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edited by
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In honor of
Sara Paretsky

PREFACE

When *Midwestern Miscellany I* appeared in 1974, it was, in mimeographed form, at once an adjunct of the *SSML Newsletter*, then in its fourth year and most properly a newsletter, and a forerunner both of *MidAmerica* and of the *Miscellany* as it has evolved. Originally an occasional publication, appearing twice in one year, it has, on occasion, been devoted to essays on individual writers, but for the most part it has remained, as in this issue, truly a miscellany that reflects the breadth and depth of Midwestern writing.

This issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* is thus suitably inscribed to Sara Paretsky, distinguished Chicago writer and recipient of the Society's Mark Twain Award for 1996.

August, 1997

DAVID D. ANDERSON

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THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE OF MINNESOTA SMALL TOWNS: GOPHER PRAIRIE, STAGGERFORD, AND LAKE WOBEGON

ELMER SUDERMAN

1. THE LANDSCAPE

Landscape, according to the OED, was first used in 1603 to mean something more specific than it means today: a painting or drawing of a countryside scene, as opposed to a picture of the sea, a person or a building. In the eighteenth century, it came to have a broader meaning of “a particular tract of land that could be seen from one point of view, *as if* it were a picture; a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view; a piece of country scenery” (1725). Later, *landscape* was generalized even further to mean the whole of natural scenery and to include verbal descriptions as well as paintings.

For this paper, landscape is the fictional delineation of a locality small enough to have some discernable boundaries, like those of Gopher Prairie, Staggerford, and Lake Wobegon, say. “As the meaning of landscape developed it has accumulated meaning yet keeping the connotations of its earlier more specific meanings of artistic expression of beauty and even, in some sense, of taste, whether expressed by elites or in vernacular forms.” [Thompson, p. iv] All of these meanings are applicable in discussing the literary landscape of the Minnesota small town.

Let us consider the physical landscape just a little further by suggesting that we are the creators of the landscapes in which we live. The people of Gopher Prairie, Staggerford, and Lake Wobegon changed the landscape by breaking the sod and planting wheat and corn, by building roads and railroads, churches, city halls, homes,

elevators, Howland and Gould's grocery, the Morgan Hotel, Bunsen Motors, schools.

Further the people in these towns wrote the landscape by the way in which they looked at the landscape. Carol's landscape is not the same as her husband's or her neighbors'. The narrator of *Lake Wobegon Days* sees a different landscape than his Norwegian bachelors. Miles Pruitt does not see the same landscape as Agatha McGee or his fellow teachers and students. To complicate the matter, each reader sees the literary landscapes of these novels differently.

We write many different landscapes, no two of which are alike, though they do have some things in common, thank goodness. One can conclude that there are as many landscapes as there are observers, and that there is no "real" Staggerford landscape out there that can be discovered, only one which we individually apprehend.

In turn the landscape writes us. "I think people tend to be the voice of the land. ...Every soil develops a voice through its people," Frederick Manfred wrote. Surely Lewis, Hassler, and Keillor's characters are written by the flat, open, vast, physical landscapes in which they live.

All of this is highly speculative and raises some difficult questions. Do the open spaces determine the way Lewis, Hassler, Keillor write? I think so, but I can't prove it. I know that style is determined by many factors. I cannot identify a prairie style, even if I think there is one.

The definition of landscape is not yet complete, certainly not of a literary landscape. Dennis Wood insists, rightly, I think, that landscape must ultimately be defined to include human beings as well as animals, birds, and plants. "The topography stripped bare to the rock is not the land. The land is a composite of those strong forms as they have come into being through the agency of wind and water, sparrow and squirrel, beech and birch. *And people.*" [in Thompson, p.7] Later in the same article Wood says that he has no interest in a landscape without people: "But...man and nature [are] not separate, [but] are in this world together." [*Ibid.*, p.12]

Landscape is closely connected with neighborhood, with community, with what Yu-Fu Tuan calls place where we feel at home, to which we are devoted, in which our values are embodied. Will Campbell says that he cannot offer allegiance to or make the whole of the United States his community. He can't live in the United States, about three million square miles; he can't absorb that much space, but he

can assimilate 80 acres of Alabama where he grew up or the forty acres in Tennessee where he now lives. Some few may be able to live in a larger world, but most of us need a more carefully demarcated area, a home place. Gopher Prairie, Staggerford, and Lake Wobegon are such areas.

All three of these landscapes are more than space, that nebulous, unexplored — at least unknown — area in which we do not feel at home, in which we may even be afraid, where we recognize no landmarks to tell us where we are. Yu-Fu Tuan distinguishes space from place, space being unfamiliar, undefined, unmapped and unnamed, inchoate, blurred, strange, without memories or history. Space does not embody values. Place does. Gopher Prairie, Staggerford, and Lake Wobegon are all distinct places, a prerequisite for, but not necessarily coterminous with community. All three small towns are communities as well as place, that is areas with familiar landmarks, with memories, with common values, which the outsider does not always understand.

While Carol never finds community in Gopher Prairie, her husband does. For Miles Pruitt, Staggerford is a community, and Lake Wobegon is a community for the narrator of *Lake Wobegon Days*. Miles never has the sense of being lost in the cosmos the way Carol does, nor do the Bunsens, or any of the residents of Lake Wobegon. Their small towns are “home.”

One more term in my title needs to be defined: a small town. A small town is a place where people live in a carefully defined area, situated at some distance from a major metropolitan area, all parts accessible by foot, the center of the town a main street or square, the people knowing each other intimately, with a tacitly understood class structure, the church playing a significant — once a dominant — role in the community, the people more aware of and more influenced by nature than their city and suburban cousins. In short a landscape, a “place,” sometimes a community.

II. GOPHER PRAIRIE: THE VILLAGE VIRUS

I take space to be the central fact to man born in America. . . I spell it large because it comes large here. Large and without mercy. It is geography at bottom, a hell of a wide land from the beginning.

Charles Olson

Gopher Prairie has become the quintessential small town in America. Gopher Prairie is a landscape; it can be comprehended,

almost at a glance. It takes Carol just thirty-two minutes to walk its length and breath. We know where its boundaries are just as we know where Staggerford and Lake Wobegon's boundaries are.

There are many Gopher Prairies. We see Gopher Prairie first through the eyes of Will Kennicott who shows Carol pictures of the town and raves about its beauty and homeyness. For Will, Gopher Prairie is "home." It is a *place*, his place.

Carol sees a very different Gopher Prairie. Before she sees the town itself she sees what most of us see when we come to a new landscape: the shape of the land's surface. She cannot avoid the magnitude of which it is a part, the great expanse of earth curving away toward infinity, the vast Midwestern prairie, stretching thousands of miles north, west, south and east of Gopher Prairie, an unnerving bigness, monotonous, interminable, limitless, a huge, vague space, breeding in Carol's eyes more fear than hope. Carol's eyes are unable to absorb the undeviating barbed-wire fences, the shorn wheat-lands with their long rows of shocks marching like soldiers in worn yellow tabards. All that space, that empty silence, a universe of nothing where her eye cannot find a resting place unnerves her.

Dismayed she turns to Kennicott for sympathy. But he does not see chaos, sees only "good hustling burgs" [23] producing an astonishing amount of wheat and rye, corn and potatoes. He sees the towns changing, the automobile, the telephone, rural free delivery all bringing farmers in closer touch with the towns. Carol is not comforted.

Gopher Prairie does not cheer Carol. All the fields sweeping up to huddled low wooden houses, unprotected and unprotecting, then past them, depress Carol. Only a tall red grain-elevator and a few tiny church steeples rise from the mass. Carol does not see Will's "homey town;" she sees "a junk heap." [29] Mankato, where she grew up, was never like this. St. Paul was never like this; Chicago was never like this.

Will's house, now hers, is as depressing as the town. She cannot like it, this square, smug, brown house, rather damp [29] with a "screened porch with pillars of thin painted pine surrounded by scrolls and brackets and bumps of jigsawed wood. There is no shrubbery to shut off the public gaze. Window curtains of starched cheap lace revealing a pink marble table with a conch shell and a Family Bible." [29-30] As she enters the house she is overwhelmed by "dinginess and lugubriousness and airlessness," [30] but she is brave and insists that she will make it all jolly.

Nor is she inspired with her thirty-two minute survey of the town: Main Street with its two-story brick shops, its story-and-a-half wooden residences, its muddy expanse from concrete walk to walk, its huddle of Fords and lumberwagons, was too small to absorb her. The broad, straight, unenticing gashes of the streets let in the grasping prairie on every side. She realized the vastness and the emptiness of the land. The skeleton iron windmill on the far end a few blocks away, at the north end of Main Street, was like the ribs of a dead cow. She thought of the coming of the Northern winter, when the unprotected houses would crouch together in terror of storms galloping out of the wild waste. They were so small and weak, the little brown houses. They were shelters for sparrows, not homes for warm laughing people. [33] Gopher Prairie, Carol concludes, is unapologetically ugly.

But we see a very different Gopher Prairie through the eyes of Bea Sorrenson, just in from the country. Gopher Prairie with its drug store with its huge, long, lovely marble soda fountain, its three story hotel, movie house and five automobiles on the street at the same time is almost more than Bea can assimilate. "Ay lak it," she tells her friend Tina. "Ay t'ink maybe Ay stay here." [40]

Such is the stuff of Minnesota landscapes: big skies, vast wheat fields, roads, lumber wagons and Fords, windmills, churches, houses, businesses, ash-piles and always endless space.

But for Will and others in the town, Gopher Prairie embodies their values of neighborliness, acquisitiveness, comfort, a place in society, the opportunity to get ahead, hard work, conservatism. Carol, of course, does not share these values; she wants beauty, books, plays, elegant dining, smart parties, stimulating conversation.

Carol sees the people of Gopher Prairie as dull and flat as the landscape, a savorless people gulping tasteless food, sitting coatless and thoughtless in rocking chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, convinced that the Model T and the sensitive art and morality of the Rosebud Movie Palace are the climax of civilization.

