MIDWESTERN MISCELLANY XVII

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PREFACE

This, the seventeenth edition of *Midwestern Miscellany*, ranges over the Midwestern cultural past, as it examines, in turn, literary assessments of the decline of higher education in the Midwest, as exemplified in World War I era Ohio State University, leisure activities in small *fin-de-siecle* Midwestern cities, a contemporary North Country unknown, and Jack Conroy in the context of the proletarian literary movement of the 1930s. The latter essays were presented at a symposium in Conroy's honor in St. Louis in November, 1988.

The range of subject matter and the variety of insights in this issue is truly a miscellany, but one that is a commonplace to those of us who continue to explore the diversity within unity of a cultural heritage at once American and uniquely Midwestern.

Suitable, this issue is inscribed to Dudley Randall, winner of the Mark Twain Award for 1989 for distinguished contributions to Midwestern literature and poet of another facet of that rich heritage, that of the modern urban Black Midwest.

October, 1989 — David D. Anderson

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THE DECLINE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE MIDDLE WEST

PAUL W. MILLER

> It was a period of muddy thought and marked, I believe, the decline of higher education in the Middle West. (James Thurber, "University Days")
>
> My lightheartedness follows from my conviction that the American school system over the last twenty-five years—far from having failed—has proved itself a roaring success . . . . For my part, I assume that American students do not go to school to acquire wisdom, to understand the literatures of antiquity and the loom of history, or to acquaint themselves with what the ancient Greeks admired as "the glittering play of wind-swift thought." They go to school to improve their lot, to study the arts of getting ahead in the world, to acquire the keys to the commercial kingdom stocked with the material blessings that constitute our society's highest and most heavenly rewards.
>
> (Lewis H. Lapham in "Notebook/Multiple Choice." *Harper's Magazine*. March 1989:12)

Long before the recent brouhaha about the alleged "failure" of American higher education had begun, two individuals who were one day to become outstanding American educational commentators were immersed in formidable educational problems of their own in Columbus, at Ohio State University. The first, Ludwig Lewisohn, was a professor of German who came to Columbus in 1911 and left under a political cloud in 1917, because of his pacifist, neutralist attitudes toward the war, and his attachment to German culture. The second was the future humorist and cartoonist James Thurber, a student enrolled from September, 1913 to June, 1918. Rejected by the army because he had only one eye, he left Ohio State before the end

of the academic year, soon to be trained in Washington as a code clerk, with eventual assignment to Paris (Bernstein 62). The only cloud *he* left under was academic, for after five years' enrollment he was still technically a junior, with 31 more hours of his 120 to complete for graduation. Despite his belated success as a college fraternity man, as an editor of the *Ohio State Lantern,* and as editor of the *Sundial,* a humor magazine, he was brought to his knees by his failure to satisfy the science, foreign language, military drill, and gym requirements—and according to his brother Robert, by the long hours he spent downtown at the silent movies (Bernstein 61, 43). He never earned a degree at Ohio State, nor did he ever receive an honorary degree there, though he turned one down in 1951, so outraged was he by the Trustees' recently passed speaker's gag rule, or Speaker's Rule, as the University preferred to call it. (The Speaker's Rule, which required the President to determine that guest speakers were in the best interest of the University, was not struck down at Ohio State till 1965).

Lewisohn reported his views on higher education at Ohio State in an autobiographical work entitled *Up Stream,* published 1922, and Thurber wrote a good deal on the same subject, notably in his personal essay "University Days," published 1933, and in *The Thurber Album,* published 1952.

Lewisohn and Thurber had very different backgrounds (Lewisohn was a Jew born in Berlin who grew up in South Carolina and became a Methodist, at least for a time, while Thurber was born into a family of Columbus Methodists, with his mother leaning toward Christian Science and numerology). In spite of these differences, their views of education at Ohio State, couched in the very different expressive modes of autobiographical jeremiad and humorous essay, are surprisingly similar. Whereas Lewisohn was inclined to blame the peculiarities of higher education at Ohio State on the American business mentality, especially in its virulent Middle Western form, Thurber thought the war had something to do with the aberrations he observed, aberrations intensified and exacerbated by the two years of compulsory military drill required of most male students at Ohio State, a land grant university. As he wrote in "University Days," "some people used to think there was German money behind it [the drill], but they didn't dare say so or they would have been thrown in jail as German spies. It was a period of muddy thought and marked, I believe, the decline of higher education in the Middle West" (227).

