pronounced sternly through Wharton. As he walks through an immigrant neighborhood, he reflects sadly: "The character of the people one meets here has changed since I was a boy. There is less vigor and Yankee pluck in their faces, more of the degradation of the European serf" (150-51). In short, he foretells—through the tawdry spectacle of Chicago's ethnic neighborhoods—the end of American race and nation, not the fulfillment of its sacred promise in the melding together of all races and nations.

## II. Willard Motley: The Ethnic Neighborhood and Beyond

Behind the genteel and elegant diction of Chatfield-Taylor's sentences, near the center of his sentiments on "degradation," lies a single, flat cliché: "there goes the neighborhood." The saying rings with proverbial wisdom in Chicago, since, over many years, it's been applied to one then another ethnic and racial group, as each in turn has moved in or fled the "old neighborhood." The reasons for this processive change and the perdurable ethnicity of the city's neighborhoods are both subtle and self-evident. The sons and daughters of immigrants, or their sons and daughters—the so-called second and third-generations—constantly re-enact the old story of generational change, conflict, and mobility. In doing so, they leave the old ethnic neighborhoods, their parents, and their past. That, at least, is one script for generational change and stasis written out by sociologists and urban historians and writ even larger in the popular culture. It

suggests that generational progression makes for unilinear progress toward an American identity and the American Dream.

I note this to stress that Motley and Algren, in the Chicago novels taken up here, do not focus squarely upon the progress of those, like Julian Romano of *Knock on Any Door* (1947), who negotiate the move across the great ethnic divide. Julian, the forgettable brother of Motley's Nick Romano, progressed from their ethnic neighborhood to Hull-House, to night school, and beyond to an American or anyway Italian-American identity.<sup>6</sup> But Julian's success in moving beyond ethnicity, within the structure of the novel, stands as little more than a dull foil to his brother Nick's contrasting failure to do the same. Motley and Algren, with different emphases, dramatize the divided selves of those characters like Nick Romano, Chet Kosinski, Bruno Bicek, and Frank Majcinek who cannot, save in grotesque or tragic ways, break the family and communal bonds of ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> They are held, seemingly against their deepest desires, to an ethnic past and identity that they strive mightily to transcend.

Perhaps it is enough to say that the ethnic characters of Motley's and Algren's Chicago novels are caught in what has often been called a "generational conflict." Neither that term nor "ethnic entrapment"—a term Cox and Chatterton effectively apply to Algren's Bruno Bicek—fully embraces their dual identities or the forces shaping their lives.<sup>8</sup> Werner Sollors has said that "if American culture symbolizes man's entry into fragmented modernity, 'ethnicity' functions as a formidable expression of a countervailing yearning for history and community."<sup>9</sup> For Algren's characters, Chicago's ethnic neighborhoods and the city on the other side of its many dividing lines symbolize those counterpoised and contradictory yearnings.

In Algren's and Motley's fiction, police and corrupt politicians typically guard the boundaries between ethnic groups and work to preserve the barriers separating ethnic neighborhoods. Armed with the authority of the law or vested with the absolute power of old world fathers, they can block or frustrate the younger generation's attempts to move across the lines of division fixed by fear and tradition. In questioning Bruno Lefty Bicek, the young boxer and hoodlum hero of Algren's *Never Come Morning* (1942), Police Captain Tenczara speaks with such authority. He asks Lefty: "What were you doin' on Chicago

Av'noo . . . in the first place? Ain't your own ward big enough you have to come prowlin' around down here . . . ?" (80).<sup>10</sup>

Lefty knows instinctively what dangers can overtake him once he goes outside his neighborhood. His fears are suggested, early in the novel, when he and his gang leave his neighborhood to heist a slot machine from a road-house. On the road, he feels a "cold spot" of fear grow inside him; he had "never been this far west of the Triangle before" (20-21). And, returning home with his take, he feels he's "been out of the Triangle and into the world and . . . made good" (26). This is exultation mixed with relief. Though he feels entrapped in the Triangle—a Polish neighborhood bounded by Milwaukee, Chicago, and Racine Avenues—he both fears and desires a world and identity outside it. His ventures beyond it are almost invariably crowned with failure. In the end chapter, Konstantin Bonifacy, a small-time politician, vice lord, and embodiment of the immigrant generation's power, blocks Lefty's escape from the Triangle.

Motley (1909-65) seldom maps out the city's ethnicity within a grid of streets as geometrical and as constricting as Algren's Triangle. In contrast to the boundary streets of Algren's Triangle, the limiting outlines of ethnic neighborhoods in his fiction seem amorphous, elusively receding. In *Knock on Any Door*, for example, he puts in place the familiar symbols of an Italian neighborhood—the extended Romano family, their back lot home at 1113 Peoria, a cluster of "Italian stores crowded together" near Halsted, a church, a parish school, and a playground (80, 90). But the Romano family and the Italian neighborhood are simultaneously breaking down. Nick Romano lasts but three weeks at the parish school, and then joins a gang that grows to include Vito, Stash, and Sleepy—an Italian-American, a Polish-American, and an Afro-American. Each of the three Romano children, including Nick, will marry non-Italian, entering so-called "mixed marriages." The old Italian neighborhood, as the novel unfolds, seems to be simply melting away; the family's ethnic line of descent is destined to end with the second generation.

For Motley, Chicago's ethnic neighborhoods represented—when projected into the future—a melting pot that would fuse all races and nationalities. In particular, Halsted and Maxwell Street, the multi-ethnic neighborhood near Hull-House, em-

bodied an ideal of communion and community that he repeatedly celebrated in the 1930s and 1940s. In a group of sketches, most headed either "Pavement Portraits" or "City Sketch," he first recorded this view of the Halsted Street neighborhood.<sup>11</sup> The prose in them is cadenced, and sometimes reminiscent of Sandburg's Chicago poems. Many of the lines are overwritten—bathos stands always just around the corner. Still, as a source for understanding the neighborhood as a "melting pot" in *Knock on Any Door*, these largely unpublished sketches, from roughly 1939 and 1940, are an invaluable guide.

The closing lines of "Mother Halsted Street" typify the collection and illustrate its most prominent themes:

Music shouts out of the open doors of taverns, record shops, restaurants: Mexican, Greek, Italian music. Garlic smells and cheese smells weave around the people.

. . . All nationalities of people. Immigrant people. Slum people. Drunks. And mother Halsted is wise. . . . Chicago's most humane street, she adopts them all.<sup>12</sup>

The rhetoric or racial or ethnic fusion here is consonant with a long and pervasive American tradition. The analogue of mingled music and the melding and blending of nationalities, for example, dates from at least Zangwill's *The Melting Pot* (1908). There, in the play's last act, Zangwill used the hero David Quixano's "American Symphony" to express a "vision of . . . coming brotherhood."<sup>13</sup> The adoptive "Mother Halsted"—mother to "all nationalities"—recalls another allegorical representation of America as universal mother, the "Alma Mater" of Crevecoeur. That figure, also represented in the act of adopting new immigrants, thus stands as a "symbolic representation of the *process* of . . . Americanization."<sup>14</sup> Motley's "Mother Halsted" and the implied vision of a "nation of nations" may find its ultimate source in a biblical verse, Acts 17:26: "God . . . hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth." As Werner Sollors has shown in detail, this verse animated American debates about race, racial fusion, and ethnogenesis from the 1830s down through the 1930s. The passage and the attendant rhetorical tradition was a favorite of black preachers and radicals like Frederick Douglass; they used its authority to assert that the human race shared a common line of descent and belonged

to a single family.<sup>15</sup> This was almost certainly a text and a rhetorical tradition that Motley, who was black, knew and understood.

Motley's melting pot vision is, of course, localized. The whole of the human race—in all its racial and ethnic diversity—seems to dwell as a single family in the Halsted Street neighborhood. When he recasts the "Mother Halsted" sketch for *Knock on Any Door*, he retains the musical symbols of racial fusion, and focuses the point of view in Nick Romano. At the same time, he drops all references to the street as an allegorical mother. In the novel, when the young Nick discovers the Maxwell Street open market off Halsted, he hears a mix of music and "men and women shouting . . . in . . . Jewish words, Italian words, words, Polish, and Russian words, Spanish, mixed-up English" (83-84). For the youthful Nick these mingled foreign sounds and words blend into "circles of song," forming a symbol of an idealized racial and ethnic unity.

Transferring such sentiments and lines from "Pavement Portraits" to *Knock on Any Door* changed their significance in at least two ways: (1) racial and ethnic melding and fusion seem to be in process, not perfected or complete; (2) attributing perceptions of racial and ethnic unity, particularly the most lyrical and sentimental, to the youthful Nick allowed Motley to distance himself from these views. Motley sought to underline Nick's innocence through another embedded and revised "Pavement Portrait." This source sketch, an impression of a "street dance on Newberry," was first printed in *Hull-House Magazine* (January 1940).<sup>16</sup> Refined and compressed, it served to illustrate Nick's first discovery of his Chicago neighborhood:

A lean young Negro . . . came out of the crowd and asked a pretty Italian girl in her teens for a dance. She smiled and nodded. . . . They whirled across the dirty asphalt and back. They swayed to the music. . . . The crowd, three-fourths white, watched, applauded when they were finished. The black boy escorted the Italian girl back to the fringe of the crowd, thanked her for the dance and went on his way. (88)

It's not necessary, in the context of the novel, for Motley to assert that the crowd is made up of "polyglot neighbors" as he did in the original sketch. The several catalogs of Halsted and Maxwell

Street people that lead to the moment of the dance spell out the neighborhood's ethnic and racial mix. Nick's fascination with the dancers and the street dance betokens his sympathetic understanding of the neighborhood's racial and ethnic diversity.

Perhaps, as many critics have charged, such rhetoric and innocent images of racial and ethnic harmony point to Motley's naive romanticism and his all too compliant acceptance of America's melting pot myth. So, Giles and Weynant, in their reading of Morley's unpublished short story, "One of the Family," have argued. In their view, it "contains the most direct statement of Motley's proletarian 'melting-pot' ideal."<sup>17</sup> Though they do not define that ideal or specify what in the story constitutes a "direct statement" of it, they criticize Motley's sympathetic treatment of an "ethnically mixed neighborhood" and, in turn, suggest that his rendering of this community reifies his "melting-pot ideal." Their reading, in short, converts Motley's measured sympathy into an "ideal." While he does categorize the Halls, and other white ethnic families of the neighborhood, as "honest, hard-working" people, he also discloses, with exacting precision, their racial prejudices and ethnic stereotypes. Their neighborhood may represent, in its ethnic and racial diversity, a coming together of all races and nationalities. But almost nothing in the story suggests that it typifies racial or ethnic fusion or the beginning of such a process.

The title itself, "One of the Family," underlines the narrative's central and informing irony. Even though Dave, "the Negro boy of the neighborhood," is treated "like one of the family," he cannot expect to become one of the Hall family.<sup>18</sup> When his friend Jimmy Hall goes out on a date—Motley emphasizes his girl's "long . . . blond hair"—, Dave stays behind with the elder Halls, playing cards. He's not expected to date or marry outside his race; even intermarriage between Irish and Germans, in this neighborhood, stands suspect. The story stresses, in polite but tense argument the Halls, the barriers between ethnic and racial groups. The working-class neighborhood where Dave and the Halls live, to this extent, symbolizes Chicago's ethnic and racial divides—not a "melting-pot ideal":

The menace was at State Street. State Street was the boundary line. All east of State was their territory. There was only one Negro family in the neighborhood. They had lived there over

thirty years; had bought their home out of the nickle, dime and quarter tips the father had received as a pullman porter. (5)

This indirect discourse encapsulates Mr. Hall's fears of blacks as a "menace" to neighborhood property values. Whether the accompanying view of the industrious black family, a faintly fictional and mostly autobiographical statement by Motley, should also be attributed to Mr. Hall is never fully made clear. The ending of the story mimics this ambiguity and ambivalence. As Dave drunkenly sings with Jimmy Hall and Hal, another white friend, we are made painfully conscious of his separate and isolated position as "the Negro boy of the neighborhood." These last lines cancel out whatever image of racial unity and harmony the mingled singing might have expressed. If, in short, "One of the Family" makes a statement of Motley's "melting-pot ideal," it does so through indirection and irony.

Why are Motley's enactments of the melting pot myth incomplete? Why do his narratives begin with the conventional gathering of "all nations" and end with images of people separated by barriers and divisions? In its narrative structure, "The Almost White Boy" opens up a more direct answer than "One of the Family."<sup>19</sup> It is a story of Jimmy, the son of a white mother and black father. He and his family had been forced to move: first, from a black neighborhood on Chicago's Sixty-First street, and, then, from a white one on Thirty-Ninth. On Halsted and Maxwell, "where all the nationalities lived bundled up next door to each other" (392), they finally find a refuge from taunts and name-calling. During this time, Jimmy goes to parties and dances on the South Side: "to Polish hops and Italian *fiestas* and Irish weddings" (393). When he meets Cora—at a dance—they fall in love. Cora, of course, is white, and learns of Jimmy's mixed racial parentage after they've fallen in love. Their love ends or, at least the story ends, with an argument and a slow, painful revelation of Jimmy's despair. After the dance, they can find no way to live and love; they can imagine no place and no future where racial differences melt away.

In one sense Jimmy stands as a *type* of ethnic and racial fusion: he is "almost white" and "almost black," but really neither and both. In terms of America's Adamic and melting pot myths, he symbolizes a "new man." A powerful sermonic and

rhetorical tradition formed this American redefinition of ethnic boundaries. It sprang from the biblical image of the "new man" that derived, in important measure, from two of St. Paul's letters:

For he is our peace who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition *between us*; having abolished in his flesh the enmity . . . to make in himself of twain one new man . . . (Ephesians 2:14-15)

"put on the new *man* . . . Where there is neither Greek nor Jew . . . Barbarian, Scythian . . . but Christ is all, and in all (Colossians 3:10-11)

For a newspaper essay on segregation, integration, and Chicago's ethnic neighborhoods, Motley wrote of a "new man" on terms that are closely parallel:

Every time there is a crossing of lines, an international or interracial marriage (of whatever races) a small hurrah arises in the guts of me. Why not an international, interracial man, looking much like a man? He would probably be tan of color with wavy hair, slant eyes and high cheek bones. . . .

His description of "international, interracial man" builds upon the images of fusion implicit in the Pauline text. The Chicago *Sunday Sun Times* printed his essay on August 11, 1963, but struck this passage and an accompanying paragraph on intermarriage and "a mixing of bodies."<sup>20</sup>

What Motley imagined, and the *Sun-Times* editors would not print, was his vision of racial fusion, a future America fulfilling its destiny as a "nation of nations." In the printed article, he remembered first "the narrow boundaries" of his old neighborhood "where a Pole was a 'polack' and an Italian a 'dago'." He then posed, in contrast, the Halsted Street neighborhood, an ideal, multi-ethnic community where "people crossed easily and naturally . . . across the borders" (4). In *Knock on Any Door*, that universal ideal, somewhat curiously, receives its fullest statement in a reverie of Pa Romano. He recollects the trans-Atlantic crossing, and the gathering of "Greeks, Swedes, Russians, Poles, Italians, Jews, mute Lithuanian peasants. . . ." He is spurred to remember the crossing, to catalog the immigrant nationalities, and to dream of "the new" on a W.P.A. project. On the streets of Chicago, "Italians, Poles, Negroes, Swedes, Mexicans" are

brought together. He discovers that "most of them were just like him" (177-78).

He and his son Nick may believe in much the same ideal, but they never speak to each other about their visions. Pa Romano's dream remains buried in his silence and dies with him; Nick's redefinition of America's racial and ethnic boundaries is spoken only in guarded, ironic, and angry words. He soon learns that the police articulate and enforce the codes that divide and separate Chicago's neighborhoods. Accordingly, his gang, a mix of nationalities and races, becomes a police target. A policeman who stops "Vito, Stash, Nick, and Sleepy" asks: "how come you boys are all different nationalities?" Nick's tough-guy reply carries, in the context of the scene, the stamp of authentic bravery. He answers the cop who has already "cracked Vito in the face," saying "that ain't nothing, is it . . . , in this country" (105-06).

Kerman, a coarse and bigoted district attorney, repeats the cop's snarling jibes about "different nationalities" at Nick's trial. Questioning Butch, Nick's friend, he says: "The defendant here . . . is Italian. You're Greek. That—the other one was Mexican. . . . down there?" When Butch answers, "Ain't that what America is?," Kerman explodes into melodramatic anger. Motley will allow him no effective logical or moral reply.

Kerman does insinuate, with unsubtle sarcasm, that "down there"—in Nick's Halsted Street neighborhood and in the Madison Avenue skid row where the gang met—the mixing of races and nationalities fostered degeneration and criminality. In one way, we have come full circle to Chatfield-Taylor's nightmare vision of "degradation" on Halsted street. That is, Kerman implicitly argues that a community should be a homogeneous ethnic group. In part, he is able to prove Nick guilty of murder because he wrests a confession out of him. But Kerman also convicts him of having crossed over the boundaries that separate the city's racial and ethnic groups.

Motley's own rhetorical strategy in *Knock on Any Door* undercuts Kerman's belligerent and brutal pleas for racial and ethnic separatism. Nick, despite his crimes and his moral failures, shines in the light of authorial sympathy because he has broken these boundaries. Nick's sensitive response to the music and street life of Halsted, and his identification with a multi-ethnic and multi-racial gang, embodied Motley's own redefini-

tion of ethnic and racial lines. If Nick does not in himself, Jimmy of the "Almost White Boy" does, fuse racial and ethnic types, at the novel's end he nevertheless symbolizes all the city's races and ethnic groups. He is the everyman who may be found behind "any door" (504). As such, he heralds Motley's "international inter-racial man."

### III. "Across the Street," Beyond Ethnicity

Motley was the prose poet of Chicago's ethnic neighborhoods. In many ways, he never moved beyond the vocabulary of lyricism and the myth of the melting-pot he first expressed in "Pavement Portraits." Though he dilligently researched and wrote page upon page documenting the grim conditions of the Halsted Street slums for the W.P.A., though he must have witnessed, in the years that he lived on the West Side, the hatred and prejudices infecting the ethnic and racial groups there, he never conceded that poverty or violence might prove more powerful than the beauty and the character of the people. That is not to say, he misunderstood the virulent prejudices that poured out of the city's melting pot neighborhoods. In his fiction he placed them in dialectic opposition to an ideal America: he opposed Kerman to Nick; the prejudiced cops to the tolerant street gangs and people.