Lewis changed the way we look at the landscape of Main Street. He replaced earlier stereotypes of a small town's landscape: the white church with its tapering spire and sober, intelligent parson. Lewis focused on a church that was half-barn and half-Gopher-Prairie parlor with a preacher who felt that the greatest problems America faced were Mormonism and prohibition. The earlier stereotype saw the lit-

tle red school house in which every scholar was a prospective inhabitant of the White House; Lewis showed us a school which taught its students to live dully but contentedly in a society whose aesthetic sense was satisfied with the beauty and strangeness of a display of potatoes at Howland and Gould's and which aspired to nothing higher than the joy of riding in flivvers and to produce, consume, or talk cheap cars, alfalfa, and safety razors. The earlier stereotype showed us the cluster of friendly houses with their jovial fathers, gentle mother, merry children, cool parlors and shining kitchens. Lewis saw Main Street as ugly, flimsy in construction, its people dull, lethargic, improvised in spirit, suffering from the village virus.

Are the inhabitants of Gopher Prairie narrow-minded, bigoted, conservative to a fault because of the landscape? Is there something in the bleak prairie that makes the people bleak? Carol seems to think so. I don't because I like vast vistas and small town people. Further the people in Washington D.C. to which Carol escapes have not escaped the village virus either.

III. STAGGERFORD: GOTHS AND VISIGOTHS

Staggerford is a small town about the same size as Gopher Prairie, its landscape similar. We know less about the physical landscape of Staggerford than about the other two towns. The primary landscape here is the town which we see through the eyes of Miles Pruitt, Staggerford High School's English teacher. Walking to Miss Agatha McGee's place where he lives, he passes some of the same landmarks we have seen in Gopher Prairie: the fire station, the city hall, the public library, the weekly newspaper office, the cafe (The Hub), a hotel (the Morgan), the hardware store, the bakery and the bank. Staggerford has a Catholic church — St. Isidore's — which Agatha McGee worries is getting too modern. Like the people of Lake Wobegon and Gopher Prairie, Agatha resists change, satisfied to appreciate the uplifting poetry of Joyce Kilmer and the traditional liturgy of the Catholic Church. Seeing some of the changes, she is sure that the Goths and Visigoths are bringing in a new dark age.

Miles also sees the town from the cemetery, where he has gone on the Saturday of this story of a week in a small town:

He looked back east, the way he had come. Showing above the distant trees were the grain elevator, the water tower (STAGGER, i

said from this angle), the belfry atop the city hall, and the spire of St. Isidore's.

He looked north across the river: woods and more farms and on the horizon a smudge of smoke from the power plant in Berrington.

He looked west. The land dropped away from the cemetery and into the gulch, then rose again beyond the gulch and climbed to the forested hills of the Sandhill [Indian] Reservation.

The social life in Staggerford is as banal as it is in Gopher Prairie. The high school faculty, a mediocre bunch, is satisfied to go to Superintendent Stevenson's on Friday nights after the football game for a party where the conversation is filled with platitudes, corny and pointless jokes, people speaking past, not to, each other. They repeat themselves as they become increasingly inebriated, but Mrs. Oppergard livens things up when she vomits across Miles's lap. Miles is too drunk to notice.

Hassler's satire of the small town is more subtle, less sharp than Lewis's. He does not use the blunt edge of the ax to smash the pretensions of the small town. Hassler is less angry than Lewis, more able to accept the foibles of small town life.

A remarkable feature of Hassler's Staggerford is the people who make up that landscape, even minor characters like Dr. Karstenburg, the dentist in Duluth to whom Miles is referred, and Herschel Mancrief, the poet who arouses Agatha McGee's ire enough for her to turn on the fire alarm at St. Isidore's Catholic Elementary in order to cut his visit short. His poetry *Miss McGee* is certain is "undistinguished," not at all equal to Joyce Kilmer's whom Miss McGee had once heard in her youth.

It is not difficult to make a list of even more memorable characters in Staggerford: Miles Pruitt; Agatha McGee, who occupies a place between Moses and Emily Post in Staggerford; Beverly Bingham, one of Miles's students who wishes that she and Miles were in love; Beverly's mother, the Bonewoman, who is slightly demented; Imogene Kite, all warts and adenoids, the town librarian, who keeps company with Pruitt; Superintendent Ansel Stevenson, who was hired at Staggerford to increase Indian attendance but failed; Wayne Workman, the high school principal and his wife, Anna Thea, better known to Miles as *Thanatopsis*, to whom Miles thought of proposing but thought too long; Coach Gibbon, who is sure that a tie even with the best team in the league is worse than a loss; Father Finn, the traditional Catholic priest.

IV. LAKE WOBEGON: THE TOWN THAT TIME FORGOT

Keillor is more specific than Lewis or Hassler in locating Lake Wobegon in space. The first chapter of *Lake Wobegon Days* describes the physical landscape in precise detail. Lake Wobegon, population 942, altitude 1418 feet above sea level, lies on the shore of the lake (678.2 acres), against Adams Hill and near woods of red oak, maple, some spruce and pine, birch, alder, and thick brush. The soil is mostly poor and sandy, best for raising rocks.

Lake Wobegon, like Gopher Prairie and Staggerford, is isolated. North of town an oiled road leads to the freeway to St. Cloud and the Twin Cities. Lake Wobegon is characterized, as Gopher Prairie and Staggerford are, by grain silos (the gold ball on the flagpole atop the Norge Co-op grain elevator is the highest point in town), a water tower (the second highest point in town), a Ford dealership (Bunsen Motors), a grocery (Ralph's), a cafe where the town meets (the Chatterbox), a tavern (the Sidetap), two churches (Lake Wobegon Lutheran and a Catholic, Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility), neither of which is any more remarkable than the Baptist or Seventh Day Adventist church in Gopher Prairie or Saint Isidore's in Staggerford, a wide main street with two parking meters which no one uses and one street light, almost always on green. Main street is a sleepy place. You could stand on it all day and not be in anyone's way.

The houses are small white frame, mostly, with lawns in front and large tidy vegetable gardens in the back. Cast iron deer, small windmills, various small plaster animals such as squirrels and lambs and small elephants, petunias planted within a white tire and some with the Blessed Virgin, standing, demure, her eyes averted, arms slightly extended above the peonies and marigolds, ornament the yards.

The people are slow of talk and movement, skeptical of progress. The conversation in Lake Wobegon considers the weather, regularity, back problems, whether something happened in 1938 or 1939. It is as extravagantly bland and pale as its food.

The men in Lake Wobegon wear seed corn caps, eat wretched food, including lutefisk, which smells bad enough to gag a goat, spend a lot of time drinking coffee at the Chatterbox and discussing the relative merits of various kinds of cars, particularly their gas mileage, the chances for rain, the prospect for crops. They don't get around much, and a trip to St. Cloud or the Twin Cities is a major event.

The women, of course, are good looking, but not particularly exciting. They can the vegetables from the garden, prepare the lute-fisk and hot dishes for the church socials, teach their children to seek moderation in all things and see to it that the men are not too badly behaved.

In Lake Wobegon almost everyone goes to church, where people get married, buried, listen with little complaint to dull sermons, and meet their neighbors. But when a young seminarian fills in for Pastor Inquist and preaches for 45 minutes and was just getting started, three deacons cleared their throat at the same time. Knowing how to read the clock is more important than theology. At noon it's time to go home, turn on the pot roast, and get the peas out of the freezer. Keillor's churches have an easy-going kind of dullness, a target for much of his whimsical humor.

At least once, however, Keillor can be as angry as Lewis about the scars the church leaves. His most virulent outburst against the church — and the town — is in a long footnote near the end of *Lake Wobegon Days* and is in the form of 95 theses which Terpsichore Terrance intended to nail to the Lake Wobegon church door but didn't because he didn't want to drive nails in good wood. Terrance flogs the church that taught him to worship a god who is like its preachers, a god who is going to slap Terrance if he doesn't straighten our fast.

But such outbursts are rare. Keillor is more likely to tease the Lutherans for being on weak grounds doctrinally and for smoking and drinking beer and going to dances but is willing to forgive them when he hears their congregational singing.

V. CONCLUSION: SO LONG AS THERE ARE SKY AND STARS

Novelists help us see: see the landscape in all its ugliness and all its beauty; see lives played out in agony and ecstasy; see life sometimes but not often enough redeemed; see ordinary events and places; see ordinary people strive for a more conscious life. Lewis, Hassler, and Keillor tell us much about the agony of the small town where the outsider is distrusted, where gossip ruins lives, where there is no room for dissent, where the village virus reduces even the most dedicated to a life of indifference, where mediocrity is preferred to excellence, where people's horizons are limited. Still these writers make us aware that "if a way to the better there be it exacts a full look at the worst" as Thomas Hardy put it.

Lewis, Hassler, and Keillor domesticate that landscape so that it can become a place in which we can live, or perhaps a place to which we can return in order to be reminded that here there are values, not always the values we value, but the source of values rooted in a community in which we have common experiences, engage in a common effort on a common ground to which we willingly belong, to quote Wendell Berry's definition of a community. All three are convinced that such a community could exist, and they regret that too often it falls short.

All three have bucolic landscapes where dogs bark, complacent chickens gurgle, wind, smelling of distance, whistles or howls or moans or blows through cottonwood trees, locus fiddle, a footstep falls on the walk, and from a distance echoes piano music. Hassler creates a landscape where Miles in his study hall, smelling a mixture of manure and Berrington country topsoil wafting from the students can see in his mind's eye red barns and rolling pastures, corn fields and windmills, lowing herds at sundown. These novelists create landscapes where geese and crows fly, where the rabbits still run and sometimes coyotes, and badgers, and water gurgles through the land, where people still smell black earth and new-mown hay. The novelists assert the privilege and accept the duty of trying to understand and explain the distinctive character of places and of the people who live in those places. They remind us that we live by stories which remind us of our differences, our angers, our foibles and failures, stories that at bottom tell us how we face matters of life and death. They take us, all three, to a landscape where there are still crows loitering and gossiping in the sky, where there is still the Nirvana of an incomparable sky, where there are still stars, and so long as we have sky and stars all is not lost.

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WE TURNED HOBO: A DEPRESSION TALE RECOVERED

JAMES M. BOEHNLEIN

“I believe hoboes are happiest sitting in a box car watching the country fly past.”