Though Lewisohn, as an outsider, was understandably more severe than Thurber in his judgements of the University, both authors criticized the skewed value system of the administration, as revealed by its spending priorities, both pointed up the intellectual limitations and anti-intellectualism of the students, and both commented on the creeping conformism and conservatism of the campus, associated in their minds with the growing presence of the military. On the subject of Ohio State professors, however, Lewisohn and Thurber were sharply divided. For while Lewisohn regard them as a pack of cowards, Thurber in *The Thurber Album* wrote extended tributes to two of his professors, mildly and gently lampooning a third for his Neanderthal taste in literature but praising him in the same breath as "the most popular professor in the history of his university." The only Ohio State instructor I've found whom Thurber exposed to no-holds-barred ridicule was a marginal member of the faculty, the Director of Athletics with a doctor's degree who pronounced "cereal" as if it were spelled "creel" and who told his freshman classes in physical education that "creel" came in a "cartoon," that is, a carton (*The Thurber Album* 186).

According to Lewisohn, the administration had abrogated its responsibility to maintain history, philosophy, economics and literature as the cornerstones of a liberal education—instead it had cultivated the skills decreed to be educational by its masters the undertaker and the hardwareman, ever intent on becoming "managers of a casket trust or a plow share monopoly." "Thus, in Central City [i.e. Columbus], there are charming buildings for the school of veterinary medicine, handsome and commodious ones for agriculture and engineering, domestic science, chemistry and forestry. The ancient arts and studies of man that give vision and wisdom are squeezed in somehow" (166). Thurber, quoting one of his favorite English professors, Joseph Villiers Denney, put it more succinctly, "Millions for manure but not one cent for literature." Extending his attack to the state government, Thurber wrote, "The Ohio Legislature was always glad to finance a new cow barn or horse building, but guffawed at the idea of a theatre on the campus" (*The Thurber Album* 207-08).

So far as the students were concerned, Lewisohn became depressed by their vast numbers and poor quality, as he explains: "One year we had eight hundred graduates; we conferred eight hundred degrees . . . . Seventy percent should never have gotten here. Seventy percent could stand no test—not the simplest—in fundamental thinking or judging or the elements of human knowledge" (168). More disturbing to Lewisohn than the numbers and academic limitations of the students was their anti-intellectualism and their reduction of education to the pursuit of "skill and knowledge with which to conquer the world of matter: "[Education] does not mean to him [the typical OSU student] an inner change—the putting on of a new man, a new criterion of truth, new tastes and other values. The things he wants at the university are finer and more flexible tools for the economic war which he calls liberty" (156). But perhaps Lewisohn's sharpest indictment of Ohio State students came with his flat assertion that it was "considered rather bad form among them to show any stirring of the mind" (156).

Milder in manner, Thurber's comments on his fellow students nevertheless had a cutting edge, as when, for example, in *The Thurber Album,* he remarked of his college years in Columbus that "perceptive and congenial young minds can scarcely be said to have flourished like wild flowers in that time and region" (171). Elsewhere, he stated that it was worth your life to be found on campus with a copy of Shelley in your pocket (quoted by Holmes 20 from *Credos and Curios:* Columbus *Dispatch,* October 28, 1923). Nor will Thurber *afficionados* soon forget two of the less talented students he pilloried in "University Days."

