

MidAmerica XXIII

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

Edited by
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In honor of
Scott Donaldson

PREFACE

The publication of *MidAmerica XXIII* marks the beginning of the Society's second quarter-century and a year that builds on the achievements of the past with the successful twenty-sixth annual conference, the symposium "The Cultural Heritage of the Midwest" and the concurrent Midwest Poetry Festival in May, 1996. Appearing here are three outstanding contributions to the conference, the prize poem, Terence Glass's "Red Berries," the prize essay, Thomas Wetzel's "'Beyond Human understanding': Confusion and the Call in *Winesburg, Ohio*," and the prize story, Dave Diamond's "Fire in the Badlands."

Honored at the conference were Sara Paretsky of Chicago with the Mark Twain Award for 1996 for distinguished contributions to Midwestern Literature and Scott Donaldson, Cooley Professor Emeritus of the College of William and Mary, with the MidAmerica Award for distinguished contributions to the study of Midwestern Literature. For his biographies of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Macleish, and others that contribute to our understanding of the lives and literature of the Midwest, this *MidAmerica* is inscribed to Professor Donaldson.

August, 1997

DAVID D. ANDERSON

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RED BERRIES

TERRENCE GLASS

The way the fence notches the face
of the woods, wears sleeves of mildew
and splits to exhale the old sun
through the overhanging leaves,

the way the posts embrace
dry grips of September, the way
the grass claims the leaves
like peelings of rust,

the way the rails hewn round
and screwed into the fat posts
spring knots like stillborn seeds
where the branches once ate

until the berries behind one section,
the red berries in twos and threes
like guts unskinned, like blisters of blood
the daylight has pinched

onto the green bush, the surgical
berries incise us, yes laser the years
packed in the heart and liver
and intestines with the child's note,

the divorce, the roses
piled high on the casket,
the infant's body squirming
in the blue-cuffed hands

that night, the chasm of white light
in the operating room that year,
the voices shooting to be right
that lifetime, the way

the whole hide of the universe splits
and the soul exhales the red berries
and I turn and there the autumn maple
bleeds its stalk of sunset

and your words rise from
the bed with you, holding
your sutures, when we love
you say we gain energy we don't

lose it, your words rise orange
through the blue sleeve of Decembers,
all of them packed like ice
around us, a solidified sea,

a journey we have put off and now
it is time it is time to go
to let the carpets of leaves rise
to sail us on the whirling day.

Central State University

"BEYOND HUMAN UNDERSTANDING":
CONFUSION AND THE CALL IN
WINESBURG, OHIO

THOMAS WETZEL

Early in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, the narrator of "The Philosopher" describes the visits Dr. Parcival makes to George Willard in the offices of the *Winesburg Eagle*, where George works as the sole reporter. Although he eagerly looks forward to Dr. Parcival's daily visits to the newspaper office, George cannot quite grasp the doctor's stories, their meanings or intentions: "The tales that Doctor Parcival told George Willard began nowhere and ended nowhere. Sometimes the boy thought they must all be inventions, a pack of lies. And then again he was convinced that they contained the very essence of truth" (33). The doctor had once studied to be a minister, one who clarifies and explains the word, but now his stories have a different intention. As he tells George, "Perhaps I am trying to conceal my identity and don't want to be very definite" (33).

This sense of the indefinite, the concealed truth, and the confused narrative pervades all of *Winesburg, Ohio*, calling the reader to read indirectly, away from the obvious and confused "truth" of how the stories appear, and to look for different sorts of cues to find the essence of personal truth within Anderson's tales. From this perspective, the fact that Jesse Bentley's story, "Godliness," is by far the longest tale in *Winesburg, Ohio* may be important.¹ Although it has little direct connection with the rest of the book (if we look at Anderson's novel as a *Bildungsroman* of sorts with George Willard as its focal point²), "Godliness" might have something vitally important to say concerning the "story" of *Winesburg, Ohio* as a whole. By focusing on Jesse's story, which begins decades before many of the other stories in the book and which takes place (for the most part) outside the town limits of Winesburg (Dewey 251), the reader might avoid

any easy reading— any “grotesque” reading (as suggested by the old man in the novel’s introduction)—of the story’s “truth.”³

“Godliness” is a biblical story⁴—a confused retelling of the Abraham and Isaac story as well as other biblical narratives, a story of reaching out in the darkness, a story of hands and broken religion, of sacrifice and faith, a story of the relation between call and response. In this confusion, Jesse’s story echoes some of the confusion surrounding the sacrifice of Isaac that Soren Kierkegaard exposes in his *Fear and Trembling*. However, unlike even Kierkegaard’s reading of the Abraham and Isaac story, Jesse’s story is not the story of a *call* requiring a *response*, but of a response sent out in the night, hoping to awaken a call—a broken reminder of Abraham’s response to God: “Here I am.” Anderson’s novel, then, suggests (in a way similar to Kierkegaard) that in this distance between ancient Mount Moriah and early twentieth century Ohio—in the way the retelling of the ancient story becomes confused and convoluted—we begin to understand the depth of alienation from society involved in love and suffering today.