— Carl S. Schockman

As many Americans reeled from the business panic of 1929, writers began to respond by leaving their ivory towers and by pitching into the job of reconstruction. The suddenness of the collapse spawned a body of literature unprecedented in its power to persuade and to effect change. During the Thirties, Leftist writers and critics like Mike Gold, Joseph Freeman, and Floyd Dell encouraged American writers to use art as a force with which to alter the course of history.¹ These writers and editors of periodicals and little magazines like *The New Masses* and *The Anvil* pointed to socialism as an antidote to America’s crumbling capitalism. Indeed, as urban breadlines lengthened, factories closed, and farms foreclosed, poets, novelists, and playwrights wrote on behalf of the destitute and impoverished. They attempted to give voice to those who were inarticulate.

Recent assessment of this body of literature—most often identified as proletarian and working-class—claims that much of this art was suppressed for ideological reasons. It is well documented that writers such as Meridel Le Sueur, Tom McGrath, Tillie Olsen, and Jack Conroy struggled for acceptance into the literary establishment only to find that their socialist leanings or gender prevented their work from being published.² Recognizing, therefore, the incomplete history of the privileged canon, literary historians like Paul Lauter, Cary Nelson, Barbara Foley, and Judy Kutulas argue that American

literary history has long supported a too narrow canon and that efforts to validate neglected texts are sorely needed.³

In light of this call for a reformed canon, Americanists are introducing previously repressed texts of the Depression-era in order to rewrite a more complete American literary history. Although many of these recovered texts do not fulfill the traditional standards of the so-called “classic,” their very marginal nature—song lyrics by rebel poets, proletarian recipes, and mimeographed short stories and plays by factory workers—provides startling evidence that the academy’s orthodoxies of the past fifty years denied American literary history a multifarious dimension. Thus, the rereading of this forgotten phase of American literary experience urges reconsideration of how Americanists do history in general and conceive of Depression-era poetics in particular.

This project, then, hopes to continue this significant discussion about the nature and purpose of American literary history. As a display text, the recently discovered *We Turned Hobo: A Narrative of Personal Experience* by Carl S. Schockman provides a remarkable example of a Depression-era text which shares in the tradition of proletarian and working-class writings and which represents a little known segment of American travel narratives. Written by an Ohio farmer from Mercer County, it recounts in some detail the trip that he and his brother took to California by “riding the rails” from November 9 to December 10, 1931. Its eleven chapters, interspersed with twelve photographs taken by the brothers, describe the American landscape and its indigents during the early years of the Great Depression. Ostensibly conceived as a “personal narrative,” Schockman’s text also provides an objective account of the effects of economic destitution upon America’s hobo culture at the time. Neither propaganda nor a self-deprecating reflection of hard people during hard times, *We Turned Hobo* is an honest and sometimes affectionate portrayal of real events and people these brothers encountered on their way to California and back.

The narrative was written by Carl Schockman as he lay in the District Tuberculosis Hospital at Lima, Ohio, during the late spring and summer of 1937, a full six years after the journey. Having suffered from tuberculosis for sixteen months, Carl was finally hospitalized in May of 1937, and it was his brother, Clarence, who recommended that he write the story of their adventure as a form of therapy during his recuperation. The resulting narrative, written

entirely from memory, attests to Carl and Clarence's *Wunderlust* as they left their family and farm in Coldwater, Ohio, in November 1931 in search for work and fortune in California.

Coldwater, Ohio, in Mercer County is situated near the west-central part of the state, not far from the Indiana border. Founded and developed by German immigrants in the early nineteenth century, Mercer County was remarkable for its strong Catholic foundation and hard-working farm families. Its flat and fertile landscape provided the early German settlers an opportunity to cultivate its land and to raise families as traditional Catholics. Indeed every little burg in Mercer County had its own Catholic church designed in the Gothic style to remind them of the northern German homeland from which many Mercer County families had come in 1837. A century later, as John Baskin asserts, Mercer County was still dominated by organization, competency, and purpose (114). This relatively isolated Ohio agricultural county retained its sense of unity well within the twentieth century when Carl and Clarence Schockman were born, and when the social fabric of America seemed to be unraveling during the Depression, it remained a unique example of unanimity, stolidness, and family.

Like many farm communities of the Depression, Mercer County faced foreclosures and crop failures. The ever-present cooperatives threatened an already fragile economy when in 1931 Carl and Clarence Schockman, both in their late teens and bored with the hard work and monotony of farm life, sought adventure in California. Remarkably, their image of California as the "land of plenty" anticipated that developed in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published two years after *We Turned Hobo*. As Carl describes their excitement at the beginning of the narrative,

Why couldn't we hitch-hike our way to California? Why we could be picking oranges in California right now. I read an article in the paper the other day stating that the oranges were ripening. Boy, we'll have the time of our life. (16)

Spurred by this "beautiful dream," the Schockman brothers prepare for their trip. Yet, their family's apprehension dampens their enthusiasm. Their mother especially tries to dissuade them from leaving but soon relents. Her only word of warning is, "Don't ride the freight trains" (19). Nevertheless, dressed in army surplus uniforms, Carl

and Clarence depart on November 9, 1931, assuring their mother that they would hitch-hike rather than hop freight trains.

The Schockman brothers are a study in contrast. Carl, the narrator, is “thoughtful, serious and ever-ready to see the dark side of life” (15). His brother, Clarence, however, is “the happy-go-lucky type with never a care or worry in the world” (15). Their complementary personalities play off one another throughout their travels, coloring their reactions to the people and events they encounter. For example, Carl’s sensitive side informs the narrative’s tone and frequent authorial intrusions. On the other hand, Clarence’s adventurous spirit allows for conflict and drama, giving the narrative balanced perspective and insight.

The overall design of the book is episodic, much like other travel narratives of the Thirties. Each chapter highlights the adventures of a particular locale as the brothers head directly west from Mercer County. Hitch-hiking through Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, the brothers encounter torrential downpours, cold nights spent in damp corn fields, and suspicious on-lookers who often mistake them for government agents because of their army surplus uniforms. Food, of course, is a constant problem. Remarkably, however, they are often made breakfasts and dinners by generous housewives who no doubt are used to panhandlers down on their luck.

Turning south from St. Louis, the brothers are picked up by truckers, salesmen, and, in one memorable incident, an elderly couple who buy them an extravagant meal in Arkansas. As they near Texas, the narrative picks up considerably. They are warned of the dangers of hitch-hiking and of sleeping in the desert by a waiter in a local Fort Worth restaurant. Also, after a particularly unpleasant night in the desert, they realize that hitch-hiking and walking long distances in unknown territory would not serve their purposes and reconsider hopping the freights.

“Hopping the Freights,” the fifth chapter of the narrative, abounds with action and suspense as the brothers meet a number of hoboes in their local “jungle” near the railroad yards of Fort Worth. In one of the most poignant parts of their travels, Carl describes life with this group of “bottom dogs”:

Almost everyone looks upon a hobo as someone who is too lazy to work and so he is a hobo. Such is not the case, for most of the fellows on the road are there because of some unusual event that drove

them to it. I believe hoboes are happiest when they are sitting in a box car watching the country fly past. And the thought of that indefinable something for which he is hunting is not the only reason for his wanting to be on the move. He plans just as a person plans his work. For instance when he is in Texas he will say to himself, 'I'm going to see if I can get to California in a week.' He has no reason for wanting to be there at a certain time, but he does get a sense of satisfaction, of real accomplishment, that thrills him when he reaches his goal on schedule. (65-66)

This approval of the hobo life style marks a turning point in the brothers' travels, for when they befriend a group of hoboes, they decide to quit hitch-hiking and jump the rails.

Waiting for the freight, Carl and Clarence also take up with Tex, a one-armed, scar-faced veteran of the rails. Tex teaches the brothers the intricacies of hopping the rails and becomes for them a mentoring figure as they learn the ropes. Indeed, hopping onto an oil or refrigerator car traveling at a speed of eight-five miles an hour is for the novices an unnerving experience. As Tex shouts directions to the brothers,

Grab the ladder, run along for five or ten feet till you get balanced, then jump. That's all there is to it. But, remember, when you grab the ladder, grab with all the strength you got. Of all the things I told you that's the most important. (80)

As the large engine roars past, Carl grabs the ladder and jumps for the rung. However, the car jerks and Carl's foot slams against the wheel. Had it not been for a hobo latching onto Carl's arm, he would have fallen beneath the car and surely died.

Watching Clarence and Tex jump, Carl realizes that the train is going much faster. Tex makes the jump; however, Clarence misses the ladder completely and falls into the sand embankment that lines the ties. At this point in the narrative, Carl loses Tex and Clarence, and spends the next several days searching for them. When he finally catches up with them in El Paso, Carl realizes that Tex and Clarence have become friends. Tex shows them a flop house in El Paso where they stay the night and soon leaves the brothers the next day when he jumps another train.

The brothers are next caught in a desert sand storm as they continue their trek for California. Eventually, they make their way to Indio, California, where they are reunited with Tex. Here, the broth-

ers are excited for having made it to the West Coast and look forward to living the good life with Tex.

California, however, becomes a bitter disappointment. As Carl describes his feelings,

We had dreamed of it [California] as being a land of sunshine, of flowers, of orange groves, beautiful mountains and streams. But instead, here at Indio the empty miles of desert sand with the barren, snow-capped mountains looming in the distance surrounded us. I knew as well as I knew anything that we could not find work. Then why should we go farther? I was tired of this kind of life. I was ready to return home. (135)

Tex by now has found a job as a painter and urges the brothers to return to Coldwater where they have the security of family and the farm. He tells the brothers about his life on the rails and discourages them from following his example. Like many young men of the Depression, Tex had no family and could not commit himself to steady employment as the open road continually called him. He describes his falling under a railroad car which sheared his arm off and the many aborted attempts at finding work.

Turning east now, the brothers leave Tex and hop a refrigerator car near Indio. They soon are arrested in Colorado, Texas, on suspicion of robbery. The charges are dropped, however, and they continue their return home. Eventually, they arrive at a mansion where they ask for food. As it turns out, they have entered the home of a reputed bootlegger, who, mistaking them for government officials, holds them at bay with a pistol. When their "host" leaves them to make a phone call, they escape and run for their lives.

In Memphis they are unexpectedly reunited with Tex. It is December now, and Tex, longing for a warmer climate, decides to go to Florida. He soon tired of his painting job and never returned to work one morning when he jumped a freight outside Indio. When Tex refuses their invitation to go home with them, the brothers leave Tex, whom they never see again, and on December 20, 1931, reach their farm in Coldwater, Ohio.