Motley writes in a prophetic mode, then, even when he seems to be chronicling the past or documenting the present. That was evident in his 1963 *Sun-Times* article, when he wrote about the Halsted Street neighborhood: "Across the street . . . on Sundays . . . people would start singing the Negro songs of the South. Other voices from nearby houses joined in. It made a beautiful sound, and soon the tenement flat, and then the neighborhood, seemed to begin to shake" (3). The scene, worthy of Frank Capra and fit for any rousing Depression-era musical comedy, does not escape sentimentality. But, despite its too artful choreography, it manages to suggest that such racial and ethnic harmony—his neighbors represent a half-dozen ethnic and racial groups—flourished for a moment and then but once a week. He again echoes the Pauline text on "the middle wall of partition," in saying the walls of the tenement were shaken. But he does not prophesy that the divisions between people will soon

be torn down. In the context of the article, this scene, and its quite traditional melting-pot imagery, offers a guarded prophecy of Chicago taken beyond ethnicity.

The language and rhetoric of ethnicity in Chicago's fiction has been beautiful and brutal, a language written in hope and hate. It is, after all, a long way from Maitland to Motley, from Chatfield-Taylor's fears of "degradation" to prophecies of peace, harmony, and the biblical "new man." What spans the distance between these separate visions is the common belief that in the city's ethnic and multi-ethnic neighborhoods the future Chicago and future America were being formed.

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#### NOTES

1. Pacyga and Ellen Skerrett, *Chicago: City of Neighborhoods* (Chicago: Loyola U.P., 1986), p. 199.
2. Maitland's *Suppressed Sensations* (Chicago: Rand, McNally Co., 1879), pp. 139-42. Future references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text.
3. All references to Chatfield-Taylor, *Two Women and a Fool* (Chicago: Stone & Kimball, 1895) will be given parenthetically in the text.
4. See the end-papers of *Hull-House Maps and Papers* by the Residents of Hull-House (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1896). For color reproductions of the Hull-House maps, see Perry Duis, *Chicago: Creating New Traditions* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1976), pp. 66-67.
5. Chatfield-Taylor, "Babel-Tongued Communities," *America* 1, #27 (October 4, 1888), 2.
6. Note, for example, the way Rosemary, an idealized Anglo-Saxon character, praises Julian Romano. See *Knock on Any Door* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1947), p. 281. Future references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text.
7. Chet Kosinski, the main character in Motley's *We Fished All Night* clumsily disguises his Polish ethnic past, when he adopts the name and character of "Don Lockwood." Dicek of and Frank Macjinek (a.k.a., Frankie Machine) of Algren's novels, *Never Come Morning* and *The Man with the Golden Arm*, also struggle to recast their identity and leave their ethnic neighborhoods and past.
8. Martha Heasley Cox and Wayne Chatterton, *Nelson Algren* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), p. 109.
9. Werner Sollors, "Literature and Ethnicity," *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard, U.P., 1980), p. 648.
10. Algren, *Never Come Morning* (New York: Berkley Medallion Edition, 1968). All references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.
11. Filed with "Mother Halsted Street" are ten other "Pavement Portraits." Willard Motley Collection, Northern Illinois University Libraries, DeKalb.
12. "Mother Halsted Street," carbon of a two page typescript. Willard Motley Collection, Northern Illinois University Libraries, DeKalb. Quoted by permission of the Willard Motley Estate and Northern Illinois University.
13. Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), pp. 142 and 179.
14. Sollors, "The Rebirth of All Americans in the Great American Melting Pot . . .," *Prospects*, 5 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1980), p. 88.
15. Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1986), pp. 60-61.
16. Motley, "Handfuls," *Hull-House Magazine*, 1 (January 1940), 10-11.
17. James Giles and N. Jill Weynant, "The Short Fiction of Willard Motley," *NALF*, 9 (1975), 6.
18. Motley, "One of the Family," typescript. William Motley Collection, Northern Illinois University Libraries, DeKalb. Quoted by permission of the Willard Motley Estate and Northern Illinois University.
19. Motley, "The Almost White Boy," *Soon One Morning*, ed. by Herbert Hill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 389-400. All references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text.
20. Motley's article appeared in the Chicago *Sunday Sun-Times*, sec. 2 (August 11, 1963), 1-4. The suppressed passages were first printed in *The Diaries of William Motley*, ed. by Jerome Klinkowitz (Ames: Iowa State U.P., 1979), p. xx.

"AS HIS HOME TOWN KNEW HIM"  
SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S LAST TRIP HOME

RAY LEWIS WHITE

*"Got aboard Santa Lucia, Grace Line, at 11 a.m. and sailed at 12. A cold day with a heavy wind and snow. . . . The sea got so rough that everything in the room flew back and forth across the cabin." Thus did Sherwood Anderson, on February 28, 1941, write the last entry in the diary that he had kept rather faithfully in the last years of his life. Bound from New York for South America—for Chile—and scheduled to pass westward through the Panama Canal, Sherwood Anderson and Eleanor Copenhaver Anderson had started the most adventuresome traveling of their married life, a trip that would take them to meet South American writers, in truly exotic lands, and to allow Sherwood to collect material for writing about the small towns of another continent as understandingly as he had written about small towns in the United States. Unfortunately, Sherwood became gravely ill on board ship was removed to a military hospital in the Canal Zone.*

*Wondering what the Andersons' family and friends had learned of the writer's illness, I searched the files of the Smyth County News—the Marion, Virginia, newspaper once owned and operated by Sherwood Anderson and, in 1941, owned and published by his son, Robert Lane Anderson. The earliest reference to Sherwood's illness, surely a wire-service dispatch, appeared in the March 4 issue of the newspaper:*

Sherwood Anderson Ill in Canal Zone

A dispatch from Cristobal, the Canal Zone, reports that Sherwood Anderson of Marion and Troutdale, American author, was removed on Wednesday, the 5th, from the Grace liner *Santa*

*"As His Home Town Knew Him."*

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*Lucia*, seriously ill from what appeared to be an abdominal obstruction.

He was taken to the Colón hospital and was accompanied by Mrs. Anderson.

Doctors said the writer was expected to respond to treatment but they indicated his condition was grave.

Mr. and Mrs. Anderson were on a "good will tour" to Chile, off the west coast of South America, at the invitation of former President Davila of that country. They left Marion February 22 and sailed from New York on the 28th.

*Then, after most citizens of Marion and the other areas of Southwest Virginia had surely learned by telegraph, by telephone, from the daily newspapers, and from radio broadcasts that Sherwood Anderson had died of peritonitis in a distant military hospital, Robert Lane Anderson had time to prepare for publication a quite lengthy and detailed obituary for his father, an obituary that appeared in the March 13 issue of the Smyth County News:*

As His Home Town Knew Him

Sherwood Anderson, 64, the story teller, died late Saturday afternoon, March 8, in the Colón hospital, Cristobal, Canal Zone, after a six-day illness which developed into peritonitis.

He was taken ashore from the Grace liner *Santa Lucia* on Wednesday, the 5th, interrupting a planned three months trip to Chile, South America, made at the invitation of ex-President Davila of that country. He left Marion two weeks ago and sailed from New York on February 28.

With him was his wife, the former Eleanor Copenhaver, daughter of Prof. B. E. Copenhaver of Marion and the late Mrs. Laura Scherer Copenhaver, who died in December.

His body is being brought back on the Grace liner *Santa Clara* by Mrs. Anderson, docking at New York Monday, March 24, and reaching Marion by train Tuesday, March 25. The funeral will be held here at 11 a.m. the next day, with burial in Round Hill cemetery, in a grave overlooking Marion and the beautiful Holston valley.

Mr. Anderson is also survived by three children by his first wife, Robert Lane Anderson of Marion, John Sherwood Ander-

son of Apalachicola, Fla., and Mrs. Russell Mayo Spear of Madison, N.C., seven grandchildren, two brothers, Karl Anderson, prominent as a painter, of Westport, Conn., and Ray Anderson of Chicago, Ill.

Of all the things which made Sherwood Anderson, the greatest was his passionate absorption in men and women, a vast, warm, sympathetic interest. He respected humbleness in others, struggled unceasingly to achieve it in himself.

He was born in the little town of Camden, Ohio, on September 13, 1876, the son of Irwin Anderson, a harness maker of Scotch-Irish descent who had wandered into that country from some section of the southern highlands, and Emma Smith Anderson, the half Italian daughter of a peasant immigrant.

Although the father was not a good provider he was "a lovable, improvident fellow, inclined to stretch the truth in statement . . . colorful, no account. He should have been a novelist himself." The mother was the mainspring, the life center of the family. She marked her son deeply. Tenderly, vividly she is described in *Tar: A Midwest Boyhood*. Almost single handed she raised a family of five sons and one daughter.

At 12 Sherwood Anderson peddled papers through the barrooms of little Ohio towns and, unknowingly, gathered from the life about him the roots of some of his greatest stories. For a few years he lived with a doctor, hitching the trotter for night calls, rubbing the horse down when it came in. He fooled around the little half mile tracks and got a love for fine trotting stock which never left him. Years later these experiences came out in "I'm a Fool," perhaps his most reprinted short story, and "I Want to Know Why."

His sketchy schooling was topped off with a year at Wittenberg College at Springfield, Ohio, where he tended fires and did other tasks to get through. Forty years later they gave him a Lit.D. He accepted it gravely. Legend has it that a Chicago advertising man heard him make a college speech and offered him a job. What really happened was that he wandered away into the Chicago of 1893 and the depression, which he got through heaving apple barrels on the Chicago river docks. Later he got into advertising and in 1898 enlisted for the Cuban war. "It was," he always said, "the last good war in history." The captain of his company had taken his wife and baby along and

bought a cow. Sherwood wangled the job of caretaker for the beast. His war campaigning, he always claimed, consisted of taking the beast out into the side roads, wandering along each day, bringing her back into the new camp each night. While the cow grazed he talked to the Cubans.

As an advertising man he was successful and began to go ahead. He had a knack of writing the right thing, selling talk for chewing tobacco, buggies, paint. Then, in Elyria, Ohio, he got into the paint business. His plant prospered by degrees. Sherwood Anderson was heading for the life of a successful mid-west manufacturer. He joined the Elks club and began to play golf.

Somewhere along the line he had begun writing. There is a story that his first piece was for a children's magazine. He sent it in after snorting at some of the pap he heard being read to his children.

He wrote at night, shutting himself away in the house. He wrote one year, two years, three years, night after night, until 2, 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning.

He sat dictating in the office of his paint factory. "I am walking in the bed of a river," he told his stenographer. While the puzzled girl watched, he walked out the door, turned up a week later in Cleveland. From then on he was a writer. He never went back to the factory; the stockholders got it.

In Chicago it was advertising again, part of the time, writing always. Some of his bosses must have been very patient; fellow workers very helpful. *Windy McPherson*, his first novel, was written. A friend showed the manuscript to Theodore Dreiser, who had already published *Sister Carrie* and who got a publisher for the book. The publisher declined to put it out without certain revisions. Anderson refused to change it. Later another publisher was found.

Hard work brought on a nervous breakdown. He recovered in an Ozark mountain cabin, subsisting principally on fat back and hominy. He wrote another book. Rereading it on the train back to Chicago he found it far from what he wanted; he heaved a year's labor out the window.

Chicago was alive in those days with young writers. With massive Theodore Dreiser plowing ahead something was being done in mid-America. He, Sherwood Anderson, others there and in the east finally and for always broke the grip of Mrs. Grundy

on American writing. Mark Twain, in his own peculiar [head?], could at last be happy.

In 1917 came *Marching Men*, one of the first, if not the first, of American labor novels, a rough, powerful call to men in the mines, the factories, to march shoulder to shoulder. After it came *Mid-American Chants*, a book of poems, a Whitmanesque voice speaking in the twentieth century. Then, in 1919, he published *Winesburg, Ohio* which received widespread critical acclaim and a certain measure of popularity. Of all his books—and there were some 23 or 24—it has been most read, most translated. Today it continues to sell steadily in various popular “library editions.” In it he told the story—simply, movingly, with dramatic power—of the American small town, from which he had come and to which he would yet return.

The book opened what some critics have called his great decade, a series of novels which included his near best seller *Dark Laughter*, two semi-[auto]biographies, and ending with *Hello Towns*, a book of reprints of his writings in *The Marion Democrat* and *Smyth County News*.

Perhaps it was his great decade, perhaps it wasn't. His work was always uneven from the critics' viewpoint. Sharp division greeted almost all his work. “I see they have buried me again,” he said once as he dug into a new book. A year later the gravediggers were glad to disinter him.

There was a strong painter's feeling in the Anderson tribe. Karl Anderson went on to become a successful painter and teacher of painting in New York and Connecticut. A younger brother, Earl, showed great promise, was injured, disappeared, came back years later from a hitch in the navy to die in a Baltimore hospital while his brothers stood by. Early in the 20s, while wintering in a shack on Mobile Bay, Sherwood turned to painting. He produced a series of color studies and still life drawings. They gave him a one-man show. Then he went back to writing. It was an interlude. He was a story teller. But always there was the strong painter sense, more and more as years went by strong friendships with painters, a feeling and understanding of their work. They in turn felt it and responded to him.

In 1921 he received the *Dial* \$1000 prize for literature.

In 1926 he went abroad to Paris. Everyone was going then. He came back the next year. Mostly he had got some grand new

friendships, notably one with Gertrude Stein, and a feeling he belonged in America, gaudy and money crazy though it was then.

Always Sherwood Anderson had written about, had felt, had fought the machine. In the '30s, as blight settled over America, he was more and more preoccupied with it, with what it was doing to men and women, those who worked the machines, those who owned them. Man was losing his touch with materials, his sense of craftsmanship, losing at the same time his self respect and love of life.

In his car he drifted about America talking to mill hands, filling station men, hunger marchers, desperate farmers on their mortgaged acres. He talked also to the men who owned the mills, the factories, who held the mortgages on the land. He visited Washington, talked to the poet Henry Wallace who was to become Vice-President and his friend.

He watched the labor movement come south, saw the fierce milltown struggles, poured out what he saw and felt in articles, stories, novels.

He died with some 24 books published. They had been translated and read in France, Holland, Germany, Russia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Spain, Argentina, China, Japan. Sometimes the first he knew of it was when a strange, paperbacked volume came and a friend translated the title. Sometimes from an honest publisher came a small check in francs, centavos, yen.

In America he influenced a whole generation of writers. Some of them didn't like it, later. Others gave him a reverence, which made him vaguely uncomfortable. Many people, artists, business men, labor leaders, workmen, gave him love.

He died with some 24 books published. He had written and destroyed many more in his writing career which started when he was 40. He died with a hundred stories still untold.

Always young writers came to him or wrote to him. If they were honest, sincere, he responded, gave freely of himself, his time, his energy.

In 1923 he was living in New Orleans. Julian Harris, the Alabama newspaperman son of Joel Chandler Harris, the *Uncle Remus* writer, told him of a cool place to spend the summer, the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Greear at Troutdale. He came to it, loved the country, drove the mountain roads with a hired horse

and buggy. On one of his rides he found a little farm at the forks of Laurel and Ripshin creeks. It was owned by an old lady named Anderson. He bought it.

The next year he built Ripshin. It was a grand year. He had a touch of prosperity that year with *Dark Laughter* but soon took care of that. With Old Man Marion Ball, the mill builder, and the men of the Troutdale neighborhood he planned, hauled, shaped, laid up, built. Finally the house was finished.

He couldn't be a country squire. All his life he had written where and when he could. Some of his best work was done in noisy railroad waiting rooms between trains. Now he had a perfect place to work and, for the time being, the work would not flow.

Seeking something to do he came to Marion to the fair. He sat in the grandstand on the north hill watching a trotting race. In the stand he fell in with Denny Culbert. "Why don't you buy the local papers?" Denny asked him. He did. A week later he was a small town editor.

He put out the Marion papers, and "put out" were the words, all the next year, all through '28 with Gil and Joe Stephenson and Jack Mennerick. His roots were going down into the country. He was back in a small town. Buck Fever wrote for the papers then, the Deep Sea Club cruised from the Rialto to Staley's Knob, Nellie the Print Shop Cat had misadventures. People all over America began to take the paper and read about the doings, the lives of Smyth County folks.

Sherwood Anderson had come to love this mountain country and its people. He wrote about the turn of a road, a field beyond. An old farmer came into the shop. "Say, that's my field you wrote about," he said. "I never realized it was beautiful until I read your piece."

Writing, of course, drew him back and away from the papers. He handed them on to his children and one of his sons bought them. Ripshin was his again, as he swung back to work, as the novels, the poems, the articles began again. He lived at Ripshin during the glorious mountain summers, in Marion off and on during the winters, ranging away and away to New York, New Mexico, New Orleans, Mexico, or once again riding the roads in his car, gossiping, bantering, talking, following the threads of American life.

Always he came back to Southwest Virginia, to saunter on Marion's old Rialto, gas in Doc Thompson's drug store, argue with cronies on the courthouse steps, discourse in Rosemont's friendly living room, drop by the print shop with a "have you got a story on such-and such?"

Always he came back.

—R.L.A.

*These touching words from Sherwood Anderson's son Bob, published in his newspaper the Smyth County News, provided just the right obituary and extensive commentary on the writer's fascinating life. Although Bob Anderson certainly had for years heard and read his father's autobiographical reminiscences, it is likely that a great deal of this material was adapted by the younger Anderson from his father's writings or from a wire-service dispatch, one of the obituaries prepared well ahead of need for use whenever the death of a prominent person might warrant. For, in this obituary and biography, Robert Anderson printed the Sherwood Anderson story very much as Sherwood created and re-created and told and re-told and wrote and re-wrote that story—with Sherwood's usual winsome legends and innocent errors and well-meant exaggerations, this material presented in the manner of a publicity release—the kind of release that Sherwood himself might have enjoyed writing—although the last paragraphs, concerning Sherwood's life in Marion after 1927, and the moving final paragraphs are surely the writing of Robert Lane Anderson.*

*Printed also in the Smyth County News issue of March 13, 1941, was a wonderful tribute to Sherwood Anderson—a tribute by a very close friend in Marion, Virginia, a tribute signed "Both Barrels," the author being the Marion attorney Charles "Andy" Funk:*

#### Sherwood Anderson, Our Friend and Neighbor

Over the entire world, wherever good literature is loved and known, people will mourn the passing of Sherwood Anderson. His works have been translated into many foreign languages. They will live and have their influence upon people and literature for generations. In practically all civilized nations he has admirers and personal friends. Some who know him only

through his books, some whom he met during his trips abroad and some who made a pilgrimage to his home in America to meet and become acquainted with him.

His fame as a writer was well established when he came to Southwest Virginia to live. We cannot claim him as a native son, but one of adoption with his own consent. While traveling through this country he chose Grayson County as the place where he wanted to live. He built a home and for the last fifteen years of his life he divided his time between Grayson and Smyth counties.

