

# MidAmerica XXVI

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

Edited by  
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In Honor of  
Mary Ellen Caldwell  
and  
Mary Jean DeMarr



## PREFACE

With its twenty-sixth annual appearance, *MidAmerica* begins its second quarter century of publishing insightful essays that contribute to an ultimate definition and exploration of the literature of the Midwest. With its companion publication, *Midwestern Miscellany*, now in its twenty-eighth year, and the forthcoming *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, it continues to mark out the path that Midwestern literary study takes and will continue to take as we enter the third millennium, the twenty-first century, and the third century of an identifiable Midwestern literature. The authors of the essays in *MidAmerica XXVI*, names both familiar and new in *MidAmerica's* table of contents and its mission, carry that mission further along its ever-widening and lengthening path that clearly has no foreseeable end.

The dedication of this issue to Mary Ellen Caldwell and Mary Jean DeMarr, both recipients of the MidAmerica Award, recognizes two scholars who have done much to carry on our mission and to further our understanding of our Midwestern literature.

July, 1999

DAVID D. ANDERSON



## CONTENTS

Preface	5
Ravens	
The Midwest Festival Prize Poem	Jim Gorman 9
A Graveyard of the Midwest: Unearthing the Influence of Sören Kierkegaard on Midwestern Immigrant Communities	
The Midwest Heritage Prize Essay	Thomas Wetzel 10
Traveling Companions	
The Midwest Fiction Award Prize Story	Etta C. Abrahams 25
The Effect of Consumer Capitalism on Middle-Class Culture in Fuller's <i>Cliff Dwellers</i> and <i>With the Procession</i>	Kevin J. Jett 34
The Ambiguities of the Escape Theme in Midwestern Literature 1918-1931	Matts Västå 49
"I belong in little towns:" Sherwood Anderson's Small Town Post-Modernism	Clarence Lindsay 77
Sherwood Anderson's Midwest and the Industrial South in <i>Beyond Desire</i>	David D. Anderson 105
Sherwood Anderson's Discovery of a Father	Paul W. Miller 113
Grassroots Communism: Contexts for the Political Activism of Grace Lee Boggs	Roger J. Bresnahan 121
Mary Frances Doner: Michigan Author	Mary DeJong Obuchowski 129
From Ma Joad to Elizabeth Berg: Women on the Road in America	Ronald Primeau 138
Fresh Salt Water: The Great Lakes as Literature of the Sea	Jill S. Gidmark 147
The Commodity Culture and Other Historical Pressures in Harriett Arnow's <i>The Dollmaker</i>	Michael Barry 156
Jim Harrison, Willa Cather, and the Revision of Midwestern Pastoral	William Barillas 171
Annual Bibliography of Midwestern Literature: 1997	Robert Beasecker, Editor 185
Recipients of the Mark Twain Award	Inside Back Cover
Recipients of the MidAmerica Award	Back Cover



## RAVENS

JIM GORMAN

At dusk I flap my two-foot wings  
from locust to oak  
and glide to the rim of the iron box  
that gives me supper.

How I get here is stink,  
and how I hop from bundle to bag, stink,  
or the almost stink  
of warm meat.

Still the shrieking girl in the flapping sheet surprises me.  
My flap and caw surprise her,  
and she gives up her armload  
into the stinking stew before she's maybe sure.

It's still tied to her,  
and her next shriek is both egg and girl,  
both wanting to be,  
and wanting to be rid.

She stretches the rope, breaks it on iron.  
She has hands not wings so she can do this,  
though hands cannot help her fly away.  
Instead she stumbles back,

drops down in her doorway, stares:  
there is no rustling between us,  
no cry down inside the box,  
only a warmth soon to be something else.