Generally, *We Turned Hobo* is characteristic of documentary reportage as it was written during the Thirties. The first-person narration, use of the slang vernacular of the hobo culture, the "participant observer" technique, and photographs support a language of engagement employed regularly by reportage writers like James

Agee.⁴ The sense of immediacy captured in Schockman's text raises his commentary above mere fact; it privileges the people and events while describing real experiences. For example, Schockman's affectionate portrait of Tex and his lyrical description of the hobo jungles are telling and knowing set-piece commentaries which rival reportage of *The New Masses* or *The Daily Worker* for its poignancy. Likewise, *We Turned Hobo* anticipates John Steinbeck's inter-chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath* for its powerful scenes of exposition.

We Turned Hobo shares as well in the tradition of the picaresque, the most notable feature of which is the presence of the picaro, or the picaresque hero. In truth, however, neither Carl nor Clarence is the picaro. Rather, Tex represents that moral center of the narrative; "he becomes the unlikely hero [or mentoring figure] who comes from a lowly background, unable to find stability in a chaotic world and suffering from loneliness" (Miller 78-88). When Tex dissuades the brothers from living a life on the rails, he consequently reinforces their family and moral values. Moreover, his disability and unsightly scar are grotesque reminders of his hard life which counterpoises Carl and Clarence's stable Catholic upbringing.

The Schockman travels also illustrate features of the *Bildungsroman*, for theirs is a story of growth, development, and loss of innocence. Because Carl is narrator, we are aware of only his point of view. His sensitive nature and intrinsic goodness make him a reliable scribe who responds to the events and people they encounter on the road and rails. Carl and Clarence, nonetheless, do change. They meet an indigent by the name of Tex whom they learn to love. They adapt themselves to all sorts of weather conditions and deprivations. Significantly, they, also, fail to heed their mother's injunction, "Don't jump the freights," further proof that their development breaks from its maternal standards of behavior. Moreover, the brothers prove to themselves that they can realize a goal that was a dream for most of their lives.

Finally, reading *We Turned Hobo* as a working-class text provides the opportunity to respond to Paul Lauter's call for a re-examination and re-assessment of the "fragmentary, incremental genres—letters, diaries, and documents derived from oral sources" (839). To this list of so-called folk art can be added "narratives of personal experience" like *We Turned Hobo*. Like other working-class art, *We*

Turned Hobo is highly traditional, even conservative; innovation is not a primary consideration. As Paul Lauter avers,

Working-class poetry and song—and to a lesser extent tales and the like—are often built around repeated elements—refrains, formulas, and commonly accepted assumptions about characters. Language, too, is often simpler, even commonplace, and less heightened than that of high-culture texts. (840)

Understanding then these features of working-class art provides texts like *We Turned Hobo* with a useful vocabulary and framework with which they can be better described and analyzed. As Paul Lauter reminds us, texts like *We Turned Hobo* are rooted in the experiences of a particular people who are facing particular problems at a particular time.

The fundamental points here are that artists and audiences of working-class texts shared a similar set of experiences and outlooks on the world. The Schockman narrative is, therefore, both personal and communal. Its poetic is not a means of producing “catharsis.” Rather, it is a means of making working people during the Depression conscious of their world and, by doing so, of enlarging the world they could experience.

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NOTES

1. A most useful discussion of radical writers and the Thirties is Daniel Aaron’s *Writers on the Left*. Also, see Walter Rideout’s *The Radical Novel in the United States*.
2. Recent assessments of these proletarian writers are Barbara Foley’s *Radical Representations* and Judy Kutulas’s *The Long War*.
3. See Paul Lauter’s very useful description of working-class literature in the anthology *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticisms*. Also, Cary Nelson’s groundbreaking *Repression and Recovery* validates critical scholarship of incremental, working-class genres.
4. See *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, considered the quintessential example of Thirties reportage. Its accompanied Walker Evans’s photography reinforces and enlarges Agee’s self-deprecating commentary. Also, William Stott’s *Documentary Expressions and Thirties America* remains one of the best systematic studies of reportage as literary genre.

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GRACE STONE COATES: A LYRIC GIRLHOOD

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Black Cherries, published by Grace Stone Coates in 1931, is indeed a lyric book. It is a book of coming to voice, of turning to language as a way to understand and to articulate what one knows intuitively and what one learns all too sadly. It doesn't rely on traditional narrative linearity or plotted crises; rather it provides an associative accruing of details and experiences. It builds our interest by subtle repetition or amplification, which occurs as the result of looking longer and more intently at an event, or re-looking at it with new words to apply to it. *Black Cherries* is lyrical because its language is tactile and metaphoric. It, remarkably directly, presents a world filled with kinaesthetic knowings and sensing, a world in which associative imagination is the primary mode of both perception and cognition. It is both illusive and elusive. The individual stories function as individual images juxtaposed on one another to create a textured montage. Occasionally its lyricism has a feminist ring to it: it is, after all, giving voice to a female experience, much of it linked to natural images, which is submerged due to the age and vocabulary of the narrator, Genevieve (or Veve). She is the heart of the book. Her subjective voice and point of view are the core of the 19 stories. She is a little girl who observes and, as her imagination and vocabulary are tested, comes to understand a world which puzzles more than it pleases. Since *Black Cherries* is her story, her lyric song, it is best to start there in our examination of the text.

Throughout the collection (with the exception of the last story—which is exceptional in many ways), the narrator, Genevieve von S---, is four to ten years old. Most often, she is between the ages of four and seven. While critical terminology would tag her a naive narrator, I prefer to think of her as a self-conscious albeit less-experi-

enced one. The world she inhabits and presents us with is one she has immediate physical knowledge of. Coates does an excellent job of creating a narrator who does not inject an adult interpretation on her experience. The point of view is literally eye-level with a four to seven year old's: it is descriptive, not intellectualized or abstract. There's the obvious example in her view of a parent: "He [my father] was very long, lying there, and incredibly old. Mother had told me at the last birthday cake that he was forty-nine. I was almost five." (*BC*, 3) But the child's viewpoint is more than this. Trying to see a picture that she is curious about, and which she intuitively knows has meaning to her parents, Veve explains: "The picture in my mother's room hung above a chair. The chair was heavier than I could move, and was not cane-seated, so I could stand in it without hurting it. Mother didn't tell me not to look at the picture, she told me not to stand in the chair. I needed to look harder, after that, because I had to be farther away" (*BC*, 9). Veve's vocabulary and sentence structure are simple and straightforward. Her words and focus are a young child's. Here, she reveals to us the process of her thinking—she is a literalist dealing with a world of symbols and mysterious abstractions. It is a world she must "look harder" at, if she is to understand (not just sense the existence of) its meaning.

Veve is aware her curiosity is not always welcomed by the adults or older children: "It made Mother uncomfortable when I looked steadily at the picture in her bedroom. I studied it longer to find out why. Looking at it was like doing other things she told me not to. I wondered why I shouldn't, and thought about it until I did them to find out. Sometimes I learned only that I mustn't" (*BC*, 8). Veve is sensitive to the nuances of voice and attitude in the adults around her, but she doesn't always know what causes their anxiety or pain (or even their joy and excitement). In "The Corn Knife," a tragic-comic story of the aftermath of a hail storm in which several farmers' lives are shattered, we are given an even clearer sense of her attentiveness and responsiveness which nonetheless lacks understanding: "Listening to Mrs. Likely made my hands cold, and my heart beat until it was hard for me to swallow, though I couldn't understand why she was so inconvenienced by losing the corn knife, or why anyone should want to take it. I waited for mother to offer her ours without being asked" (*BC*, 134). Since Veve had recounted just before this Mrs. Likely's incoherent comments to her mother (which indicate that Mr. Likely has taken the corn knife for a suicide attempt), the

reader realizes the gulf between adult understanding and Veve's. Over and over, Veve is aware of something happening or having meaning beyond her understanding. She feels significance but cannot understand or articulate meaning. In the title story "Black Cherries" so much happens that Veve does not understand that in what is, for the adults and the reader, the climactic moment, Veve is merely puzzled: "'You shall never touch a child again, yours or mine, as long as I live in this house.' She[mother] lifted the stove lid and put the strap on the coals. I wondered why she said yours or mine" (*BC*, 19-20) Veve is right, in large part, to focus on the strange wording, for it does hold a key to the meaning of the incident; but she can only puzzle, not understand.

It is this very limitation in understanding, however, that compels Veve's memory: "The next day I played alone all day. I knew things I had not known the morning before. There were things one learned, and things one knew without learning. Things I learned were like pictures to paste in a scrapbook. Things I knew were like pages to paste pictures on. I had learned that Augusta and Carl were not like Teressa and me. They were different the way things we bought were different from things we raised in the garden. What I knew was this: learning about one thing that puzzled me only made other things to wonder about" (*BC*, 20-21). It is this "wondering about" that structures the book. Veve's personality, her point of view, are the pages of the scrapbook (what she knows) and the events she recounts are the pictures (what she learns). But the pictures are often in code and we see her frustration with this: "It was hard to explain about the peaches, because I didn't understand about them. Something had happened while mother was away that father and she were not happy about, and eating the peaches seemed part of it. I hoped mother would tell me it was wrong for father to eat them. It seemed wrong. If it was wrong, and he did it, I would understand and not care. I did not know whether things grown persons did were ever not right. Mother did not tell me" (*BC*, 49). For Veve, the purpose of remembering is to wrestle with these unarticulated meanings—to re-view them with harder looking, to re-sense and re-vivify them with the tactile memories she has, to somehow hold them until she can understand them. "The questions came, and burrowed, and lay still, and wriggled again, always with the tickling brush of cherry leaves against my face, the scent and tang of cherry bark, and forbidden red-black smoothness across my cheek;

always with the choking mystery of twilight, and the strangeness of plowed ground under hurrying feet" (*BC*, 21).

