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PREFACE

This is the second issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* focusing on the work of Sinclair Lewis. This issue includes essays setting Lewis and his characters within the culture of their time and what these observations show about the continued importance of Lewis as a writer and social critic.

Critical interest in Lewis is continuing to grow. Over 60,000 people have visited the Lewis website since it was established in October 1998. There is the newly-published biography of Lewis written by Richard Lingeman. The Modern Language Association featured Lewis on their radio program "What's the Word?" in Spring 2002. And the Modern Library has reprinted *Kingsblood Royal*, Lewis's 1947 novel about race relations in post-World War II America.

The five essays collected here all provide insight into the context of Lewis's novels. The first one, "The Idea of Europe in Sinclair Lewis's Novels," focuses on Europe as a locus for many of Lewis's characters, both physically and emotionally. "Walden Pond and Tin Lizzie: Sinclair Lewis Records the Great Plains" does the same thing for Lewis in the Midwest, especially his beloved Minnesota. "Here is the story THE MOVIES DARED NOT MAKE" and "The Language of Unrest: *It Can't Happen Here* and *Native Son*" deal with contemporary political issues connected to one of Lewis's most controversial novels. "Mrs. Babbitt and Mrs. Rabbit" relate one of Lewis's best-known novels to a literary descendent, the Rabbit novels by the novelist John Updike.

These essays will provide an enjoyable way to appreciate a variety of Lewis's novels in both a historical and social context.

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THE IDEA OF EUROPE IN SINCLAIR LEWIS'S NOVELS

ROBERT E. FLEMING

[Babbitt] "I suppose you'll be going to Europe pretty soon again, won't you?"

[Lucille McKelvey] "I'd like awfully to run over to Rome for a few weeks."

"I suppose you see a lot of pictures and music and curios and everything there."

"No, what I really go for is: there's a little trattoria on the Via Della Scrofa where you get the best fettuccine in the world." (*Babbitt* 196)

In 1904 Harry Sinclair Lewis took his first trip to Europe. The trip was the unlikely beginning of a love affair with England that would blossom into an abiding interest not only in Great Britain but in continental Europe as well. That interest would inspire numerous subsequent visits to Europe, but more importantly, it would serve as the basis for three novels that are very important in the Lewis canon: his first novel, his last, and perhaps his most ambitious—though not fully appreciated—book. James Hutchisson has written of *Dodsworth* that it demonstrates "Lewis's increasing tendencies to write books 'out of his head,'" rather than base them on research, as he had done most successfully in *Arrowsmith* (172). In the case of these three novels, Hutchisson is certainly correct: had the young Lewis not whimsically sailed for Liverpool after his freshman year at Yale, the world would still have had novels such as *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, but it might never have seen *Our Mr. Wrenn* (1914), *World So Wide* (1951) or *Dodsworth* (1929). Europe meant something special to Lewis, an extension of his eastward pilgrimage that had already carried him from Sauk Centre to New Haven. In his fiction he explored the possibilities lying in wait for the receptive American who revisited the old world.

The trip began prosaically. Dr. Edwin Lewis had complained of financial troubles in letters to New Haven, and a summer junket aboard an ocean liner was out of the question. Instead, Lewis signed up with the American Shipping Company as a cattle feeder on the *Georgian*, a British cargo ship that would transport 650 cattle from Portland, Maine, to Liverpool. Lewis spent the better part of two weeks working fourteen-hour days feeding and watering the cattle and cleaning up after them. The food was worse than plain, the crew a rough assortment of cowboys, rejects from better berths on other merchant ships, and petty criminals. The forecabin was such a smelly place that Lewis chose to sleep on deck or in the hold where the hay was stored. For this labor Lewis earned his passage and eight days of freedom in England, with enough money to keep him there if he lived frugally (Schorer 76-86).

What did Lewis gain from this first trip? He was able to see Liverpool itself, especially the more seedy portions of the city to which his budget consigned him. He saw some of the English countryside when he attempted to walk to Manchester, over thirty miles away, but he had to turn back after hiking about fifteen miles. He attended cricket matches and church services and visited the Walker Art Gallery and a Liverpool museum. Then it was time to reboard the *Georgian* for the return voyage to Portland. The adventure hardly sounds like an inspiring "summer abroad" program, but Lewis evidently saw the experience as worth while, for he would repeat it after his junior year.

This second trip added considerably to Lewis's knowledge of England. Sailing on the *Philadelphia* on June 22, 1906, he found the ship's crew a better lot than that of his first ship, and he was prepared for the long days of physical labor. This time when he reached England, he had enough money to allow him to see more of the country. He was able to visit Chester, Shrewsbury, Birmingham, Kenilworth, and Warwick and to spend a week in Oxford and some ten days in London. In London he visited St. Paul's, Parliament, the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Tate Gallery, and attended one performance at the Covent Garden Opera House. He returned to the United States as a paying passenger on an ocean liner (Schorer 108-10).

The first book to emerge from this experience appeared eight years after Lewis's second stay in England. The fact that *Our Mr. Wrenn* (1914) was the first adult novel Lewis published testifies to the importance of his first trips abroad. Much has been made of

Lewis's debt to H. G. Wells's *The History of Mr. Polly* (1909), and indeed Lewis himself mentioned the personal importance of that novel to him in an introduction he wrote to a 1941 edition of *Mr. Polly* (Foreword vi-vii), but Lewis's own first novel could not have been written without the important firsthand experiences—positive and negative—that the 1904 and 1906 trips furnished. The trip across the ocean by the young man from the provinces, the outsider from the Midwest, proved to be the key that unlocked a major literary career.

Sally Parry has emphasized the romantic nature of Lewis's first dreams of Europe as a boy back in Minnesota (Parry 27). Although he lives in New York City, not a small Midwestern town like his creator, William Wrenn dreams of travel to exotic places such as Paris and London, and his dreams are based less on actual knowledge of the places he visits in his daydreams than on the idealized sites described in romantic novels, glossy travel brochures, or Baedeker travel guides. His imagination can turn a trip on a ferry into international travel. *Our Mr. Wrenn* tells how such a man goes in search of the reality behind his dreams and how he deals with the lessons he learns during his quest.

William Wrenn is an undistinguished clerk for a New York souvenir and novelty company who can indulge his dreams of travel when he receives a small inheritance. To make the most of his small capital (and to best exploit Lewis's literary capital), Wrenn sails for England on a cattle ship, explores the countryside and towns between Liverpool and London, settles in the city and explores its offerings, becomes infatuated with a bohemianized American art student who—anticipating Fran Dodsworth—represents the worst in American responses to Europe, returns to New York, and marries an extremely domestic young woman from small-town Pennsylvania. The two settle into conventional married life, dreaming of someday escaping, not to Europe now, but to a cottage in New Jersey. Wrenn has experienced the greater world across the Atlantic, and a small taste was sufficient for him. As so often in his early works, Lewis makes some significant observations and explores some serious social themes but then retreats to a whimsical romantic plot line with which he apparently hopes to win over the casual reader.

But before Lewis turns the novel around slightly beyond its midpoint, he shows some signs of the novelist who will develop into the author of *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Dodsworth*. Just before receiving his inheritance, Wrenn, who knows he cannot compete for a berth

with the real sailors he sees on the New York docks, has dreamed of shipping out “as steward in the all-promising Sometime” (10). He is ripe for the advertisement that lures him into the office of a labor contractor for shipping lines, an ad that promises “Free passage” and “Easy work” (37). The reality, as Lewis knew from his own experience, was something else. With the exception of Harry Morton, a somewhat kindred spirit, the other sailors on the *Merian* are a coarse lot, shocking to the sheltered Wrenn. A dirty, profane batch of misfits, they finally provoke the meek Mr. Wrenn to fight (and, remarkably, beat) a tough factory hand who has been his chief tormentor. The timid Mr. Wrenn who began the voyage ends it as Bill Wrenn, a man’s man.

Wrenn’s English experience draws on Lewis’s second trip to England more than on his first. After touring Liverpool with Morton, he embarks on a planned walking trip across the English countryside. He gives up the walking plan out of loneliness and takes the train to Oxford, where the loneliness persists. Wrenn is discovering the truth of Emerson’s maxim that “travelling is a fool’s paradise.” Although he tries to enjoy Oxford and even attaches himself to Dr. Mittyford, a visiting American Ph.D. who is boringly informative about Oxford’s architecture and history, Wrenn fails to appreciate the uplifting experience of the university town until he visits a pub with the professor. In the morning, hung over and smarting from Mittyford’s verdict that he is too uneducated to benefit from the Oxford experience, Wrenn takes the train for London.

Although he dutifully attempts to see the cultural sights, Wrenn’s experience in the capital is disappointing. He thinks of emulating Morton, whose goal was to work his way across Europe, but his half-hearted attempt to ship out on a British ship is rebuffed. He settles down in a small room depressingly similar to his New York boarding house room and eats all his meals in the same humble cocoa house. After twenty-two days in England he is so lonely and unhappy that he plans to sail for New York as soon as he can arrange for passage.

Istra Nash changes all of his plans. An exotic-looking woman who seems to belong to the European world—she wears flamboyant clothes, smokes openly, drinks wine without shame, and regards the world with resigned ennui—Istra turns out to be an American from California. Although she identifies herself as an art student, she is really no more than a dabbler in the arts, her main art being the achievement of a superficial sophistication that is enough to dazzle

the impressionable Wrenn. Istra considers the London theater not worth attending: "Everything's rather rotten this season, I fancy" (85). Historical attractions such as the Tower of London are not worth seeing because "trippers," or tourists, visit them. She does offer to take Wrenn to the Tate Gallery, but more important, she undertakes the task of teaching Wrenn "how to play," her term for engaging in the sort of bohemian existence she favors. Together they explore a London Wrenn has been too timid to sample, from elegant tearooms to inelegant restaurants in Soho. She also introduces him to others of her set, such as Carson Haggerty, a would-be poet who "knows all the toffs in London" (113). Like Istra, Haggerty is a refugee from Berkeley, and like her, he is spending his time in Europe learning how to imitate Europeans.

By the two of them, Wrenn is led into a temple of bohemianism, the salon of Mrs. Olympia Johns. There he meets an odd assortment of poets, students of Greek archaeology, radicals, and "superradicals." The glue that binds this "intellectual" group together is their "frank talk of sex" (119). But frank talk is apparently Istra's limit. While she shocks Wrenn by casually kissing him, she is expert in deflecting his serious efforts at romance. While Istra Nash is not fully developed in *Our Mr. Wrenn*, she anticipates Fran Dodsworth in her desire to take on the external trappings of European culture while she misses its deeper significance and real values.

The climax of Wrenn's and Istra's relationship is a walking trip to an art colony near Chelmsford. After walking all one night in the rain, sleeping in a straw stack for most of the following day, and spending a second night in an abandoned stable, Wrenn and Istra reach the art colony. In spite of being snubbed by some of the pretentious denizens of the group, Wrenn plans an elaborate tea for Istra, only to find a note telling him that she has left for Paris on a whim. Crushed, Wrenn books passage, steerage, on a ship for New York. He has been in England for one month and seventeen days.

It would be unfair to conclude that William Wrenn is completely unchanged after his European adventure. He changes his lodgings, meets Nelly, the young woman who will eventually become his wife, and works his way up in his old firm. Inspired by trips to the New York theater, he even writes an imitative play which incidentally proves that his meager European cultural experience has been lost on him. Most important, when Istra returns from Paris and once again attempts to captivate him and hold him in reserve while dating more eligible suitors, Wrenn returns to his Nelly. Unlike his creator, Wrenn

has had his adventure, returned from it, and chosen to remain a small contented man, aspiring to a house in the suburbs. Perhaps because he is such an unimaginative man, his travels have failed to inspire him.