In 1927 he purchased the two county papers published in Marion and personally conducted them. One was a Republican paper and one a Democratic. He kept himself so far removed from the narrowness of partisan politics that no one of either party ever accused him of being unfair. Immediately after he took charge of these papers they were greatly improved. Many of us remember the writings of "Buck Fever" and the stories of the Rialto. He made the daily happenings here important by pointing out the important things of human interest. He seemed to cause us to realize that here in our own little "Old Home Town" that life was interesting and worthwhile and that people were nice. He loved people and he loved life.

The people of Marion and Smyth and Grayson counties have lost, in his passing, more than Sherwood Anderson the great writer. They have lost Sherwood Anderson their good friend and good neighbor. We did not look at him through his books or magnify him through his fame. We found and loved the man himself for what he was.

On the lawn of the court house or the court house steps, on the curb, at a filling station, the back end of a drug store, or the running board of a car—in our homes and at his home, Ripshin, is where we met and became acquainted with him. He was interested in people and wanted to be with them because he loved them. The more humble the people the more interest he seemed to have. Many times when things have looked dark to some of us we have gone to him with our troubles and we usually came away feeling better than when we went. He had a mind that seemed to tear apart the difficult problems of life and reconstruct them. However, he was not a person who always sympathized with those who came. Many times in the mirror of

his thought and reasoning we could see ourselves reflected as we really were and we would come away better persons.

He was not a man whose fame caused him to lose his human balance. One week he would have as house guests famous writers or actors or painters or sculptors or government officials; the next week he would entertain a bunch from the Rialto of Marion—from the store, the shop, the office, the street and the farm. He loved people from all walks of life for what they were.

If we had the space we do not have the ability to properly appraise him as a writer. This has [been] and will be done by those accomplished in the field of literature. We speak of him in the manner that we knew him, a good citizen, a good friend and a good neighbor. As such he will always be missed.

—Both Barrels

*The news account of Sherwood Anderson's funeral and burial, written by Robert Lane Anderson or by a staff reporter of his newspaper, appeared in the Smyth County News in the issue of March 27, 1941, one day after the services were conducted:*

#### Sherwood Anderson is Buried in Round Hill

Sherwood Anderson was buried Wednesday, March 26th, in Round Hill cemetery while nature smiled.

The American story teller and citizen of Smyth and Grayson counties, who died at Colón, Canal Zone, on March 8 on a trip to South America, came back to one of the small towns he loved and understood so well on Tuesday.

His body was brought home by Mrs. Eleanor Copenhaver Anderson, his wife, and it was at the Copenhaver home, Rosemont, that the funeral was held.

Friends from Smyth and Grayson, friends from other parts of America, gathered. An American flag, sent by the War Department because Mr. Anderson was a volunteer in the Spanish-American war, covered the casket. In the generous floral gifts red roses predominated.

The service was conducted by the Rev. J. J. Scherer of Richmond, Mrs. Anderson's uncle; Dr. Hugh J. Rhyne, president of Marion College; the Rev. Brokhoff, pastor of the Marion Lutheran Church. The Marion College choir and sextet sang from the upper hall.

Two brief tributes were read, one by Paul Rosenfeld of New York, read by the Rev. Mr. Brokhoff, and one by Theodore Dreiser read by Stanley Young of New York.

As has been previously reported, Mr. Anderson is survived by his widow, two brothers, three children and seven grandchildren.

Pall bearers were Chales H. Funk, Robert F. Williams, David A. Greear, B. L. Dickinson, J. Fred Killinger of Marion, John A. Sullivan and Orlie Stamper of Troutdale. W. F. Wright, another old Grayson friend, now of Marion, acted as usher.

Among those who came here for the funeral were Karl and Ray Anderson, brothers, of Westport, Conn.; John Sherwood Anderson of Apalachiola, Fla., a son; Mr. and Mrs. Russell M. Spear of Madison, N.C. (Mrs. Spear being the former Marion M. Anderson, a daughter); Dr. and Mrs. Henry Van Meier, Stillwater, Minn.; Dr. and Mrs. Channing Wilson, Baltimore, Md.; Mr. Rosenfeld and Mr. Young; Mr. and Mrs. Louis Galantiere of New York; Mrs. Burton Emmett of New York; Roberto Rendueles of New York; Dr. Ferdinand Schevill of Chicago; Paul Green of Chapel Hill, N.C.; Wharton Esherick of Paoli, Pa.; Judge Preston Campbell and George Kreger of Abingdon; Mrs. R. L. Myers of Detroit; R. R. Horner of Roanoke.

*Readers of the Smyth County News were fortunate to have Robert Lane Anderson operating the local newspaper, for, in the issue of April 3, 1941, Sherwood's son printed the two funeral eulogies referred to above—one tribute written by Theodore Dreiser, the American writer whom Sherwood Anderson early on had most admired and identified with, a tribute read at the funeral ceremony by Stanley Young; the other tribute, written by Paul Rosenfeld, since the early 1920s one of Sherwood's most faithful and sympathetic literary friends, Rosenfeld's words being read at the ceremony by the Reverend John R. Brokhoff, minister of the Lutheran church in Marion, Virginia:*

Sherwood Anderson

Anderson, his life and his writings, epitomize for me the pilgrimage of a poet and dreamer across this limited stage called life whose reactions to the mystery of our being and doings

here—(our will-less and so wholly automatic responses to our environing forces)—involved tenderness, love and beauty, delight in the strangeness of our will-less reactions, as well as pity, sympathy and love for all things both great and small. Whenever I think of him I think of that wonderous line out of the "Ancient Mariner"—"He prayeth best who loveth best all things both great and small." And so sometimes the things he wrote as well as the not too many things he said, to me personally, had the value of a poetic prayer for the happiness and well being of everything and everybody—as well as the well-outcoming of everything, guided as each thing plainly is by an enormous wisdom—if seemingly not always imbued with mercy—that none-the-less "passeth all understanding." He seemed to me to accept in humbleness, as well as in and of necessity in nature, Christ's dictum: "the rain falleth on the just and unjust." Also that we are to "take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what you shall drink! nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?"

As I see him now there was something biblical and prophetic about him. Through all his days he appears to have been wandering here and there, looking, thinking, wondering. And the things he brought back from the fields of life! *Dark Laughter! Many Marriages!* "The Triumph of the Egg"! *Mid-American Chants! Winesburg!* in which is that beautiful commentary of the strain of life on some temperaments called "Hands"! It is to me so truly beautiful, understanding and loving, and weeping, almost, for the suffering of others.

Well he is gone—wise, kind, affectionate, forgiving. And I wish he were not. To me, amidst all the strain of living and working, he was a comforting figure—never in any sense a slave to money, or that other seeming necessity to so many—show—or pretense. He was what he was and accepted himself in just that sense—"I am that I am—Take me or leave me for what I am to you." And I, like millions of others, I assume, have taken him in just that sense. And other millions will, I feel, for the duration at least of any American literature.

—Theodore Dreiser  
Hollywood  
March 19, 1941

## The Man of Good Will

The world lies discolored, ghostly about a hole in space through which Sherwood Anderson has vanished. One wonders how it will be possible for the fragments he has left behind him ever to be otherwise than grey and thin. A sunlike being is gone, a tiny Sol close to us, cheerfully aglow down in the thick mists of earth, sending horizontal deeply warming beams through the terrestrial atmosphere.

Like the sun in heaven, he was concentrated good-will. Infinitely more than any personal profit he might derive from the creatures and things among whom he existed, it was the life and the forces making for the life of these people and objects that were dear and desirable to Sherwood Anderson. But he was good-will incarnate, in the human flesh: in touch and connection with the reality, inner thought, living heart of things. No man, one thinks, can have been in tenderer unity with it than himself. With his exquisite imagination he warmed and illuminated this hidden realm, casting light onto the connection of all things, one the self-sameness of the impetus to life in all, the immense part of the inclemency of circumstance in all frustration and deformity; penetrating the mysterious subliminal events which shyly shrink from the day but make up man's real history.

No contemporary was more perfectly free from malevolence than Sherwood. No words uttered in our times were more perfectly bare of poison than were his. Thus his life and presence cheeringly, exhilaratingly, sunwise woke us who had the immense privilege of being his personal friends to the fact that a perfection was possible upon this earth. Good-will—in the last analysis what is it but consummation itself, completion in itself, as unity with the reality, inner truth, living heart of things? Thus his art spread and increased the possibility of such perfections by infecting the untold thousands who were its readers with something of the spirit of good-will which fathered it.

Yet if the world is grey and like an airy nothing without him, it were a sin to see in that bleakness the sign of the triumph of death. In our very grief for him of our loss we cannot fail to realize that what he gave us has given him life in our hearts while they last, and will cause him to rearise, a sun-in-splendor, in the mind of man. And there in the discolored world still stand with

us, comfortably and perhaps eternally, the nurses and the sources of his spirit? nurses and sources to which his whole life-work constantly referred and sang. One, is the communal good-will of the American Middle West, whose truest, finest younger son and exponent he was. Another, is Nature, which all his days held him in bonds of soft good-will. The greatest is the Source to which he pointed with his vision of the dignity and worthship that inalienably are life's no matter what its torment and its sorrow. This, is Good-Will from beyond the stars.

—Paul Rosenfeld

*Wise and moving as are these two eulogies to Sherwood Anderson, both from noted American authors, one other of Sherwood's closest friends of many years—a friend from Marion, Virginia—published in the March 27 issue of the Smyth County News perhaps the most heartfelt and the most earnest valedictory. Signing himself only as "Pat," Preston Collins thus said his farewell to Sherwood Anderson:*

## A Friend's Epilogue

His was an unshackled spirit. It soared with the eagles in its ambition to interpret and was yet simple and childlike. He loved the flowers of the fields, rippling water, harvested crops, birds of the air and all plain and natural things. He loved rolling hills and lofty mountains because they too are simple and natural. He loved the changing seasons because in them he saw the untarnished art which lies in nature itself. Above all, he loved the souls of unpretentious, hard working, honest individuals. His sympathies flowed freely to the underprivileged. He understood weakness, and believed that strength lay in simplicity.

His mind was clear and wrought with precision and logic. He saw in man's effort to become objectively strong through invention, the correlative loss of man's dignity and subjective strength; and the growth of spiritual sterility.

Sherwood Anderson was a medium through which the grandeur of plainness, naturalness and simplicity was expressed.

As the years go by the realism of Sherwood Anderson will bring many a literary traveler to his graveside here in Marion overlooking the Holston. His friends will not forget even though he will not come back again.

—Pat

Thus, in these few columns from the Smyth County News, from a few days in March and April of 1941, are to be found the contemporary accounts of Sherwood Anderson's last trip home and the tributes to the writer from the people with whom he had shared his life. One further item does appear, in the April 3, 1941, issue of the News—an indistinct photograph of the burial ceremony, showing a group of mourners gathered under and near a funeral tent on a steep cemetery hillside, a photograph bearing only this stark explanation: "In Round Hill cemetery as Sherwood Anderson was buried on March 26th. The town of Marion is seen in the background."

Illinois State University

## SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S *POOR WHITE* AND THE GROTESQUES BECOME MYTH

DAVID D. ANDERSON

When the Modern Library edition of Sherwood Anderson's *Poor White* was published in 1926, Sherwood Anderson wrote—a rare occasion in the Modern Library series—his own introduction to the novel. He wrote not for a new generation of readers but for those who had not read the book in the more than five years since its original publication. In the introduction, he talked frankly about *Poor White* as he had seen it while writing it, as the critics understood it when it appeared, and as he saw it five years later.

Earlier, in 1920, he had summed up his view of what he thought he had done in the novel in a letter to Jerome and Lucile Blum. At that time he wrote "The new novel [*Poor White*], out in October, will, I hope, build up the country about Winesburg, sweep Winesburg into the modern industrial life, show what made it an Akron, Ohio."

Five years later, however, he had undergone several major transitions in his life: he had abandoned Chicago, New York, and New Orleans for the hill country of western Virginia, divorced Tennessee Mitchell and married Elizabeth Prall, and rejected the spirit of liberation that a decade earlier he had thought was so important; furthermore, in that five years he had published two novels, two volumes of stories, and a volume of memoirs, and he had a fictionalized autobiography of his childhood ready for publication. From this new perspective, he began to review the experience of Modern Library publication, and then turned to the book itself:

There is this book, "Poor White"—now to be published in The Modern Library, tricked out in a new dress, going to call on new people. The Modern Library is something magnificent. Long rows of names—illustrious names. My book, "Poor White," feels a little like a countryman going to live in a great modern sophisticated city.

The book becomes now—well, let us say a house in a vast city.

With this new perspective, from experience, from writing, from the Virginia hills, he saw that *Poor White* was not merely the biography of a town as it became an industrial city as he had written to the Blums, but that, like *Winesburg, Ohio*, it was primarily about people:

Who lives in the house?

I began reciting names . . . Jim Priest, the farm hand who admired General Grant . . . Rose McCoy, the school teacher . . . Hugh McVey . . . Clara Butterworth . . . Steve Hunter, an early Rotarian . . . Sara Shepard . . . Joe Wainsworth . . .

I tried to put down the things you did to each other and the people about you and what other people, what life itself did to you.

Earlier, when he finished the novel and tried to assess his accomplishment, he recognized now, he had seen the appearance of the novel rather than its reality, the town rather than its people:

There was a town in the state of Ohio. The town was really the hero of the book. After "Poor White" was published none of the critics spoke of that. What happened to the town was, I thought, more important than what happened to the people of the town.

Why—well, because I presumed I realized all the time that after Joe, Jim, Clara and the others had been forgotten new people would be living in the town.

Five years later, however, Anderson knew that while his fictional town would continue to grow, to change to something no longer recognizable for what it had been, the people, those whom he had created and placed there were fixed in time and place, durable rather than ephemeral:

I sat in the back room of a saloon among sailors and while they talked of the sea little Joe Wainsworth killed Jim Gibson in a harness shop in the Ohio town. I was on the deck of a boat in the

Gulf of Mexico and there came that moment when Hugh McVey crept out of his wife's bedroom. On another day I was in a quiet residence street at night. It was dark. I went along swinging my stick. People passed—knowing nothing.

And all the time as I walked that tall gaunt man, Hugh McVey, was creeping in the cabbage field at the edge of town, back in Ohio—that night when he frightened the French boys so that they ran away . . .

How much of all I felt, saw, knew of my people of my town, of the people of my fancy finally got into the book?

That you, the reader, will have to decide. Here is the book. I cannot change it now. It is very close to me and at the same time very far away.

In this introduction Anderson was not only closer to the novel and more understanding of what he had done at any time since he put the last words on paper, but he would never return to it in such intimacy again. Unfortunately, however, not only has this introduction almost uniformly been overlooked by critics and scholars, but the book, then and now, has continued to be seen as the biography of a Midwestern town in transition from its nineteenth century origins as the trading center of an agricultural region to its new twentieth century role as an industrial complex in a new technological age.

That dimension of the book is certainly important: it is, without question, the best fictional account of that transition that we have, and it does indeed show, as Anderson wrote, *Winesburg* as it became another Akron. But to accept that interpretation is, as Anderson recognized and tried to communicate to the readers of a new, inexpensive edition, to ignore or overlook the novel's most durable, most memorable dimension, that of the people of Bidwell. Like those of *Winesburg*, the people of Bidwell are memorable for their very humanity; they are durable in their attempts to express it, to define it, to make their indelible marks on the fragile pages that preserve the history of the evolution of their time and place.

*Poor White* is indeed the story of *Winesburg* become another Akron and of the creation of the American twentieth century. But it is also the story of those who came out of the nineteenth century, pursuing a humanistic ideal, only to create at the same time a new materialism and a new dimension of the perennial

Midwestern—American—search for an elusive personal fulfillment. It is, in other words, the story of the two competing ideals of the eighteenth century that had been carried across the mountains and down the rivers in the early years of the nineteenth century to make of the Old West as it became the Midwest an intellectual—and often personal—battleground that would ultimately define the nature of the region and the nation in what we had, until recently, called the American century.

But *Poor White* is neither intellectual nor economic history. It is, like *Winesburg, Ohio*, the story of its people, and its substance is the intensity of their experience as twentieth century America became reality, as the Hamiltonian definition of progress fused with New England Puritan values to smash forever the Jeffersonian dream of a self-sufficient society of farmers and craftsmen, united by their common human dignity. For Anderson, the competing ideals, carried across the mountains and up the rivers by the men and women who sought order and fulfillment in a new land had, by the end of the 1860s, through the already mythical figures of Lincoln, Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan, made a permanent mark on the national psyche. As the novel opens, the ideal of human freedom shared by Jefferson and Hamilton alike had become an attainable reality.

The story of the town and its people begins at that great nineteenth century social and cultural watershed in Midwestern—and American—history. Anderson describes that moment in detail in its human, its individual, its personal dimension:

In all the towns of mid-western America it was a time of waiting. The country having been cleared and the Indians driven away into a vast distant place spoken of vaguely as the West, the Civil War having been fought and won, and there being no great national problems that touched closely their lives, the minds of men were turned in upon themselves. The soul and its destiny was spoken of openly on the streets. Robert Ingersoll came to Bidwell to speak in Terry's Hall, and after he had gone the question of the divinity of Christ for months occupied the minds of the citizens. Then ministers preached sermons on the subject, and in the evening it was talked about in the stores. Every one had something to say. Even Charley Mook, who dug ditches, who stuttered so that not a half dozen people in town could understand him, expressed his opinion. . . .

. . . everyone knew his neighbor and was known to him. Strangers did not come and go swiftly and mysteriously and there was no constant and confusing roar of machinery and of new projects afoot. For the moment mankind seemed about to take time to try to understand itself.

It was to Bidwell at this time that Hugh McVey had come in 1889, at the age of twenty-three, in search of the most mundane manifestation of fulfillment: a job as telegrapher and agent at the Wheeling and Lake Erie station at Pickleville, a mile north of town. Behind him McVey left the early nineteenth century past: the sleepy Mississippi River town of Mudcat Landing, Missouri, and the primitive frontier roots of Mark Twain and Huckleberry Finn, of Thomas Lincoln, of those who pursued their happiness in the territories, of those who, in Anderson's words in *Winesburg, Ohio*, sought their fulfillment in an environment characterized by an "old brutal ignorance that had in it also a kind of beautiful childlike innocence."

But McVey, like Abraham Lincoln two generations earlier, becomes a townsman, and in so doing, becomes, again like Lincoln, a catalyst that unwittingly brings about a new American reality. Whereas Lincoln, however, had sought order and justice through law, a decision consciously arrived at, McVey fell under the influence of those who were to transform the Jeffersonian agrarian democracy into a Hamiltonian economic oligarchy. In turn, after having fallen under that influence, essentially the sense of guilt and of fear that had come across the mountains from New England to the Old Northwest, McVey became a tinkerer and a catalyst in the tradition of Edison and Henry Ford, and like them, he was to reshape the lives of the people in the town and beyond.