Otterbein College

# A GRAVEYARD OF THE MIDWEST: UNEARTHING THE INFLUENCE OF SÖREN KIERKEGAARD ON MIDWESTERN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

THOMAS WETZEL

In a recent interview, the then 83-year-old Howard V. Hong recalled “an earlier time when [he] first heard the name Kierkegaard.” Hong, the general editor of Princeton University’s twenty-six volume *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, comments, “My father had borrowed a book from a farmer in Norway Lake [Minnesota]. When I asked him about the book, he said, ‘It’s by a Dane named Kierkegaard.’ I remembered that later, that name... That was the beginning.” This brief comment confounds the traditional academic reading of Kierkegaard as the father of intellectual existentialism, a relic of the nineteenth century only resurrected in the World War II era by the likes of Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger. Hong’s comment verifies that, far from first appearing in America through the post-war university communities, the thought of Kierkegaard decades earlier was wandering the highways and byways of the immigrant Midwest.<sup>1</sup>

Although born in 1912, Hong remembers farmers exchanging copies of Kierkegaard’s works in his youth. This was not an isolated incident: historical research shows Midwestern universities teaching selections of the Dane’s texts before the turn of the century and seminaries in the Midwestern states equipping their future ministers with Kierkegaardian perspectives long before existentialism reached the shores of Massachusetts and New York. In fact, the first serious American article on Kierkegaard appeared already in 1916. The author, David Swenson (himself a Minnesotan like Hong), discovered Kierkegaard’s works around the turn of the century, and by 1914 he was lecturing regularly on Kierkegaard at the University of Minnesota (Elbrønd-Bek 77; *Presence* ix).

The question, of course, is why? What does the Midwest offer that would make it a special home for Kierkegaard? There is much

circumstantial evidence that, when taken together, suggests the immigrant population of the American Middle West both knew and propagated Kierkegaardian ideas through early native-language churches and seminaries. Crucially, much of this Kierkegaardian perspective was communicated, not through the intellectuals, but through the workers, ministers<sup>2</sup> and common folk of these small-town communities. Needless to say, the views of these groups create a picture of Kierkegaard very different from those associated with Kierkegaard's thought in present-day American academic circles. By tracing the expression of religious impulses among many Midwestern immigrants, one discovers a Kierkegaardian influence in their approaches to faith and to life, and from these influences, one discovers that Kierkegaardian ideas entered into the literary milieu of America's turn-of-the-century Midwestern writers. In fact, one might suggest that from these supposed historical "footnotes," a Midwestern Kierkegaard emerges.

Historian Oscar Handlin, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Uprooted*, discusses the mindset and experiences he found common in the European immigrants who came to America in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on diaries, archives and immigrant journalism of the time, Handlin sums up the role of religion in the European immigrant's mind quite simply: "Man holds dear what little is left. When much is lost, there is no risking the remainder." The immigrant, in the crossing of the Atlantic, had lost so much of what made his or her life meaningful that he or she would become almost violently conservative in the preservation of those customs and beliefs which could be kept; and for many, if not most immigrants, what was kept was the Christian faith (Handlin 7-17, 331, 105, 85-88, 86, 108).

Emigration posed a serious crisis, particularly for the European peasant. What Handlin suggests in fact seems the logical outcome:

The whole American universe was different. Strangers, the immigrants could not locate themselves; they had lost the polestar that gave them their bearings. They would not regain an awareness of direction until they could visualize themselves in their new context, see a picture of the world as it appeared from this perspective.... When the natural world, the former context of the peasant ideas, faded behind the transatlantic horizon, the newcomers found themselves stripped to those religious institutions they could bring along with them. Well, the trolls and fairies would stay behind, but the church and priest at least will come. (84, 105)

In other words, to the degree the New World seemed removed from the old ways of life, Handlin contends, to that same degree Christianity exerted a greater hold on the immigrants' lives: "the immigrants directed into their faith the whole weight of their longing to be connected with the past." The practice of faith became a passionate remembrance of the old life, an active attempt to recreate what once had been (Handlin 105-106).