Twenty years after publishing *Our Mr. Wrenn*, a very different Sinclair Lewis published *Dodsworth* (1929). Lewis had made himself famous during the 1920s with satirical novels of small town life, tired businessmen, the medical profession, and the ministry, but it remained for him to create a definitive work that would transcend his earlier topical novels and claim a place for him among the great writers of America. In *Dodsworth* Lewis followed the lead of Henry James, whose international novels depict characters who travel to Europe in search of marital partners, culture, intellectual stimulation, and, ultimately, themselves. By the late twenties Lewis had supplemented his early trips abroad with more luxurious visits, during which he had had suits made in Saville Row and had joined the fashionable horseback riders on Rotten Row in Hyde Park. He had thoroughly explored not only England but the continent as well. However, the similarities between *Our Mr. Wrenn* and *Dodsworth* suggest that the influence of Europe as a shaping influence on the American character was a topic that continued to interest Lewis throughout his career. At the end of his most successful decade, he was able to treat the international theme with greater maturity in spite of being distracted by marital difficulties.

Unlike William Wrenn, Sam Dodsworth is in no need of stimulation for his creativity. A successful automobile executive, Sam has made his mark on the industry by becoming a leader in the streamlining of the American auto, which began as a boxy imitation of the horse-drawn carriage. No Babbitt but an inventor and businessman in the mold of Benjamin Franklin, Dodsworth has made his fortune early and can afford to give up his business interests and pursue personal and intellectual growth. Unlike Mr. Wrenn, Sam initially has no special desire to engage in world travel. Sam's wife Fran, however, has been eager to return to the Europe that she visited years ago as a schoolgirl. When Sam sells his Revelation Motor Company to a larger firm, it seems natural to mark this major passage with some decisive act. Fran pushes him into an open-ended European adventure.

The two travel in England and on the continent. For the first time in his life, Sam has nothing to occupy his mind, and he drinks in

Europe like a child, eager to learn from the new experiences. More important, he also has a chance to examine his life and his values. Fran, on the other hand, is too pretentious and too proud to admit to her own naivete. She refuses to engage in any activities in which "trippers" might indulge. If she examines her own life at all, in spite of her devotion to ephemeral activities, it is only to recoil from what she learns. She busies herself with social climbing and flirtations which culminate in her unsuccessful attempt to leave Sam. Sam meets Edith Cortright, an American widow who has lived in Europe for an extended time. The novel ends with Dodsworth in Europe, conflicted over his old love for Fran and his new love for Edith, unsure of what he has learned from his experience and unsure whether he now belongs in Zenith or Europe.

Although Fran is in some respects similar to *Our Mr. Wrenn's* Istra Nash, Lewis develops her character more fully to complement Sam's nature and to exploit a twin view of Europe—as a source of dangerous pitfalls for the naive traveler venturing abroad and as a catalyst to free the mind for the larger spirit. Henry James's international novels such as *Daisy Miller* (1879) and *The Ambassadors* (1903) furnished models to aid Lewis in the development of Sam and Fran as they experienced Europe. What had interested James was American innocence (or is it naiveté?) in conflict with and learning from European sophistication (or is it decadence?) Lewis saw possibilities in placing his own Zenithites in Jamesian conflict with older cultures abroad. Fran holds out the possibility of transformation during an extended sojourn in Europe. Although she treats the trip as an escape—"Let's run off some place" (9)—she also uses words that prove prophetic when she predicts that "perhaps we'll get us some new selves, without losing the old ones" (29). As the novel progresses, both she and Sam undergo a transformation that builds on their previous characteristics while effecting major changes in their behavior.

Fran and Sam separately reflect the Jamesian influence. Fran represents the naiveté of a Daisy Miller, made ridiculous in Fran's case because she is not a teenager but a grandmother in her early forties. Her head is turned by titles, and she engages in flirtations—and worse—with an English major who has family connections with nobility, with a Europeanized American adventurer, and finally with an Austrian nobleman whom she plans to marry. If she does not literally die like Daisy, she suffers from the same sort of ostracism

Daisy undergoes when her noble suitor's family rejects her as an unconventional choice.

Sam, on the other hand, undergoes a transition from the romantic dreaming awakened by his first glimpse of England and fed by the bustle on the streets of Paris and the exploration of medieval buildings in Germany and Italy. As the Dodsworths' stay is extended, Sam is inspired by leisure and the removal from familiar settings. He reflects the Jamesian view of the major period, exhibiting the ability to learn and grow exhibited by Lambert Strether of *The Ambassadors*. Basically, the distinction Lewis makes is between the businessman and the man. Faced with the loss of his career, Sam must leave behind his engineer's specialization to become what Emerson had called Man Thinking. Sam determines to devote his new life to rounding out his character, to examining life.

Lewis early makes it clear that Sam has been taught to suppress the spirit of philosophical inquiry: "he was extremely well trained, from his first days in Zenith High School, in not letting himself do anything so destructive as abstract thinking" (12). Later, at Yale and in the corporate world, he has obeyed the "duty" of the businessman, husband, and leader in society "never to be alone, certainly never to sit and think" (13). Yet even during his business years, Dodsworth has reveled in the brief respite he enjoys when his chauffeur drives him to work: "he liked to be alone, he liked to meditate" (13). The enforced leisure of European travel allows Sam to develop this side of his character and to know himself as he was never able to do while immersed in business and the superficial social life of Zenith.

The transformation Sam's character undergoes is only dimly perceived and less understood by Fran even though she has predicted that both of them would change. Before the couple left home, Fran optimistically told Sam "you could be so magnificent. . . if you didn't feel you had to be just an accessory to a beastly old medium-priced car. . . (29). Sam countered her optimism with an Emersonian dose of reality: "Do you actually mean to tell me, Fran, that you think that just moving from Zenith to Paris is going to change everything in your life and make you a kid again? Don't you realize that probably most people in Paris are about like most people here, or anywhere else?" (31).

In England, Sam soon sees beyond the superficial differences he encounters and falls back into reliance on his own strong character. Lewis sums it up in another Emersonian passage:

He had, for a few days, forgotten that wherever he traveled, he must take his own familiar self along, and that that self would loom up between him and new skies, however rosy. It was a good self. He liked it, for he had worked with it. Perhaps it could learn new things. But would it learn any more here . . . than in his quiet library, in solitary walks, in honestly auditing his life, back in Zenith? (59)

Using his Yale class reunion as an excuse, Sam returns briefly to the states, where he uneasily discovers the answer to that question. He now resents the noise and "hustle" of American life. In Europe he has grown more introspective, more intellectual. His sojourn abroad has marginalized him so that he no longer fits into American culture. But when he rejoins Fran in Paris, the contrast between the two of them has sharpened. Fran has completely lost the sense of who she is, a state illustrated most effectively when the Dodsworths receive a wire from their daughter Emily, informing them that they are grandparents. Fran's happiness over Emily's news immediately gives way to fear that the Austrian count she is stalking will find out that she is a grandmother and that she is forty-three, rather than vaguely in her late thirties. Fran has cut herself off from self-knowledge. Jilted by her count, she attempts to win Sam back, but he has outgrown her.

In the time he has spent apart from Fran, at her insistence, Sam has come to see her in a new light as "an unsurpassed show-window display" in a shop with "not much on the shelves inside" (223). He, on the other hand, has begun to observe and appreciate details of European life, especially the architecture, that he had not noticed while under the influence of Fran and her busy social climbing. He has also come to have more appreciation of his own creativity as an auto designer, an artist of sorts: "He had created something! He had no pictures in the academies, no books to be bound in levant, . . . but every one of the twenty million motors on the roads of America had been influenced by his vision . . . of long, clean streamlines!" (247). He wonders if he can develop further this late in life. After Fran's unsuccessful attempt to lure him back, Sam returns to Italy and to Edith Cortright, with whom he settles down on more equal terms than he and Fran ever achieved. Edith, herself the veteran of an unhappy marriage, has long lived in Italy. She has advised him, "Let yourself enjoy life, Sam! You're typically American in being burdened with a sense of guilt, no matter what you do or you don't do" (362).

While Sam is a changed man at the close of the book, he is unable to forget his old life completely. He plans to experiment with the building of “caravans,” what we have come to know as travel trailers or recreational vehicles, and he still thinks of his old life with Fran more than he would like. The ending has disappointed some critics. Glen Love, for example, feels that Lewis experienced a “lessening of intensity toward [*Dodsworth’s*] main theme, an inability or unwillingness to follow. . . the heroic builder through to the completion of his grand designs” (82). Noting that Lewis had struggled for a focus during his composition of the novel, James Hutchisson amply documents the false starts for the book (172-92) and suggests that the open ending shows that Lewis never did achieve a clear focus. Lewis finds an unlikely champion, however, in Mark Schorer. In his afterword to the New American Library edition of *Dodsworth*, Schorer suggests that the American attitude toward Europe, like the novel, is full of “unresolved complexities,” that Europe has “meant oppression, corruption and decadence” to the man in the street, while to the artist it has meant “civilization, tradition, spirituality, and art” (Afterword 360-61). Perhaps Sam’s indecision at the end is the greatest strength of the book, appropriate to a novel if not to a satire. *Dodsworth*, with all its flaws, marks the high point of Lewis’s career, a risk-taking book that effectively raises questions absent from most of the Lewis canon.

Lewis returned to his international theme with his last novel, published twenty-two years after *Dodsworth* and thirty-seven years after *Our Mr. Wrenn*. But the Lewis who wrote *World So Wide* was not the same man who ended his best decade by writing *Dodsworth*. After winning the Nobel Prize, Lewis’s career had turned downward, and many of his novels after 1930 looked backward to previous works, almost to the extent of rewriting them. *Ann Vickers* (1933) can be viewed as a rewriting of *The Job* (1917), *The Prodigal Parents* (1938) as a revision of *Babbitt* (1922), and *Cass Timberlane* (1945) as a return to some of the themes of *Main Street* (1920). *World So Wide* returns to some of the ideas, and certainly to the plot, of *Our Mr. Wrenn* although it has been argued—largely because of the similarity of the two protagonists—that it reprises *Dodsworth* (Parry 31-32). But even in his decline, Lewis found something new to add to his previous portraits of Americans abroad.

World So Wide is the story of Hayden Chart, who like Sam Dodsworth (and unlike William Wrenn), is a creative, educated man

when he embarks for Europe. After an auto accident that kills his wife and puts him in the hospital, Hayden, an architect, leaves his symbolically named Colorado city of Newlife for the Old World—Europe. A reader like Wrenn, Hayden recalls earlier dreams of travel, and now, with sufficient funds to travel anywhere, he embarks on a European adventure:

“I must voyage away from everybody who is familiar with the shape of my nose and the contents of my checkbook, find a world where I’ve never seen a soul, and so find some one who knows what I’m really like—and who will tell me, because I’d be interested to learn!

“What I want is less to voyage in any geographical land than travel in my own self. I may be shocked by what I find there.” (28)

After brief visits to England and France, Hayden moves on to Italy, where he settles in Florence. There he meets Sam and Edith Dodsworth and Olivia Lomond, an American professor engaged in research. Hayden embarks on a program of study, trying to learn something of Italian language, history, and architecture, and successfully courts Olivia. But before the two can marry, two other Americans enter the picture. First Professor Lorenzo Lundsgard replaces Hayden in Olivia’s affection; then Roxanna Eldritch, a local reporter from Newlife turned foreign correspondent, appears in Florence. Hayden realizes that Roxanna is his true love, and the two marry and return to Colorado.

Although both *Our Mr. Wrenn* and *Dodsworth* gave brief satiric glimpses of the American expatriate community in England and France, what is new in *World So Wide* is a more thorough examination of the new American expatriate. Lewis delineates the various types of Americans abroad and subjects most of them to his scathing satire. If *Dodsworth* is the most Jamesian of Lewis’s novels, in *World So Wide* he attempts to move beyond James, as he makes clear in a passage in which he invokes the memory of the Master:

Mr. Henry James was breathless over the spectacle of Americans living abroad and how very queer they are, in English country houses or Tuscan villas or flats in Rome, and how touchy they become as they contemplate the correctness of Europeans.

But just how queer they are, Mr. James never knew. . . . Americans are electric with curiosity, and this curiosity has misled foreigners

and Mr. James into crediting them with a provincial reverence which they do not possess. . . . (96)

The new American abroad, Hayden finds, for the most part resembles what would become known as “the ugly American,” rather than the Europeanized Americans depicted by James.