Part of the growth of Veve comes through her acquisition of language, through acquiring a vocabulary whose meaning is learned (not just sensed) over time. She is both literal and limited, but her fascination with language is always a key to her understanding. Some of her earliest freedom comes as a result of her linguistic play. Her ease with her father is predicated, at first, on their playful rhymings and the fact that "...I could say a great many things one didn't say to persons who listened too hard, like mothers. I could use words that didn't really belong to me, words in books...like *valley, daisy, fern*" (*BC*, 4). The sounds gave pleasure that she sensed more than understood; the actual objects were outside her experience, only things she can imagine. Often, when she is youngest, words seem kinaesthetic in their presence. Asking her father what a nighttime sound is, he replies: "'Some of the nocturnal stridulating Gryllidae, I assume.' His words sounded like bells. Like church bells. I said them over and over to myself" (*BC*, 6). She's never heard church bells, but she has imagined their sound and now, imagines the similarity it must have to the crickets. Her literalism is a major source of tension in the book as we begin to see what she cannot imagine. One of the central issues of the stories revolves around her parents' relationship and, in particular, her father's commitment and attachment (almost obsession) to his dead first wife—in his words, his only wife. Veve at first is confused by his references to what seems linguistically to be a given: "He had seen *Enoch Arden* 'with his wife once, and wanted to see it again. He said, *with my wife*, and I said, *with mother*; because I knew that" (*BC*, 47). The fact that the phrases don't mean the same is of overwhelming importance to understanding the family dynamic, but Veve does not have that awareness, that vocabulary. What results from the confusion, though, is another understanding for both Veve and the reader: words and language are her father's tools and weapons. His language is the creator of the tension, or at the very least its outward manifestation. When Veve's curiosity about a statue in her father's study (a statue of two embracing lovers with an inscription: "In Memoriam—Lovers long betrothed were they") leads to a fight between her parents and her father's act of filing off the inscription, Veve searches to understand her father's explanations and the significance of the inscription (the words): "Father said, 'I honor my wife with all the love and fealty one can bear the dead.' I broke what he

said apart in my mind as we walked toward the house. His wife...that was mother. The dead...In Memoriam...that was the statue. Perhaps the reason she didn't like the statue was because she didn't know this" (*BC*, 82). The word wife has a different definition than Veve's experience allows; her father uses that additional definition to make unhappy the lives around him.

Words and language are associated with Veve's father throughout the stories and Veve is careful to monitor her father's language: "When father talked to people he didn't like he sorted his words, and used only the smooth, best ones" (*BC*, 51). We get many examples of this, directed both at family members and at society in general. Directed at the external world, the reader and Veve can take it lightly, albeit ironically: "Mother was more indignant with father for laughing at the Likelys than for laughing at Mr. Jenkins. She said the accident of success had made him insufferable. Mrs. Likely was worried for fear, if Mr. Likely got well, he would be arrested and put in jail for trying to commit suicide. Father said he was not derisive of the Likelys' adversity, though severing one's jugular vein was not a sound application of intelligence to an economic problem, nor a corn knife an aesthetic medium of approach to Pluto's realm; but he was not unwilling to laugh at the absurdity of a law that punished failure in an undertaking whose success precluded punishment" (*BC*, 137). We hear father's distinctive voice in this quote. Educated, sardonic, detached—the language has a cadence all its own, unlike any else in the book. We can understand Veve's comment earlier that his words sound like church bells. We have other adjectives: sonorous, melliforous, maybe even pompous, but we can also hear the church bells. When father's language is used inside the family, however, it is no less ironic, but much more hurtful. Like so many bullies, father knows the power of words and yet tries to avoid the blame for using them. With the young Veve, his words can be shrugged off. When she asks him about a sound, "he listened again, and said the noise was quite possibly subjective—which was just like saying nothing" (*BC*, 6). Her mother, however, cannot shrug off the father's words. And we (before Veve) come to see the intentionality of the pain he inflicts. Perhaps more painful is our growing awareness (which again precedes Veve's) that this man of words does not keep his word and uses them spitefully. His denials ("Now, Augusta, now my dear, you entirely misconstrued...") are not believable and his too late removal of words, as from the statue, simply emphasizes the damage done

(As mother notes when she says, “Can you obliterate it [the inscription, the words] from my soul?”)

Still language is part of the difference Veve makes between knowing intuitively and learning. Her sensitivity and senses help her know, but language becomes a way to learn, a way to get closer to understanding. Not atypically, these two sides have links to her mother and her father. It was the difference between the black-cherry tree and the Ailanthus trees. In “Black Cherries,” we have an experience whose meaning cannot be articulated by the narrator. It is a story that focuses on the mother and is retained in memory by the retention of natural images: “The black-cherry tree that stood beyond the kitchen door was mother’s. At first, at the very earliest, I thought the tree was mother. I thought it *was* mother-being-a-tree... Because of something that happened once, as I gathered her an offering, the tree stands forever in the disquieting twilight which haunts unhappy dreams—the shadow that prevents any dream from being happy” (*BC*, 13-14). Her memories of the event throughout the book and her life are triggered by the sense and feel of cherries and orchards, but the meaning remains elusive—there are no words for it. But it is through words that she begins to understand father. She needs to develop more of a vocabulary, as the ailanthus trees show. Veve knows something intuitively about these trees from the beginning: “Two Ailanthus trees stood outside the pantry window. These were not like real trees. They belonged to the dark strange things that meant something other than themselves. They were father’s trees. Mother, who loved always, hated them. She never looked at them, never spoke of them, yet I knew she hated them. I wondered if they were part negro” (*BC*, 62). Mother has never said she hates them, but Veve knows she does. Veve sets out, indirectly, to learn why. She discovers first that her parents have separate names for the trees: “Father called them Ailanthus trees, and mother, Ailantus” (*BC*, 69). What they each feel about the tree mirrors the softness and harshness their names imply. Father tells Veve they are East Indian, “and the Indians called it the Tree of Heaven” (*BC*, 71). Mother, who does most of her work overlooking (literal and figuratively) the trees, says “they should have been planted some place where she would not have to look at them” (*BC*, 71). When one of the trees dies over winter, father announces he will uproot both. Given the usual frugality of the family, Veve is surprised. More surprisingly, perhaps, her parents have an exchange regarding the trees: “Mother thought it silly to destroy

2 lives because one happened to die, but father said that when one died, it was kinder to consign both to oblivion" (*BC*, 71). Veve follows her father to see how he disposes of the trees and when she asks him why, he responds, "It is beyond your comprehension" (*BC*, 72). When she asks her mother, she is told not to question. When she asks her older sister Teresa, she finally gets words that she can only wonder about: "She [Teresa] said, 'Father and *somebody* planted an *Ailanthus* tree on each side of the gate'....I wondered about the gate. We had no gates except at the corral, and horses would trample trees there. When I asked Teresa about it she said, 'Little idiot! Not *this* house. Not *this* gate.'It bothered me to know part of a thing, and not why it was so. It kept me from wanting to play with my dolls. After I had asked Teresa about the trees there was no one else to ask. I went into the yard to look at the place where they had been. It was dusk. I could imagine the trees against the sky, but they were flatter and darker than when they had been alive, and I could not make their leaves stir in my mind" (*BC*, 73). Only as she comes to define who somebody is, that there are multiple gates and houses, can she understand. And without that understanding she cannot even imagine the trees back in their meaningful form. She is forced, for the moment to "think of other things; about school, and about things I remembered, and things I was going to know" (*BC*, 109).

Although a vocabulary and language are needed to understand the complex family dynamic which seems so mysterious to her, we are also made aware of how sophisticated some of Veve's knowing is (particularly relative to peoples' isolation from one another and her early awareness that the ideal is always an illusion). While wondering why her parents worried about leaving a preschooler home alone, she noted "I did not understand why they disliked to leave me. People were always inside themselves, anyway, and other persons outside them. It seemed almost the same whether they were outside close by, or outside farther off" (*BC*, 25). Although phrased very commonly, the instinct is anything but common. Her understanding remains centered on the concrete but its psychological implications are complex: "I thought about people. I thought of them as if they were wrapped in layers of something thick like quilts, only not quilts, that kept them from knowing how things really were" (*BC*, 36). It is Veve's ability to burrow among the quilts that we come to appreciate. But it is also what matures and ages both of us. Once enamored of the statue (in "Plaster of Paris") she still doesn't get its

symbolic meaning, but she knows something vital: “The statue wasn’t quite true on its pedestal after father changed it, because the rod was bent. The place where the letters had been filed off was flat, and of different color from the rest. I loved the statue less. I knew how it was made, and felt sorry for it. When I dusted it I was ashamed without knowing what I had done” (*BC*, 63). That, too, has become her understanding of her father. She is beginning to see how he, like the statue, is made and inscribed, and she is sorry for him, even without knowing why.

The young Veve’s learning is almost concluded in “A Cast Leaf,” the 17th out of 19 stories. Living now in Kansas City, the family awaits another baby, Veve’s mother’s attempt to yet again fulfill her pledge to the man who has never really kept his promise: “Now shall I give you many a son,/ And each trace of the old maid teacher be gone” (*BC*, 103). This occasion echoes earlier ones that Veve has not understood (including attitudes *re.* school, and the peach episode of “Late Fruit”). What she can, finally, at age ten do is analyze how and what she has come to learn, as well as know, about her family:

“During my father’s stay in Europe, and the year of his return, the variously tinged shadows hovering over earlier childhood where light had been withheld integrated themselves into a fairly comprehensive picture.

I knew, never from direct enlightenment, but from word fitted to word, comments half caught, and memories of low-voiced bitterness, that it was a stranger who father called “my wife.” By entries in old account books, and records in the family Bible, I knew that his children, Augusta and Carl, had been young when he and my mother married.

The circumstances of their marriage, and the gulf that opened between them almost in the moment of their union, lay wrapped in that atmosphere, exciting and impenetrable, which had stirred my childhood to pondering and question: so that I envisaged the two held in a globe of darkness, yet separated by a deeper darkness at their feet, wherein hid all that later rose between them” (*BC*, 164). Veve has piled the words and images together—and what she’s learned, added to what she knows, finally gives her the understanding she needs.