The impact of New England morality on McVey and through him on generations of Midwesterners is personified in Sarah Shepard, the first of the grotesques become myth, the motherly woman become the image of the New England conscience brooding over the Ohio countryside. When Sarah, the New England-born wife of Henry Shepard, the stationmaster, took over the direction of Hugh's life at fourteen, much as the Widow Douglas had attempted to take over Huckleberry Finn's, to "civilize" him through imposition of the Puritan virtues of hard

work, thrift, sobriety, and guilt that would bring success, Sarah herself takes on mythic proportions as the force who, single-handedly, will transform the brutal ignorance of the Old Western frontier to the orderly countryside of the new Midwest. To Sarah it was no less than her duty: "When a job has to be done," she tells Hugh, "there's no use putting it off. It's going to be hard work to make an educated man of you, but it has to be done." To her, idleness—which she called laziness—was evil, to be destroyed in the spirit, and her words rang in her head for the rest of his life:

"It's a sin to be so dreamy and worthless."

Like Edison, born on the bank of Ohio's Huron River, Hugh becomes a telegrapher, and his riverbank dreaminess is transformed to a practical imagination useful to the new age. As a telegrapher, as a tinkerer, he came to Bidwell, on Ohio's rich agricultural lake plain as, Anderson notes, the time of waiting was coming to an end, and the town, the region, and the nation had determined the course of the future:

New talk ran through the town. A new force that was being born into American life . . . was feeding on the old dying individual life. . . . It was meant to seal men together, to wipe out national lines, to walk under seas and fly through the air. . . .

The wise old men of the town began to see the lives of the people in new terms. To Judge Hanby, the future was clear:

In England, he explained, the cities were constantly growing larger, and already almost every one either worked in a factory or owned stock in a factory. "In New England it is getting the same way fast," he explained. "The same thing'll happen here. Farming'll be done with tools. Almost everything now done by hand'll be done by machinery. Some'll grow rich and some poor. The thing is to get educated, yes, sir, that's the thing, to get ready for what's coming. It's the only way. The younger generation has got to be sharper and shrewder."

While at Pickleville, Hugh McVey watches the cabbage-planters in the fields along the railroad tracks and begins to tinker and a rich farmer, Tom Butterworth, sends his daughter Clara off to the state university in Columbus, another old man, a refugee in the town from New York City and post-Civil War

Reconstruction in the South, sees the new age somewhat differently:

"Well, there's going to be a new war here," he said. "It won't be like the Civil War, just shooting off guns and killing people's bodies. At first its going to be a war between individuals to see to what class a man must belong; then its going to be a long, silent war between classes, between those who have and those who can't get. It'll be the worst war of all."

Life in the town, imbued with the spirit of the new age, began to take on an air of excitement. McVey produced a workable planting machine, to the curiosity of the town and the enthusiasm of its men of affairs, and Anderson recreates the town's commitment to what could be, and, for many of them, would be:

The air of Bidwell began to stir with talk of new times. The evil things said of the new life coming were soon forgotten. The youth and optimistic spirit of the country led it to take hold of the hand of the giant, industrialism, and led him laughing into the land. The cry, "get on in the world," that ran all over America at that period . . . rang in the streets of Bidwell.

But for Joe Wainsworth, the journeyman harness-maker, perhaps a shadow image of Anderson's technologically-displaced father, insulted by a request to repair shoddy machine-made harnesses, the future would belong, as had the past, to the conscientious skilled craftsman:

During the afternoon, after he had heard of the four factory-made work harnesses brought into what he had always thought of as a trade that belonged to him by the rights of a first-class workman, Joe remained silent for two or three hours. He thought of the words of old Judge Hanby and the constant talk of the new times coming. Turning suddenly to his apprentice . . . he broke into words. He was defiant and expressed his defiance. "Well, then, let'em go to Philadelphia, let'em go any damn place they please. . . . I know my trade and do not have to bow to any man," he declared. He expressed the old tradesman's faith in his craft and the rights it gave the tradesman. "Learn your trade. Don't listen to talk," he said earnestly. "The man who knows his trade is a man. He can tell every one to go to the devil."

But the machine-made harnesses continue to arrive at the Bidwell freight station, and they appear increasingly on the

streets and the country roads, even as Bidwell's first factory, to manufacture McVey's planting machine and the other inventions to follow, rises along the railroad tracks. While Wainsworth mutters at his work and on the streets, a model of the planter appears, to the joy of the townspeople. But it drew, too, the denunciation of Ezra French, who had planted cabbage plants by hand all his life, twisting his body permanently in the process, and whose sons were to follow his path:

"The thing, you see, can't be done. It aint right. Something awful'll happen. The rains won't come and the plants'll dry up and die. It'll be like it was in Egypt in the Bible times. . . . Don't it say in the Bible men shall work and labor by the sweat of their brows? Can a machine like that sweat? You know it can't. And it can't do the work either. No, siree. Men've got to do it. . . . It ain't right. That's what I say and all your smart talk ain't a'going to change me."

With the failure of the planting machine and of the company formed to manufacture it, to French, to Wainsworth, to the handful of other sceptics, it appears that justice and tradition will prevail, even at the cost of the savings of much of the town. But the corn-cutting machine and the coal-unloading machine that McVey invents are successes, the town flourishes, factories are built, farm hands become factory hands, and foreigners appear on the streets. The tinkerer, still practical, becomes rich, as do the town's men of affairs. The young men of the town are captured by the spirit of the new age, and local varieties of the new era's dreams of conquest, of manifest destiny, of class stratification appear among them. For young Harley Parsons, son of the shoemaker and himself an apprentice blacksmith, new-found prosperity in the nearby oil fields make possible a personal victory over the old world and far places:

He came home wearing a fancy silk vest and astonished his fellows by buying and smoking ten-cent cigars. His pockets were bulging with money. "I'm not going to stay long in this town, you can bet on that," he declared one evening as he stood, surrounded by a group of admirers before Fanny Twist's Millinery Shop on lower Main Street. "I have been with a Chinese woman, and an Italian, and with one from South America." He took a puff on his cigar and spat on the sidewalk. "I'm going back and I'm going to make a record. Before I get through I'm going to be with a woman of every nationality on earth, that's what I'm going to do."

But for other young men of the town, the new aggression manifests itself in the economic and social opportunities available in the town and the new age as a new social structure, compounded of money and power, begins to appear. Young Ed Hall, formerly a carpenter's apprentice in the town, becomes a foreman in the new corn-cutter factory at a salary of twenty-five dollars a week. Anderson describes the result:

It was more money than he had ever dreamed of earning in a week. On pay nights he dressed himself in his Sunday clothes and had himself shaved at Joe Trotter's barber shop. Then he went along Main Street, fingering the money in his pocket and half fearing that he would suddenly awake and find it all a dream. He went into Wymer's tobacco store to get a cigar, and old Claude Wymer came to wait on him. On the second Saturday evening after he had got his new position, the tobacconist, a rather obsequious man, called him Mr. Hall. It was the first time such a thing had happened and it upset him a little. He laughed and made a joke of it. "Don't get high and mighty," he said, and turned to wink at the men loafing in the shop. Later he thought about the matter and was sorry he had not accepted the new title without protest. "Well, I'm foreman, and a lot of the young fellows I've always known and fooled around with will be working under me," he told himself. "I can't be getting thick with them."

Ed walked along the street feeling very keenly the importance of his new place in the community. Other young fellows in the factory were getting a dollar and a half a day. At the end of the week he got twenty-five dollars, almost three times as much. The money was an indication of superiority. There could be no doubt about that. . . .

For Joe Wainsworth, the harnessmaker, for the former farm hands, and for Peter Fry, the blacksmith, the new values and the products and the system out of which they came are incomprehensible and their effects on the townspeople deplorable, both upon those who rise in the new society and the taciturn farm hands turned factory workers whom it victimizes as they lose the dignity and the mobility that once had been theirs. For Wainsworth, the result is a grudging concession that eventually explodes into violence; for Fry, for Smoky Pete, as the town knows him, it is a new role as the town's conscience, its Jeremiah, come from his forge and his small house, threatened by expanding

factories, to walk the streets of Bidwell, calling down condemnation and judgment on those corrupted by the new values. At Sandy Ferris, the housepainter taken to drink, he shouts, "You cheap thing, warming your belly with whisky while your children freeze . . . ;" for Pen Beck, a merchant and elder of the church, whom rumor had caught in an indiscretion that included drinking and a bout with a notorious woman of the county seat, his indignation turns to ridicule on crowded Main Street: "Well, Penny, my lad, so you went for a night among the ladies? You've been fooling around with my girl, Nell Hunt, over at the county seat . . .," and to the townspeople: "He didn't commit adultery. I don't want you to think that happened. All that happened was he bit my best girl, Nell Hunter on the neck. . . ."

With that, Anderson recounts, "The merchant, white with anger, rushed up and struck him a blow on the chest with his small and rather fat fist. The blacksmith knocked him into the gutter and later, when he was arrested, went proudly off to the town mayor and paid his fine."

To prosperous farmer Tom Butterworth, seen slipping into the millinery shop at night, Smoky Pete makes the source of his indignation clear: "Well, Tom Butterworth, you're fooling around with Fanny Twist. You're sneaking into her shop late at night, eh? . . . Are you and Fanny Twist going to open a house here? Is that the next industrial enterprise we're going to have here in this town?"

Smoky Pete, the town concludes, has gone crazy.

For one of the French boys, son of old Ezra, who had denounced McVey's first invention, another kind of disillusionment comes, and he walks along the railroad track with a group of factory hands, muttering and cursing.

. . . I thought I'd come to town to a factory and find it easier here. Now I've got married and have to stick to my job no matter what they do. In the country I worked like a dog a few days a year, but here I'll probably have to work like that all the time. It's the way things go. I thought it was mighty funny, all this talk about factory work being so easy. I wish the old days was back. . . .

For Joe Wainsworth, an abortive effort at change, at adapting himself and his craft to the machine age and its values, results

in humiliation and tragedy. While socialist union organizers arrive in town to attack the Ed Halls and promise dignity to the farm hands turned factory hands, moving inexorably toward the "long, silent war between classes" predicted by the wise old man when Bidwell was a village, Wainsworth buries himself in his work and his brooding, turning the day-to-day operation of the shop to Joe Gibson, his journeyman harnessmaker. Gibson is an individualist and, like many of his contemporaries, a "spiritual bully," who is determined to rise in the new age. But his success will not come though the hard work that had brought Wainsworth to mastery of an obsolete craft and near-despair; it will come through acquiring personal power:

. . . A week before, a traveling man had come to the shop to sell machine-made harness. Joe had ordered the man out and Jim had called him back. He had placed an order for eighteen sets of the harness and had made Joe sign the order. The harness had arrived that afternoon and was now hung in the shop. "It's hanging in the shop now," Jim cried [to workmen outside in the street]. Go see for yourself."

For Joe, humiliation was complete:

. . . In his hand he held his harness-maker's knife, shaped like a half moon and with an extraordinarily sharp circular edge . . . on the day after the incident of the placing of the order for the factory-made harness he had gone into a hardware store and bought a cheap revolver. He had been sharpening the knife as Jim talked to the workmen outside . . . Joy shown in his eyes [as Joe returned to work].

With one stroke, Jim is nearly decapitated, and Joe goes off into the street, the revolver in his pocket, the cries of workmen—"Hey . . . do you believe in factory-made harness now-days, Joe Wainsworth? Hey, what do you say? Do you sell factory-made harness?"—ringing in his ears. On a street corner he encounters Steve Hunter, the entrepreneur who had brought the new times to Bidwell; Joe shoots him dead, and dropping the revolver, flees into the woods to seek his own death.

With Joe's ultimate indignity, captured by Ed Hall, the new superintendent of the corn-planter factory, in his refuge in the woods, the subjugation of the town and its old values is complete. Those whose values were not conducive to survival in

the new age, the technologically displaced craftsmen, the voices crying out against the new materialism, fade away, their cries falling mute under the triumphant whistles of the factories. The people of the old Bidwell take their places in an American Midwestern past rapidly moving from reality to myth, from childlike innocence and brutal ignorance to a pastoral paradise that never was. Living people in the novel provide the record of a period of social change, whether pointing the way, as did Sarah Shephard when she inadvertently introduced the Puritan ethic to a primitive youth, or attempting to stop a force they do not understand, as do Ezra Frank, Smoky Pete, and Joe Wainsworth, who protested the effects of that ethic on the society they founded and in which they flourished. But each of them becomes, as the factory whistles shriek, not a living person in a town become a city, but a grotesque become myth as elusive thought become truth slips out of helpless fingers. Each becomes a vague memory, a shadowy image in a new vision of what was, and, the whistles make clear, will never be again.

For those who brought the new age into being—Hugh McVey, who made it possible, Ed Hall, who transformed the ideas of a rustic genius into bricks and mortar and whistles, Clara Butterworth, who sought a new, personal freedom and a new meaning in her marriage to McVey—the book is unended; Hugh and Clara find each other and seek a new, post-industrial fulfillment, but Hall and his cohorts are part of a newer, more brutal ignorance unmitigated by the childlike innocence of the Frenches, the Wainrights, the Jeremiahs of the Ohio countryside. Their voices, stilled, have been replaced by the harsh, impersonal whistles that suggest ultimate failure for Hugh and Clara, and final and permanent but empty victory for the Ed Halls as the novel ends.

## WILLIAM MAXWELL'S LINCOLN, ILLINOIS

RICHARD SHEREIKIS

With small town people, every story is part of some other story.

William Maxwell, *Ancestors* (1977)

When critics and historians chronicle the history of American literature, they are obliged to recognize the significant work of writers who have taken small Midwestern towns as their subjects and settings. Richard Lingeman's *Small Town America*, a "narrative history," is sprinkled with references to literary village boosters, like Zona Gale and Booth Tarkington, and to village "rebels," like Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis. In the early years of the twentieth century, Gale wrote about Friendship Village, where "togetherness" was the dominant quality, and where one of the characters can say, unabashedly, "If you want to love folks, just you get in some kind o' respectable trouble in Friendship, an' you'll see so much loveableness that the trouble'll kind o' spindle out an' leave nothin' but the love doin' business." And Tarkington's Plattville, the town in *The Gentleman from Indiana*, is described as a place where the people seem to be one big, jolly family.

At the other extreme are the portraits of Master's Spoon River, Anderson's Winesburg, and Lewis's Gopher Prairie. Here we find blighted lives and blasted hopes and pettiness and provinciality. We see the corruption and hypocrisy in Spoon River, the grotesques of Winesburg, and the bigoted boosters of Gopher Prairie. As it emerges from the pages of these disparate Midwestern writers, the Middle-Western small town is either a cradle or a bed of nails, a noose or a life-line. People either love it or, when they can, they leave it, to seek their fortunes in cities, where, supposedly, people are broad-minded and opportunities are unlimited.

As Lingeman implies at the end of his chapter on "The Village Rebels," the dichotomy in the portraits of the Midwestern small town has created a literary void which may be a disservice to an entire way of life:

The buried lives in the villages, which had . . . been ignored in the cheerful literature, were given their day in literary court. The very self-consciousness of the rebels, which made them revolt, making possible their writings, spread through the larger American society; it placed the small town firmly in the American mind as a place of spite, frustrated lives, conformity, middle-class morality. The Spoon Rivers, Winesburgs, and Gopher Prairies of America, however, receded into another corner of the small-town mythos, along with the Friendship Villages and Plattvilles. The former were truer literary reflections than the latter, but they harbored their own distortions. The sum of both traditions indicated, if nothing else, that America had a love-hate relationship with its country towns. The freedom and imperial wealth and cultural fecundity of the cities were powerful drugs, and thousands of real life Felix Fays and Carol Kennicotts and George Willards imbibed them. But deep down inside, they must always wonder—had something been lost? (p. 391)

What may have been lost, in all these contrasting portraits, is the richer texture of small-town life and the untouched veins of human emotion and painful experience which remained after the works of the Gales and the Tarkingtons, the Masters and the Lewises. Certainly, there was togetherness in small towns—the rallying around families in trouble, the chicken casseroles when someone died. And surely there was corruption enough to fill a ten-part docudrama and enough frustration to fill an Akron or a Toledo, let alone a Winesburg, ten times over. But there was also the ordinary business of living and dying, of loving and being rejected, of being a kid and growing old, of getting married, and of being alone. There was, as in most lives, occasional happiness and frequent sorrow and a good deal of cause for melancholy. And William Maxwell, when he writes about his childhood in Lincoln, Illinois, comes as close as anyone has to depicting this world with balance and sensitivity.

That so few know of Maxwell and his impressive work is surprising, given the length and distinction of his career. Born in Lincoln in 1908, he moved with his family to Chicago when he

was fifteen. After graduating from high school there, Maxwell attended the University of Illinois, where he also taught freshman composition for a time, after a year of graduate work at Harvard. He has published six novels over the past fifty years (the most recent being *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, which won the William Dean Howells award for fiction in 1980), numerous short stories, and an autobiographical memoir, *Ancestors* (1977), in which he traces not only his own history, but that of his family. For forty years, he was an editor for the *New Yorker*, for which he still writes reviews and an occasional story, the most recent ones of which form a kind sequel to *So Long* . . . And in much of his work, a thinly disguised Lincoln—sometimes called Draperville, sometimes Logan—is in the background, casting shadows and forming a backdrop to people's few joys and many tribulations.

Maxwell's Lincoln, a town of about 12,000, both in literature and life, is a place where life moves quietly, out of the glare and bustle of fame or notoriety. It was a place, says Maxwell, in *Ancestors*, where "Nothing of any historical importance had ever happened . . . , or has to this day." But it wasn't nondescript, says Maxwell. Like any town, it held a universe of diversity and strangeness, and it was full of surprises. And his description of it in *Ancestors* suggests Maxwell's tolerance and generosity of spirit as well as the wisdom and keen sensitivity that dominate his work and set him apart from both the village boosters and the rebels:

Lincoln was not a typical small town, because there is no such thing, any more than there is a typical human being. Every person was exceptional in some way. When I think of the Rimmerman girls, three middle-aged and unmarried sisters who never stopped talking, and of old Mrs. Hunter in her rusty black hat, and the plumber's wife who stopped my brother on the street and said, "I dreamt about you last night, Edward, wasn't that habitual?" and the Presbyterian minister's son who had ears like a faun and induced a kind of sexual delirium in girls without even having to get off his bicycle, and the discontented dentist's wife who was straight out of Ibsen, I wonder that so small a place could hold so much character. In the same way, every street was exceptional. You could not possibly mistake Fifth Street for Eighth Street (even when I dream about them I know which street I am on) or

Broadway for Pulaski Street, and no two houses were exactly alike either. Some of them were so original that they always seemed to have something to say as you walked past: perhaps no more than this, that the people who lived in them did not wish they lived in Paris or Rome or even Peoria. What would be the point of living somewhere you did not know everybody? (p. 189)

Maxwell understood well enough the oppressive prying that is so much a part of small town life, especially as the rebels portrayed it. In *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, which mixes autobiography with an outsider's account of murder-suicide that rocked Lincoln in the early years of the century, Maxwell talks of how, "In a town the size of Lincoln there are no well-kept secrets. Somebody told somebody who told somebody who told somebody who told . . ." a man named Clarence about some mysterious letters with no return address that his wife Fern was dropping into the letter box by the post office every night. "It didn't even take very long for this to happen," says Maxwell, "Or for Fern to find out that Clarence knew."