An exception is Sir Henry Belfont, known by the American community in Florence as a snooty British nobleman, a character who could almost have stepped out of a James novel. Roxanna, through her newspaper connections, unmasks “Sir Henry” as an American from Ohio whose move to England was made possible by money inherited from a robber baron grandfather. In England, Belmont bought a title, but, being unable to pass as a nobleman there, had to move to Italy to be honored as a member of the aristocracy.

More typical is Roxanna herself. Sent to Europe by her editor to write a series of articles for potential tourists, Roxanna falls in with rich Americans in Cannes (who would be completely at home in the world of *Tender Is the Night*), then with more bohemian expatriates. Her head turned by the society she has joined, Roxanna has bummed around Europe after being fired by her Newlife editor. Like Hayden, she is ready to return to her Colorado roots by the end of the book.

Olivia Lomond is in the process of reversing the old imperial order by which Europe conquered the new world and imported its riches into the mother country. She comes to postwar Italy as a miner in the archives of Florence, extracting scholarly gems from the papers of Machiavelli for export back to her university in the United States. Although she seems to fit in with the native culture—she speaks excellent Italian—she is nevertheless an exploiter of that culture.

More blatant than Olivia is Lorenzo Lundsgard, also a professor but of a different stripe from Olivia. Lorenzo (formerly Oley Lundsgard), a former football hero and sometime movie actor, is a popularizer of Italian culture who hires others to do his research and write it up, simplifying the results in the process. His immediate aim is to produce a series of popular lectures; his ultimate goal is a movie for which he will write the script and play a major role. A Gatsby with a PhD, Lundsgard captures Olivia’s affections, perhaps because she realizes that, different as they are, they have something in common—the exploitation of Italy for their own ends.

Among them all is honest Hayden Chart, who seriously attempts to learn the language, read the history, and study the architecture as a

means for genuine self-improvement. He meets a kindred spirit in Sam Dodsworth, who in spite of long residence in Italy has remained true to himself. Sam surveys the American colony with distaste. Having travelled through India and China as well as much of Europe, Dodsworth finds himself unable to return to his home town of Zenith, where "Everybody is so damn busy making money. . .that you can't find anybody to talk with" (46) and where mature men fritter away their leisure time by playing golf, hunting, fishing, and watching baseball. Like Lewis, who died in Rome shortly after completing *World So Wide*, Dodsworth has become a citizen of the world, whose increased awareness leaves him at home nowhere. Sam warns Hayden, "Don't stay in Italy too long—or anywhere else abroad" (46).

Hayden takes that advice, as does Roxanna. A plot summary of *World So Wide* might suggest that Lewis had learned nothing since he wrote *Our Mr. Wrenn*: both novels show a traveler who goes abroad, becomes disillusioned as well as educated, and returns to the United States to marry a girl next door. Yet both *Dodsworth* and *World So Wide* transcend the simple nature of *Our Mr. Wrenn*. Both effectively make the Emersonian point that it is through travel that one learns to recognize one's own nature. It was a lesson that Lewis had been trying to teach himself since his first wide-eyed view of England.

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WALDEN POND AND TIN LIZZIE: SINCLAIR LEWIS RECORDS THE GREAT PLAINS

ROGER FORSETH

I

John Dos Passos, in his first profile of Henry Ford, wrote that in 1901, "Ford put out his first Model T. ... That season he sold more than ten thousand tin lizzies, then years later he was selling almost a million a year" (45)¹ Many have since deplored the infestation of the natural world by the automobile and its fumes and highways. Sinclair Lewis was not one of them. Indeed, in his 1919 novel, *Free Air*,² the motor-car in a sense is a major persona. Yet, as important as the new means of travel was in his life and work, Lewis never lost an almost Thoreauvian passion for the countryside of his childhood.³ This passion becomes especially clear upon an examination of newly available collections of Lewis's letters' in combination with others of his naturalistic writings.

Lewis never saw himself as a Thoreau or, for that matter, a Willa Cather,⁵ but his letters and the *Minnesota Diary* in particular demonstrate a progression from an early focus on practical matters of travel to a more reflective response to the land he discovered he had all along loved. And though Lewis's return to Minnesota in the 1940's proved temporary, the place of his origins never left his imagination.

II

Lewis was the most peripatetic of human beings, and he seemed to experience nature as he did life, largely while on the move. On October 17, 1917, he wrote to Joseph Hergesheimer from St. Paul:

Come west to us, Hergesheimers! Europe you have seen, and N. Eng. -- now come see America! ... [Y]ou and I will venture out into these incredibly barren and planless villages -- where now the trees

are bare, and a thin sneering snow is flying -- and see people who are but the frozen soil in which, with a spring sometime to come, life will begin to spring. (Napier 239)

This jaunty invitation catches Lewis's ironic pose, but it also contains a precise imagery seemingly designed to taunt the effete Easterner. When Lewis writes, "come see America," he means "see" the vast expanse from a car window -- or from that of a train or plane. Indeed, it is worth mentioning that his first book, the 1912 children's novel *Hike and the Aeroplane*, is one of the earliest fictional treatments of flight.⁶ And one recalls Carol Kennicott's fateful journey by rail from St. Paul to Gopher Prairie:

Under the rolling clouds of the prairie a moving mass of steel.... Towns as planless as a scattering of pasteboard boxes on an attic floor. The stretch of faded gold stubble broken only by clumps of willows encircling white houses and red barns. (*Main Street* 24)

What is especially striking about Lewis's portrait of Great Plains topography in his early work is hard-edged and unadorned observation; his depiction of the landscape does not become refined and nuanced until his return to Minnesota in the 1940's.

This straightforward descriptiveness is confirmed by an examination of the newly-available letters Lewis wrote to the *Saturday Evening Post* editor George Horace Lorimer. These letters, now in the Lewis Archive of the Minnesota Historical Society, (MHS), demonstrate early on that Lewis was alert—at turns wryly and affectionately, but always matter-of-factly—to the Midwestern countryside and people.⁷ Lewis wrote to Lorimer:

I have plans for a serial—no I ain't going to bore you with the plot—and a desire to do some *Post* stories about my native state, Minnesota, which has some exceedingly dramatic stuff that has been practically untouched by fiction. (MHS 16 Aug. 1915)

The serial referred to is *Free Air*, based on a trip that Lewis and his first wife, Grace Hegger Lewis, took from Duluth to Seattle in 1916. This novel, a spritely and still readable affair, is filled with realistic, at times acrid, descriptions of people, places, and customs, and its initial appearance, in the *Post*, resulted in an amusing controversy. One H.G. Davis, Secretary of the Minnesota Highway Improvement Association, wrote to Lorimer:

The opening chapter of your current serial entitled "Free Air" by Mr. Sinclair Lewis is creating a great deal of unfavorable comment in Minnesota, owing to the fact that it is appearing at the opening of our tourist season, picturing the roads in Minnesota as actually impassable. (MHS 16 Aug. 1918)

The Secretary then offers Lorimer a piece for the *Post* on the virtues of the state highway system with the added incentive that "I think you would find such an article very popular with your advertising clientele especially those advertising road materials, motor cars, motor trucks and accessories" (MHS 4 June 1919). Lewis, at Lorimer's request, responded to the secretary:

I do not ...say that the roads are impassable; simply that there is mud after rains — which there is.... The [mud] hole which I describe as the one in which Claire [in *Free Air*] was stuck is the actual hole in which I was stuck, with my wife, ...in 1916.... I could go on for pages, but you would think I was trying to start a controversy, which is exactly the opposite of my purpose. That purpose is to persuade you that I want Minnesota to be helped instead of injured by my story.... How many writers are writing about Minnesota...? Any one save myself? Any one else boosting our prairies, our lakes? Our people? Then why do you want to tie my hands by insisting that I indulge in untrue glorification? (MHS 10 June 1919)

It is worth noting that a year before publication of *Main Street*, which was almost universally received as an anatomy of "The Village Virus," Lewis thought of himself as a booster of his home state! For that matter, at the same time he also was becoming something of an expert on self-promotion. He wrote to his publisher, Alfred Harcourt:

[*Free Air*] should be especially pushed in Minn, NDakota, Montana, Washington. Here's an idea for an ad: Whenever you see the sign / FREE AIR / before a garage think of / the one book that makes motoring romantic / FREE AIR.

No sooner was *Free Air* in the pipeline and while he was deep into the composition of *Main Street*, Lewis wrote Lorimer that he was planning a series of articles on "motor-touring" for the *Post* (MHS 4 June, 3 Oct. 1919) The result, "Adventures in Automobumming," continues the *Free Air* theme:

[T]he coming of the gasoline motor...has brought back the age of joyous piracy with the immense advantage that you do not have to associate with pirates.... The long-distance motor tourist, swooping down a corkscrew hill into a shining white town of which he has never heard, sliding along a ridge with fields to westward droning in blue shadows, picking up a wayfarer with a new dialect and a new world of interests, is adventurous as any heaving brigantine wallowing all day through changeless seas. (5)⁸

Lewis's argument, pushed with enthusiasm, would appear to be that "bumming" around the country by car is a grand way to commune with nature.

III

In his 1923 essay "Minnesota, the Norse State" Lewis wrote, "To understand America it is merely necessary to understand Minnesota" (285). The enormous success of *Main Street* propelled the author from a moderately successful regional writer to an international celebrity, and for the next two decades Minnesota, while on his mind, was largely absent from his published writings. During these years Lewis seldom returned home, and when he did the experience was scarcely sentimentalized. In 1934 he wrote to his second wife Dorothy Thompson:

Two trips to Sauk Centre...was a ringing experience in recalled memories. We found the Stone Arch—over a little creek, beneath railroad tracks—which was the holy of holies in the way of playground when we were kids.... and found there, boldly carved and still fresh, initials [Lewis's brother] Claude had cut in the stone forty-five or so years ago...and did not make one feel too young. That was conceivably for keeps, this once the richest of farming lands but now becoming arid through too much industrious slashing off of trees. The really lovely creek that once flowed through that arch is absolutely gone—just a dirty dry channel. Same with another once exuberant creek farther out; while Fairy Lake, once the loveliest of lakes in all that land of lakes will be gone in another two-three years.⁹

A decade later, however, Lewis saw—or remembered—something else.

In a 1942 interview in a St. Paul newspaper, headlined "Sinclair Lewis Rediscovered Native State," a reporter wrote that

scenically Minnesota compares with the New England he calls his adopted home. 'Why,...I never knew Minnesota was like this. I thought it was all as flat as Stearns county, where I was raised. If I had picked up and dropped suddenly on the north shore of Lake Superior, for example, I should never have believed I was in this state.' (Johnson)

More seriously, shortly after this public comment he privately told his friend, the novelist John Marquand, that "he was feeling out of touch with all American realities.... He would return to Minnesota and live simply and anonymously" (Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis* 702). Lewis at this point, then, had every intention of spending the rest of his days in his home state, and one result of his "rediscovery" of it is the "Minnesota Diary" he kept from 1942 to 1946. The diary is

crammed with accounts of his many trips all over the state, with a meticulous record of the weather, with guest lists, with transcriptions of roadside Burma Shave jingles and religious slogans and of inscriptions copied from tombstones, with observations on hotel service, local speech habits, clothing, and manners generally (Schorer, "Diary" 160).