The first of these was of course Bolenciecwcz, who according to Thurber's college friend and subsequent theatrical collaborator Elliott Nugent was modeled on Chic Harley, Ohio State's first All-American halfback (1916). One may recall that in order to maintain eligibility for the Illinois football game, Bolenciecwcz had to be helped by the whole economics class, including Professor Bassum, to name one means of transportation, any means. Bolenciecwcz, assisted by broad hints such as "toot, toot," "Ding dong" and "*Chuffa* chuffa," finally stumbled upon a correct answer, "train." The second student mocked by

Thurber in "University Days" was an agricultural student named Haskins who, having dared to study journalism, had so much difficulty finding "C" and "L" on the typewriter that he sometimes had to ask others to help him hunt. It was he who after much encouragement and some harassment from his professor, came up with the following "snappy" opening to his journalistic piece on the horse barn beat: "Who has noticed the sores on the tops of the horses in the animal husbandry building?" (*My Life and Hard Times* 223-27).

No less severe with the 500 Ohio State professors than with their nearly 5000 students, Lewisohn charges them with cowardice and "effeminacy of mind," a euphemism for the same sort of conformism, the same lack of passionate conviction he found in the students.

> Two men there were . . . who in public writing and private speech stood four-square against the pulpiness and muddled utilitarianism of our educational machine. Just two—my friend, the professor of philosophy and I . . . . We were free of that infinitely curious, characteristic American trait—the easy-going, kindly, disastrous dislike of clean-cut individual convictions (169).

In sharp contrast to Lewisohn on the subject of the faculty, Thurber begins by paying tribute to his favorite professor, Joseph Russell Taylor, whom he contrasts with Lewisohn himself:

> Ludwig Lewisohn, who in my time was teaching German and German literature at Ohio State, was disappointed to find no "vicious faces" on the campus. Joe Taylor, however, was interested not in a search for depravity but in finding signs of spiritual increase and of fine sensibility in the world about him, and he never gave up the wistful hope of instructing the un-vicious in the literature of living . . . (*The Thurber Album* 171-73).

Thurber's second pedagogical hero was Dean Joseph Villiers Denney, the "millions for manure" man mentioned above. He was a distinguished Shakespeare professor whose notorious absent-mindedness "was usually a whimsically studied effect," as when he told a reporter after he had become national president of the American Association of University Professors, "I have either just appointed that committee, or I am just about to" (*The Thurber Album* 200). In sum, Thurber describes him as "the last of the old-fashioned apostles of the classics and

humanities at Ohio State" (207). The final sentence of Thurber's tribute to his beloved professor, written in the fifties when academic freedom was under siege at Ohio State, reads as follows, "I like to think that his incomparable length and shadow have not been completely lost in the towering and umbrageous wilderness of modern Gigantic Ohio State" (212).

The third member of Thurber's triumvirate belonging to "the species known as English professor," for which in 1960 the author confessed a special fondness, was William Lucius Graves (quoted by Holmes 21 from Thurber's Denney Hall dedication speech [*Ohio State University Monthly,* May, 1960]). Thurber's feelings for Graves were distinctly mixed, for Graves was an apostle to the masses rather than to the elite with whom Thurber identified himself. The contrast between Graves and the two professors Thurber idolized is well made in his *Album* essay "Beta Theta Pi," a title alluding to Graves' life-long love affair with his fraternity (*The Thurber Album* 185-99).

> Joe Denney, like Joe Taylor, was loved and admired by the appreciative few, but Billy Graves was known for more than forty years as the friend of freshmen, the confidant of seniors, and the chum of alumni . . . . They recognized the tall, well-groomed bachelor, forever young in heart, as a mere visitor in the intellectual world, like themselves, and not one of its awesome, withdrawn first citizens. They liked him because he never missed an issue of the *Cosmopolitan* magazine, and made no bones about it, and because he sometimes openly confessed his inability to understand certain so-called masterpieces of writing [such as *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*] that had set his colleagues to twittering. (186-87)

We turn finally to the looming presence of the military on Ohio State's campus, especially after the entry of the U.S. into war in April, 1917. Lewisohn describes the situation as follows:

> The campus had been turned into a training-camp and swarmed with youths in khaki. They studied, slept, ate, drilled, talked in mechanically formed groups. A slow, stinging horror seized my flesh and crept into my bones. They were being trained to kill and be killed, to mutilate and to be mutilated. They were very cheerful. Each, at the innermost point of consciousness, carried the invincible, mystical assurance that he would come out unscathed. Each, like all of us, was unable to imagine his own death . . . . The sight of those cheery, healthy boys turned me sick. I saw them blinded, waving bloody stumps, rotten with gangrene in trenches under fire . . . . A leprous sun seemed to burn over Central City. Middle-aged men and women roared and wheezed and sweated with hatred and patriotism and urged these young bodies to hasten to hurl themselves into blood and ooze and ordure. (216)

Thurber, as befits a humorist, was inclined to take the presence of the military on campus less seriously, even light-heartedly, as one may recall from "University Days."

> We drilled with old Springfield rifles and studied the tactics of the Civil War even though the World War was going on at that time. At 11 o'clock each morning thousands of freshmen and sophomores used to deploy over the campus, moodily creeping up on the chemistry building. It was good training for the kind of warfare that was waged at Shiloh but it had no connection with what was going on in Europe. (*My Life and Hard Times* 227)

Though Thurber may have sounded light-hearted on the subject of military drill, in fact he so strenuously disliked such regimentation that he once said he'd rather not graduate from the University than meet its drill requirements—which is of course exactly what happened. (Baker 12).

In reviewing Lewisohn's and Thurber's views of higher education at Ohio State in the second decade of the twentieth century, I am struck by how little the fundamentals of Midwestern higher education have changed in the interval. We are still blessed with administrators to whom image and political considerations are more important than the quality of education offered. We still have students, not to mention professors, who reduce the high calling of education to vocational tool sharpening, and we still desperately compete for floods of students with little preparation or aptitude for college, and with more interest in the degree to be acquired than in the education that makes it meaningful. As to the professors, what can I say, being one of them? All I can say, in at least partial agreement with Lewisohn, is that I'm reminded of the lawyer's lament in Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* that too many of us "settle for half," sacrificing our integrity and our pursuit of truth to accommodate the administration, our colleagues, our students,

or our own comfort and convenience. On the fourth concern, the intrusion of the military into academe, I rest relatively easy, but perhaps only because I teach at a small college with few or no military contracts and without an R.O.T.C. chapter. Yet even in a small college this relatively happy state of affairs is subject to sudden change, as we learned at Wittenberg in the late sixties when a former president, under financial pressure from the Board, went to the wall for an R.O.T.C. unit, and failing to get it, resigned, much to the relief of a rebellious faculty.

In the words of the French proverb, the more it changes, the more it is the same here in the Midwest as higher education approaches the end of the twentieth century.

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DISCONTINUITY AND UNITY OF PLACE IN THE WRITINGS OF RODNEY NELSON

JILL B. GIDMARK

If you haven't heard of Rodney Nelson, you are not necessarily in the minority. In fact, perhaps outside of Minnesota and North Dakota (with the exception of certain environs of San Francisco, where Nelson lived from 1965 to 1978), he's had little press. And even if your have resided within the borders of Minnesota and North Dakota, as I have for over four decades, Nelson may have escaped your notice, as he did mine. Not to worry. Most of his earlier works—four thin volumes of prose and five of poetry—appearing in little California, North Dakota, and Wisconsin presses, can quite happily be overlooked. Juvenilia chronicling odysseys of anti-war sentiment, treating drug use as a commonplace of life, offering love and sex as opiates against boredom, the writing says not much new and not much worth listening to.

In *Oregon Scroll* (1976), Nelson's first book, twenty-two scant, untitled but self-satisfied poems use wind in the Columbia Gorge, and storms and sea birds on the north Pacific coast to symbolize the author's various personal moods and reflections. The Midwestern reader feels displaced, has a hard time identifying. The biographical note on the back cover maintains that the black prairies of eastern North Dakota have left their mark on Nelson's writing, yet the book has an indisputable Oregonian setting, and furthermore is published in California during Nelson's residency there. Too much geographical eclecticism leaves one meandering no place in particular. It's as if Nelson were just passing through, and we're just passing by. Indeed, in poems like the following, we are at best accidental—and perhaps even coerced—tourists to mood and terrain which could just as easily be passed up.