And in *Time Will Darken It*, Maxwell's 1948 novel set in Draperville, he is even more pointed in his portrayal of the gossip and small-mindedness which can sully a name or kill a reputation. "Of the literary arts," Maxwell writes, "the one most practised in Draperville was history. It was informal, and there was no reason to write it down since nothing was ever forgotten. The child born too soon after the wedding ceremony might learn to walk and to ride a bicycle; he might go to school and graduate into long pants, marry, move to Seattle, and do well for himself in the lumber business; but whenever his or his mother's name was mentioned, it was followed inexorably by some smiling reference to the date of his birth."

And the history was developed in the usual small-town ways: "Research in Draperville was carried on over the back fence, over the telephone, in kitchens and parlours and upstairs bedrooms, in the back seat of carriages, in wicker porch swings, in the bell tower of the Unitarian Church, where the Willing Workers met on Wednesdays and patiently, with their needles and thread, paid off the mortgage on the parsonage."

The nerve center of Draperville's historic research is the Friendship Club, a group of eight women who "met in rotation at one another's houses for luncheon and bridge." Maxwell's

description of the Club is set in the context of the central narrative line of the story. Austin King, a decent, self-doubting lawyer, has become the object of his young cousin Nora's hopeless romantic crush. The girl has even taken up the reading of law in Austin's office in order to be close to him. Austin is troubled and embarrassed by Nora's attentions, but he doesn't want to hurt her by packing her off to her home in the South. Austin's wife Martha knows about the situation, and while she's not thrilled by it, she understands Austin's discomfort. But the Club is not inclined to look beneath the surface, and what they see on the surface is Nora spending a lot of time with Austin, talking to him at length in public, on the post office stairs. "No reputation was safe with them," says Maxwell, "and only by being present every time could they hope to preserve their own. The innocent were thrown to the wolves, the kind made fun of, the old stripped of the dignity that belonged to their years. *They say* was the phrase invariably used when a good name was about to be auctioned off at the block. *They say that before Dr. Seymour married her she was running around with . . . They say the old lady made him promise before she died that he'd never . . . They say she has cancer of the breast . . .*"

When they saw Nora on the street, the Club members "stopped her and asked questions that appeared to be friendly but that were set and ready to spring like a steel trap." And Maxwell becomes uncharacteristically vehement in another passage in which he summarizes the workings of the Club: "*What is the chief end of Man?* the historians might well have asked over the bridge tables, but they didn't. When they met as a group, they slipped all pity off under the table with their too-tight shoes, and became destroyers, enemies of society and of their neighbors, bent on finding out what went on behind the blinds that were drawn to the window-sill."

But not everyone in Lincoln/Draperville/Logan was hounded by the likes of the Club. Maxwell's town is not like Carol Kenicott's Gopher Prairie, where the knowledge of watchful eyes prevents one from doing anything different; or George Willard's Winesburg, where an insistence on conformity twists everyone into grotesqueness. While Maxwell's characters are sometimes victimized by talk and nosiness, they seem less mindful of the town's opinions than a Carol or a George, more

involved in simply getting by than in pleasing those around them. Maxwell himself makes an important distinction in *Ancestors* when he comments on the levels of tolerance in the Lincoln he remembered:

You could be eccentric and still not be socially ostracized. You could even be dishonest. But you could not be openly immoral. The mistakes people made were not forgotten, but if you were in trouble somebody very soon found out about it and was there answering the telephone and feeding the children. Men and women alike appeared to accept with equanimity the circumstances (on the whole, commonplace and unchanging) of their lives in a way that no one seems able to do now anywhere. This is how I remember it. I am aware that Sherwood Anderson writing about a similar though smaller place saw it quite differently. I believe in Winesburg, Ohio, but I also believe in what I remember." (p. 190)

And, like Draperville's communal memory, Maxwell's is also sharp and long. Although he left Lincoln after his freshman year in high school, he has mined his memories of small town life for over fifty years. Lincoln, like many central and southern Illinois towns, was settled largely by Southerners who had migrated from Virginia and Kentucky. In *Ancestors*, Maxwell describes the arduous lives his forebears led as they trekked across the continent, "in movement in a new country": "In the mountains of Virginia they listened thoughtfully to tales of how easy life was in Kentucky, and from Kentucky, when they had to sell out, or were sold out, to pay their debts, they moved on into Illinois. With their minds always on some promised land, like the Old Testament figures they so much resembled, they did not bother to record or even remember the place of their origin."

And these Southerners brought with them values and qualities which have put their stamp on countless Midwestern towns. Some of them brought a fierce religious faith, which frowned on frivolity of any sort. In a series of statements from a church quarterly of 1864, Maxwell recognizes "the intellectual climate of my Aunt Maybel's house on Union Street," a house, he says, which "knew the Bible backwards and forwards, and could quote chapter and verse to prove that dancing was wrong, in itself and because of what it led to. So was playing cards for money. And swearing. And drinking anything stronger than

grape juice or lemonade. And spending Sunday in any other way than going to church and coming home and eating a big dinner afterward." The quotation from the church quarterly suggests the prevailing chill of this climate: "Let every preacher resolve never to enter a meetinghouse of our brethern in which an organ stands. Let no one who takes a letter from church ever unite with another using an organ. *Rather let him live out of a church than go into such a den.* Let all who oppose the organ withdraw from the church if one is brought in."

By Maxwell's time, and in Maxwell's novels, the specific religious forces have waned considerably—there are no churches or church-going to speak of in any of the novels or stories—but there is a severity to the lives which has its roots in those Southern settlers. And there are other values, too, which Maxwell recalls from the "dense Tolstoian family life" he experienced during his first ten years or so, before the traumatic death of his mother, which finds a form in nearly everything he wrote.

The values and assumptions of that household I took in without knowing when or how it happened, and I have them to this day: The pleasure of sharing pleasure. The belief that it is only proper to help lame dogs to get over stiles and young men to put one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder. An impatient disregard for small sums of money. The belief that it is a sin against Nature to put sugar in one's tea. The preference for being home over being anywhere else. The belief that generous impulses should be acted on, whether you can afford to do this or not. The trust in premonitions and the knowledge of what is in wrapped packages. The willingness to go to any amount of trouble to make yourself comfortable. The tendency to take refuge in absolutes. The belief that you don't have to apologize for tears; that consoling words should never be withheld; that what somebody wants very much they should, if possible, have. (pp. 50-51)

Maxwell isn't sure how many of these values and attitudes came from his Kentucky grandmother, but "the prevailing atmosphere of her house and of ours," he thinks, "was Southern . . ."

As these values and assumptions suggest, there were noble ideals and sentiments in this strand of Middle Western settlers. But there was a broad streak of materialism, too—the kind of thing that Graham Hutton and Lewis Atherton have remarked on in their studies of Midwestern life—which surprised and

disillusioned Maxwell when he discovered it in one of his father's anecdotes about his grandfather. The older man's advice, Maxwell's father had reported, was that if he could set aside a thousand dollars, he would have a hedge against disaster, a rainy-day reservoir that would insure his success. When did the idealism get replaced by money? Maxwell asks:

At what point, I have often asked myself, did money . . . become so real to them all? And why? And was it true of other Middle Western families as well? Was it the period? Or was it the inevitable consequence of my grandparents' moving to town? I think of John England [the brother of Maxwell's great-great grandfather], who fell asleep the minute people began to talk about money. To him it was an object of no value. You couldn't plant it. The rain didn't rain on it. You couldn't harvest it or watch it ripen. It was a dead thing and what interested him was life. Eternal life. I find it a terribly strange—and terrible—fact that the only words of my grandfather which my father ever quoted to me—his testament, so to speak—were not about faith or honor or truthfulness or compassion for other human beings but about saving money. (p. 164)

But the power of Maxwell's fiction comes not from his judgments and portraits of the town he recalled so clearly. His power lies in his ability to render the texture of his characters' lives, to show their suffering and their essential decency. A passage from *So Long, See You Tomorrow* suggests the vein he has mined for nearly fifty years, from *They Came Like Swallows* (1938) to "The Holy Terror" a *New Yorker* short story of 1986:

Very few families escape disasters of one kind or another, but in the years between 1909 and 1919 my mother's family had more than its share of them. My grandfather, spending the night in a farmhouse, was bitten on the ear by a rat or a ferret and died three months later of blood poisoning. My mother's only brother was in an automobile accident and lost his right arm. My mother's younger sister poured kerosene on a grate fire that wouldn't burn and set fire to her clothing and bore the scars of this all the rest of her life. My older brother, when he was five years old, got his foot caught in a turning carriage wheel [and had his leg amputated several inches above the knee].

And if all that wasn't bad enough, the narrator's (and Maxwell's) younger brother was born on New Year's Day of 1918, at the height of an influenza epidemic. His mother—and Maxwell's—died two days later, of double pneumonia, and thereby cast a premanent shadow of grief: "After that, there were no more disasters," the narrator says. "The worst that could happen had happened, and the shine went out of everything."

The effects of Maxwell's telling and re-telling, his re-examination of these melancholy events, is to create a fictional universe that has the feel of the very town which Maxwell evokes. In nearly all his novels, he uses multiple points of view, moving smoothly from one perspective to another to give the reader a sense of how events affect different people. Eventually, the events become familiar, like the topics of small-town discussions, as we move from Maxwell's earliest work to his recent *New Yorker* stories.

In *They Came Like Swallows* (1938) Maxwell assumes three points of view to tell the story of a mother's death during an influenza epidemic. The first part is told from the point of view of Bunny, a sensitive, thoughtful boy of eight who isn't cut out for life on the playgrounds and whose mother dotes over him. The second section is told from the point of view of Robert, Bunny's older brother, who lost his leg in a carriage accident but who refuses to give up the sports and mischief he loves so much. The third section is told from the father's point of view, suggesting the depression and helplessness he feels after the death of his wife. The basic elements of the story are almost completely autobiographical, like much of Maxwell's later work, but the play of his imagination and his ability to bring a variety of view points to life give the story a quality that a mere report could not produce.

In *Time Will Darken It* (1948) Maxwell incorporates other elements from the disasters of his family. The novel opens with a visit by some Southern relatives to Austin King's Lincoln home. It deftly contrasts the Southerners' apparent gentility and their willingness to bend certain rules, with the awkward but principled behavior of the Midwesterners, especially Austin. It traces the growing infatuation of Nora Potter with Austin; of Nora's helping to start a Montessori school with two old maids; and of Nora's terrible accident, when she burns herself badly while

trying to start a fire at the school. *Time* also sketches the living conditions for blacks in Draperville, which, like Maxwell's real-life Lincoln, includes a black section where the homes stand in striking contrast to the stately houses on the King's Elm Street. And the novel even contains an account of The Sudden Change, a legendary 1836 incident in Central Illinois when the temperature dropped so low so precipitously that travelers and workers were, reportedly, frozen in their tracks.

Four of the stories in Maxwell's 1977 collection of short stories entitled *Over by the River* are also set in Draperville, enriching our sense of the texture of life there. In "The Trojan Women," a married woman has run away—not for the first time—to a summer cottage on the lake, where she can escape the oppressiveness of her marriage, but not the gossip of the town. In "What Every Boy Should Know," a young boy's father, like Maxwell's own, teaches him the value of money through some lessons involving a paper route, a new bicycle, and an aborted strike by the delivery boys. In "A Final Report," a narrator ruminates on the meaning of his aunt Maud's life, in the wake of her death. He tallies her possessions, in the context of her will, revealing a "past unilluminated by memory or love"—a past that includes an accident in which the narrator's older brother loses a leg in a carriage accident.

And in "The Value of Money," the narrator returns to visit Draperville and his father, and finds himself actually enjoying the company of old friends and relatives. In the glow of his visit, he even grows tolerant toward the boosterism that is so often so obnoxious in small town conversations, which Sinclair Lewis satirized so broadly. Once again, Maxwell's touch is gentler, more sympathetic:

With several drinks under his belt, Edward looked around the noisy dining room. The faces he saw were full of character, as small-town faces tend to be, he thought, and lined with humor, and time had dealt gently with them. By virtue of having been born in this totally unremarkable place and of having lived out their lives here, they had something people elsewhere didn't have . . . This opinion every person in the room agreed with, he knew, and no doubt it had been put into his mind when he was a child. For it was something that he never failed to be struck by—those sweeping statements in praise of Draperville that were almost an

article of religious faith. They spoke about each other in much the same way. "There isn't a finer man anywhere on this earth," they would say in a tone of absolute conviction, sometimes about somebody who was indeed admirable, but just as often it would be some local skinflint, some banker or lawyer who made a specialty of robbing widows and orphans and was just barely a member of the human race. A moment later, opposed to this falsehood and in fact utterly contradicting it, there was a more realistic appraisal, which to his surprise they did not hesitate to express. But it would be wrong to assume that the second statement represented their true opinion; it was just their other one. (p. 210-11)

With *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, William Maxwell received more popular regard, to complement the high esteem in which writers such as Jean Stafford, John Cheever, and Frank O'Connor had held him. As I've suggested, *So Long* blends some of the details of Maxwell's own life—his mother's death, his father's grief, their move to Chicago—with an account of the murder-suicide which left another boy, Cletus Smith, friendless for a while. The narrator befriends Cletus briefly, until both move away, and the story is told, ostensibly, to expiate the narrator's guilt for not having acknowledged Cletus several years later, in the halls of a bustling Chicago high school. Once again, the old themes are there, the old situations—a mother's death, a boy's guilt and sorrow, a family's grief and trouble.

But the strands of *So Long* . . . and of Maxwell's ongoing account of his memories of Lincoln continue to weave their narrative spell in the pages of the *New Yorker*. In November of 1984, "The Man In the Moon" appeared, giving a fuller account of the unfortunate uncle who had lost his arm in the car wreck. In January of 1985, came "My Father's Friends," a reminiscence about his father's death in 1958 and of some mixed reactions to that death by men who'd known his father. And in March of 1986, "The Holy Terror" appeared, perhaps the most poignant work in Maxwell's long career. It is another re-telling of the terrible accident his brother Hap had suffered, when he lost his leg at the age of five. The story recounts the details of the accident as they had been passed down by the family, and it pays tribute to the brother's remarkable strength and courage. He had lived a full and active life, winning tennis matches, riding

a bicycle, playing football despite his injury, and becoming a successful lawyer, like the grandfather he admired so.

But "The Holy Terror," like some shocking family legend, goes on to make a startling revelation: That Hap's leg had been mistreated by a dottering local doctor; that the injury was fairly routine; and that, according to a younger, more professional doctor called in after gangrene had set in, the leg could have been saved if it had been treated correctly. Hap had never been told about this, and the narrator had kept the secret until his brother's death had made it possible to disclose the terrible truth.

So William Maxwell continues his journey backward, to the leafy streets of Lincoln and to the recesses of his family's history. The tight-knit web of characters and memories, like the town that Maxwell evokes, is both constricting and comforting, tolerant and judgmental. It is, like Thackeray's world, "more melancholy than mirthful." But it has the feel and texture of real life, really lived in that area between Gopher Prairie and Friendship Village, not far from Winesburg and just down the road from Lake Woebegone.

In some writer's hands, the constant return to personal memories might become, as Joyce Carol Oates put it in a 1977 review of *Over by the River*, "merely reminiscing; loosely organized, anecdotal, trivial." But in the hands of a Maxwell, as Oates points out, no such words apply: When such personal writing "is sharply focused by an intelligence wise enough to use autobiography as the material for art, . . . it has the power to deeply move us, and even to wound us, to surprise us into sympathies we could not have anticipated."

Like a modern-day Jane Austen, Maxwell examines his fertile but constricted world with a jeweller's eye. Like a contemporary Thomas Hardy, he gives us a sympathetic vision of life's sad realities. Like all great writers, he creates a world that is at once detailed and personal, profound and universal.

Sangamon State University

## SAM SHEPARD'S CHILD IS BURIED SOMEWHERE IN ILLINOIS

PARK DIXON GOIST

Sam Shepard, playwright, screenwriter, director and movie star, is considered by many to be a Western writer because so many of his works deal with cowboys and take place in the Southwest.<sup>1</sup> But though he grew up in California, Shepard's American consciousness has been shaped in good part by his Midwest heritage.

He comes from a family with deep roots in Illinois. Shepard's great-grandfather, Samuel Shepard Rogers IV, was a Chicago *Daily News* editor whose son married Hearn Dodge, granddaughter of a well known Civil War hero. The couple settled in Crystal Lake, a small town fifty miles outside of Chicago, where Shepard's father was born in 1917. He carried on the Roger's family tradition of naming the first born son Samuel Shepard when the future playwright was born in 1943 at Ft. Sheridan, Illinois. Shepard's father was a bombardier in the Second World War and the family knocked around the country a good deal during and after the war, ending up in California. At the age of nineteen Samuel Shepard Rogers VIII dropped his last name and left home. He has been known ever since simply as Sam Shepard.<sup>2</sup>

Arriving in New York in 1963, Shepard became one of the leading off-off-Broadway playwrights. In a time of crumbling traditions he wrote unconventional plays with no clear story line, but marked by striking images and lyrical monologues. He often sought to create pure emotional states rather than conventional narratives. His bizarre characters were in a desperate search for identity amid the chaos of a radically changing society and an omnipotent popular culture.

In recent plays, dating from the late 1970s, Shepard has adopted more conventional theatrical forms to explore his concern with the relationship between self and community. In doing this he has also turned his attention to the family, thus joining America's leading twentieth century playwrights for whom the family has been a primary focus. As Samuel Freedman, a drama critic for the *New York Times*, has pointed out, "Whatever else any great American playwright has done, each has created . . . a personal vision of the American family." Shepard is now engaged in creating his own mythic vision of the family.<sup>3</sup>

*Buried Child*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979, is the second in Shepard's cycle of family dramas.<sup>4</sup> This play is set in Illinois and portrays a depressed farm family, Shepard's sense of which is very loosely shaped by the circumstances of his father's experiences as an unsuccessful dairy farmer. Shepard has mentioned that the important circumstances of his father's life were World War II, the Depression, and the poverty of the Midwest farm family. But while based partially on family experience, the play also operates on a symbolic level and the action is connected to broader cultural themes by Shepard's particular adaptation and reworking of certain American myths.