Sections of the diary originated as letters Lewis wrote to Marcella Powers, a correspondence now in the Sinclair Lewis Archives at St. Cloud State University. Miss Powers (1921-1985), a seventeen-year-old actress when she and Lewis met, became his protégé and, for a time, his mistress. The correspondence to a large extent is something of a geography lesson, the mentor instructing the novice:

Back unimpaired from a trip of 1300 miles, which is only one hundred miles less than driving the distance from New York to Minneapolis but which out here, where men and women are not broads but just broad, merely took us creeping along the borders of two states and halfway across another. Get out your atlas, I know you haven't one but if you did have one, and look at Lake Minnesota and Minneapolis south to Albert Lea, Minnesota—there is too a town named that, and a very fine, natty up-to-date town it is—then west to the Dakota border, cross said, west through Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which is a roaring metropolis of 34,000, and north and west to Aberdeen; then cross the border again into North Dakota, stop at the village of Linton and eat some of the worst and most chip-like roast beef that ever desecrated an oven, north and west to Bismarck, then turn sighing east again to Fergus Falls, Minnesota, and back home.... I was enormously impressed by this wide land.¹⁰

And his particularization of a North Country scene is a model of thoughtful accuracy:

Best was Manitou Falls. We climbed up and up a hill, by a rocky and neglected path, then on the flat, cool among birch trees, then cautiously down broken stairs, foot deep in water, panting in the heat that on Wednesday had suddenly replaced the stretch of grayness and cold fogs, edging down, hoping not to turn an ankle—and came out on a boiling down-pouring river that must drop seventy feet down into a dark, rock-lined gorge, melodramatically beautiful. Along the lofty rocks of the gorge, seemingly living without earth at all, cling dizzy little cedars and birches. The gorge is filled with mist flung up by the shattered waters, and through it, casual, so delicate in all this tumult...gaily fluttered white butterflies! (SCSU 16 June 1944)

Many of Lewis's personal letters over the years are similarly descriptive, but after moving to Duluth and buying a large house overlooking Lake Superior, they became, like the "Diary," reflective as well:

It is so beautiful [in Duluth] now; the yard edged with peonies and shadowed by think trees, the lake rich with summer, blue and silver; and out of town, the deep grass of meadows, with buttercups and daisies; and the house is restful and gay and handsome.... It's a success to have come here; the next book [*Kingsblood Royal*] will show it, as well as [*Cass Timberlane*]. Yet I imagine that after three or four years, I'll be selling the place after having enough of Duluth, and look at New England again, with jaunts to Old England. After so much New York, this has been, as I hoped, a re-perusal of typical American life. (SCSU 22 June 1945.)

In the event, rather than in "three or four years," Lewis was to leave Duluth for the East in less than a year. The author of a 1945 cover article in *Time* magazine, occasioned by the publication of *Cass Timberlane*, reported that Lewis "breezed in from his newly acquired 15-room Tudor mansion on Duluth's lake front to "[h]aunt Manhattan's better taprooms in dismal abstinence" and to "[s]quire Literary Agent Marcella Powers, thirtyish, whom Lewis says he will not (but rumor insists he may) soon marry" ("Laureate" 100). In the event, the mansion was shortly sold, the feigned abstinence did not last, (Fleming, "Alcoholite" 592) and the marriage was not to be. The serenity of the bucolic was defeated by the restlessness of the man.

IV

Once again Sinclair Lewis deserted Minnesota, but for all that I believe Lewis's devotion to his homeland was real and lasting. Like so many in our time he was caught in a dilemma. In *Walden* Thoreau wrote:

Near the end of March, 1945, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber. (27)

Here is Dos Passos in *The Big Money*:

[L]ike plenty of other Americans, young Henry [Ford] grew up hating the endless slogging through the mud about the chores, the hauling and pitching manure, the kerosene lamps to clean, the irk and sweat and solitude of the farm. (44)

But were these the only alternatives? For Lewis at least there was another...and the "Model T" provided it, for he was one of the first to understand that for the ordinary person there is no contradiction embedded in the act of engaging nature through a moving window.

In its May 24, 1943 issue, *Time* magazine reported that, [b]olstered by the complete works of Henry David Thoreau, newly bought, novelist Sinclair Lewis abandoned his Manhattan duplex for rustic life in his home state, Minnesota. He told a reporter that a reading of Thoreau would explain it all, but admitted: "I don't mean I want to go around in a sheet like Ghandi." Next fall, he will do some public debating on rusticity, said he. (qtd. in Killough, "SL-Minnesota Rustic"⁹)

Yet beneath the wise-cracks, as George Killough observes in his excellent study of the "Minnesota Diary,"

the man who arrived [in Duluth] on May 17, 1944, had a deep sensitivity to the American landscape and American ideals. His private papers show a quiet voice, self-award, reflective, appreciative. One of his motives for returning to Minnesota to live was, in fact, to have an experience like Thoreau's, to get close to a Midwestern equivalent of Walden Pond. (Killough, *SL-Minnesota Rustic*⁹)

It would be tempting to argue that for Lewis, as for many of us, a declared devotion to *Walden* was more window dressing than deeply felt experience; and it is true that for him Thoreau's master-

piece was more an idea—a spiritualized organizing principle—than a way of life. Nonetheless, it was an idea that structured and especially enriched his feelings for the landscape of the Midwest. The question to be sure remains: without his tin lizzie would Sinclair Lewis have had his Walden Pond?

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NOTES

- ¹In contrast to America, in Europe the automobile in the beginning was rare: “[I]n 1908, when Edith Wharton said that the automobile had ‘restored the romance of travel,’ England boasted exactly 41 motor cars” (Kimball). For an examination of Lewis’s use of the auto in *Dodsworth*, see Williams.
- ²A new edition of *Free Air*, edited by Robert E. Fleming, has been published by U of Nebraska P. See review: Forseth, “A Romance of Manners and Class.”
- ³See Killough, “Sinclair Lewis—Minnesota Rustic.” Killough’s edition of *Minnesota Diary, 1942-46* has been published by the U of Idaho P.
- ⁴For a bibliographical account of these collections, see Forseth, “From the Lewis Archives II.”
- ⁵For Lewis’s admiration for Cather, see “A Hamlet of the Plains.” For Thoreau, see Killough, “Sinclair Lewis’s ‘Minnesota Diary’ and His Devotion to Thoreau.”
- ⁶Lewis also used aircraft in his 1915 novel *The Trail of the Hawk*. See Fleming.
- ⁷The Sinclair Lewis Letters Collection in the Minnesota Historical Society consists of about 200 letters written by Lewis from 1915 to 1936, primarily to Lorimer. The *Post* was Lewis’s primary publishing outlet from 1915 to 1920 when, with the publication of *Main Street*, he was no longer dependent on magazine income.
- ⁸The series was continued in the following two issues of the *Saturday Evening Post*, 27 Dec. 191 and 3 Jan. 1920.
- ⁹Sinclair Lewis to Dorothy Thompson, 30 July 1934. Letter in the Dorothy Thompson Collection, The George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University: Series III, Box 5, Folder 4.
- ¹⁰Excelsior, MN, 15 May 1942. “Letters from Sinclair Lewis to Marcella Powers,” St. Cloud State University Archives (SCSU): Part XIII, Box 27, Folder 6.

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**“HERE IS THE STORY THE MOVIES DARED NOT
MAKE”: THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT AND
RECEPTION STRATEGIES OF THE *NEW YORK POST*’S
SERIALIZATION (1936) OF *IT CAN’T HAPPEN HERE***

FREDERICK BETZ

Unlike the controversial cancellation of the planned M.G.M. film in February 1936 and the play sponsored by the Federal Theatre Project in October 1936, the unabridged serialization of *It Can’t Happen Here* (ICHH) in the *New York Post* in the summer of that year has been almost completely overlooked in Sinclair Lewis scholarship (Parry 145)¹. Just when and how the *Post* arranged with Lewis and/or Doubleday, Doran to serialize the novel, which had appeared in October 1935, remains obscure, as the correspondence between Lewis and his publisher does not contain relevant documentation and the *Post* refuses access to its historical archives.² But since the *Post* itself is available, it is possible to examine the reception strategies of this serialization in historical or contemporary context.

As reported in *The Publishers’ Weekly* (22 and 29 Feb. 1936), there was “considerable confusion as to the motives” (“Hollywood”) behind M.G.M.’s announcement in mid-February to “indefinitely postpone” (“Hays”) its plans to convert *ICHH* into a movie. On February 16, the *New York Times* carried a story in which Lewis was quoted as claiming that the film had been withdrawn, because Will Hays, head of the Film Production Code Administration, had forbidden its production for “fear of international politics and fear of boycotts abroad.” According to the *Times*, Lewis had also intimated that Hays feared possible repercussions at-home, because “he didn’t know which way the next elections might go,” and that he didn’t want to offend the Republicans. Hollywood, on the other hand, vigorously denied that Hays had banned the film. Louis B. Mayer, then vice-president of M.G.M. in charge of production, announced that the film

had been postponed, "because it would cost too much." But Mayer also stated that Hays had criticized the film, because it would involve the motion picture industry in politics and might offend Hitler and Mussolini. Whatever the truth of the matter was (Schorer 616; Higham 250; Bergman 115),³ *The Publishers' Weekly* found it strange that M.G.M. should have adapted the novel, cast it with Lionel Barrymore in the lead role, and built its sets, only to decide at this late date that it would cost too much. In any case, *The Publishers' Weekly* predicted, "the furor [would] arouse intensified interest in the novel and greatly enhance its sales in bookstores"; indeed, sales jumped from 3,000 a week before M.G.M.'s announcement to 6,000 in the following week.

At its meeting on February 26, the Council of the Authors' League of America issued a statement strongly condemning Will Hays's interference with the filming of *ICHH* ("Authors"), and around the same time a group called the Legion of Freedom launched a postcard campaign urging people to sign and send the postcard to Mr. Louis B. Mayer at M.G.M. in Culver City, California. The postcard pledged signers "not to see any more MGM pictures until 'IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE' is released in the United States - with no changes except those necessary for the mechanical transference of the book to the screen" (Sinclair Lewis Papers). The *New York Post* reported on this unsuccessful postcard campaign, and from its article of March 11, entitled "Postcard Flood Asks Why It Can't Happen in Films," to its sensational full-page advertisements for the serialization in early July, it is evident that the *Post* sought to capitalize on the continuing controversy and the resulting increase in sales of the novel ("ICHH' Storm" and "ICHH' on the Stage").

Founded in 1801 by Alexander Hamilton "to inculcate just principles in religion, morals, and politics; and to cultivate a taste for sound literature" (editorial in the first issue), the *Evening Post*, as the *Post* was called then, stuck to that basic credo for over 130 years. In 1933, the *Evening Post*, whose politics had by then become as stuffily conservative as its typography had always been, was sold to a Philadelphian, J. David Stern, who, according to Hendrik Hertzberg "jazzed it up a bit, dumbed it down a bit, dropped the 'Evening' from its name, and made it a supporter of gaseous liberalism in general and F.D.R. in particular" (124-25). The *New York Post* now drew its readers from lower-middle- and working class New Yorkers, many of whom were Jews and Blacks (Gordon 283; Hertzberg 125); in 1936

the *Post* had a circulation of just over 121,000, far fewer than the number of readers of other major New York newspapers such as the *Times*, the *Herald-Tribune*, the *Mirror*, or the *World-Telegram*, which had circulations three to five times that of the *Post* (Ayer & Son's Directory 636, 642, 624, 630, 645).⁴

With its readership in mind, the *Post* no doubt also used its serialization of *ICHH* to further dramatize its reports, commentaries, and editorials on recent or current signs or threats of fascism, both foreign and domestic, for example, military action, oppression, and terror in Nazi Germany, adulation of Mussolini following the lifting of League of Nations sanctions for Fascist Italy's invasion and occupation of Ethiopia, activities of fascist organizations like the Croix de Feu against Léon Blum's Socialist government in France, the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, and the Black Legion movement in the United States.⁵ Founded in 1931 in Ohio, the Black Legion displayed in its formalities, rituals, and practices many of the characteristics of European fascist parties. It was organized along military, authoritarian, and hierarchical lines from its constituent cells, and officers held military titles equivalent to army ranks. The supreme leader, General V.F. Effinger, called his organization "a guerilla army designed to fight the Republican and Democratic parties" (Janowitz 305-08). With approximately 40,000 middle- and working class members of Anglo-Saxon descent, the Black Legion denounced and opposed Blacks, Jews, Catholics, foreigners, and Communists. In the spring of 1936, the movement was especially active in the Detroit, Michigan, area, and its activities, beatings, lynchings, and murders of its enemies, were reported extensively in the *Post* as "evidence that Sinclair Lewis was right: that a dangerously large section of the population of the United States is fertile seed for Fascism" (28 May 1936; rpt. *Press Time* 173-176).⁶

As a liberal democratic newspaper, the *Post* clearly also used its serialization of *ICHH* to support its strong endorsement of President Roosevelt for re-election in 1936, as expressed in its editorials on the Republican and Democratic National conventions in June and in the "We, The People" columns by Jay Franklin (John Franklin Carter)⁷, a Democratic Party insider and the anonymous author (The Unofficial Observer) of *American Messiahs*, a book published in spring 1935 to warn against fascist threats of such individuals as Senator Huey P. Long of Louisiana, Father Charles E. Coughlin of Detroit, Michigan, Dr. Francis E. Townsend of California, Governor

Eugene Talmadge of Georgia, or Senator Theodore G. Bilbo of Mississippi (Betz and Thunecke 37). Foremost among these “American Messiahs” or “Forerunners of American Fascism,” as Raymond Gram Swing had called them in his book of the same title in Spring 1935 (Tanner 60; Betz/Thunecke 37), was Huey Long, who, as Sinclair Lewis stated in an interview in 1948 (Austin 203), served as the principal model for his dictator-president, Buzz Windrip. Windrip wins the Democratic Party nomination over FDR in July 1936 (Ch. 7), but Long posed no real-life threat to FDR’s renomination, of course, as he had been assassinated in September 1935 (and hence referred to in Ch. 4 as “the late Huey Long”). Since FDR went on to win re-election in November 1936, it is generally overlooked that in June 1936 FDR still faced real threats to his renomination and re-election from within the Democratic Party as well as from the opposition Republican and National Union parties.