Further, language barriers and cultural prejudices forced these immigrants—peasant and active religious dissenter alike—into a religious world outside that of the established churches of both America and the homeland. In addition to the huge financial burden of building a community's own church was the "weight of glory"—settling the matters of belief and faith. Forced by the circumstances of immigration and the state of America's already hyper-individualistic religious practices, the immigrant churches became churches of tightly-knit communities and individuals without strong hierarchical centers, instead constructed locally around the theology of an early minister's views or based on a shared faith experience unique to the given congregation. Not surprisingly, Handlin notes that many institutional churches found it very difficult, if not impossible, to reassert authority over these churches once denomination began to condense during the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century. If anything, many of the immigrant churches rejected the American denominations and formed their own native-language congregations. The Lutheran Church in America at one point had Norwegian, Danish, Irish, Finnish and German synods all operating independently of the English-speaking American Lutheran Church. It is into such a milieu that Kierkegaardian views on faith first entered the American Midwest (Handlin 115-128; 125).

Recently, Niels Thulstrup and M. Mikulová Thulstrup edited *The Legacy and Interpretation of Kierkegaard* (1981) as a volume of the respected *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana* published in Copenhagen. This volume offers a new perspective on the history of Kierkegaard's influence throughout Europe and the United States. Most valuable to us is Lewis A. Lawson's article, "Small Talk on the 'Melancholic Dane' in America." Expanding on research he began in 1970, Lawson here discusses both possible and definite connections between Kierkegaard's thought and the ideas of Americans, particularly Midwestern Americans. Lawson works from the esteem in which Kierkegaard's writing style was held by Danes in the latter part of the

nineteenth century, and he contends, “No doubt there were Danes who brought Kierkegaard’s works with them when they settled in Wisconsin or Minnesota or Iowa... (“Small Talk” 178-179).

Lawson offers some generalizations about the Danish immigrant experience that would have made them “responsive to Kierkegaard’s way of looking at things.” To begin with, Lawson contends that early Danish immigrants were at odds with the established state church of the time, so Kierkegaard’s “attacks upon Christendom”—his critique of the rabid power of the state-sponsored church wandering from the true Christian message—would have found a clear echo in the immigrant’s views. In fact, Kierkegaard’s critiques of the Danish state church were among his most widely-read and notorious works—even and perhaps especially outside his homeland—during his lifetime and for decades after his death in 1855 (“Small Talk” 179; Hale 164).<sup>4</sup>

Historical evidence bears out Lawson’s connection. Dorothy Burton Skårdal points out, for instance, that already in their Scandinavian homelands, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish parishioners were organizing local pietist movements that criticized the clergy of the state Lutheran churches. Once these immigrants began founding Scandinavian Lutheran churches in America, though, another Kierkegaardian element emerged: as Lawson puts it, “their activity was characterized by frequent factionalism,” again suggesting a strong break with traditional state Lutheranism. Nineteenth century demographer John H. Bille pointed out that even relatively small issues of argument between ministers and congregations led to large theological quarrels. Norwegian church members “were, as a rule, willing to split up their congregations and go to the expense of building a separate church and of employing a separate minister” during such conflicts<sup>5</sup>. Even Carl Sandburg notes such an extreme response in his descriptions of his childhood church in Galesburg. In his autobiography *Always the Young Strangers*, Sandburg describes just the sort of factionalism that suggests to Lawson an emerging sense of Kierkegaardian dissatisfaction with the concept of Christendom, state churches, and authoritarian religious practices that seemed emptied of faith (Skårdal 166-167; Bille 5-7, 14; “Small Talk” 179; Bille 15; Sandburg 67-70; “Small Talk” 180-181).