Shepard believes the power of a myth is to communicate widely-held emotions which start on the personal level, then flow out to others. "You start with something personal and see how it follows out and opens to something that's much bigger." A play works when the connections between the personal and the cultural mesh. What distinguishes Shepard's work is that such connections are never clear cut, but ambiguous, contradictory, ultimately mysterious. A play takes on mythic quality not only because it ties into the experiences of an audience, but also because the emotions "that come up during a play . . . seem to remind you of something that you can't quite put your finger on." Shepard uses myths, then, not so much as a means of dramatizing universally repeated experiences, but as a way of exploring the emotional contradictions and confusions which mark such experiences.<sup>5</sup>

This way of looking at Shepard relates his work to scholars who maintain that a culture achieves its distinctive character not

by adherence to a given set of ideas but rather through disagreements over those ideas. R. W. B. Lewis was the first proponent of this approach among students of American culture. In *The American Adam* (1955), Lewis argues that every culture tends "to produce its own determining debate over the ideas that preoccupy it." He goes on to point out that "a culture achieves identity not so much through the ascendancy of one particular set of convictions as through the emergence of its peculiar and distinctive dialogue."<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Sam Shepard is not so much interested in presenting a resolution to the contradictions that make up personal and cultural experience as in dramatizing the emotions that emerge from those contradictions.

## I

*Buried Child* is marked by misunderstanding, fear and violence among family members, by an intense sense of personal and cultural loss, and by a need to establish individual and family identity. Like his other plays it has a mad comic touch which can bring laughter, but also can leave the audience puzzled and saddened.<sup>7</sup> The drama's central image, the buried child of the title, is surrounded by mystery and contradiction, and yet at the end of the play the jolting appearance of this dead child's rotted skeleton ironically seems to suggest hopeful possibilities for the future.

The play takes place in the frayed living room of a run-down Illinois farm house. It is raining outside as the lights come up in act one to reveal Dodge, in his late seventies, covered with an old blanket, staring vacantly at a blank television set and taking furtive swigs from a bottle of whiskey.<sup>8</sup> Halie, his nagging wife, begins a rambling conversation with him from her upstairs bedroom. Among other topics, she contrasts a happier day when, "Everything was dancing with life," to the looser morals of the present, a theme to which she returns frequently.<sup>9</sup>

During this exchange Tilden, their eldest son, comes into the living room. He is a big child-like man in his late forties, a former All-American football player who has recently returned from a twenty year absence in New Mexico. Wet from the rain, he carries an arm load of fresh corn. This introduces the first major contradiction in the play, for when Tilden says he picked it from

the back yard, Dodge yells at him that nothing has grown out there in forty years. He tells him to take it back to where he got it, but instead Tilden dumps the corn into his father's lap. During their ensuing conversation Tilden seats himself on a milk stool and begins husking the corn.

Halie now comes downstairs, talking about her sons—Tilden, Bradley, and Ansel, who is dead. Wearing a veil and dressed in black as though in mourning, her long soliloquy is a comic eulogy to her dead boy. In her memory Ansel stands in sharp contrast to her two living sons. "He was a hero . . . Brave. Strong. And very intelligent. . . . I only regret he didn't die in action." Instead he died in a motel room on the night of his honeymoon. In a bizarre blend of prejudice and humor, Halie attributes Ansel's death to the fact that he married "into the Catholics. The Mob."

Halie's reminiscences of Ansel are suddenly interrupted when she notices corn husks all over the floor. "What's the meaning of this corn Tilden!" she shouts. When he replies it's a mystery to him, she screams at him and he starts to cry. Dodge takes issue with Halie's treatment of Tilden, and the two of *them* begin shouting at one another. It is during the course of this bitter exchange that a second significant mystery of the play is introduced.

Halie threatens Dodge by saying that Bradley, their second son who has lost a leg in a chain saw accident, will be upset when he sees the mess Tilden has made. Dodge has already expressed fear of Bradley, because of his sadistic habit of cutting his father's hair when Dodge is asleep, leaving the old man's scalp cut and bloody. Dodge now shouts that Bradley "was born in a goddamn hog wallow!" How can you say that about "your own flesh and blood," Halie asks. Dodge yells back at her, "He's not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood's buried in the back yard." At this line the three actors freeze. Soon after this Halie leaves to have lunch with a local clergyman. When Dodge falls asleep in the sofa Tilden gathers up the corn husks and drops them gently over his father's body and exits. Then Bradley, the one-legged son, limps in and act one ends as he turns on a pair of electric clippers and begins viciously cutting his father's hair while the old man sleeps on.

The audience is now left to ponder any number of matters. How can Tilden be bringing corn in from a field which has been

barren for decades? Why does he dump the corn over his father? What do Halie's strange reminiscences of her dead son have to do with anything? Why does Bradley insist on cutting his father's hair in such a violent manner? Above all, what is to be made of Dodge's shocking remark that his flesh and blood is buried in the back yard? Will the second act clarify any of these mysteries?

Act two revolves around the arrival of Tilden's son, Vince, and his girl friend, Shelly. He is about twenty-two and has come back to the homestead after a lengthy absence "to pick up where I left off." There is a problem, however, and yet another mystery is introduced, for neither Dodge nor Tilden recognize him. Dodge at first confuses him with Tilden, then is hostile and tells him to "Keep your distance." Shelly, who initially treats Vince's trip home as a huge joke, thinks the house looks like a Norman Rockwell cover and expects "turkey dinners and apple pie and all that kinda stuff," is terrified by Dodge's open hostility.

When Tilden comes in, carrying an arm load of carrots, he too fails to recognize Vince. Shelly asks him point blank, "Is he your son," but Tilden confuses the situation further by replying, "I had a son once but we buried him." Dodge shouts at him, "You don't know anything about that! That happened before you were born!" When Shelly suggests to Vince, "They just don't recognize you, that's all," he replies, "How in hell could they not recognize me! I'm their son!" Unable to cope with this lack of recognition, he decides to leave, ostensibly to get Dodge another bottle of whiskey.

After Vince's departure, Shelly gets Tilden to talk and he shocks her by bringing up the topic of the dead child again. "We had a baby. (motioning to Dodge) He did. Dodge did. . . . Dodge drowned it." From across the room Dodge protests, struggles to his feet, staggers forward, then falls to the floor, coughing. Ignoring this, Tilden continues, "He said he had his reasons. Said it went a long way back. But he wouldn't tell anybody. . . . why he did it." At this point Bradley comes into the living room.

Tilden, who is visibly intimidated by his younger brother, bolts and runs out. When Shelly asks if there isn't something that can be done for Dodge, who is still on the floor, Bradley laughs and says, "We could drown him!" Shelly, having heard enough about drowning people, responds instinctively, "Shut up!" she

shouts. Bradley stops laughing, moves menacingly to Shelly, orders her to open up and thrusts the fingers of one hand into her mouth. This concludes act two.

Has the second act clarified anything for the audience? Not much. If Tilden can be believed, Dodge has killed a child and buried it in the back yard. But whose child is it and why was it killed? While these questions remain unanswered, a new mystery is introduced. Why doesn't anybody in his family recognize Vince? Is there some connection between the buried child and Vince, and maybe to the other dead son, Ansel? Does the final act hold the answers?

In the last act it is morning, the rain has stopped and the sun is out. Shelly is telling Dodge she has seen him in some family pictures hanging in Halie's bedroom. He denies being in any of the pictures, "That was never me! This is me. . . . The whole shootin' match sittin' right in front of you." Shelly responds, "So the past never happened as far as you're concerned?" Dodge later confirms this view by insisting, "There's not a living soul behind me." As Shelly wonders aloud, "What's happened to this family anyway?" Halie returns from her "lunch," accompanied by Father Dewis, a distinguished looking clergyman.

Halie is wearing a bright yellow dress and carrying roses of the same color. She announces that Father Dewis has arranged for a bronze statue to be built in honor of Ansel, recognizing his patriotism and all-American status—"A basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other." Then in an exchange with Shelly, Halie launches into a tirade about how today's young people are becoming monsters. Reacting to this and in an effort to assert herself and be recognized, Shelly grabs Bradley's wooden leg.

With Bradley whimpering and Halie shouting, "Give my son back his leg. Right this very minute," Father Dewis pleads for some reason. Shelly replies, "There isn't any reason here! I can't find a reason for anything." When Halie threatens to call the police, Bradley protests that they don't want the cops coming into their home. "That's right," Shelly says, "Don't you usually settle your affairs in private? Don't you usually take them out in the dark? Out in the back? . . ." Then Dodge, apparently in defiance of Bradley and Halie, suddenly begins to tell his story of the mysterious buried child.

According to Dodge, after the three boys were grown Halie got pregnant, "outa' the middle a' nowhere," he insists, because they had not slept together for years. Incest between Halie and Tilden is hinted at. "We couldn't let a thing like that continue," Dodge maintains. "I killed it," he continues "I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter." Ansel would have stopped him, Halie injects, and looking at Bradley asks, "What's happened to the men in this family! Where are the men!" Just then Vince returns.

He is drunk and, in a reversal of the second act, no longer recognizes the members of his family. Looking into the house Vince shouts that maybe he should come in and "usurp your territory!" As he slashes at the porch screen with a hunting knife, Bradley falls off the sofa to the floor, and Halie and Father Dewis head upstairs to get out of the way. Dodge yells at Vince, "Go ahead! take over the house." Vince crashes into the room to inspect his "inheritance," while Dodge reads from an imaginary will, leaving the house to his grandson and ordering the rest of his belongings to be burned in a huge bonfire.

Shelly now leaves. Vince refuses to join her, claiming "I just inherited a house." "I've gotta carry on the line." In a monologue addressed to the audience Vince tries to explain his decision by recounting his previous nights' experience. Intending to turn away from the confusions of his grandparents' house, he had driven all night in the rain, got to the Iowa border, then turned around and came back, because of something unusual he had seen as he drove:

I could see myself in the windshield. . . . I studied my face. . . . As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him. . . . And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. . . . And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear back to faces I'd never seen before but still remembered. . . . I followed my family clear into Iowa. . . . Straight into the Corn Belt and further. Straight back as far as they'd take me.

Following this Father Dewis leaves, mumbling that he had just come in for some tea, not knowing there was any trouble.

Vince now discovers that Dodge is dead. He covers him with the blanket, which he had been wearing over his own shoulders, puts the yellow roses on his chest and lies down on the couch. As

in act one, Halie begins talking to Dodge from upstairs, not knowing that he is dead. Tilden was right about the corn, she says, "I've never seen such corn. . . . It's like a paradise out there." As she talks Tilden, unseen by Vince, enters the living room. In his arms he is carrying the decayed corpse of a baby. Tilden makes his way slowly up the stairs while Halie's voice continues. She is trying to account for the paradise in the back yard. A good hard rain takes nourishment down to the roots, she muses, down to little white shoots which are strong enough to break through the earth. "I've never seen a crop like this in my whole life," she says. "Maybe it's the sun." Tilden now disappears from view at the top of the stairs, and the lights fade as the play ends.

## II

In approaching *Buried Child* from the perspective suggested by R. W. B. Lewis, the characters can be heard carrying on a conversation, or rather a shouting match, not only about their own particular plight but also about concerns central to the American experience.<sup>10</sup>

The two major images in the play are the corn and the buried child, symbols of past and present aspects of this particular Illinois family and of America itself. The corn is tied to a mythic past of abundance and fertility for both family and nation. But Dodge's family is also deeply entwined with some tragic, mythic blunder in the past, some ancient corruption which suggests the breaking of forbidden social taboos. The child buried in the back lot symbolizes this painful event. In attempting to deny this aspect of the past family members have tried to blot out its memory.

For Dodge the actions of his confused and brutal past are so well buried that he no longer recognizes his own grandson. According to one interpretation of the play, Vince is the real buried child, and this explains Dodge's initial refusal to recognize him.<sup>11</sup> Dodge furthermore denies he is in the old family pictures which Shelly asks him about, insisting that he exists only in the present. Shelly's rejoinder, that the past then never happened as far as Dodge is concerned, is correct to the extent that he has repressed the tragedy of his personal history.

Bradley is the other member whose denial of family history is equally vehement, and he suffers severely from the consequences of such denial. He is mean, threatening and resentful, an emotional and physical cripple. He sadistically attacks his sleeping father with electric hair clippers, symbolically stripping Dodge of any lingering potency he might still have. Feeling himself to have once been bullied by his family, Bradley relishes the power he now has over an enfeebled father and a "half brain" brother. But Bradley is himself impotent, turned into a whimpering child when denied his wooden leg by Shelly and then Vince in act three. An equally vivid example of his impotence is Bradley's sexless rape of Shelly, which he accomplishes by thrusting his fingers into her mouth.

Tilden's relationship to past and present is quite different. When he says that the corn he brings into the house is from the back yard, the symbolic place of the buried past, both Dodge and Halie initially claim that nothing has grown there since 1935. But Tilden's produce symbolically raises the possibility of new life. Like the rest of the family he knows what horror is buried out back. But he also represents another awareness about the past, that it contains not only the seeds of present decay but also the roots of future liberation.

When Tilden (whose very name suggests a tiller of the soil) dumps the ears of corn into Dodge's lap and again when he drops the husks gently over his sleeping father, he is symbolically urging on Dodge a view of the past that recalls it was once also rich and abundant. It is Tilden whose actions make it necessary for the family to confront, rather than continuing to deny, the tragic mistakes of the past. This is most vividly represented in the play's final image, as Tilden comes in from the back yard carrying the corpse of the buried child. With Dodge dead the family must face the tragic blunder symbolized by the unearthed child.

Halie and Vince are the two remaining members of the family who must come to terms with the past. Vince has returned to his grandparents' home in order to reconnect himself to his past, only to find that he is not recognized. His response is to run away, but he is drawn back. In language which moves his experience to a symbolic level, Vince explains why he returned. Whereas Dodge claims there is no living soul behind him, Vince,

in studying his face in the reflection of a rainy night windshield, sees the faces of generations which preceded him, including his father and grandfather. In those faces Vince is able to symbolically follow his family back, "straight into the Corn Belt and further. Straight back as far as they's take me." Near the end of the play Vince pays homage to his grandfather by covering him with the blanket and placing Halie's roses on his chest. He then takes Dodge's former place on the sofa, new life replacing old, and lies staring at the ceiling as his grandmother delivers the play's final monologue.

The soliloquy, addressed to her dead husband and his heir, is Halie's beginning effort to confront a past which she has so desperately tried to deny. Throughout the play she has continually turned to the memory of her dead son, Ansel, contrasting him to her living sons and to all of today's "monster" children. But in act three Halie appears in yellow (rather than the black mourning dress of act one), carrying roses, which may, like the corn of the same color, stand for the fertility of spring.

The possibility of renewed life is also at the heart of the monologue Halie delivers as Tilden mounts the stairs to her room carrying the corpse of the unearthed child. As this aspect of the past is about to confront her, she looks out the window into the back yard and now sees evidence of the abundance which Tilden has been bringing into the house. The play ends with Halie describing the tiny little shoots of life which account for that fertility, recognizing the possibilities of a present freed from the distortions of the past. Her last words, "Maybe it's the sun," might be a play on the word "son," thus alluding to a future left in Vince's hands.

The future, of course, is always unknown and problematic.<sup>12</sup> Does Vince's usurption/inheritance of the farm house suggest he will carry on the line of impotent or ineffectual males debilitated by the past? Does his "rebirth" and assumption of Dodge's position on the sofa mean that he will continue the family effort to deny its history? Or does his final shedding of Dodge's blanket indicate he has symbolically overcome the past? Will he now be able to respond positively to the hopes expressed by his grandmother? These questions are unanswered and the issue of the future unresolved by the playwright, most likely in recogni-

tion of the fact that all considerations of the future can ultimately only be speculative.

In *Buried Child* Sam Shepard brilliantly dramatizes contradictory attitudes toward two of America's leading myths. One of these myths is that in the past America was a land of enormous potential; the second is that somewhere in our history we lost that promise.<sup>13</sup> In dramatizing conflicting views of the meaning of these myths in the individual lives of a particular Illinois family, Shepard has also "hooked up" with an American sense of confusion about its history, an uneasy feeling that somewhere in the past we made a tragic mistake which continues to haunt us. Whether this was conscious on Shepard's part or not, it is one of the important connections between the author and his society that can be made from an effort to understand his plays within the context of the cultural dialogue to which he is so vividly contributing.

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#### NOTES

1. Shepard's first play is entitled *Cowboys* (1964). Other plays which feature cowboys or western figures include *Cowboys #2* (1967), *The Unseen Hand* (1969), *Cowboy Mouth* (1971), *The Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974), *True West* (1980), and *Fool for Love* (1983) as well as the screenplays for *Paris, Texas* (1984) and *Fool for Love* (1986). Critics who treat him essentially as a Western writer include Vivian M. Patraha and Mark Siegel, *Sam Shepard* (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Press, 1985), which appeared in the Boise State University's "Western Writers Series." See also Ron Mottram, *Inner Landscapes: The Theatre of Sam Shepard* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1984), particularly 9-10 and 160; and Don Shewey's biography, *Sam Shepard: The Life, The Loves, Behind The Legend Of A True American Original* (New York: Dell Press, 1985).
2. Shewey, 19 & 30. Of the name change Shepard has said, "I always thought Rogers was a corny name, because of Roy Rogers and all the association with that. But Samuel Shepard Rogers was a kind of long handle. So I just dropped the Rogers part of it. That had gone on for generations, the name, seven generations of it. It kind of shocked my grandparents more than anybody, I think, 'cause they kind of hoped I would carry it on. Then I called my kid Jesse, so that blew it entirely. Now in a way I kind of regret it. But it was, you know, one of those reactions to your background." Quoted by Shewey, 30-31.
3. Samuel C. Freedman, "Sam Shepard's Mythic Vision of the Family," *New York Times*, December 1, 1985, sec. H, 1 & 20.
4. The other plays in the cycle are *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) and *True West*, both set in California, *Fool For Love*, which takes place somewhere in the Southwest, and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), with two western settings one of which is identified as Montana.