FDR easily won renomination in late June (June 27), but he had been challenged by former New York governor and Democratic Party standard bearer, Alfred E. Smith, the American Liberty League, led by the financier John J. Raskob and the wealthy Du Pont family, and Jeffersonian Democrats, who bitterly opposed the New Deal and therefore now withdrew from the party and threw their support to Kansas Governor Alfred M. Landon, who had been nominated for president at the Republican National Convention on June 11 (Fried 120-23). Landon was no joke to the Democrats in June 1936, for he had won the nomination over such strong candidates as Senators Borah and Vandenberg and the Republicans had enunciated a moderately liberal platform (Burns 270-271). In June 1936 such fanatical and demagogic foes of FDR as Father Coughlin, Gerald L. K. Smith, and Dr. Townsend were also joining forces in an effort to defeat the president in November, and even though their third party (National Union Party) candidate, Representative William Lemke of North Dakota,⁸ suffered an even more humiliating defeat than Landon in the November election, “in the steaming months of July and August” (Bennett 3), when Townsend’s Old Age Revolving Pension Plan and Coughlin’s National Union for Social Justice held their raucous conventions in Cleveland, there was further cause for concern among FDR’s supporters.⁹ The attacks from left and right had brought a sudden slight drop in FDR’s popularity in June, and it was clear that the president would have to wage a strong campaign to win re-election (Stegner 244; Brinkley 261; Bennett 7; Jeansonne 60).¹⁰

Against the background of foreign and domestic threats of fascism in general and the 1936 presidential election in particular, the *New York Post* promoted its unabridged serialization ("with no elisions") of *ICHH* from July 9 to September 5 with full-page ads on July 3, 6, 7, and 8, a lead editorial on July 9, and an interview with Sinclair Lewis on the same date. Above a picture of the Capitol Building in Washington, D. C., the bold headline on July 3 read: "THE MOST IMPORTANT NOVEL IN AMERICAN HISTORY: SINCLAIR LEWIS'S LATEST AND GREATEST STORY." In an insert below the headline, the *Post* made the following appeal to its readers:

HERE is the most fascinating story, the most inspired story, the most powerful story ever written by America's foremost living novelist. [...] Sinclair Lewis's newest and mightiest book, 'IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE,' a bestseller throughout the nation, has aroused more fervor, more discussion, more acclaim than any other novel of the past 25 years. Here is the story THE MOVIES DARED NOT MAKE. Here is a story that will thrill you more than any other book you ever read in your life [...] because YOU! YOU AND YOUR LOVED ONES are involved in this story - a story of your America of 1936 - an America misled and betrayed by politicians and ground under the merciless heel of fascism. Be sure to begin this story next Thursday, July 9, in the NEW YORK POST, the first newspaper in the United States to serialize this newest and most powerful novel of the nation's greatest living novelist.

Using exaggeration and repetition, with capitalizations and exclamations, warning against "the merciless heel of fascism," with allusion to Jack London's famous dystopian novel, *The Iron Heel* (1907),¹¹ presenting "the story THE MOVIES DARED NOT MAKE," and emphasizing the personal impact of Lewis's novel, the *Post* could not fail to arouse the interest of its readers, but for good measure, it repeated variations of the same message on July 6, 7, and 8. On the 6th, the full-page announcement included quotations from other newspapers in the East (Boston, New York, Buffalo) and the Midwest (Chicago) that had recommended the book publication in October 1935. On the 7th, the announcement was set against a picture of militiamen shooting a man on the steps of a government office building; on the 8th, the announcement was set against pictures of the Capitol Building, a man with a bullwhip, the goddess of justice with her mouth gagged and holding uneven scales, militiamen in forma-

tion and giving the fascist salute (arm stretched out to the right), and, at the bottom, resistance fighters with firearms.

In its lead editorial on July 9, under the title "It Can't Happen Here," the *Post* celebrated the "free speech, free press, religious freedom, [and] personal freedom" that are guaranteed in a democracy, even for opponents or enemies of the government. On the right, "Alfred E. Smith and the Du Ponts," the *Post* noted, "want the President thrown out of office," and: "They say so, publicly and emphatically. They contribute of their wealth and talents to put Roosevelt out of the White House." Moreover: "Nobody tries to stop Messrs. Smith and Du Ponts. They have a right to their opinions. They have a right to express them. They have a right to spend their own money." On the left, "Earl Browder and Zack Foster are 'ag' in the Government," and: "They say so publicly and emphatically. They and their radical party meet in Madison Square Garden, strongly assail the system we call capitalism" (Schlesinger 189-91, 568-70).¹² Likewise: "Nobody tries to stop Messrs. Browder and Foster. They have a right to their opinions. They have a right to express them. They have a right to spend their own money." "That is democracy," the *Post* commented, but the editorial went on to speculate what would happen if "we didn't have democracy," and then described "secret service men" placing Al Smith "under protective arrest" or "a regiment of hoodlums" snatching Browder and Foster off the platform of their Communist convention. "Your newspaper doesn't print a word about these incidents," the editorial continued, and that would be the last you heard of these men. "That is dictatorship," noted the *Post*, adding that it had "many guises." "Are we only a few steps from it?," the editorial went on to ask. "Or is it utterly fantastic even to imagine Government in America by hateful force, instead of Government by consent of the governed?" "To answer these questions," the *Post* was publishing *ICHH* and concluded that "if every American reads and understands it, then 'It Can't Happen Here.'"

On the same page (6) as the *Post's* editorial, readers were referred to Lewis's interview (19) with *Post* writer and book reviewer, May Cameron, in which Lewis warned especially against the fascist threat posed by the now united third party leaders, Coughlin, Townsend, Smith, and Lemke. "Coughlin and Company divided were not so dangerous, Mr. Lewis said, but now that they are united, if they develop any sense of organization at all, they could be extremely powerful. Nothing in years had been so definite a danger in his opinion." Lewis

went on to note: “I have a vague, general fear that if somebody like Coughlin gets in, there’ll be hell to pay. Either this group could put over a real dictatorship or they could have it taken away from them by a hard-boiled group of reactionaries who to save themselves and their families would overthrow the whole government and substitute their own brand of Fascism.” This threat was all the more possible, in Lewis’s opinion, as the Democrats and Republicans were preoccupied with “attacking each other,” while the Democrats were “busily cutting their own throats” with “the secession of the Al Smith bunch.” Lewis also mentioned the threat of “the Black Legion thing” and could not help adding that to date the government had done nothing about it. In general, Lewis thought that the threat of fascism would result from indifference, on the one hand, and “an increased fear of anything like liberalism in the country,” on the other.

Under the headline: “‘It Can’t Happen Here’: America Under a Dictatorship,” the daily installments (except Sundays) were introduced (from July 13 to August 3) with sub-headings and summaries of action, accompanied (from July 9 to July 23) by illustrations (drawings) of characters and scenes, and interspersed with captions to break up the text (esp. longer paragraphs) and to highlight action or characterization. Such features were clearly designed to facilitate reading for the *Post’s* readers, who would be particularly receptive to a story of a fascist takeover of the United States and subsequent suppression and elimination of racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities. In the first summary on July 13, Buzz Windrip was characterized as the “absolute ruler of his state (though never Governor), idol of the State militia, the most bouncing and feverish member of the Senate since the late Huey Long.” In subsequent summaries, Buzz Windrip would be compared repeatedly to the late senator from Louisiana: he was, for example, “the rarin’ counterpart of Huey Long” (18 and 20 July), “a second Huey Long” (21 and 31 July), or a “Huey-Long-like demagogue” (1 Aug.), but as the new “American Fascist” president (23 and 27 July), Windrip “kicked down rungs of the ladder Huey Long only dreamed of ascending” (29 July). Windrip’s Minute Men, once innocent marching bands, were now the official armed military. All right thinkers were now Corporos, for it was now the Corporate State. “In Italy they would be Fascisti; in Germany, Nazis,” and, as noted further in the summary of July 29, “they have, naturally, put down labor, and those target minorities, the Jews and the Negroes.” In the last summary supplied by the *Post* on August 3, readers were

reminded that "Doremus Jessup, liberal Vermont editor," had "rebel[led] too late," "long after Buzz Windrip's election as President and his subsequent seizure of dictatorial powers." In the remaining installments from August 4 to September 5, the *Post* facilitated reading only with captions in the text to highlight the action or the appearance of characters.

In July the *Post* also encouraged reader-response, and letters to the editor, published on July 14, 15, 20, 21, and 30, document the impact of the *Post*'s promotion and serialization of *ICHH*. A letter of July 14, for example, reiterated Lewis's criticism of the lack of federal action against the Black Legion movement. Another letter of the same date disputed the argument in the lead editorial that "under an American Fascism, du Pont et al. would be persecuted for their views, as would radicals and liberals," and commented: "Your statement is like saying that 'everyone loses in a war.' We know, in fact, that some very well-identified individuals benefited from the last war. Did Thyssen [Fritz Thyssen, German industrialist and steel magnate, who helped finance the Nazi Party] lose from German Fascism? Will he? Would du Pont lose [...] in an American Fascism?" A letter of July 20 characterized "[Al] Smith, Du Pont, etc." as "the very epitome of Fascism" and as "the forerunners of Fascism today." A letter of July 15 debated whether "It Can" or "Can't Happen Here": "the growing popularity of our national administration, its unrelenting fight to install social security for all, and to promote a saner economic life for every inhabitant within our shores," and its pro-labor stance in combating "the vicious exploitation of selfish, powerful individuals," all suggested to the reader that "It Can't Happen Here," but the existence of "secret subversive societies in our land of both foreign and deteriorated American origin," "the malicious accusation that President Roosevelt's ideals are un-American" [Fried 114-115 (Father Coughlin), 122 (Al Smith)], and "the pending rift between various factions of the A.F. of L." (Fried 127-30), gave "tangible evidence for those who say 'It Can.'" After starting to read the *Post*'s serialization, however, the reader "was definitely swayed to join the chorus of those who cry 'It Can,'" and he congratulated the *Post* "for choosing such an opportune moment before the election to publish for their readers a great American story."

Finally, "a well-known magazine writer, whose name was withheld, at his request," reported on July 30 how a big citrus strike was being ruthlessly crushed in Santa Ana, California. Santa Ana had, the

writer noted, “a Doremus Jessup in J. H. Burke,” who was “an outstanding liberal and the best publisher Orange County ever had.” But “Mr. Burke [didn’t] own his newspaper anymore,” because “he was too liberal,” and “the orange growers and the would-be Fascists set up a competing newspaper” and forced him “into retirement.” Santa Ana also had “Minute Men, who, although they [didn’t] wear the cock-eyed costumes of the Minute Men in Mr. Lewis’s book, [went] around the county warning people not to do certain things”¹ and “these Minute Men happen[ed] to be members of the American Legion.” Santa Ana had “a Francis Tasbrough” in Stuart Strathman, the “head of the local growers’ association,” who “work[ed] hand in glove with a Shad Ledue,” Sheriff Logan Jackson, who had “a force of twenty State police” and “600 [armed] deputies” and “carrie[d] two .45’s” and “a machine gun to guard himself with.” The magazine writer went on to describe “protective arrests,” loss of “civil liberties,” spying in churches, activities of the local Ku Klux Klan, “beatings,” and other acts of violence. Santa Ana had demonstrated to this writer that “It Can Happen Here,” and, in his opinion, “forces” there were “waiting for the day when a leader will come along and spread the policy of violence and suppression of American liberties over the land.”