Jesse Bentley lives a confused life. As the narrator’s opening description of his piece-meal farmhouse suggests, to understand Jesse requires sensitive searching and watching of one’s step, an awareness of narrative mazing and confusion (45). The reader has already seen this coexistence of narrative and geographic confusion in the settings of other *Winesburg* stories. In many cases, like Elmer Cowley’s shop, the hall next to Dr. Reefy’s office, or the alley behind the New Willard Hotel, one finds refuse and revelations, confusion and clarity, or garbage and godliness, in the very same place (23-24 174-175; 204). Along with the wandering stairs and oddly placed rooms of Jesse’s house, the geography of *Winesburg* suggest that “the place [is] full of surprises” (45), experiences and settings that clutter the individual characters’ perceptions and beliefs.⁵

It comes as no surprise then that Jesse Bentley lives a confused life, believing himself a prophet or patriarch much like the Old Testament figures that have peopled his mind since he first left home to become a minister (47-48). Jesse takes the matter to God, after he must return home when all his brothers are killed in the Civil War and he is passionate in his desires, fanatical:

“I am a new kind of man come into possession of these fields,” he declared. “Look upon me, O God, and look Thou also upon my neighbors and all the men who have gone before me here! O God

create in me another Jesse, like that one of old, to rule over men and to be the father of sons who shall be rulers!" . . . In fancy he saw himself living in old times and among old peoples. The land that lay stretched out before him became of vast significance, a place peopled by his fancy with a new race of men sprung from himself (52)

Ironically, Jesse already has begun to confuse the biblical stories.⁶ Connecting himself with the "tree of Jesse," the Old Testament name for the family from which came King David and later Jesus, Jesse Bentley forgets that the Old Testament Jesse never ruled over ancient Israel; indeed, the biblical Jesse remains a simple farmer and sheep herder all his life (I Samuel 16:2).

In his wish to possess the land around him and to be the father of a new race, Jesse Bentley more resembles an even older biblical patriarch, Abraham, the first to whom God gives the covenant of the Promised Land.⁷ God came to Abraham with a call and a promise: after manifesting himself to the patriarch and talking personally with him, God says, "Here now is my covenant with you; you shall become the father of a multitude of nations. . . . I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land you are living in, the whole land of Canaan, to own in perpetuity, and I will be your God" (Genesis 17:1-8). Abraham's response to God and the covenant is simple, yet profound: "Here I am." Jesse Bentley takes the ancient promise of Canaan as his own, "that as the true servant of God the entire stretch of country through which he had walked should have come into his possession" (Anderson 54).

But, at the same time, and very much unlike Abraham whose faith in God and the covenant does not waver, Jesse becomes convinced that all the other Ohio farmers around him are Philistines trying to wrest the promised land away from him, and he begins to fear the arrival of a Goliath who could defeat his holy mission (55). In this fear, Jesse Bentley convolutes the biblical narratives obviously, for now he is re-enacting the role of ancient Israel's first king, Saul, whose army faced the Philistines and who himself feared he might have to fight the Philistine champion (I Samuel 17:11). And so, as Jesse Bentley's wife lies in bed in the throes of childbirth, he cries out to God for a champion of his own, a son to be called David, who will help him "to pluck at last all of these lands out of the hands of the Philistines and turn them to Thy service and to the building of Thy kingdom on earth" (55). But this too differs from the original

biblical story of Jesse; for his family, like Abraham and the other patriarches, is called by God (I Samuel 16:3). The biblical David becomes a champion by default, drawn into battle with Goliath only when he takes a meal to his brothers (I Samuel 17: 12-54). In the biblical narratives, a call always precedes response. Jesse Bentley, in contrast, cries out in search of a call, hoping to draw God's attention to him: "Here I am."

The breakdown of stories here, if we are to believe Anderson's narrator, coincides with the onset of the Industrial Revolution in America's Middle West (Stouck 32-33; Anderson 52-53). In a time of mass produced, cheap books and newspapers, in an age of automotive mobility, "[m]uch of the old brutal ignorance that had in it also a kind of beautiful childlike innocence is gone forever" (Anderson 53). While the older generations filled their days with heavy labors and had no time to consider world events, Anderson's narrator points out that "[i]n our day a farmer standing by the stove in a store in his village has his mind filled to overflowing with the words of other men" (53).⁸ The Middle Western farmer no longer ponders only the biblical stories in his quiet moments; instead, his mind is filled with glib and senseless confusion. Jesse Bentley is no exception. His mind too is filled with two conflicting influences: his faith in God and his faith in the capitalist industrialism of his age.