Lawson’s claim that this break with the state church mentality arose from a specifically Kierkegaardian mindset also is borne out by historians. Skårdal points out that many reform-minded Danish-

Americans acknowledged the influence of Kierkegaard on their thought and work. Another historian, Kenneth O. Bjork, argues that the Norwegian-American dissenters of the latter nineteenth century were at least in part pietists influenced by Kierkegaard. And schism were occurring in the Scandinavian homelands that would have contributed to such responses as well. These movements created views that were anathema to both the political status quo of the Scandinavian states and the security of the state churches, and Kierkegaard's views were quickly connected to these movements. In fact, Kierkegaard was so closely associated with such views at the time that Dr. Georg Brandes was forbidden to lecture on Kierkegaard at Christiania University in 1876. Brandes' lectures were moved to the Students' Union and an audience of 300-400 dissenters attended, hailing Brandes as a champion of freedom of thought. Some of these dissenters would stay on in Europe to agitate for change in both state and church; others took the opportunity to carry Kierkegaardian and other similar ideas to the settlements of the New World (Skårdal 174; Hale 164; Bjork 525; Svendsen 21-22).

Other specifics further reinforce this view. Lawson and historian Frederick Hale describe the life of Mogens Abraham Sommer, a Danish Jew converted to Lutheranism. After becoming an itinerant minister and agitator, Sommer was imprisoned several times in Denmark for his criticisms of the clergy and the state-run church. He immigrated to America in 1861, but he returned to Copenhagen in 1864 to open an immigration office. Through this work, Sommer conducted to America "parties of immigrants that ultimately numbered into the tens of thousands." When he wrote his autobiography—significantly, published in Chicago in 1891—he entitled it (in Danish, of course) *Stages on Life's Way*, the name of one of Kierkegaard's best-known works. Lawson draws two inferences from the book:

- 1) "that Sommer knew of Kierkegaard's life and work and thought that his own career was sufficiently like that of Kierkegaard... warrant using a Kierkegaard title;
- 2) "that Sommer knew that his Danish-American audience would recognize the Kierkegaard reference and thus be drawn to his book."  
(180)

Frederick Hale adds that Sommer's views were further institutionalized when several congregations under his leadership were founded in Denmark in the 1850s. These churches exerted substantial influence in American immigrant settlements as well ("Small Talk" 179-180; Hale 165).

Sommer, however, was not the only immigrant minister to settle numerous churches. Frontier ministry frequently offered the possibility that a single pastor could found numerous churches throughout the Midwest, thus developing congregations of likeminded people who would perpetuate his views. Carl Sandburg describes the wide-ranging influence of a similar immigrant minister,<sup>6</sup> and still other telling literary evidence adds to this conclusion. In his *Prairies Within: The Tragic Trilogy of Ole Rølvaag*, Harold P. Simonson notes that the respected immigrant novelist Ole Rølvaag learned English from an Elk Point, South Dakota, minister named P.J. Reinertsen. The minister offered the then twenty-year-old immigrant his library of Kierkegaardian works as part of Rølvaag's study in 1896. According to Simonson, "young Rølvaag devoured" the minister's library. Because Rølvaag had read Kierkegaard in Danish as a child in Norway,<sup>7</sup> it is reasonable to assume that the Kierkegaardian study was part of Rølvaag's introduction to English translation. Rølvaag later developed an admiration for frontier ministers like Reinertsen who were familiar with Kierkegaard. Rølvaag even suggested in letters later in life that frontier ministers should be familiar with Kierkegaard to best equip them for their ministries (Sandburg 365-366; Simonson 34).

To summarize: not only was it likely that many Scandinavian immigrants were familiar with Kierkegaardian views on faith and religious practices, but many early immigrant ministers were steeped in either Kierkegaardian theology or at least theologies sympathetic to Kierkegaard's views. Given the mobility of both settlers and frontier ministers during this period, it would not have been hard for even a relatively small group of "Kierkegaardians" to have a wide-ranging and deep impact on Scandinavian Midwestern immigrant communities. The initial insularity of the immigrant community would have reinforced this as well—and, interestingly enough, offered ways in which these ideas could have moved beyond the immediate immigrant group and into the culture of the small Midwestern town as a whole (Skårdal 166-170).