In late July the *Post* started advertising a Super Deluxe Paladin edition of *ICHH*, a leather-bound copy of the Doubleday, Doran edition of 1935, with the owner’s name to be engraved in gold on the front cover, which readers could purchase for \$2.50 (the same price as that of the first edition) and tickets saved from each week of the remaining installments. In the first ad on Saturday, July 25, the *Post* reported that “thousands of readers” had informed the newspaper that “they” wanted Lewis’s “mighty masterpiece” in “book form,” and then the *Post* announced: “Be sure to get the POST on Monday - not only to read the next installment of this tremendous, electrifying novel - but also to learn about the amazing EXCLUSIVE OFFER made to the readers of the POST.” For some reason, no information appeared on Monday, July 27, but on July 28 and 29 full-page ads appeared, with a picture of the Super Deluxe Paladin edition, a list of ten special features, a reservation form, and an appeal to readers to act quickly, for the *Post* could “give only a limited number of copies in this unusual order.” Oddly enough, however, there is no further mention of this special edition after September 5, when it was advertised for the last time at the end of the final installment. Perhaps only few copies were actually sold, since Doubleday, Doran announced

already on September 19 the establishment of a new reprint house, the Sun Dial Press Incorporated, whose introductory list of titles included *ICHH*, which would cost only \$.98 and was scheduled for release on October 20 to coincide with the production of the WPA dramatized version ("Bargain Market").¹⁵

The *Post* reviewed the play, when it opened on October 27 at the Adelphi Theatre in New York and simultaneously in more than twenty other cities across the country. Hallie Flanagan, the National Director of the Federal Theatre Project, recalled in her memoir (1940) that:

Some people thought the play was designed to re-elect Mr. Roosevelt; others thought it was planned in order to defeat him. Some thought it proved [the] Federal Theatre was communistic; others that it was [the] New Deal; [still] others that it was subconsciously fascist. All, apparently, agreed that the date October 27 must have some mystic connection with the coming election. (117)

The election campaign gives perhaps some credence to the suspicion of Republicans that the mass opening of the play was timed to help the Democrats in the early November election, for FDR had seemingly moved off center-stage after his acceptance speech at the Philadelphia convention in late June, allowing Landon to stump the country and to monopolize the attention of the press, much to the frustration of FDR's nervous campaign organization. Roosevelt did not even start his formal campaign until the end of September, when he used the occasion to answer charges from Father Coughlin and others that the Communists were supporting the New Deal and to sarcastically strike at the "me, too" speeches of the Republicans. By late October, the National Union Party, suffering from dissension among its leaders, was visibly faltering, and Dr. Townsend was urging supporters to vote for Landon in states where Lemke was not on the ballot. Landon was campaigning relentlessly against the New Deal, and hopes ran high with support from the great majority of the newspapers around the country and with continuing denunciations of the New Deal by Al Smith and Jeffersonian Democrats. Moreover, the *Literary Digest*, whose polls had been amazingly accurate since the 1920 presidential election, showed Landon on October 31 holding a decisive edge over Roosevelt (Schlesinger 633, 639-40).¹⁶

In his review of the play-version of *ICHH* in the *Post* for October 28, John Mason Brown blamed "the movie magnates [...] for not hav-

ing turned it [the novel] into the excellent motion picture it would unquestionably have made,” and went on to criticize the play, for it “is not the kind of novel that can be squeezed down into three acts and five changes of scene, without suffering as Samson did from Delilah’s scissors,” more specifically: “All of the details by means of which Mr. Lewis made his fascist dictatorship seem possible are left out. So, too, is the energy, the humor, and the bitter savageness of Mr. Lewis’s descriptive writing. What one finds in its place is a tepid and confusing melodrama.” In Brown’s opinion, the only actor who came close to the spirit of Lewis’s writing was Frederic Tozere, “who gave an uncommonly sinister and very satisfactory performance as the vile Corpo Commissioner [Effingham Swan].” By contrast, Buzz Windrip, the dictator-president, emerged in “one poor scene [I,8] merely as a funny paper figure who, even in the maddest days of political insanity, could never be a real threat.”¹⁷ Brown believed that *ICHH* “belongs either in its original medium where, if accepted on its own terms, it was effective enough, or on the screen, where it would be no less effective.” Obviously, the *Post* had agreed with its theater reviewer’s conclusion, and since the film had been canceled, it sought to perpetuate the effect of the “original medium” by running an unabridged serialization in the summer of 1936, while it was endorsing and promoting the re-election of FDR, who “on the last day of October brought his campaign to a passionate climax” before “a wildly fervent, chanting crowd in Madison Square Garden” and one week later won re-election by a landslide over Landon (Burns 283-84).

Epilogue

It is not known how Lewis actually voted in the 1936, but since his wife, Dorothy Thompson, the “On the Record” columnist for the staunchly Republican *New York Herald-Tribune*, suspected Roosevelt more and more “of leading the country down the road of benevolent despotism,” and therefore “reluctantly” threw her support behind Landon, it is possible that Lewis voted the same way. FDR was widely criticized in his second term of office for appearing to want to concentrate in the presidency increasing powers over both the legislative and judicial branches of government. Particularly controversial were FDR’s so-called Supreme Court ‘packing’ plan in 1937 and his Government Reorganization Bill of 1938, which were motivated by the president’s desire to protect New Deal legislation

and to make the federal government run more efficiently, but which were perceived as measures threatening the separation of powers in the Constitution. Equally disturbing was FDR's attempt to 'purge' conservative Democrats in the mid-term elections of 1938 in order to make a clear distinction between a liberal Democratic Party and a conservative Republican Party. After years of criticizing FDR, however, Dorothy Thompson switched her support from Willkie to Roosevelt in 1940, because she was convinced that FDR could better lead the country in the world war against fascism. Lewis had also intended to vote for Willkie, because "the country needed a change," but changed his mind at the urging of Thompson, who asked him "to speak on the radio on a country-wide roundup for Roosevelt." Switching her support from Willkie to Roosevelt cost Thompson her job with the *Herald-Tribune* in spring 1941, but she accepted an offer to move her column to the *New York Post* (Kurth 223, 320-22, 331; Schorer 669; Gordon).

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NOTES

1. Only Sally E. Parry mentions it in passing in her unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: "The *New York Post* ran a serialized version of the novel in 1936 and capitalized on the cowardice of MGM. One advertisement read 'Here is the story THE MOVIES DARED NOT MAKE'" (145). Seven other novels by Lewis were serialized in magazines aimed at the "better-off" middle class and subsequently revised and published in book form. See Martin Bucco's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation and his "The Serialized Novels of Sinclair Lewis." By contrast, the unabridged serialization of *ICHH* in the *Post* followed the book publication and was aimed at lower-middle and working class readers.
2. See the correspondence between Lewis and Doubleday, Doran in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University (New York). The *New York Post* would not respond to my inquiry or to questions from Lynn D. Gordon (282).
3. Mark Schorer concluded that "the motive for stopping the film was probably less political than economic" (616), but inter-office memos, obtained from the Sidney Howard Papers in the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley, reveal that M.G.M. feared that the film script (27 Jan. 1936) would be censored because it was considered politically too controversial both in the U.S. and in Europe. Charles Higham gives political, technical, and financial reasons for the cancellation, but also argues that had Mayer read the novel itself, "he certainly never would have embarked on the picture at all" (250), esp. after M.G.M.'s experience with the film, *Gabriel Over The White House* (1933), which Mayer, a staunch Republican, had thought was "a slap at recent Republican presidents" and "a piece of propaganda for the incoming administration" (Bergman 115).
4. Of these newspapers, only the *Post* steadily increased its circulation from 1935 (60,270) to 1937 (205,962); see Ayer & Son's Directory for 1935 (639) and 1937 (640). There is no evidence for attributing the doubling of the *Post's* circulation in 1936 to the serialization of *ICHH*, but the promotion and publication of Lewis's novel must have contributed to this dramatic increase in the *Post's* readership.

5. See, e.g., “Hitler Sends Army to Rhine; France Cancels All Leaves,” *New York Post* 3 Mar. 1936; “More Nazi Troops Will Go To Rhine” (22 July); “Chamberlain Charges Hitler Makes Germans Slaves” (28 July); “Hitler Army Move Stirs War Fears; French Leaders Confer in Crisis” (25 Aug.); “Nazi Oppression Forcing Christianity Out of German Life” (27 Aug.); “Jews in Germany Face Hopeless Situation, U.S. Pastor Finds” (28 Aug.); “Haile [Selassie] Decries Betrayal in Face of Fascist Hisses. League in Uproar As King Recites Broken Pledges [at Geneva]” (30 June); “Fascist Party Hails Il Duce as League’s Sanctions Cease” (15 July); “‘Ageless’ Mussolini is 53; He Celebrates, Italy Mustn’t” (29 July); “Blum’s Foes Riot in Paris Streets. Premier Quits Chamber After Attacks as Jew” (6 June); “Rightists Accused of Plot to March on Paris. French Leftists Demand Crushing of Armed Groups. Fear Civil War by 700,000 in Croix de Feu. Blum Battles for Labor Bills” (17 June); “French Fascists Win Concession from Premier Blum. Rightist Group Gets Permission to Act as Party. But Must Drop All Semblance of Private Militia - Victory Haile” (25 June); “100 Injured as Parisian Rightists Battle Gendarmes” (6 July); “Fascists Battle Police of Paris” (14 July); “Fascist Leader Is Slain in Spain” (13 July); “Spanish Rebels Claim Victory. Army Revolt Reaches Spain from Morocco” (18 July); “Rebels Battle in Madrid Streets, Malaga. Ablaze, Segovia Bombed” (20 July); “Americans Flee Barcelona. Bowers [American Ambassador] Safe in Fortress” (23 July); “140 Americans Marooned in Madrid” (25 July); “Paris Plans 3-Power Intervention As Spain Revolt Stirs War Fears” (31 July); “Democracy is at Stake in Spain” (11 Aug.); “Black Legion Night Riders Execute Michigan Wife Beater” (22 May); “U.S. Urged to Crush New Klan” (25 May); “Black Legion Claims 6,000,000” (26 May); “Foreign Backing Hinted for Black Legion” (27 May); “Michigan Calls on G-Men to Crush Black Legion” (28 May).
6. See “The ‘Black Legion’ Happened Here” (Editorial), *New York Post* 28 May 1936, reprinted in *Press Time* (173-76). On the rise (1931-1936) and collapse (1939) of the Black Legion, following legal investigations and prosecutions (1937-1939), see Janowitz (305-08). In January 1937, Warner Brothers released a film under the title *The Black Legion*, starring Humphrey Bogart as a happy-go-lucky auto worker who receives a jolt when another worker, a hardworking Polish immigrant, gets the promotion he had been expecting and is then easily recruited into a secret organization known as the Black Legion, which advocates hatred of foreigners and different races. See Sennett (78); also Bergman (107-09).
7. See also, “Text of Chairman Snell’s Speech. Roosevelt Assailed as Dictator,” *New York Post* 10 June 1936; “Three Portrait Studies of President Roosevelt. FDR Verve Still Strong 4 Years After Last Drive” (23 June); Jay Franklin, “They Hate Roosevelt for Saving Their Hides” (25 June); “Roosevelt is Nominated by Mack. Record Ovation Rocks Hall” (26 June); full-page picture of President Roosevelt and FDR’s acceptance speech (27 June); Jay Franklin, “President Roosevelt: a Study in Courage” (2 July). Two other editorials are reprinted in *Press Time*, “Landon” (221-23) and “Political Miracle at Philadelphia” (224-27).
8. On June 19, 1936, Father Coughlin spoke to a radio audience estimated at thirty million, denounced the New Deal, and announced the formation of a new “Union Party,” with “Liberty Bill” Lemke of North Dakota as its presidential candidate and the Principles of Social Justice as its platform. Two weeks later, Coughlin announced that Dr. Francis Townsend’s hundreds of thousands of would-be pensioners, as well as remnants of Huey Long’s Share-the-Wealthers under Gerald L. K. Smith, had joined him to support Lemke. See Stegner (244).
9. See also, “Coughlin Joins Townsend in New Third Party,” *New York Post* 16 July 1936; articles on the second national gathering of the Old Age Pension Plan (16-18 July); “Father Coughlin in Never-Never Land” (13 Aug.); articles on the convention of the National Union for Social Justice (13-16 Aug.); “Father Coughlin’s Appeal to Prejudice is Resented” (21 Aug.).
10. Bennett observes that “when these ‘little foxes’ [Burns 210] decided to strike for power through the vehicle of the Union Party, the whole nation took note. The strategists of the