True, Jesse "still believed that God might at any moment make himself manifest out of the winds or the clouds" (62). But, in his own mind anyway, and in the years after his farm becomes enormously successful, he no longer demands such recognition; instead he prays for it, full of regret that fate "had not let him live in a simpler and sweeter time when at the *beckoning of some strange cloud in the sky* men left their lands and houses and went forth into the wilderness to create new races" (62, emphasis added). At the same time, though, now that he has tasted of worldly success, Jesse also has "been touched by the deep influences that were at work in the country during those years when modern industrialism was born" (63). He reads newspapers and magazines regularly and even tinkers with technological innovations like "a machine for the making of fence out of wire." In other words, as the narrator explains, "The greedy thing in him wanted to make money faster than it could be made by tilling the land" (63).

Jesse therefore wrestles between God and mammon, between spiritual and worldly success—and he begins to become somewhat

unhinged in the process.⁹ He rejects Louise, the daughter born to his wife Katherine on the night he begged God for a son (60, 69, 78), but he desperately desires *her* son, whom we can guess Jesse demanded be called David, and whom he will later demand to raise as his own on the Bentley farm when the boy is twelve (60). After the boy has lived with Jesse for several months, the old man feels reawakening “the notion that now *he could bring from God* a word or a sign out of the sky, that the presence of the boy and man on their knees in some lonely spot in the forest would *make the miracle* he had been waiting for almost *inevitable*” (67, emphasis added). Once they reach the spot, Jesse falls to his knees and cries out with the whole left side of his face twitching, demanding to be acknowledged. David becomes afraid, believing that some “terrible man” has taken the place of his grandfather, and he runs away. The boy hits his head when he trips over some tree roots, leaving Jesse only to mutter to God, “What have I done that Thou dost not approve of me” (68). Despite his efforts to make himself noticed, Jesse does not evoke a call.

But still, Jesse does not give up. When David reaches the age of fifteen, he—like his biblical namesake—fashions himself a slingshot (80), and he carries it along as he and his grandfather return to the wilderness (81). On the way, Jesse and David collect from the flock a lamb born out of season, tying it up carefully so it cannot escape. Jesse says to David, “I saw it yesterday and it put me in mind of what I have long wanted to do.” The biblical echo is ominous, for Jesse once more resembles Abraham when God comes to him: “‘Take your son,’ God said, ‘your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah.’ ‘There you shall offer him as a burnt offering, on a mountain I will point out to you’” (Genesis 22:2). Jesse has become convinced that, like the ancient patriarchs, he must make a sacrifice to God (82).

As they reach “that place where Jesse had once before appealed to God and had frightened his grandson,” David again becomes afraid, his face turning white like fleece (83), and he decides to untie the strings on the lamb. Equating himself with the little animal, the boy says, “If anything happens we will run away together” (83). David almost seems to sense the reenactment happening before him, and he has begun to fathom his role in this story. Although David himself does not speak, Isaac’s words to Abraham seem to describe the boy’s feelings: “Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. ‘Father,’ he

said. 'Here I am, my son,' Abraham replied. 'Look,' he said, 'here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham answered, 'My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering'" (Genesis 22:7-8). Jesse erects a heap of sticks and sets them afire, while David sits nearby, the lamb in his arms (83). But as Jesse approaches to kill the lamb, *David* now confuses the story. He thinks Jesse is coming to kill him, and he releases the lamb and runs away with it. Jesse, having forgotten the boy, chases after only the lamb with his knife (83), but given David's sense of connection with the fate of the lamb, the ambiguity of Jesse's threat is probably real enough.

Although the biblical narrative describes a somewhat different situation that follows, the role of the son is the same in David's mind:

Then [Abraham] bound his son Isaac and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and seized the knife to kill his son. But the angel of God called to him from heaven. "Abraham, Abraham," he said. "Here I am," Abraham replied. "Do not raise your hand against the boy . . . Do not harm him, for now I know you fear God. You have not refused me your son, your only son." (Genesis 22:11-12)

But here, all the stories fall apart—or fall together—depending on one's perspective. David picks up a stone and, like his biblical namesake, puts it in his sling and hurls it at Jesse. It hits Jesse squarely in the head, and he falls to the ground (I Samuel 17: 48-49). In the moment that Jesse confuses the biblical narratives and terrifies his grandson, the biblical stories coalesce and merge. Jesse the "father" of David, who wanted to be an Abraham, becomes the very Goliath he feared—a Philistine trying to uproot the promised land (I Samuel 17: 49-50). David, the grandson of Jesse, has first been turned into the sacrificial Isaac, but now he becomes David the warrior and future king after whom he was named. With even further confusion in Anderson's narrative, David's comments after Jesse falls to the ground also portray him as Cain, the fugitive wanderer who has killed God's chosen one. Although Jesse is only stunned, David still exclaims over his fallen grandfather, "I have killed the man of God and now I will myself be a man and go into the world" (Anderson 84; Genesis 4:14-16). With this moment, "[t]he shell of circumstances of [David's] life was broken and he was compelled to start forth. He left Winesburg and no one there ever saw him again" (Anderson 79).