But Coates does something else interesting in *Black Cherries*. In a final chapter, a chapter not narrated by Veve, but told by a limited omniscient narrator through the filter of the father, we see the adult

Veve and her dying parent. Its significance centers again on the distinction between knowing and learning. Once again the father has found words to hurt and embattle the family. He has written his will to simultaneously disinherit his four children and to pit them against each other. But he is nagged by an unfinished thought, actually an unfinished quote. Like the young Veve, he feels that knowing the words would answer an unarticulated problem: "He had no time to ponder phrases. There were weightier matter to adjust. Yet recurrently, in dissolving instants of abstraction or penetration, that elusive phrase and the solution of his problem seemed identical, as though to catch the one would be to grasp the other" (*BC*, 193). But before that happens, he must deal with the appearance of his adult daughter Veve. Veve accepts his position even as he bitterly proclaims his self-pity at being aged and in a Home. What comes through their encounter is the awareness that language (words) and learning are but half the equation (not to be an essentialist—the male half), while knowing (accepting the people and world on their own literal and physical terms) is the other half (possibly the female half). The adult Veve says this on the most direct level when she tells him:

"I am the only one of your children who really loves you...I am the only one who has never loved you from a sense of duty. I love you because you are you, and I am I, and my love for you is part of my life and mind and flesh. Loving you is part of living, as breathing is. I love you, understanding you....Teressa and they loved you blindly, because they were taught to love you and believe you perfect. When they saw your faults, they hated you blindly. But I loved you without being taught, and knew your faults without learning them. And I have never judged you." (*BC*, 203-204). Teressa, Carl and Augusta were taught, they learned to love him. And words and learning were not enough. When he hears Veve recount a part of the family past, he cries: "'I am old. Love me, love me, I did not know!' and saw it his duty to have known" (*BC*, 206). In many ways, symbols, idealizations and words have kept him from knowing (sensing) what was or should have been true. Too late, he sees what has hindered him; "'Too many words,' he muttered, 'always verbiage'" (*BC*, 212). Forced to recognize what he always should have known, he changes his will (his last words), leaving everything to Teressa, the daughter most like his second wife, indeed, her surrogate throughout the book. Ironically, his final words (and Coates's to us) are simply

a noted moment that undercuts language: “Airplanes are tracing *vapor writings* on sky” (*BC*, 213).

Black Cherries is a short, powerful, often overlooked and now out-of-print book. It is a book that thrives not on nostalgia, static myth or worn plots, but on sharp images, accruing associations and a growing vocabulary. Reading the book we begin to understand the relationship between knowing (intuition and imagination) and learning (articulating and being taught). We reaffirm for ourselves and Veve that to understand is to both grow and grow stronger, and to somehow integrate the two. Veve’s voice is unique and strong, like literal black cherries, juicy, sweet and rare to come upon. But coming upon it, well worth indulging in.

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MIDWESTERN "INNOCENT ABROAD"

RUSS BODI

While a student at Ohio State University, James Thurber developed a taste for the writings of Henry James that was to affect both his aesthetic and personal views of life. Thurber's special love for Henry James's work led him to fulfill a life-long dream of imitating "the master" in a pastiche as well as a double parody of both Henry James and Willa Cather. However, his dream of someday creating a dramatic rendition of James's *The Ambassadors* was never realized. "Love" is perhaps inadequate in describing Thurber's attachment to Henry James. In his later years, Henry James became more like an obsession for Thurber who once said that "the influence I had to fight off in writing was that of Henry James, and the influence that helped me most was that of E. B. White."¹ The focus of Thurber's casting off of Henry James's influence included perhaps more than the stylistic and perceptive attributes associated with James, but rather the intense image of a painful past Thurber relived in *The Ambassadors*. I intend to explore these similarities between Thurber and his idol, Henry James, both as Americans abroad, and as men with like sensibilities,

While attending O.S.U., Thurber became a disciple of the popular teacher, Joseph Russell Taylor, whose specialty was the Romantic and Victorian poets and novelists. It was Taylor whose charismatic demeanor motivated students with such memorable statements as: "A straight line can also be the dullest distance between two points"... "Art is revision"... "You can't get passion into a story with exclamation points"... "The only taste that is false is that which does not change"...and... "Nothing genuine need fear the test of laughter" (Bernstein, 57). Taylor gave Thurber an initial contact with Henry

James, which kindled into an ardor fueled by other contacts and experiences. According to Thurber biographer, Burton Bernstein:

The professor himself was something of a James character—hyper-sensitive to beauty, enthralled by subtleties, and a worshipper of the female. He was also a painter, who, before Thurber's time at O.S.U., had encouraged the pursuit of an artistic career by a young student named George Bellows. As far as is known, he never encouraged Thurber to continue his drawing. (57)

Another member of the O.S.U. English faculty, Herman Miller, shared a close personal relationship with Thurber as well as a common interest in Henry James. In a letter to Professor Miller and his wife Dorothy, Thurber expresses his passion for James, his interest in Jamesian themes, and his lament for the loss of Victorian principles. In October of 1936, Thurber wrote:

Why does Henry James have to be dead? Goddam it, people are always crocking [sic] off at the wrong moment. Speaking of Henry, I went down to my first wife's home and got the set of H. J. she once gave me for Christmas and I have been reading some of the seventeen volumes I never had read.... I had never, God bless my soul, read *The Spoils of Poynton*. What a nicely glowing point of honor he put upon two people for giving up Love for a principle! It seems so far-away in this day when we give up principles for Love—and somehow the Love they gave up seems, God help us all, rather more worth the having, and the principles not so much. He would have been most unhappy now, I'm sure, in an age when the male sometimes doesn't even take off his hat or the woman her overcoat. (In bed, of course, I mean.) There's an essay in it, my friends. (*Letters*, 36)

Thurber's ironic sense of the modern-day desecration of principles, evinced in this letter, colors many of his own humorous pieces. Walter Mitty, for instance, indulges in flights of fancy wherein his dramatic heroism vividly contrasts his brow-beaten, quotidian existence. The principles of "manhood" and "bravery" are lost and lamented. Walter Mitty's decorum also contrasts that of a Jamesian hero in that he has to be told to put on or to take off his gloves, unlike Lambert Strether, from *The Ambassadors*, who can not only pick up his own hat and gloves, but do it with dramatic emphasis.

Thurber's "little man," the subject of many of his stories and drawings, is comparable to one American character type Henry James depicted in *The Ambassadors*. His description of Jim

Pocock could also fit several Thurber characters—especially the “cookie dough” types so familiar in his drawings. James depicts Jim Pocock as:

Small and fat and constantly facetious, straw-colored and destitute of marks, he would have been practically indistinguishable hadn't his constant preference for light-grey clothes, for white hats, for very big cigars and very little stories, done what it could for his identity. (262)

Besides the physical similarity, the behavior of Jim Pocock makes him a prototype of the indelicate American, eager to explore Europe without “holding back.”

Thurber's personal experience also parallels the Jamesian idea of the American abroad—a life in Paris, minus what James called a “virtuous attachment” to a European woman epitomized in *The Ambassadors*. Thurber arrived in Paris, France, on November 13, 1918, two days after the last of the fighting was over. Determined to change his image and become a “man of the world,” he met several obstacles. For one, his luggage, including the Hershey bars his mother had packed for him, was hopelessly lost. His mission, to be an American Peace delegation's code clerk, was mistakenly confused. Colonel Edward M. House had requested fifteen copies of the American code book, and had gotten fifteen code clerks instead. Thurber was sent to the American Embassy where there was little work and much time to tour Paris.²

While in Paris, Thurber often wrote to his longtime friend, Elliot Nugent, trying to impress him with his savoir-faire. On June 11, 1919, he wrote about Paris from the point of view of one who knew first-hand of its charms—also one who knew a good deal of Henry James:

I must admit that Paris is going to be a very hard place to leave. It is all that dear old Henry [James] said of it, just as wonderful just as charming. There is surely no other place in the world where there is such a variety of things that interest or amuse or instruct or enthrall. (Bernstein, 90).

His recollections seem to be experienced through some kind of Jamesian filter with *The Ambassadors* as a point of reference:

[W]e have had tea and marmalade and cakes in the pretty court garden in the Latin Quarter, one of the famous Duck Dinners at the Tour D'Argent, the famous restaurant opposite Notre Dame and the place

where Strether and Madame de Vionnet dined together, if you have as yet read M. Henry James' "The Ambassadors". And tomorrow night we hear a concert in concert, And life goes on fine and gay and...ahum...extremely expensive, in Oldgayparee."(90)

In reality, Thurber's Parisian encounter was far from the romantic portrait he gave his friend. As Elliot Nugent had recently returned to O.S.U. and gotten his degree, the envious Thurber undoubtedly felt the pangs of insecurity, the evidence of which is exposed in his somewhat condescending tone and sophisticated allusions. Paris, for Thurber, was actually a nightmare. For one, he was touring some battlefields near the American Embassy and accidentally set off a landmine which scared him badly. More traumatically, the Parisian notoriety for debauchery became a glaring reality for James Thurber. In the fall of 1919, Thurber, still innocent and virginal (hardly the image he tried to project) finally acquiesced to the pressures of sensuality. According to Bernstein:

His scrupulously guarded virginity, hidden for so long on that same lofty pedestal where American Womanhood dwelled, was surrendered to a semi-professional demimondaine, a Folies Bergeres dancer named Ninette, and was continued with yet another. The "first step aside," as he put it in an almost offhand confession of the cataclysm, set him on a downward course of guilt-ridden indulgence...Thurber was so tormented, almost destroyed, by his first steps aside that he suffered an acute attack of 'nerves,' as the Thurbers tended to call mental collapse. It tied his tongue and his psyche in knots, and he withdrew into a dark silence from family and friends (92).

Years later, again assuming the mask of the sophisticate, Thurber recalled the event of his "first time" for Dorothy Miller:

The whirl when once it whirled went whirling so fast that I saw it as a reason for whirling home. Ninette told me once in the privacy of her cute Montmartre apartment, "Jeemy, at zee step which you step, you must last about two weeks." "Ah, non, ma cherie," I returned, lighting a Pall Mall from a huge red box of them which I had given her, and offering my glass for some more of her fine Porto, "Ah, non, vous vous trompez, you are very wrong, at this pace I will last all of ten days." Voila...