- major parties eyed the new alliance with suspicion and, in some cases, with fear" (7); Jeansonne notes that "to historians familiar with third party failures since 1936, it seems a foregone conclusion that the Union Party would fail," but that "it was not evident at the time" (60).
11. In London's novel, the great capitalistic monopolies of the U.S. band together in a fascist organization known as the Iron Heel, which seizes control of the country. The wording in the *Post's* announcement clearly recalls the warning in London's novel: "We will grind you revolutionists down under our heel, and we shall walk upon your faces" (97).
 12. Earl Browder and William Z. Foster were leaders of the American Communist Party which bitterly opposed the New Deal because Roosevelt's program only wanted to reform the capitalistic system, not to destroy it. At the party's convention in June 1936, Browder declared that however hopeless Roosevelt was, it was necessary to differentiate sharply between him and Landon, for Browder regarded the Republican Party, with its Hearst and Liberty League allies, as the main enemy that must be defeated at all costs. Yet the Communists could not support Roosevelt, for if he were to feel secure in their support, he would, Browder argued, move in the direction of Landon and the fascists.
 13. In an insert on the same page, it is noted that Herschel Brickell was on vacation and that his regular column would reappear in August. Brickell had reviewed *JCHH*, which had left him "completely unconvinced in its main thesis."
 14. See notes 5 and 6 above. Note also, the German-American Bund (Fritz Kuhn), the Silver Shirts (William Dudley Pelley), and the White Shirts (George W. Christians). See Knoenagel (226-28), and Betz and Thunecke.
 15. The typescript of the play, written by Lewis and John C. Moffitt, is dated September 18, 1936 (copy obtained from the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin).
 16. However, Schlesinger also points out that "the public opinion polls of George Gallop and Elmo Roper, based on statistical sampling rather than direct-mail ballots, reported a marked swing to Roosevelt in the last weeks and forecast a Roosevelt victory of considerable proportions" (640).
 17. In his review in the *New York Times* (28 Oct. 1936), Richard Watts, Jr. also found the portrayals of Buzz Windrip and Pastor Prang "entirely out of the mood of the rest of the play": "while the rest of the narrative is in deadly earnest, the account of the two Corpo leaders is done in terms of sheer burlesque. The two villains are merely clowns, without any possible suggestion of the sinister about them. The scene of their meeting is lamentably weak."

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THE LANGUAGE OF UNREST: *IT CAN'T HAPPEN
HERE AND NATIVE SON*

“Never were such sharp questions asked as this day”—Walt Whitman

REBECCA COOPER

Walt Whitman’s quote appears at the beginning of Norman Corwin’s published radio address *On a Note of Triumph*. The quotation illustrates Corwin’s hesitation to give in to the nationalistic fever in 1945 and celebrate the end of World War II. *On a Note of Triumph* addresses the American tendency to “wash our hands” of war as soon as the celebration is over and forget the fascist discourse that excused the events and the atrocities that lead to our involvement:

The war goes on, and peace stands offstage waiting for a cue at the end of a Japanese drama—The part where the mighty warrior lays down the Samurai sword before a grocery clerk from Baltimore. [...] Shall those of us who never quite believed that war could come now hasten to believe it over? We here at home who safely tidied battles into books, spliced the counter-offensive into a feature film, and went to see it together with an Andy Hardy picture at the Orpheum? We who followed the bloody tracks on maps, and took assurances from pins that tanks had gotten through—Shall any of us celebrate beyond the compounds of a day?”(53-55)

Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* (ICHH) illustrates how the power structures communicated through language systems can create a fascist state similar to Germany under Hitler. Lewis warns in ICHH that power structures seek to homogenize society by controlling what information people receive and how it is received. The information that actually gets through these power structures is what people use to create their identities and relationships to the world around them. In a similar way, Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son* describes Bigger Thomas’s process of articulating his identity using the carefully con-

trolled language of secondary media—newspapers, movies, newsreels, and radio. In both of these novels the ideological belief systems of the public are disseminated through popular media outlets that are controlled by dominant groups. *Native Son* and *ICHH* have become a part of our American repertoire of anecdotes about power because the authors and the protagonists critique the discourse of power created by popular culture and conveyed through secondary media.

Critical discussion of *Native Son* and *ICHH* has been passed down through the decades since their publication without much deviation. Previous critics have discussed these texts as “protest” or “propaganda” fiction because of their close relationship to contemporary issues and events. Older critical paradigms for looking at *ICHH* and *Native Son* label these texts as protest novels and thus dismiss the contributions that they have made to other genres and authors. Using Bakhtin as a theoretical starting point, we can see how the authorial speech, narrational speech, the speech of characters, and inserted genres play with and against each other to create a novelistic language that redefines these “propaganda” novels as powerful statements against the centripetal forces of political and social discourse.

Critiques of the 1930s writers—by Mark Schorer in his biography of Lewis and by Margaret Bourke-White—have argued that authors who recreate contemporary American social systems become social reporters. According to these critics, if language is social, then it is not literary or timeless. If we turn this narrow definition around and argue that novelistic language is inherently social, our discussion of how these novels work becomes more interesting. If the language of these novels is inherently social, then each time a novel is read its language takes on new meaning based on the experiences of the writer or reader. Discussion of *Native Son* and *ICHH* as protest novels historicizes or limits the socialness of these texts. Historicized texts are only meaningful to the culture within which they are created; they do not have a voice outside of that time period. If we can interpret novelistic language as infinitely social to the extent that it can be recreated in the social context of the reader, then we can see that this novelistic discourse speaks in many voices to each new set of readers. Understanding these texts outside of the historical moment in which they were created may help us analyze how we form social and ideological paradigms from which we derive our discourse and belief systems.

The hierarchical power structures of social, political, and economic groups are created and maintained through unitary language despite attempts to destabilize these power structures by protagonists such as Bigger Thomas and Doremus Jessup.¹ After Doremus Jessup is jailed for agitating against the Corpo regime, he takes personal responsibility for allowing this political power structure to go unchecked: "The tyranny of this dictatorship isn't primarily the fault of Big Business, nor of the demagogues who do their dirty work. It's the fault of Doremus Jessup! Of all the conscientious, respectable, lazy-minded Doremus Jessups who have let the demagogues wriggle in, without fierce enough protest" (169). Individuals must question the system, or else the system will elevate evangelistic speakers like Windrip to positions of power. Groups, like the Corpo regime and the white community in *Native Son*, try to maintain the pyramid of discourse that put them on top: "Oh, [Windrip's] something of a demagogue—he shoots off his mouth a lot about how he'll jack up the income tax and grab the banks, but he won't—that's just molasses for the cockroaches. What he will do ... is to protect us from the murdering, thieving, lying Bolsheviks that would" (Lewis 45). Doremus's son—fooled by Senator Windrip's evangelism—believes that the enemy is out there and only the Corpo regime can protect Americans.

In *Native Son* as in ICHH individuals begin to use the dominant discourse to express themselves; by using this filtered language they subvert their power of self-expression. The dominant discourse in *Native Son* suppresses the black community; the freedoms and rights that the white community takes for granted are denied to the black community: "Bigger knew the things that white folks hated to hear Negroes ask for; and he knew that those were the things the Reds were always asking for. And he knew that white folks did not like to hear these things asked for even by whites who fought for Negroes" (225). Bigger Thomas was taught his place in society through the language of people around him. The rights that are denied to him and others in the black community are not questioned in their discourse because those rights have never existed, and the community has come to believe in the discourse systems that were created for them.

Alfred Kazin ignores the influence of secondary language systems on Bigger by labeling Bigger's self-discovery as "mechanical and convincing."² Early in the novel Bigger points out that the freedom of animals and planes is a strong contrast to the confinement of

Blacks: "I reckon we the only things in this city that can't go where we want to go"(22). Gus and Bigger are trapped by the discourse systems created by the white community to suppress them. This is the first turning point for Bigger; he realizes that he can never express his identity in terms of the language created by the white community.

The white community directly and indirectly controls Bigger's expression of himself: it controls secondary media, which depicts black men as savages and suppresses any contradictory ideas of blacks; Mr. Dalton's company owns the apartment building in which the Thomases live. Since Bigger defines himself through secondary media he does not actively create his relationship with the white world; "Most of what human beings know about reality is not gained from direct experience at all. Most of our knowledge comes to us already mediated, already freighted with a society's consensual values" (Reilly 36). To a significant extent, John Reilly's ideas are still true of American society; secondary discourse filtered by movies, newsreels, newspapers, and magazines creates our idea of self. Bigger's creates his idea of self and the guidelines for his relationship to the Daltons from secondary media. In *ICHH* Buzz Windrip complains about his isolation from real events after one of his friends is killed: "So I just never know anything about what's going on! Why, even the newspaper clippings are predigested ... before I see'em" (301). In both of these novels the group in power creates a veil to block out opposition; but the veil also confines them.

Bigger Thomas and Buzz Windrip suffer from the same lack of direct experience; they rely on "predigested" media to create their understanding of the world and to communicate their identities. According to Ross Pudaloff, "Bigger knows only the self and the world mass culture present to him" (3). When he is jailed after the murders, Bigger demands a newspaper in order to read about himself: "Our experience here in Dixie with such depraved types of Negroes has shown that only the death penalty, inflicted in a public and dramatic manner, has any influence upon their peculiar mentality" (323). The newspapers filter out information that does not reaffirm the fears and stereotypes that the public relies on to create their idea of the world. Bigger uses this language of oppression to define his experience: masturbating in the theater, he tells Jack "I'm polishing my nightstick" (32); "nightstick" being a weapon used by police to beat criminals. Later he describes himself as "like a rod" (33); "rod" was slang for "gun" in popular detective fiction. By using the

language of his oppressor, Louis Tremaine believes that "Bigger suffers from an inability to communicate a conscious understanding of his own emotional reality" (73). Redefining and reusing the language of the white community stalls Bigger's progress toward separating himself from their racial constructions but it also calls attention to the whole process of how our language systems are constructed.

Dominant groups suppress the protest of the collective by monopolizing secondary media: " 'Seeing Buzz and then listening to what he actually says does kind of surprise you—kind of make you think!' But what Mr. Windrip actually *had* said, Doremus could not remember an hour later, when he had come out of the trance" (97). Doremus no longer controlled his paper so he could not use it as a forum to speak out against the Corpo establishment. Without an outlet for expressing their protest individuals cannot disagree with the dominant discourse. By controlling the secondary media, the dominant culture avoids dissenting opinions. Protest literature—like the pamphlets Jan gives Bigger (225)—speaks out against established communal paradigms. Jan's pamphlets represented the Communist Party's protest against the established government. Protest fiction is born out of opposition. According to James Jones, rather than break down the paradigms media has constructed, protest fiction seeks to democratize its own set of opposing stereotypes and it relies on the secondary discourse of media to construct its opposition (223)³ Bigger's discomfort with communist rhetoric illustrates its inability to represent the black community's needs. Using the same hierarchical discourse as the white establishment, the communist party tried to control the black community.