Yellow had no name, no form
And someone called it butterfly.
Shrubs grow glossy on the bank
And emerald has been heard of.
Where this flake of nothing goes
Her wings will part a mountain range,
So my grief has taken wind
Down the Columbia gorge. (n.p.)

The Boots Brevik Saga (1978) meanders lazily, by fits and starts, reading more like a collection of unrelated and underdeveloped short stories than a single, sustained adventure novel. It strives for validation and import by tapping into the roots of Scandinavian mythology with which Nelson's Norwegian and Swedish grandparents had equipped him. He's got the ring and rhythm of authentic customs, surnames, and lineage down pat, but the ring seems hollow when it reverberates with vagabond hippies, pet dogs named Achilles, Nestor, Ajax, and Agamemnon, and a hero—Boots Brevik—who becomes deputized to rid Western civilization, so he says, of rape, mayhem, and homocide, but whose hidden agenda is to save some recent acquaintances from police apprehension in a drug bust. Though the characters have some initially promising ecentricities and banalities; though Buddhism, Communism, and Platonism are the substance of certain set pieces; and though allusions to Landor, Eliot, Donne, and Graves grace some pages, this writing is neither madcap nor probing enough to endure. Both the profundity and the romp of odysseys by Abbey, Kesey, Steinbeck, Kerouac, and Pirsig are missing, and the reader's sympathies are unengaged.

Vigil, a collection of twenty-nine poems published in North Dakota a year later, defines place with more clarity and articulates more strongly its lure for humanity. The poems—some of them are sonnets—show more form than the earlier poetry and, despite a variety of settings (Oregon, California, Germany), there is here less the feel of the vagabond; more roots emerge: "our wilderness belongs to the waking" (8). One unabashed love poem even predicts a sentiment and empathy in works to come: "Seeing myself and much that I have lived/Tumbled in the blue cloud of your gaze" (16).

In 1982 appeared *The Popcorn Man: A Norwegian Immigrant Verse-Play*. Set in the late 1940's in the Red River Valley,

this slight attempt at drama shows a confidence man gulling quiet immigrants who "are as dreary as/The land they walk: a prairie in the head" (17). Though it allows Nelson to putter around in Viking mythology, the play amounts to little more than "dust in the sunlight" (18).

The immigrant settler's solidity and exclusion, a circling in of the wagons, is evident in *Red River Album*, poetry published the same year as the play. The imagery here gathers complexity: "something quakes,/ Ear-pricking like a dragonfly of pain/ That's gone in a hum" (21). The locale zooms in on Minnesota and North Dakota, the season darkens to autumn. "September's homing pressure" (21) and a smack of "Odin's luck" (21) infuse verses which hail progeny as the key not only to myth-making in general but to a firm rooting in one place in particular. The poetry's best statement lies in intermingling the ideas of progeny with nature—in Nelson's case, a land of sugarbeets, farmgirls, and boxelders:

The bones I left in North Dakota
Uphold the names of my dead,
And what I kept is the winter calling;
It lives in the father's blood. (23)

The final poem is an autobiographical account of a home-town boy made good, returning to the prairie to read his poems in a public basement, introduced, moreover, by a television personality. After his reading, Nelson the poet muses: "Education is a farming of man:/ Put in the seed; let them sleep if they can" (38).