I have no regrets, fortunately, but I will say that I can't see it except as a passing experience once in—or twice in—a life-time, providing

there is not One Girl. I mean if there isn't One Girl, why then say six or eight passing experiences or nine or ten or...hell. (Bernstein, 92)

Except for his eventual handling of his sexual disaster in Paris, there is much in Thurber's response to Parisian love to draw parallels between Thurber and the heroes in *The Ambassadors*. When Lambert Strether first meets Maria Gostrey, she comments on his general "failure to enjoy" to which she importunes, "I wish you *would* let me show you how!" (*Ambassadors*, 11). In many ways Maria Gostrey is his guide, one who will help him reach illuminations about the situation in Paris between Chadwick Newsome and Mme deVionnet. She helps Strether recognize and get rid of the terror of the impending encounter with Chad in which he admits to her that he stands to lose "everything" (52). Strether's eventual attraction to Maria Gostrey and his affecting departure from her must have provided a puzzling moral dilemma for young Thurber. As Strether says, "It's you who would make me wrong!" preferring instead to take a higher moral ground, to be as James says, "honest and fine." The choice Thurber had made so unscrupulously with Ninette seems tawdry by comparison.

Nevertheless, Strether's somewhat awkward provincialism, especially compared to Chad Newsome's apparently seamless assimilation into the Parisian mode, reflects the difficulties encountered by many Americans who were transplanted in France. While Henry James was not trying to show Paris as a decadent Babylon, he did draw contrasts between Victorian America and Paris that accounted for a certain discomfiture in Americans. He shows such a contrast in his description of the opinions of Woollett, a mythical eastern American city:

Strether had never in his life heard so many opinions on so many subjects. There were opinions at Woollett, but only on three or four. The differences were there to match; if they were doubtless deep, though few, they were quiet—they were, as might be said, almost as shy as if people had been ashamed of them. People showed little diffidence about such things, on the other hand, in the Boulevard Malesherbes, and were so far from being ashamed of them—or indeed of anything else—that they often seemed to have invented them to avert those agreements that destroy the taste of talk. (123)

The depth of Thurber's "opinions," to use James's word, might have been the result of his Midwestern background. The clear distinction

between right and wrong, like Strether's, explains the stultifying effect of his sexual encounter. Had Lambert Strether proceeded in his involvement with Maria Gostrey, he would have doubtless suffered pangs of conscience similar to what James Thurber experienced. While Strether's choice to "get out" spared him the moral equivocations, he nevertheless faced the concessions to the realities of his mind, heart, and time of life.³ Thurber's indulgence remained with him into later years to trouble his sensibilities.

One of the haunting themes of *The Ambassadors* is that of the metamorphosis of Chadwick Newsome. During an interview with little Bilham, Strether discusses this change:

'Chad's a rare case!' Bilham luminously observed. 'He's awfully changed,' he added.

'Then you see it too?' [Strether asked.]

'The way he has improved? Oh yes—I think every one must see it.' (126)

Strether was later surprised, though perhaps not the reader of James's novel, that the relationship which precipitated the dramatic change in Chad was not the "virtuous attachment" Strether was lead to believe existed between Chad and Mme de Vionnet. All was a magnificently "artful" performance created to beguile a man with Strether's extreme sensibilities. While Thurber's "attachment" was also lacking in virtue, it would be difficult to argue that Thurber felt he had improved through the experience. Like the citizens of Woollett who saw the entire liaison with Mme de Vionnet as "repulsive," Thurber saw his own encounter with Ninette through the narrow eyes of conventional and provincial morality.

What seems to be the drawing force for both Henry James and James Thurber is the embodiment of Paris. If there is an open mind, it is represented in the very character of Paris and all of Europe's cosmopolitan cities during the turn of the century. Joseph Warren Beach comments:

[James's] descriptions are no more extended, I think, than is usual in the later novels, but we cannot escape the insistent note of this background, which is always so vividly and yet discreetly present... all keep us reminded of the physical brightness and amenity of Paris.

But one can hardly distinguish background and foreground. There is not the least suggestion—such as one may sometimes detect in the earlier novels laid in Paris—of an artificial bringing together of char-

acters and setting, of the scenery's being let down behind the figures. ("Full Prime," 41)⁴

Paris, what James called a "huge iridescent" jewel and what Thurber referred to as a "City of Light...costumed like a wide-screen Technicolor operetta," plays its own artful yet powerful role in convincing, and perhaps gulling our heroes.⁵ Thurber himself alludes to this phenomenon in his letter to Elliot Nugent:

It is impossible to get a perspective or a determination over here. All that is Paris militates against determinations and decisions, and for that reason it isn't any too good for one in a sense. (Bernstein, 90)

Strether's indecision questioned whether Paris was "charming" or "strange." Chad's pride in the display of his connection with Mme deVionnet both puzzled and fascinated Strether. Thurber likewise bears this same aspect of uncertainty, doubting his future plans. "I have arrived, or been arrived, at the point in one's life which is extremely disturbing and full of hopes and fears and doubts and one thing another in wild profusion" (90).

As it turned out, much of Thurber's indecisiveness was clearly vanquished once he returned home and began making his way as a writer. Still, in the back of his mind lurked that unfulfilled longing to pay tribute to Henry James and perhaps to relive and absolve himself of the painful time in Paris. The precedent for such tributes had already been set. Max Beerbohm's famous impersonation, "Mote in the Middle Distance," had already won popular acclaim as did his "A Christmas Garland." Thurber's astute appreciation of Henry James made registering his own statement a natural conclusion.⁶ "None the less," realizing his dream of writing a pastiche of Jamesiana would not be an easy task. He would have to trim and tailor his many allusions to James's stories and novels into a manageable and publishable format. During the editing process, he wrote a letter to Herman and Dorothy Miller, declaring, "During the four months I worked on it day and night, I was a nuisance around the house because I was unable to get out of the Jamesian phraseology in talking to Helen, the cook, or our guests" (*Letters*, 44). In Thurber's parody, a connoisseur of James will readily identify the many allusions to James's works, especially the strong emphasis on *The Ambassadors*. But the striking title, "The Beast in the Dingle," shows Thurber's discriminating awareness of how both "The Beast

in the Jungle" and *The Ambassadors* conflate the themes of tragic realization of a wasted life and of sacrificial spectatorship. Although he thought the title "too slapstick" he stuck with it in lieu of titles like "The Larger View" and "The Sharpest Sense" (*Letters*, 44). It is the story of a man, Charles Grantham, and his convoluted involvement with a woman, Miss Amy Lighter. Grantham, of course, leaves her wondering where in the world he is going. Evidence of James's parenthetic style are lampooned in:

'Beat her, then,' Amy Lighter had smiled, 'to it. Talk, if you will, her head off. Give her,' she had added, after a moment, 'the works.' Our poor sensitive gentleman could only draw, at this, quite collapsing in his chair, the longest of sighs (*Horizon*, 171).⁷

Exaggerated emphasis on such a style comes in: "[O]ur play is set, I beg you to remember, in New,' he dwelt upon it, 'York. In West-' he added for special emphasis, 'chester'" (173). Aside from this playfulness, there is still the ubiquitous "Thurber Woman" who dominates Thurber's "Little Man." Here is an example:

He had been brought, deviously and unaware, once again before her door, on the realization of which, he performed, bowing over her hand, his little ritual of adieu, but grasping him figuratively by the nape of his neck, she guided him, taking no note of his decorous protests, firmly up the steps and into her parlour. (177)

Yet another of the direct echoes of *The Ambassadors* again confuses the literal and figurative for humorous effect. Grantham says:

'I was only pulling at a thread to see what might unravel.' She had a faint brave smile. 'You left the lady, in pulling at your thread, stark, raving, as my mother used to say, naked,' Amy Lighter said. He had his own small smile and word for this. 'Oh, well, then clothe her, while I look the other way.' (178)

The shadows of Walter Mitty and Mr. Martin, ("The Catbird Seat") merge in the shade of Lambert Strether with unlikely irony. In this pastiche, Thurber takes his own best characters and allows them to play the roles of Henry James's most memorable ones. Grantham, Thurber's version of what James calls the "poor sensitive gentleman" in his introduction to "The Beast in the Jungle," falls short of a Jamesian dramatic realization, but lapses into a bit of aberration that is typically Thurber: "'Why, here I go,' cried Charles Grantham, with a lit-

tle toss of his hand and his best, his most wonderful twinkle, 'round the prickly pear'" (186).

The response to "The Beast in the Dingle" was mixed. *New Yorker* editor, Harold Ross rejected the piece saying, "I only understood fifteen percent of the allusions" (Bernstein, 372). Later in 1948, Thurber saw it published along with several other stories in *The Beast In Me and Other Animals*. *Time* magazine reviewed the book calling "The Beast in the Dingle" "a superb parody of a Henry James short story that delicately deflates the most long-winded master of modern letters" (Oct. 11, 1948). Popular opinion was still decidedly anti-James. Rex Lardner, for example, said of the collection of stories: "All but one of the short stories are done with typical craftsmanship, and the essays are consistently trenchant and funny" (*Times*, Oct. 9). It is easy to guess which one he didn't like. Cyril Connolly, on the other hand, was so taken by the piece that he asked Thurber for permission to reprint it in the British publication, *Horizon*. Thurber, in granting this permission, was exuberant. Confused by the mixed response given the story, he told Connolly that his intense closeness to the project for so many years made it difficult for him to make judgments about it.⁸

It is unfortunate that *The Beast in Me and Other Animals* marked so vividly the beginning of the decline of Thurber's powers. His almost total blindness showed especially in his hitherto uncollected and final drawings, Rex Lardner saying of them, "Some. . . look as if they had been done with a busted pencil." Compared to his other compilations, the sales of this book were dismal. Nevertheless, his personal accomplishment of writing Henry James arrested the obsession of many years.

While ridding himself of the ghost of Henry James, Thurber wrote a sentimental piece, included in *The Beast in Me*. The narrator of the piece tells of a fanciful meeting between himself and Willa Cather's Marian Forrester, with an extended allusion to Mme de Vionnet, entitled "A Call on Mrs. Forrester (After rereading, in my middle years, Willa Cather's 'A Lost Lady' and Henry James' 'The Ambassadors')." Harold Ross liked this one and said of it, "It's about a man and two women, and it comes over" (Bernstein, 372). Using his knowledge of Paris and of Henry James, Thurber expresses his affection for Mme de Vionnet who symbolizes the grace of bygone days, and an experiential realization with which he can finally make peace. He wrote:

I will carry lilacs, one of these summers, to the house on the boulevard Maeshherbes, and take Mme. de Vionnet to a matinee of "Louise," have a white port with her at one of the little terraces at the quietest corner of the Parc Monceau, and drop her at the door well before the bold moon has begun to wink at the modest twilight. Since, in the best Henry James tradition, I will get nothing out of this for myself, it ought to make up for something. I could do worse than spend my last summers serenely, sipping wine, clop-clopping around town, listening to good music, kissing a lady's hand at her door, going to bed early and getting a good night's sleep.