Protest fiction that does not directly question popular culture's discourse systems is like another *Nightmare on Elm Street* episode; we know we are comfortable and safe despite what is going on in front of us: "The 'protest' novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary" (Baldwin 14). According to James Baldwin, protest novels only mirror the conflict within a society or between social groups but they do not work for change: "[Protest novels] emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream" (14). To Baldwin, novels like *Native Son* and *ICHH* are sentimental fantasies that reaffirm the stereotyped characteristics of minorities through predominant social discourse

systems evidenced in media. These predominant discourse systems trap minority groups in a centripetal spiral toward obscurity in order to emphasize the contemporary discourse of power. Critics like Joyce Ann Joyce and Yochinobu Hakutani, who look past *Native Son's* designation as a "protest novel," find linguistic complexity in its interwoven strands of cultural language systems. These language systems oppose each other and expose the gaps in signification.

Labeling these novels as protest fiction denies other voices from entering the novel out of fear that they may not legitimize the "protest." Using the theory of inherently social novelistic language, we can consider how the language of these novels reverses meaning with the changing social and political conditions. This theory of linguistic reversal explains how language that once oppressed people can take on opposite meanings each time it is read. Linguistic reversal illustrates how discourses are shaped by social settings and how the content of those discourses is socially constructed. If the novel is created by many social discourses then no one discourse can dominate. Heteroglossia challenges how critics have argued language functions in each of these novels. According to Hakutani, "the power of [Richard Wright's] narrative is generated by the fierce battle Bigger wages against racist society" (68). Bigger's murder of Mary is his second turning point; by murdering Mary, Bigger acts out against the language systems that confine him and begins to create his own identity: "He had murdered and created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him" (119).

Historically literary critics have not recognized the force of Sinclair Lewis's language nor how it captured the feelings of unrest in America during the 1930s. Critics, like Mark Schorer and Alfred Kazin, have unjustly labeled Lewis's novels as failed works of art. Alfred Kazin's analysis of Sinclair Lewis's work as a contribution to the 1930s skirts the issue of artistic value by labeling Lewis as a realist. Kazin degrades the realism of Lewis's writing by calling it domestic, "instinctive, rambling, and garrulous, and homespun" (206). For Kazin, the voice of Lewis's realism was not sophisticated enough; rather, the realism of Lewis's work was "concerned not with the conflict of great social forces that had dominated the first naturalist generation, but with the sights and sounds of common life" (207). Kazin categorizes Lewis and Wright's novels within the "realism of revolt," because he believed their work "had become familiar

and absorbed in the world of familiarity” that it was no longer a threat to the establishment (219). According to Kazin, members of the “realism of revolt,” such as Lewis, were not concerned with artistic value; “they wrote with the brisk or careless competence [. . .] that was necessary to their exploration of the national scene” (207). Kazin could not see past the familiar aspects of these narratives to the layers of interwoven discourse systems, which create complex narratives. If we see discourse as inherently social, then we can reevaluate *ICHH* and *Native Son* and how the participation of alternative discourse systems in these novels removes them from the too familiar realism of revolt.

The racism of 1930s America, depicted by the irrational execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, is recreated in *ICHH* as well as later in *Native Son*. Both novels depict the ideological stance that an elite group could control the identity of others. Lawrence Dennis’s book *The Coming American Fascism* is an example of the fascist discourse maintained by that elite group to shape the public’s ideological structure: “Those who cannot be made safe for the community as cooperative members must be made harmless by effective methods which do not allow repetition of the offense or encourage imitation by others (Knoenagel 228). Bigger’s trial and punishment are an example of the methods encouraged in Lawrence Dennis’s book. Media also stages an “execution” of a kind for Bigger in its elaboration on the crime and its motivations. By inflaming the irrational fears of the public, media effectively makes the black community harmless.

It is possible to understand how one group cannot control the inherent socialness of language. These novels function as influential statements about the power of discourse systems to break free of their imposed limits and redefine our world. Bigger’s last speech act—“But what I killed for, I am!” (501)—demonstrates how closely his identity is intertwined with his actions. Discourse created Bigger; rather, he was created by the secondary discourse that he was exposed to through the media. Because there were no language systems with which he could create himself, he began to act when he could not speak. By murdering Mary, Bigger commits a language act. The content of his actions was composed of a hunger for identity and the power to create his own language with which to identify himself. Bakhtin’s theory makes it possible to see Bigger’s murders as speech acts that rebelled against the unitary language white society had given blacks and allow heteroglossia to enter the novel.

The infinite socialness of novelistic discourse combats the centripetal forces behind unitary language. In *ICHH* Doremus and the N.U. newspaper rebel against the domination of the Corpo controlled media by mocking the Regime and its policies. Lewis understood the need to undermine the predominance of discourses of power. He treated the threat of fascism with a comic seriousness by doing “imitations of Father Coughlin, Huey Long, and others on the lunatic political fringe as though they were great clowns and nothing more” (Schorer 612). Lewis realized, if Schorer did not, that satire undermines the power of these leaders and their discourse. Lewis saw that he could reach more people with a novel satirizing the political situation in America than through a novel of high seriousness. This kind of absurdity was taken to a new level in postmodern writers of the 1970s, but it was Lewis who mixed the voices of satire, the absurd, and the rhetoric of the novel to create a powerful novel that would inspire writers like Richard Wright to continue fighting for individual power and freedom from the secondary discourse systems filtered through media. Both of these writers knew that the aesthetic distance that had been subscribed by naturalists could not give their work the same force.

Mark Schorer’s critical approach to Lewis’s work follows Alfred Kazin by narrowly defining technique as the lens for creating aesthetic value. According to Robert McLaughlin, Schorer equates technique with a sophistication that he finds lacking in Lewis’s work:

Lewis’s technique was not sophisticated enough to create an aesthetic distance between his characters and their environment and between their experiences and the expression of their experiences, an aesthetic distance in which self-awareness, significance, and universal meaning might be found. (25)

The discourse of characters, narrators, and the environment all represent linguistic unities that cannot be separated in Bakhtin’s theory or novelistic discourse. These unities must interact within the novel in order for heteroglossia to occur. Schorer’s complaint that Lewis did not create enough aesthetic distance assumes that a character’s significance cannot come from the interaction of the linguistic unities that the author allows to enter the novel.

The stratification of language within the novel—the mixture of narrative voice with the voices of characters and secondary media—encourages a dystopian perspective and allows language to

change and grow. According to James Jones, dystopian fiction is life-affirming because it depicts the stratification of discourse: "Anti-utopian, or dystopian, literature [...] really amounts to satire. Huxley satirizes our blind faith in science and technology; Orwell satirizes wartime propaganda. The critique intended by satire hopes to correct the flaws in its object by presenting them as the basis for the model of the negative society envisioned" (215). Lewis realized that satire would undermine the power of dominant discourse systems because he treated those systems with "comic seriousness." The language of his literature was meant to critique collective discourse systems of power. Utopianism reaffirms collective discourse systems, and, as with "protest" fiction, all opposing discourse systems are suppressed. By suppressing other discourse systems, utopianism becomes fascist and life defeating.

This analysis of ICHH and *Native Son* has shown how discourse systems privilege those in power and democratize the ideals of the majority by throwing out any opposing views. Lewis and Wright present readers with a contemporary social discourse of power, and they set up opposing narrational styles to critique this system: "[Lewis] set up a conflict between characters like General Edgeways, Mrs. Gimmitch, Tasbrough, and Rotenstern, with their ideas of militarism, nationalism, capitalism, gender and their associating definition of patriotism, strength and manliness—in short, how power is to be distributed and used in American society—and the narrator and his critique of these positions" (McLaughlin 33-34). The opposing narrational styles that Robert McLaughlin points out mock the seriousness of these groups. Wright sets the textual voices in opposition in order to critique their system: Bigger's murder of Mary Dalton is a direct critique of the white community and the Communist Party's struggle to monopolize the voice of the black community.

These texts reveal the role of language in creating our sense of self and our relationship to other groups. People cannot change if the language they use does not change. Lewis mocked the language of fanatical politicians because he realized how language defines us in extremes. Bigger struggles with these extremes throughout the novel either by not knowing what to say, or feeling uncomfortable with Jan's communist rhetoric. Eventually he acts out with his fear and tries to create his own language. Ultimately, *Native Son* and ICHH reveal how inadequately protest and utopianist literature represent reality, because they deny other voices from speaking out. The nat-

ural tendency of language is to move toward chaos and it cannot be constrained by outside forces.

Norman Corwin's 1945 radio address is prophetic and very appropriate for the discussion of what these texts bring to readers outside of the historical context in which they were created:

"What have we LEARNED out of this war? For one thing, Evil is not always as insidious as advertised but will, upon occasion, give fair warning, just as smoke announces the intention of flame to follow. [...] We've learned out of World War II that we'd learned nothing out of World War I. [...] We've learned that a newspaper right at home can lie with a straight face seven days a week, and be as filthy and fascist as a handout in Berlin. We've learned that those most concerned with saving the world from communism usually turn up making it safe for fascism. [...] We've learned that freedom isn't something to be won and then forgotten. It must be renewed, like soil after yielding good crops; must be rewound, like a faithful clock; exercised, like a healthy muscle" (45-51).

600 million people heard Norman Corwin's radio address, and perhaps Richard Wright and Sinclair Lewis were among that number. According to Stephen Conroy, the motivation behind Lewis's and Wright's endeavors is what differentiates them from "exploiters of mass taste" (200). Their texts "give fair warning" of the evil present in our own society and the detrimental effects of social power when it is channeled to a small group of people.

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NOTES

1. According to Stephen Tanner, Lewis realized these power pyramids existed in organizations: "He had an extraordinary distrust of organizations in general and seemed troubled by the frequent ineffectiveness of individualism in political situations. He believed that organizations, no matter how worthy their intentions, tend to generate an undesirable conformity" (63).
- 2 "Bigger Thomas 'found' himself in jail as Wright 'found' himself, after personal suffering and confusion, in the Communist Party; what did it matter that Bigger's self-discovery was mechanical and convincing" (Kazin 387). Kazin oversimplifies the impact of Bigger's self-discovery and Wright's role in the Communist Party. The Communist Party attempted to lend its voice to the black community but by doing so it created another, more subversive power structure, that downplayed the black community's attempts to find its own voices.
3. According to James Jones, "The difference between those in control and those in submission is that those in power seek to democratize their own ideals" (223). Jan's pamphlets want to displace the current dominant power with the Communist Party's dominating authority. The white community and the Communist Party are both struggling for control and they use the same hierarchical language systems. Jan fails to defend Bigger for his crimes because Jan's language could not explain the murders as speech acts.
4. See Bakhtin for more information on heteroglossia.

MRS. BABBITT AND MRS. RABBIT

BRENDA GABIOUD BROWN

John Updike's last novel in his Rabbit trilogy, *Rabbit is Rich*, begins with two epigraphs—the first is taken from Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel, *Babbitt*. According to Updike, "he worked up Rabbit [Harry Angstrom] through *Babbitt* as diligently as he had worked up Toyota dealerships" (Light 487). Published almost sixty years apart, both of these novels examine the role of middle-class men in American society. Although critics have often compared these two works, they have neglected to examine the main female characters, Mrs. Myra Babbitt and Mrs. Janice Angstrom. Paralleling their male counterparts, these two characters represent the role of women in their respective societies.

Myra and Janice have four primary ways of being identified: social, familial, individual, and sexual. Although all of these are important to both women, the hierarchy for each is different. For Myra, the above order is an accurate representation of her life. Above all, she has to maintain her social status; her sexuality is ignored. In contrast, in *Rabbit is Rich*, Janice's sexuality is a crucial part of her personality; her social status is significant but easily preserved. The shifting emphasis on these four means of identification parallels the advancements women made in the six decades that separate these novels.

In the Babbitts' 1920s world, social status meant everything. According to John Brooks, in *Showing Off in America*, in such "status competition the display of wealth evolves into a display of style" (270). Anything and everything was scrutinized by a person's friends, neighbors, and most importantly, business associates. The type of car driven, the cut of meat served, the guest list for a dinner party, the clothes of the entire family—each was meticulously noted. For Myra