God does not speak. Jesse, unlike Abraham, loses his “only son,” and with him, the hope of creating a chosen people in a promised land. The burnt offering is a complete failure, utter confusion. There is no call—only silence. When Jesse later speaks of the matter, “[he] began to talk about God. That is all they ever got out of him. Whenever David’s name was mentioned he looked vaguely at the sky and said that a messenger of God had taken the boy. ‘It happened because I was too greedy for glory,’ he declared and would have no more to say in the matter” (84). In the end, after all of Jesse’s attempts to force God to speak, there is only the sky and the empty silence—and one feeble voice: “Here I am.”

Anderson’s decision to retell the Abraham and Isaac story in such a muddled fashion is not without precedent. Soren Kierkegaard, in his *Fear and Trembling*, suggests that the biblical narrative itself defies the sort of “grotesque” readings of which Anderson has warned us to be wary. There is no simple truth in the incidents on Mount Moriah, according to Kierkegaard. In this sense, Kierkegaard himself describes a very “Modernist” view of the biblical text—a view of reading and writing that would influence the literary movements of the decades after him. While he admits that “Abraham arouses [his] admiration,” Kierkegaard at the same time finds him appalling (71). Noting that Abraham possesses only his belief that God has called him to sacrifice Isaac—and no objective verification of it—Kierkegaard contends, “One cannot weep over Abraham. One approaches him with a *horror religiosus*, as Israel approached Mount Sinai” (71).

Likening “the solitary man who ascends Mount Moriah” to a seeming “somnambulist who walks securely above the abyss,” Kierkegaard can only ask in astonishment, “. . . [What] if this man is disordered in his mind, if he had made a mistake!” (71-72). In ironic confusion, Kierkegaard can claim,

Abraham I cannot understand. . . . If people fancy that by considering the outcome of this story they might let themselves be moved to believe, they deceive themselves and want to swindle God. . . . They would suck worldly wisdom out of the paradox. . . . for our age is not willing to stop with faith, with its miracle of turning water into wine, it goes further, it turns wine into water. (48)

In other words, the biblical story of Abraham, much like Anderson’s retelling of it in “Godliness,” also is a broken story. In later biblical

narratives, the prophet Jeremiah will tell the people of Israel, after they have turned to the worship of Molech which involved human sacrifice, that God finds the Israelites' sacrifice of their children an "abomination." God, Jeremiah emphasizes, is punishing Israel for sacrificing their children, going so far as to say that Israel's God would never even imagine such a request (Jeremiah 32: 28-35)—a stark contradiction of what happened on Mount Moriah.¹⁰ Put simply, in the biblical narrative, God calls Abraham to do that which God himself finds despicable. Thus, as Kierkegaard explains, those who wish to see in Abraham's act a simple expression of obedience to God have sucked all meaning from the biblical story, turning the wine of human experiences and stories into water of simplistic and abstracted truisms. In other words, seeing Abraham simply as obedient to his God is a "grotesque" reading of what actually happens.

But, Kierkegaard nonetheless believes there is truth and meaning in this story, and his comments that help to clarify Abraham's problem also offer insight into why a retelling of this story functions as the narrative center of *Winesburg, Ohio*:

[Abraham's] justification is once more the paradox; for if he is justified, it is not by virtue of anything universal, but by virtue of being the particular individual. How then does the individual assure himself that he is justified? It is easy enough to level down the whole of existence to the idea of the state or the idea of society. If one does this, one can also mediate easily enough, for then one does not encounter at all the paradox that the individual as the individual is higher than the universal. . . [E]ither Abraham was every minute a murderer, or we are confronted by a paradox which is higher than all mediation. (72-77)

In other words, Abraham, as the father ready to sacrifice his son, has rejected his duties as father and so stands outside the universal—the ethical and moral standards of society. As Kierkegaard stresses, "His relation to Isaac, ethically speaking, is this, that the father should love the son" (81). Obviously, a loving father, in terms of ethics and society alone, cannot sacrifice his son. Abraham standing on Mount Moriah cannot fit into society, cannot place himself within a community, without surrendering the reality of what he is at that moment.¹¹ His only hope that he himself is not crazy, that he himself will not momentarily become a brutal butcher, is his faith in God—