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NOTES

1. Burton Bernstein, *Thurber: A Biography* (New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1975), 372. See also *Selected Letters of James Thurber*, Eds. Helen Thurber and Edward Weeks (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990). Quotations from *The Ambassadors* are taken from The World's Classics edition by Henry James, Ed. Christopher Butler (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985).
2. These events are documented in *Remember Laughter: A Life of James Thurber*, by Neil A. Grauer (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1994), 17-19. See also, Bernstein, 92 ff.
3. See F. W. Dupee, *Henry James: His Life and Writings* (Garden City: 1956), 214.
4. Beach's comments appear in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Ambassadors: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. Albert E. Stone, Jr. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc).
5. "The First Time I Saw Paris" recalls Thurber's 1919 entrance into Paris. This quote is from *Alarms and Diversions*, 10.
6. Whether by coincidence or Thurber's erudition, the timing could not have been better. Interest in Henry James was focusing on new interpretations of *The Ambassadors*. Critics like F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock attacked earlier assertions that James's favorite novel was "too subtly fine for general appreciation." too "subjective" and the "reader is lost if his much-wearied attention falters." (Henry M. Alden's memorandum for Harper and Brothers quoted by Albert B. Stone, Jr. in the introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Ambassadors*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1969), 1. The resultant controversy shed new light on various aspects of *The Ambassadors* as well as other works by James. Eunice Hamilton's "Biographical and Critical Studies of Henry James, 1941-1948" chronicles this critical upheaval. The locus of some of the James criticism was the suspenseful initiation of the hero into a world of new values and the series of climaxes which lead him to new discoveries.
7. Thurber's story appeared in *Horizon* 18 (September, 1948) 170-186 as well as in *The Beast in Me and Other Animals: A Collection of Pieces and Drawings about Human Beings and Less Alarming Creatures* (San Diego: HBJ, 1948), along with "A Call On Mrs. Forester." The latter piece is anthologized in *Alarms and Diversions* and four other collections. "The Beast in the Dingle" has only one other appearance besides the aforementioned.
8. Thurber also told Connolly about a Hollywood agent who approached him with a lucrative offer which he turned down in favor of the less financially advantageous prospect of writing a Henry James pastiche. Thurber said of the rejected offer: "He backed away from me as if I were insane, and happily dropped out of my life" (Bernstein, 372).

LOUIS BROMFIELD AND ECOLOGY IN FICTION: A RE-ASSESSMENT

DAVID D. ANDERSON

Whether this paper is a re-assessment, a re-evaluation, or a revisitation of and with Louis Bromfield, his fiction, and his commitment both to ecology and the writing of fiction, I'm not sure, but it is certainly a long-overdue return on my part to Bromfield, his fiction, and his lifelong infatuation with the land, its ethical and intelligent treatment, and its potential bounty. Since I published *Louis Bromfield* in 1964 my relationship with all three has been rather sporadic—a paper, “Louis Bromfield and the Myth of the Ohio Frontier,” at the first Symposium on the Culture of the Ohio Frontier in 1978, a lecture at Mansfield’s Kingwood Center, an occasional visit to Malabar Farm and lunch at the Inn, a few even more occasional articles and a brief poem, and a series of requested encyclopedia and other entries: in the English *Reference Guide to American Literature*, in *The Dictionary of American Biography* and the new *American National Biography*, and in two volumes of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*: #9, *American Novelists, 1910-1945*, and #86, *American Short Story Writers*.

Such a list is respectable but not excessive, and it might have remained at that rate or even decreased, but a number of recent events have conspired to return my attention to Bromfield, to re-read the Bromfield canon—all thirty volumes, fiction and non-fiction alike, however uneven—and perhaps even to do some long-overdue re-thinking about Bromfield, his work, his relationship with the earth, and the uniquely American philosophy that made him what he was.

The first incident was actually a series of conversations with a number of junior colleagues, all of whom express a deep professional and personal concern with the relationship between American writ-

ers and nature, who practice a relatively new approach to literary analysis called ecocriticism, and who had never heard of Louis Bromfield, thus, perhaps, inadvertently validating Edmund Wilson's unfortunate essay of half a century ago, "What Became of Louis Bromfield." But theirs was an innocence that I hope to correct; Wilson's was one of the last major salvos in a savage campaign of vilification, largely Marxist inspired and conducted, that had begun fifteen years earlier.

The second incident occurred recently in the reference section of the Michigan State University library. Occupying a reasonably prominent position among all the hundreds of literary reference works is a new two-volume work, *American Nature Writers*, edited by John Elder and published in 1996 by Charles Scribners' Sons and the other members of the conglomerate that has absorbed at least two fine old family-owned literary publishing houses to the detriment of both the conglomerate and its co-parents. The work has seventy substantial entries on American writers and twelve equally substantial supporting essays. Nowhere, to my dismay, in any of them, is Bromfield's name even mentioned.

Fortunately, however, something else has happened recently to give me a measure of hope. That is the announcement that the Ohio State University television station will produce a video biography of Bromfield, and that project, in which I will participate, produced by Brent Greene of OSU, is now underway. A great many people who remember Bromfield and who admire his work, especially at Malabar, are interested and involved in the project, and it promises to reacquaint a generation who should not have forgotten him with his accomplishments as a writer, a nature writer, and a farmer who was as curious as he was practical and who was perhaps more completely dedicated to an ideal than anyone since the death of his mentor, Thomas Jefferson, on July 4, 1826.

But biography is a difficult art at best, video biography is the most difficult medium in which to work, and Bromfield, a man of immense and often apparently contradictory personal characteristics, is, as I can testify, the most difficult of topics. The conventional critical view of Bromfield, when one exists, an increasingly rare phenomenon today, is a perception of three unrelated Louis Bromfields: the promising young novelist of the 1920s who won a Pulitzer Prize for his third work, the commercially successful novelist of the 1930s whose work became a Hollywood staple, and the conservative

would-be gentleman farmer of the 1940s and 1950s, whose farm had become a gathering place for celebrities.

The popular view of Bromfield today is not entirely dissimilar, stemming as it does from the preservation of Malabar Farm as a state park and the popular tours of the "Big House" as well as the recollection, enshrined in the popular memory, that Malabar was the site of one of the celebrated celebrity marriages of its time. That marriage, of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, is, unfortunately, to too many, the only significant reason for remembering Bromfield at all.

This wide variety of popular and critical views of Bromfield suggests at once a fact too often ignored by most perceptions of Bromfield today. That is, that he was not only one of the most complex men of his age, but that behind the facade of the three or more Louis Bromfields, there is a remarkable unity, and that unity, of purpose as well as philosophy, produces a personal story, supported by impressive documentary evidence in fiction and non-fiction alike as well as the remarkable memorial that is Malabar Farm, that is one of the most remarkable of a century now passing rapidly into history.

That unity, evident in all his novels, the strongest, such as *The Farm* (1934), his best novel, and the weakest, *Wild is the River* (1941) alike, as well as in his non-fiction, ranging from *Pleasant Valley* (1945) to *From My Experience* (1955), has its origins in the practical philosophy of a late eighteenth-century Virginia gentleman farmer, inventor, political theorist, and practical politician named Thomas Jefferson. From Jefferson, through his staunch Jeffersonian Democratic ancestry, Bromfield inherited the beliefs in a society marked by limited government and an open society, an economy based upon agricultural self-sufficiency, and a conviction that in such a society, free of the evils of urbanism and industrialism, talent and virtue would come into their own, producing a natural aristocracy to provide the intelligent, limited leadership such a society deserved. This was the philosophy Bromfield's ancestors and thousands of others brought across the Appalachians and into the Ohio country in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and which provided, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the foundation of an orderly agricultural society.

But the Ohio into which Bromfield was born in 1896 was governed by the industrial-political oligarchy that had emerged from the Civil War to dominate the political and economic life of the country;

the state's towns, like Mansfield, in which Bromfield was born, had become industrial centers or had, like countless others, disappeared from the map and the Postal Directory; and agriculture, in Bromfield's own Richland County, in his own family, and in the nation at large had gone into a decline compounded by a hostile economic system and a changing national standard of values as well as careless and harmful economic practices. By Bromfield's youth, in the years just before the outbreak of World War I, the Jeffersonian dream had given way to the reality of the society he and his eighteenth century mentor had most feared: a society dominated by rampant materialism, by urbanism and industrialism, and by the greed which exploited and depleted the soil as well as those who farmed it.

For Bromfield, the war years, particularly those of his military service, 1917-1919, were those which taught him that the Jeffersonian dream of a self-sufficient pastoral and agricultural society, which he shared with his maternal grandfather and his father, had become impossible to realize, they introduced him to France and the French people, and they taught him that he might become a writer. More importantly, those years provided the substance of his best work in the remarkably productive years between the publication of *The Green Bay Tree* in 1924 and *The Farm* a decade later. These years saw the publication of, among others, the four which he called "panel novels" beginning with *The Green Bay Tree* and including *Possession* (1925), *Early Autumn* (1926), for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in 1927, and *A Good Woman* (1927). Three of the four novels are rooted in his experience in Mansfield, the characters in all four are based on members of his family and close family connections. The fourth, *Early Autumn*, although set in New England, shares time, characters, and theme with the others, and all four are what he says "might be considered as a single novel with the all-encompassing title 'Escape'." The theme of the four, as Bromfield sees it, is clearest in a statement by Julia Shane, one of the last of the natural aristocrats in the town and a central character in *The Green Bay Tree*, and used as a prepatory statement in *Possession*:

"Life is hard for our children. It isn't as simple as it was for us. Their grandfathers were pioneers and the same blood runs in their veins, only they haven't a frontier any longer. They stand—these children of ours—with their backs toward this rough-hewn middle west and their faces set toward Europe and the East and they belong to neither. They are lost somewhere between."