5. The quoted material in this paragraph is from Amy Lippman, "Rhythm & Blues: an Interview with Sam Shepard," *American Theatre*, April, 1984, 9-13 & 40-41.
- Shepard's plays have also been likened to jazz and the comparison can give some insight into the way he shapes the dialogue, the images, the experiences and the myths which make up his plays. In jazz a melody can be started, played for awhile, then begun over again and taken in a different direction; a jazz line may thus seem to contradict itself. Similarly, in a Shepard play we are frequently not offered a single meaning for an image or bit of action, but are involved in a kind of mystery where different and quite opposite meanings of the same image are suggested at different times. The enjoyment of jazz comes, at least in part, from the unexpected twists and turns the musicians give to the melody, and the same can be said of the contradictions in a Shepard play. In this sense *Buried Child* has been seen as a kind of verbal jazz. (See Wayne Turney, "About the Play," Program Notes to Cleveland Play House production of *Buried Child*, October 7-November 9, 1986, 4.)
- If a Shepard play is a kind of verbal jazz, it is not the quiet cocktail mummur of George Shearing, but the violent argument of Charlie Mingus. And the things being shouted about are often differences over major values represented in the myths and popular beliefs which are at the heart of American culture.
6. R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 1-2. I have also adapted this approach to the study of "community" in American culture in *From Main Street to State Street: Town City and Community in America* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977).
7. Harold Clurman has commented on this unusual comic touch in his "Review of *Buried Child*," *The Nation*, December 2, 1978, 621-???
8. Dodge's name is the same as Shepard's grandmother's maiden name.
9. The quotations from *Buried Child* used in this essay are from Richard Gilman, ed., *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* (New York: Bantam, 1981 and 1984), 63-132.
10. Some critics see *Buried Child* as a modern version of the central theme of mythology in the Western World, the death and rebirth of the Corn King. In this interpretation the spreading of corn over Dodge suggests his symbolic role as the Corn King, and the death which he describes in terms of burning is appropriate to that role. The yellow roses signify Dodge's figurative castration and imminent death. Vince is, then, the reincarnation of the buried child, and his symbolic rebirth (as he cuts his way through the screen porch) and reclaiming of his patrimony, is signaled by the sudden growth of corn in long fallow fields. Thus behind the bickering of a typical Midwestern family lies a tale of sacrificial rites and dying gods. Thomas Nash, "Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*: The Ironic Use of Folklore," *Modern Drama*, 26, 4 (December, 1983), 486-91. See also Lynda Hart, *Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 75-87. Hart maintains that the mystery child is the issue of Tilden and Halie, its identity having been denied by the family until Vince's return to reclaim his identity stirs up the suppressed memories and forces his family to recognize him as the real buried child.
11. Both Callens and Hart make this point. See previous footnote.
12. Whatever the working out of the future brings, it is clear that the two non-family members will have no active role to play. Father Dewis represents the ineffectiveness of established authority and the irrelevance of contemporary religion. Whatever solace Christianity might have once offered, the representative of that faith in this play simply walks away from a troubled situation.

Shelly too finally leaves. She is like a typical audience in her conventional attitudes and the need to find a clear reason for everything. From her hip, California perspective she thinks Vince's efforts to retrace his childhood are rather corny. But Shelly's expectations of Vince's family are very conventional. She assumes family members should recognize one another and have turkey dinners and apple pie together. When Vince's family doesn't live up to her expectations, and when the situation in the house becomes even more disconcerting, she turns to familiar things, cleaning carrots, having a conversation with Tilden, making broth for Dodge. Such comfortable things make sense and Shelly wants things to make sense, for there to be some reason in appearances. But ultimately she finds, "There isn't any reason here!" When she can find no reason for why nobody recognizes one another or in the contradictory stories about the buried child, Shelly wants to get away. When Vince tries to explain why he came back to the house and why he intends to stay, Shelly responds simply, "Bye Vince," and leaves.

13. In his work Shepard dramatizes a widely held assumption among many scholars of a lost or wronged America. See Thomas Bender's discussion of the surprising number of sociologists and historians whose work points to a "decline of community," in modern life in *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1978).

It could be argued that community is one of the vital elements that Shepard's characters sense has been lost from the past. The monologue that opens *Curse of the Starving Class* is a kind of paean to community: "I was lying there on my back. I could smell the avocado blossoms. I could hear the coyotes. I could hear stock cars squealing down the street. I could feel myself in my bed in this house in this town in this state in this country. I could feel this country close like it was part of my bones. I could feel the presence of all the people outside, at night in the dark. Even sleeping people I could feel. Even all the sleeping animals." (*Seven Plays*, 137) This feeling is shattered with the intrusion of the son's drunken father.

Again, in *True West* one of the characters expresses this same sense of a lost community past in terms of the disappearance of a once familiar landscape: "There's nothing down here for me. There never was. When we were kids here it was different. There was life here then. But now—I keep comin' down streets thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin'. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar. On the way to appointments. Wandering down streets I thought I recognized that turn out to be replicas of streets I remember. Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in a postcard. Fields that don't even exist anymore." (*Seven Plays*, 49)

## GARRISON KEILLOR'S LAKE WOBEGON: THE CONTEMPORARY ORAL TALE

PHILIP GREASLEY

American fiction and poetry written to reflect spoken language and assert the values of common people constitute a major continuing tradition in American literature. Elite writers from Twain to Faulkner, from Whitman to Sandburg and Langston Hughes, to name only a few, have relied upon the qualities of oral expression to convey their deepest values.

While appealing primarily to elite audiences, this "oral" literature has remained consistently populist. These writers measure worth in individual integrity and fullness of life, not wealth, power, or position. Furthermore, American oral literature is consistently apolitical or anti-establishment, making the Rousseauist assumption that individuals in the state of nature are inherently good while societally-based greed and ambition regularly corrupt the elite.

While celebrating true social and technological advance, oral literature aggressively confronts negative implications of social, economic, and technological change. It is—for a form often branded as radical and revolutionary—essentially conservative, looking, with immense specificity, at the effects of social and technological change on common people. Increasingly, oral literature has asserted the unproductivity of movement to larger-scale, more mobile, highly sophisticated social orders and advanced technologies because these innovations can destabilize the social order and destroy the individual.

Just as the message of American oral literature has remained constant, so have its stylistic techniques. As literature celebrating common man amid life's difficulties and uncertainties, oral literature regularly assumes the form of first person vernacular

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narrative, rich in sensory specifics, apparently rambling and unformed, but in reality rigidly and rigorously structured. More important, oral literature provides the raw *experiences* of common life rather than distanced, intellectual statements about it. Repetitive syntax and non-standard diction typically symbolize virtue amid exploitative elite glibness. Time after time in oral literature, the lower-class, often rural, vernacular-speaking apparent-rube is shown to be far wiser and more attuned to enduring values than his more sophisticated, eloquent, urban counterpart. Using and recording slang, colloquial, or dialect language, the narrator moves toward affirmation of life.

In short, America's oral tradition in literature is experiential, populist, value-laden, and possessed of characteristic techniques.

Garrison Keillor's fictional reminiscence, *Lake Wobegon Days*, fits well within the American oral tradition, even adding new refinements to the mode. As with almost all oral literature, *Lake Wobegon Days* emphasizes the dominating, low-mimetic first person central narrative voice. In fact, Keillor's form is deliberately open, freeing the narrative vision to take any turn and assume any guise it wishes. The result is a narrative tour de force. Keillor's narrator freely crosses time and space, making forays into memory and reminiscence, offering boyhood and mature visions, repeatedly passing between reality and imagination, myth and history, romanticism and pragmatism. The narrator assumes multiple fictitious voices, including those of the state geographic survey, a 19th century historian, the Federal Writer's Project, and several family members presenting multiple discordant perspectives on the family's Thanksgiving holiday. Even the normally clear distinction between author and narrator is blurred by references to *The Prairie Home Companion*, older kids who played mean tricks on him as a child and never write to him about the show now, and Keillor's failed first marriage.

Keillor sets the book's tone in the "Preface," suggesting that "it was a story given to me as in a dream, [in which] people . . . might discover something they too were looking for all these years."<sup>1</sup> With this beginning, he alludes to his personal search for roots and identity, permanence, and movement from rejection to acceptance and affirmation of the past.

The deliberately unassuming nature of Keillor's narrator and his willingness to recognize his errors, laugh at his pretensions, and assert that he is nothing special endear him to the reader and lend credence to his vision. Keillor opens the preface with the story of his first big sale as a writer and the ensuing expansive family vacation to San Francisco with what he would later find out were almost his entire earnings for the year, riding first-class in Pullman compartments, eating big meals in the diner, and lounging in the club car, luxuriating in the role of the "successful American writer who provided good things for his family" (vii-viii). Within the first paragraph, his expansive romantic balloon is burst by reality and self-critical introspection as the train derails and he and his family are transferred to "an old bus that smelled of engine fumes" (viii).

My wife dozed next to me, the little boy lay across our laps and slept, and I sat and thought about the extravagance of this trip, the foolishness—one stroke of good luck, the Opry story, and I was blowing a big wad of the proceeds on what? False luxury, which was now derailed (viii).

This anecdote and many others, laced with slang, dialect, and mild vulgarisms, reinforce Keillor, the narrator, as an unthreatening presence, one we can relax and enjoy while retaining our smug sense of personal superiority. Using this strategic ploy, Keillor's humor and self-deprecation lead us to lower our guard and critically consider experiences closer to our own personal and collective memories, values, and prejudices than we might otherwise willingly confront.

The same technique is used in presenting Lake Wobegon. Repeatedly, Keillor maintains that the town and its people are nothing special. Indeed, the personification of the town, the statue of the unknown Norwegian, stands, full of uncertainty, the daunted victim of everything from artistic ineptitude to the vicissitudes of the elements, civic budgetary constraints, and, above all, the ever-dominating pragmatic considerations of mower blade damage.

A proud figure, his back is erect, his feet are on the ground on account of no money remained for a pedestal, his eyes—well, his eyes are a matter of question. Probably the artist meant him to exude confidence in the New World, but his eyes are set a little

deep so that dark shadows appear in the late afternoon and by sunset he looks worried. His confident smile turns into a forced grin. In the morning, he is stepping forward, his right hand extended in greeting, but as the day wears on, he hesitates, and finally he appears to be about to turn back. The right hand seems to say, Wait here. I think I forgot something.

Nevertheless, he is a landmark and an asset, so it was a shame when the tornado of 1947 did damage to him. . . . it blew a stalk of quackgrass about six inches into the Unknown Norwegian, in an unusual place, a place where you wouldn't expect to find grass in a person, a part of the body where you've been told to insert nothing bigger than your finger in a washcloth.

Bud, our municipal employee, pulled it out, of course, but the root was imbedded in the granite, so it keeps growing out. Bud has considered using a pre-emergent herbicide on him but is afraid it will leave a stain on the side of his head, so, when he mows, simply reaches up to the Unknown's right ear and snips off the blade with his fingernails. It's not so noticeable, really; you have to look for it to see it.

The plaque that would've been on the pedestal the town couldn't afford was bolted to a brick and set in the ground until Bud dug it out because it was dinging up his mower blade. Now in the historical society museum in the basement of the town hall, it sits (114-15).

Keillor's choice of oral structuring further enhances the narratively-induced sense of garrulously rambling oral amor-phousness while in reality maintaining tight, highly efficient structure. Most central in conveying this impression is Keillor's use of explanatory footnotes and regular parenthetical comment. The explanatory footnotes give rise to many voices and types of commentary. On the whole, however, they function as "sidebars," or new perspectives, on stories presented in the main text. At times, the sidebars are quite lengthy—running as many as twenty-two pages on the bottom halves of pages—as the main tale continues above.

Beyond the appearance of apparently unselfconscious rambling, Keillor gains in other ways by using these footnote sidebars. Most simply, by including a second perspective, Keillor is able to explore the colorful characters and histories of

individuals incidental to his major text. More frequently, his sidebars add a note of humor or contrast. Aside from the interest factor, Keillor's humor functions regularly as a leavening, softening agent, easing the harshness of criticism and heightening audience acceptance of his social commentary. Since Keillor's comments about himself and his "nothing special" town ultimately focus upon the reader's values and sense of community, leavening humor and contrast are all the more important.

Keillor's sidebars also provide contrast. The most major instance of this kind occurs in the chapter entitled "News" and includes a humorous commentary on the vicissitudes of running a small town newspaper. The chapter highlights hilarious parody "society page" *non-coverage* of wedding night misadventures.

Poor Ruthie. Bob got shnoekered at the wedding dance, and she drove them to a \$50 motel room in St. Cloud and sat on the bed and watched a Charlie Chan movie on TV. "The bridal suite featured violet satin bedsheets and a quilted spread with ironed-on bride & groom appliques, a heart-shaped mirror over the dresser, a bottle of pink champagne in a plastic ice bucket, a bouquet of funereal red roses, and her husband sick in the john," the Herald Star did not report. "The bride felt queasy herself. Reception was poor, and the picture kept flipping. She adjusted the brightness knob to sheer black and turned up the sound. The man in the next room, with whose flesh hers was now one, dressed in white cotton boxer shorts with blue fleur-de-lis and a yellow 'Keep On Truckin' T-shirt, sounded as if he was almost done. Wave after wave of multicolored wedding food had come out of him, propelled by vodka sours, and now he was unloading the last of the wedding cake and cheese dip and the liverwurst snacks. The bride, whose personal feeling about vomiting is that she would much prefer to lie very quietly for three days, tried to occupy her mind with the pleasant memory of being class orator in blue ankle-length sateen graduation gown with bell sleeves and blue pumps and a mortarboard cap with a yellow tassel and reading five hundred words on the subject 'Every Conclusion Is a New Beginning,' but she wasn't sure she felt so hopeful about the conclusion taking place in the next room. And she needed to pee" (324-27).

Keillor juxtaposes this hilarious story with an ex-resident's "dark night of the soul" attack on Lake Wobegon values. His "95 Theses" constitutes the most direct, hard-hitting indictment of the

religious, conservative, work-guilt oriented values of the town, an attack which goes totally unanswered. The Theses assert, for example,

You have taught me to feel shame and disgust about my own body. . . . You have taught me to fear strangers and their illicit designs. . . . Your theology wasn't happy about the idea of mercy and forgiveness. . . . You taught me that . . . the world is fundamentally deceptive. The better something looks, the more rotten it probably is down deep (315-25).

The diametric opposition between the light-hearted wedding story and the sidebar's unrelieved hostility, sharing the same pages, reflects the narrator's early ambivalence toward the town while at the same time softening what otherwise would be a ponderous, difficult statement totally out of harmony with the ultimate values of the book as a whole. Together, these co-statements allow presentation of the honest attack on the negative aspects of town values leavened with humor, irreverent language, and some of the excesses which the author of the 95 Theses asserts to be impossible in Lake Wobegon.

Juxtaposition of this kind is not limited to sidebars or parenthetical glosses. In fact, it appears on almost every page of *Lake Wobegon Days*. Several major juxtapositions recur consistently within the text—typically without transition. As in the sidebar above, Keillor regularly juxtaposes direct social attacks, moments of happiness, and poignant visions. Almost equally common is his pairing of massively idealized or romanticized fantasy against the realistic, excessively pragmatic, often debased actual. Keillor regularly slides in Walter Mittyish manner between the actual and the imagined, the romantic adolescent dream of glory and heroism and the actuality of shyness, awkwardness, acne, and the limitations inherent in small town life. Often too, Keillor moves his audience between the present and the world of memory, of reminiscence. And more often than we might expect, his memories are unhappy, laden with fear of ostracism and burdened with the recurring specter of premature death.

Beyond juxtaposition, Keillor uses motif organization—fully developed individual variations on broad unifying themes—to organize his book. Each chapter presents a number of loosely related anecdotes with some applicability to recurrent themes—

town history, protestantism, *sumus quod sumus* (we are what we are, or real versus ideal), summer, fall, school, winter, and so forth. As a sole principle of organization, this very loose motif organization would be extremely weak. However, in conjunction with complementary organizing principles, it is strong and provides much of the texture—continuity within diversity—of the book. Moreover, loose motif organization allows Keillor to emphasize the individual, particular, and experiential. Motif organization involves readers in the hopes and fears of individual characters, allows us to internalize the town's collective value system, and encourages our emotional involvement in the stream of interactions which constitute Lake Wobegon life.

In fact, Keillor's exhaustive centering on the individual is his most central and important oral organizing principle. He gently sketches telling moments in the lives of very ordinary, superficially unappealing individuals, arousing our fullest sympathy through the sureness of his delineation and the poignance of the moment. Such is the case, for example, in his delineation of the old, perhaps cancerous, farmer and his '66 Chevy:

Florian pulls his '66 Chevy into a space between two pickups in front of the Clinic. To look at his car, you'd think it was 1966 now, not 1985; it's so new, especially the back seat, which looks as if nobody ever sat there unless they were gift-wrapped. He is coming to see Dr. DeHaven about stomach pains that he thinks could be cancer, which he believes he has a tendency toward. Still, though he may be dying, he takes a minute to get a clean rag out of the truck, soak it with gasoline, lift the hood, and wipe off the engine. He says she runs cooler when she's clean, and it's better if you don't let the dirt get baked on. Nineteen years old, she has only 42,000 miles on her, as he will tell you if you admire how new she looks. "Got her in '66. Just 42,000 miles on her." It may be odd that a man should be so proud of having not gone far but not so odd in this town. Under his Trojan Seed Corn cap pulled down tight on his head is the face of a boy, and when he talks his voice breaks, as if he hasn't talked enough to get over adolescence completely. He has lived here all his life, time hardly exists for him, and when he looks at this street and when he sees his wife, he sees them brand-new, like this car. Later, driving the four blocks home at about trolling speed, having forgotten the misery of a rectal examination, he will notice a slight arrhythmic imperfection when the car idles, which he will spend an hour happily correcting (6-7).

Whether the picture is of an old, dying man meticulously caring for his venerable Chevy, an off-hand reference to giving away bags of tomatoes in August or the felt-impotence of trying to start the car in the coldest January weather, a vision of generation after generation of children escaping schoolwork's tedium to the freedom of imagination, or the delineation of a child walking through town, Keillor's memory and his unfailing eye for detail make his subjects come alive to emotion and memory. He describes the boy, saying,

Along the ragged dirt path between the asphalt and the grass, a child slowly walks to Ralph's Grocery, kicking an asphalt chunk ahead of him. It is a chunk that after four blocks he is now mesmerized by, to which he is completely dedicated. . . . The boy kicks the chunk at the curb, once, twice, then lofts it over the curb and sidewalk across the concrete to the island of Pure Oil pumps. He jumps three times on the Bunsen bell hose, making three dings back in the dark garage (2).

Keillor's oral emphasis on the individuals and particulars of Lake Wobegon evidences his dedication to common man and the diversity of fulfilling experiences marking "common" life.