At first, the native languages created a sort of protective barrier around the immigrant community. If a group did not learn English, they were effectively cut off from the influence of American ideas and practices and could retain the older traditions. But as the immigrant community and church became dominated by English and "Americanism," communication could expand among ethnic groups. Skårdal points out that as the larger classifications of ethnicity declined, religious affiliations became increasingly important and even transgressed ethnic boundaries. Bille observed that Danes in particular quickly began to choose affiliations with Swedish or Norwegian churches, rather than Danish churches, because they sought congregations with similar theological commitments. With the change in language came a break, to some degree at least, with the focus of the religious service. Not only did the nostalgic elements weaken, but also the church could begin to explore ideas and practices discovered through the new exchanges among different ethnic groups. Thus, the relatively rapid process of assimilation could offer the possibility of both preservation and dissemination of theological beliefs occurring at roughly the same time (Skårdal 184, 180-182 Bille 13-15).<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the strongest evidence in Lawson's argument is his discovery of the "first known institutional response to Kierkegaard in the United States." Two professors, Nels Simonsen and Carl W. Schevenius, were teaching Kierkegaard as both literary figure and social theorist at least as early as 1885 at the Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston, Illinois. The school, also known as "The Norwegian Danish Theological School" after 1891, was only one of many native language seminaries in the Midwest created as a "response in higher education to the Scandinavian immigration to the United States according to Lawson. Other schools included Luther College in Wisconsin (founded in 1858); Augsburg Seminary, first of Wisconsin and later moved to Minnesota (1869); Red Wing Seminary, also in Minnesota (1850s); and the Swedish Methodist divinity school in Sandburg's own Galesburg (1868), which moved to Evanston in 1882), among at least a score of others arising during the same period throughout the upper Midwest. Further, at least two state schools in the Midwest were offering curricula in Scandinavian languages and literature in the latter nineteenth century. The University of Wisconsin started a program in 1869, while the University of Nebraska began its course offerings in 1887. The possibility of these schools teaching

Kierkegaard's works to at least some extent seems quite strong. Taking all this into account, Lawson feels safe in asserting that "[t]here was, then, by the 1890s a gradual introduction of Kierkegaard's thought into the education of the ministry serving Scandinavian churches in the Middle West" ("Small Talk" 181-182; Nelson, I, 317-335; II, 75-83, 129-135).

Another crucial means of disseminating Kierkegaard's thought was the popularity of the works of Henrik Ibsen. Connection was made between Kierkegaard and Ibsen in the English-speaking world at least as early as 1899.<sup>10</sup> However, among Scandinavians—both at home and in America—the connection between the Norwegian playwright and the Danish philosopher had been realized much earlier. The same Georg Brandes who was denied the chance to lecture on Kierkegaard in Copenhagen was also mentor to Ibsen during his most formative years. Brandes saw early the influence of Kierkegaard on Ibsen, noting in an 1888 letter to Friedrich Nietzsche that "[i]ntellectually, [Ibsen] has been very dependent on Kierkegaard." Brandes and Ibsen remained in close contact for many years. Along with this, Brandes's towering influence as a Scandinavian critic made his views almost commonplace in the European reading of Ibsen (Downs 134, 136-145; Kaufmann xv).

Ibsen was popular, both in Scandinavia and in America, from nearly the beginning of his career. Immigrant letters reveal that Ibsen's work was both well-known and popular enough among immigrants not only to warrant requests for expensive mailings of the author's works from the homelands, but the books themselves even received notice in American immigrant newspapers. This also suggests that his popularity—indirectly, at least—would have created in Ibsen's readers sympathy for Kierkegaardian perspectives. Howard V. Hong makes this connection even more overt in his own life. In the same interview where he discussed his first encounter with Kierkegaard's name, he reflects too on his first intellectual encounter with the Dane. In 1932, after re-reading two of Ibsen's earliest plays—*Peer Gynt* and *Brand*—Hong realized, "...I thought there might be some substance related to Kierkegaard, maybe no historical connection whatsoever, perhaps a kind of cultural dualism, that the same thing can appear independently in different places... (Zempel 62; Elbrønd-Bek 77).

Historian Harald Beyer went even further in 1952, claiming such a connection not only with Ibsen but also with the Norwegian people