In conjunction with his portrayed movement from adolescence to maturity, from rebellion to affirmation, Keillor organizes *Lake Wobegon Days* in a rising structure similar to those of Whitman and Thoreau. He moves from negation and rejection to acceptance and affirmation. Keillor's chapters trace the evolution of the town and people from their brutish, naive, often gruesome early days, through alienation from and subordination to dominant culture, through religious turmoil and the individual dark night of the soul in "Protestant," "Winter" and "News," to a satori-like experience of rebirth, peace, and acceptance in "Spring" and "Revival." Keillor's movement is almost zen-like, logically presenting individual and collective frustrations in this highly conservative rural town while seeking permanence, strong values, and consistent meanings in an age of impermanence, rootlessness, homogenous valuelessness, and absorption with potentially destructive technology. Finally, in a moment of unexpected openness, the realization comes that we live in a universe of divine wisdom, love, and goodness; that we are more blessed than we deserve; and that this overarching providence

has protected us from our own misguided dreams and aspirations. Here in this detested actual is the answer to our fondest prayers, the fulfillment of our deepest needs. In describing a townsman, Keillor asserts:

What a lucky man. Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known (420).

Yet despite Keillor's consistent adoption of oral techniques, his almost book-long denigration of Lake Wobegon appears at first highly atypical of recurring oral norms. In early views of Lake Wobegon and its people, Keillor repeatedly undercuts the town and its people through strategic recitation of the most unsupportable Babbit-like puffery in combination with damning glimpses of the essential ugliness, narrowness, economic uncompetitiveness, and unappealingly anachronistic nature of the town living out its final years in a backwater bypassed by progress and technology. Thus, for example, Keillor's first description of the road into town includes "dark woods," "magnificent concrete Grecian grain silos," "the town's one traffic light," and "a few surviving elms" (1). In image after image, Keillor's portrayal of the town continues totally negative.

Further adding to our initial negative impression of Lake Wobegon is the ineptitude of local efforts to compete successfully with vital, growing economic centers of the region. Indeed, anything boosterish juxtaposed against the town's "Wobegon" name and character reaffirms the insurmountable gulf between the afflatus of unbased aspiration and the town's very limited potential for contemporary success.

Finally, Keillor's continuing identification of himself as one who escaped the town at the first possible moment and his constant differentiation of his personal values, interests, and goals from those of other town residents further lead readers to maintain an amused, condescending attitude toward the town and its people.

The key to understanding Keillor's early digression from the norm of oral literary support for common people and simple life lies in his combination of the oral tale with Bildungsroman. The movement here is that of growth and development of the

narrator-protagonist. As such, Keillor's early felt alienation and superiority based upon misperceived personal sophistication, his impression of town limitation, and his adolescent yearning to escape Lake Wobegon's identity and limits become the antagonist, the worldview which he must work through and discard if he is to reach full maturity and wisdom. One failed marriage, many romanticized self-images, eleven big city apartments and three houses later, he sees the town, its people, and his own inherited identity in a far different, more charitable way. By this time, he has learned and seen the worth of oral values. The now-mature Keillor recognizes the value of permanence, individuality, strong values, and independence from technological change.

The transition from rejection and escape to acceptance and affirmation is associated with his growth into a truer picture of himself, the recognition of time passing, and the impermanence of big city life and friendships. It must also be associated with the very mode of Keillor's oral experiential perception. "Common" individuals and memories live in his mind, moments give way to lives, and lives intertwine, creating the texture of life in the town that time forgot. The appeal of these moments and individuals is undeniable. Finally, two relatively minor incidents highlight the unattractiveness of rootless, disconnected modern life and the weakness of the technology upon which modern society relies.

The first is the death of an ex-townsman. His rootless, uncaring family foist the responsibility of funeral and burial on a distant Lake Wobegon relative. He shoulders the responsibility without demurrals, organizes a local lodge honor guard, and buries the man with dignity at a ceremony that the town attends. Here the values of family loyalty, permanence, and respect for the individual stand out.

A simple snowstorm is the second telling event. Coming in to Lake Wobegon for Thanksgiving, a California family of ex-Wobegonians luxuriates in technology's advantages, two glasses of champagne and lunch filling the time from California to Minnesota. But then, nature steps in with the snowstorm. The plane is rerouted and technology stands impotent. "Up in the air it was the twentieth century, but in the blizzard on the ground it was the Middle Ages" (257). Nature is the reality, "progress" and human control the illusion.

By the end of the reminiscence, Keillor, like another man he describes, makes clear how fortunate he is in his "common" small town heritage, identity, and the love of those around him. With this, recurrent American oral literary values and techniques come back into harmony. Now mature, Keillor stands with the underdogs, unworried about alienation or the taunts of the big city elite. He has found his home and in the process helped all of us "find something . . . [we] too were looking for all these years" (x). His conscious, contemporary oral tale reasserts the values fostered by American elite oral literature throughout our history.

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NOTE

1. Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days* (New York: Penguin, 1986) x. All subsequent references are to this work. Page references appear in parentheses in the text.

## THE IMAGE OF DETROIT IN *THE DOLLMAKER*

JAMES SEATON

There is little disagreement about the image of Detroit in Harriette Arnow's best-known novel. One critic describes the Detroit of *The Dollmaker* as a "society of the damned," so that the journey that Gertie Nevels makes from the Kentucky hills to Merry Hill, a housing project in World War II Detroit, is a movement "from an almost Edenic environment to the city of Hell" (Lee, 92). Another critic argues that that characterization is misleading—but only because Kentucky too has its faults; "Detroit is clearly a hellish place," he agrees (Malpezzi, 85) referring to the city as "the new Babylon" (Malpezzi, 86). For this critic

Babylon, so connotative of all that is meretricious in the world, is an appropriate analogue for Arnow's portrayal of Detroit—that wasteland of unfulfilled dreams where there is seldom enough milk and never honey. (Malpezzi, 86)

In the television version of *The Dollmaker* Jane Fonda's Gertie achieved a happy ending in what seemed the only way possible, given this vision of the city: she ultimately returns to Kentucky and leaves Detroit behind, as the Gertie Nevels of the novel was never able to do.

Harriette Arnow herself does not seem to feel the hostility toward Detroit or cities that one might expect from the author of such a book. She tells an interviewer "I like to live close to a city" (Miller, 85) and the interviewer notes that "You said that you did some of your best work and most of it when you lived in cities" (Miller, 85). Harriette Arnow says of Detroit itself

The educational system—you hear many complaints of it. But it does have a great library system and other things that a writer needs, including museums. And it also has the multitude of people. Not that you use them for characters, but they're just good to see and hear. (Miller, 85)

Although Gertie Nevels did not find her way to Detroit's libraries or museums as did the author herself, Arnow points out that in Detroit Gertie did find

all manner of people. She herself might be called "hillbilly" and the children might fight, but they all fought—but she became part of the conglomeration of people and in a sense she was more at home—I say only in a sense—she knew more kindness from her neighbors when she was in trouble . . . she was both helped and trusted as she had never been at home. She ceased to be the peculiar person that didn't fit into the community—that's the way I see it—but was a part of all these strange people. (Miller, 86-7)

How does one balance the view of Detroit and of *The Dollmaker* that emerges from Harriette Arnow's conversation against the picture of Detroit that most critics accept and which was endorsed by the television movie of the novel? D. H. Lawrence's injunction to trust the tale, not the teller, would seem to make the answer obvious. But I would argue that a close reading of *The Dollmaker* sustains Harriette Arnow's own interpretation of her work, even while it accounts for the dominant impression of Detroit as sheer hell. It seems to me that there are two Detroits in *The Dollmaker*, Detroit as image and Detroit as lived reality. The image of "Detroit" remains strange, frightening and mysterious throughout this long, meticulously detailed novel. On the other hand, "the alley," the section of the Merry Hill housing project where the characters actually live their lives, becomes, despite its cramped physical space, "bigger than Detroit" (436), a paradoxical statement which I think must mean that the human reality of the city is finally more important and more powerful than the complex of mysterious non-human forces summed up by the word "Detroit."

One's sense that "Detroit" is the home of uncanny, inexplicable forces is conveyed in part by the references to Detroit weather. On arriving at the bus depot in Detroit, Enoch looks outside and reports back to his mother

I see Dee-troit, Mom. It's a snowen like I ain't never seed. Th snow in Dee-troit, don't fall down. It goes crosswise. (161)

The wind in Detroit is associated with the sounds of the social environment. Gertie, hoping the mailman will bring Christmas mail, finds only

. . . some as yet unheard voice of the many-voiced wind, for Detroit's wind seemed like her people, a thing of many voices, many tongues (322).

Later, Gertie wonders if she is hearing simply the wind as she strains to listen for Cassie murmuring "Callie Lou" in the trainyard:

Memories of old tales of witches and warnings of names called down from the sky or up from a river came back to her. The wind, she'd always said, for the wind in leaves and by water had many voices. There was a little wind today, but the brassy-voiced Detroit wind could never whisper so. (402)

Gertie finally locates Cassie, but she is unable to rescue her from the unseeing train. After the funeral she stays in her room, unwilling to return to the tasks of everyday life. Max attempts to rouse her, saying

You'll smother in this room, kid. Th sun's took a notion to shine, an considering it's in Detroit it's doing pretty good. You need a little air. (427-8)

At first glance one might sum up the effect of these passages by suggesting that Arnow is using one of the oldest of literary techniques, the pathetic fallacy; references to the weather are used to emphasize the emotions of the human characters. And of course this is true. But references to the weather in *The Dollmaker* have a very different impact than they do in, say, *Wuthering Heights*. In a romantic novel of landscapes storm and wind can indicate depth of passion, depth beyond that of ordinary, everyday existences. On the other hand, the weather of Detroit does not echo the feelings of individual human beings, nor does it intimate an intensity of feeling beyond social conventions. Instead, it conveys a sense of the immensity and strangeness of a social environment which itself seems beyond human understanding. Although Detroit has been created by human beings, it appears as a kind of alien force, no more comprehensible than the weather. A stranger at the bus station tells Gertie that

You know, everthing's on wheels; that's traffic. Detroit's worse'n Willer Run. It ain't no place fer people." (159)

And her warning seems accurate as Gertie looks around her on the long cab ride to Merry Hill:

It seemed suddenly to Gertie as if all the things she had seen—the blurred buildings, the smokestacks, the monstrous pipes wandering high above her, even the trucks, and the trains—as if all these were alive and breathing smoke and steam as in other places under a sky with sun or stars the breath of warm and living people made white clouds in the cold. Here there seemed to be no people, even the cars with their rolled-up windows, frosted over like those of the cab, seemed empty of people, driving themselves through a world not meant for people. (168)

Throughout the novel this sense of “Detroit” as a mysterious, non-human force remains.

Detroit is mysterious in other ways as well. To some, it seems all too friendly to migrants from the Kentucky hills like the Nevels. Gertie hears a “jeering voice from a strange alley” shout

“Dem hillbillies, dey come up here an get all da money in Detroit.” (285)

Others feel the same way; a new neighbor

... one day in Gertie’s hearing remarked in her broken English to Mrs. Daley that Detroit certainly loved the hillbillies: there was a hillbilly family close by with only three kids, but they had three bedrooms, and the man hadn’t had to go to war, and now he was working through the changeover. (508)

But to Gertie it seems that Detroit is entirely inimical to her heritage. She must now learn “All the new Detroit words—adjustment, down payment, and now Whit’s eviction and communism,” words which “would get into her head and swim round for days . . .” (245). And even the old words have new meanings. It takes her a long time to learn that “a Detroit ‘yeah’ . . . almost never meant yes” (554). Some, like Joseph Daley, are all too ready to teach the newcomers the language of the city:

Huh? Youngen, whatcha mean youngen? In Detroit youse gotta learn to speak English, yu big nigger-loven communist hillbilly. Yu gotta behave. I, Joseph Daly, will see to ut yu do. I’m a dacent, respectable, religious good American. See?” (313)

In the same speech, however, Daly himself virtually concedes defeat, admitting that he no longer can speak with authority for Detroit:

Detroit was a good town till da hillbillies come. An den Detroit went tu hell. (313)

But Mrs. Miller, 200 pages later, argues that it is the hillbillies who have saved Detroit:

Want us to go back home an raise another crop a youngens at no cost to you an Detroit, so’s they’ll be all ready to save you when you start another war—huh? We been comen up here to save Detroit ever since th War a 1812. (509)

In this debate neither side has a monopoly of virtue; Mrs. Miller is as bigoted as Joseph Daley, telling him when she is about to leave the city I almost wish I was stayen. I’d help make Detroit into a honest-to-God American town stid uv a place run by Catholic foreigners.” (509)

The upshot seems to be that Detroit cannot be identified with any one ethnic group, nor can ethnic relations be summed up in any easy moral formula. “Detroit” remains a puzzle beyond comprehension, a name for all the social forces beyond human control and human understanding.

The “brassy-voiced Detroit wind” (402), for example, does not correspond to the voices of Detroiters whom Gertie meets face-to-face but rather to the alien voices invading her home from the radio. Gertie is shocked, “terrified into muteness” by her fear that “some crazy man must have broken through the thin wall” (184) of the apartment when she first hears the metallic voice:

... a brassy-voiced man cried from the bedroom behind the kitchen, “Now, don’t forget, tell your mothers about Tootsie Rootsies, the cereal our soldiers eat.” (184)

Gertie does not again mistake the radio for a human intruder, but she never ceases to regard its sound as an intrusive, alien force; on the radio even “mountain music” acquires “a loud, nosey twanging that she hated” (478).

The sound of the radio thus becomes symbolic of the essence of “Detroit,” an environment created by human beings but appearing only as a mysterious, inexplicable force. Gertie must

call upon her Biblical imagery to confront the power of this machine to lead her children into a new, alien world populated by voices which are seductive but with a strange, inhuman accent:

Twice she called softly for Clytie . . . but Clytie never heard for listening to the trials and tribulations of Wanda Waxford. Through Christmas vacation Clytie had gone more deeply into the world of the radio people . . .

Just now, as always before and after and in the middle of Wanda Waxford, a husky-voiced man who could somehow talk so that a body felt you and he were alone together told Clytie to use Amber Soap becausee her shoulders after its use, her wh-oole bo-aw-dy, a-all her body, eeveery bit of her bo-aw-dy would be so-o beaau-uutiful, so-so-o-oft. The voice crooned on about the beautiful body Clytie would have until her eyes softened, glinted, and her lips moistened as she twisted her head about to consider the beauties of her arms and legs. Gertie, watching, thought now as always of Eve listening to the serpent, looking at her own body, becoming aware of the forbidden fruit. (325-6)

Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* or Woody Allen's *Radio Days* present one view of the radio of the forties; for *The Dollmaker* the radio is never the voice of popular culture but instead the voice of an alien dominance, the voice of the Detroit wind become articulate.

But if Gertie Nevels is surrounded by a "Detroit" which threatens to engulf her and her family, she also lives among actual human beings, contradictory but real. Instead of living in the solitude of a mountain home, she lives in an alley, where interaction is impossible to avoid. The human reality of Detroit for her is "the alley." At first it seems to be only a microcosm of Hell. When Johala tells Gertie that "In Detroit there are many Christs," Gertie answers "Seems like they're all dead an hung on crosses" (238).

Mrs. Daly emerges as the most representative character of the alley. And, at first, she seems to confirm all the stereotypes about ignorant ethnic prejudice. Mrs. Daly's Roman Catholicism shows itself only ironically, in her choice of Roman Cleanser as the bleach which she throws in the eyes of the meek "gospel woman" along with this advice:

Youse ain't blinded . . . I give youse a little Roman cleanser inu water's all. But come close t'my house anudder time an youse'll git a pot a lye water. Keep them books an that talk away from mu kids, see? (224)

But Mrs. Daly, it turns out, has other uses for Roman Cleanser. On Christmas Day she shelters the helpless, drunken Sophronie and cleans her child's hair:

I went to work. I used everting—oxydol, yellow sopa, shampoo soap, denna took Roman Cleanser. It's like silver now, but she's wentu sleep, pore t'ing, anu head wet, anu fire out. (300)

She now feels pity for someone who gets bleach in their eyes. When Gertie exclaims "I don't see how you cleaned that hair," Mrs. Daly replies

Twas harder ona kid den me. She got Roman Cleanser in her eyes—pore t'ing. (302)

And later Mrs. Daly washes some shirts for Gertie herself, again using her favorite ingredient:

Do come in, Mrs. Nevels—a little Roman Cleanser is all them shirts needs—but do come in an have some coffee. (467)

The point here is not that Mrs. Daly undergoes a moral conversion in the course of the novel. After all, she welcomes Gertie into her house and offers her coffee only because she has noticed Homer Anderson watching the scene, hoping to gather material for his doctoral thesis on "The Patterns of Racial and Religious Prejudice and Persecution in Industrial Dertoit" (285). Before she had noticed him, her first words to Gertie had been "Listen, youse nigger-loven—" (467). The point is rather that because Mrs. Daly is human, she has about her a human complexity. She is more than a voice on the radio or a statistic for a sociology thesis. Without sentimentalizing Mrs. Daly, Gertie can compare her, even identify her, with Mary, the mother of Jesus:

"They both seen a lot of trouble, had a heap a yougens, an worked hard," Gertie said . . . The most she'd seen of [Mrs. Daly] was angry eyes above a broom handle, but she did work hard and keep her children clean. (262)

And when the atom bombs fall on Japan, Mrs. Daly cannot help but recognize a common humanity:

Mrs. Daly sighed, "Yu gotta realize that it an't like them Japs was good white Christians; as Mr. Daly says, them Japs is pretty near as bad as them communist Russians—but," and she looked about her and spoke softly, guiltily, as if her words were treason, "yu still gotta say, people is people. Why them Japs lives something like this," and she waved her hand over the flowers, the low houses, the child-flooded alleys, the babies, "all crowded up togedder inu towns; little cardboard houses kinda like what we've got; and maybe lotsa—you know—kids." (496)

Mrs. Daly, a stereotypical example of ethnic prejudice at first glance, becomes by the end of the book an example of the difference between Detroit as lived, personal experience and Detroit as the summation of impersonal forces. At the conclusion of *The Dollmaker*, when, in a gesture of apparent defeat, Gertie orders a carpenter to split apart the wooden Christ figure on which she has been working throughout the novel, he says to her

Christ yu meant it to be—Butcha couldn't find no face fu him.  
(599)

But if Gertie has been defeated, it is not because she has not been able to find images of Christ in Detroit. Johala, she now recognizes, had been right all along. She tells the workman

... "No. They was so many would ha done; they's millions an millions a faces plenty fine enough—fer him."

She pondered, then slowly lifted her glace from the block of wood, and wonder seemed mixed in with the pain. "Why, some a my neighbors down there in th alley—they would ha done." (599)

This is the ultimate significance of Gertie's recognition of

... the bigness of the alley, the kindness ... for the alley and the people in it were bigger than Detroit ... (436)

The alley, of course, is only one small section of the geographical Detroit; but its human reality is finally more important, "bigger," than the vast, impersonal forces summed up in the novel by the term "Detroit." Detroit as the nexus of the forces of war and capitalism is indeed hellish; but Detroit as the lived reality of the alley in Merry Hill becomes a human community whose sig-

nificance is greater even than the vision of solitude and independence Gertie Nevels had hoped for in the Kentucky hills.

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