Before another volume of poems comes *The Green God: A Novella*, published the same year as *Red River Album*. This, Nelson's longest work, sprawls awkwardly in philosophical speculation of tortuous epistle and artificial, pseudo-philosophical dialogue. The hazy diction mirrors the unspecified but vaguely Scandinavian setting and the aimlessness and artlessness of the plot. Young Ingrid Borke marries mature Gunnar Ulven, and, after a period of halcyon hedonism together, Gunnar gradually becomes cold and morose, hermetically sealing himself off from Ingrid. Her mind is drawn to the "north woods," and her body to Gunnar's handy best friend, Sigvald Odegaard, a celibate religious student who eagerly takes her to those woods, where his vows of celibacy quickly fall away. They enjoy the same pleas-

ures and frivolities that she had earlier done with Gunnar, and then the pair returns to Gunnar. This is a pagan and painful idyll, a sojourn forth and back for almost no discernible reason All three—Gunnar, Ingrid, and Sigvald—sit around a campfire in the concluding scene, draw straws for turns to speak, and separately orate how their various joinings and severings were motivated by weakness. But they all have clear vision now, they know who they are, and their confidence has brought them so much independence that they will from henceforth go it alone:

> "Everything is balanced now," Ingrid replied, still smiling.
> "Where are you going?" said Gunnar.
> Her look made the question meaningless. He nodded.
> They sat staring into the fire until it died. (124)

The slight volume of poetry *Thor's Home* (1983) turns from the mythological environs of *Green God* to a very specific identification of place mainly Midwestern once again. There are titles like "Minneapolis," "North Dakota: 1979," "Desire in Manitoba," and "Fargo Fall" and lines like "Go east to where the east begins,/ To Minnesota. There the past remains" (16). Nelson, like Frost's farmer in "Mending Wall," likes having said it so well he says that line twice—once at a poem's beginning, again at the end. Rasps of grackles, snows that linger into April, regret and dreaming lend melancholy to the certainty that home's the right place for life, and the debt to Frost is unmistakable:

> I am a poet far from home
> And so I'll climb up to the tower,
> And following the way of leaves
> I'll come back down again. (8)

Nelson is a maverick. Had I approached his work thus, chronologically, it would have been difficult to escape the conclusion that he was a writer of slight consequence. I don't think I would have kept reading. However, assigned by *North Dakota Quarterly* to review Nelson's 1987 novella *Villy Sadness*, I approached a slim, attractive volume apart from the evolutionary stages that preceded it. *Villy Sadness* represents not only early Nelson matured, but Nelson miraculously transformed, and this is in no way better illustrated than by his use

of place. This, and the novella published before it, *Home River* (1984), are both fortuitously grounded in the Midwestern territory that Nelson called his "ruts."

Home River functions almost as a footnote to *Villy Sadness*. The extended exposition about Ida and Paal Malmlund in which *Home River* indulges gives some context to their later domestic violence that the narrator in *Villy Sadness* observes. *Home River*, set in 1945, begins with Ida and three-year-old Peter musing over a picturebook of Norway. They've returned with Paal from Seattle after unsuccessfully trying to eke out a living there; Ida's heart remains with the fog and traffic and relatives and acquaintances of the Pacific Northwest, but Paal is relieved to be back on solid North Dakota plains. Ida's heritage is really Midwestern, too, for it is on the farmstead of Ida's parents, twenty miles south of Fargo, North Dakota, that the couple lives while househunting. Tricking Ida into believing that she will have a voice in the selection of their new home, Paal has already put a downpayment on a dirty migrant shack and a plot of farmland. Ida is embarrassed and indignant at such neglect, and wants to leave him. After agonizing with her sister and mother over the ramifications of divorce, Ida realizes that her emotional crisis is inseparable from crisis of place:

> In the silence of this country, where things lay open to God's eye, the thought of divorce seemed unreal. She asked herself what many would soon be asking: How could she?
>
> Ida wanted to keep a home in the world, . . . and the only world happened to be Hedmark, North Dakota. In Seattle a person could get ten divorces and it wouldn't matter. (57)

Just as that certainty locks her into a course of action where she can have no choice, despite her antagonism toward Paal, Ida is tricked again. Paal has staged a car accident to elicit her sympathies toward him, and the deception works. She decides the migrant shack won't make such a bad home after all. As she and Paal and Peter work the next day to fix up "the new house . . . in the most beautiful place on earth, our beloved Red River Valley" (75), Ida muses, "The view is wondrous; . . . [I've] never known the river to be so glassy. It's always moving on yet always where it belongs" (76). If her son's recent nightmare about all three of them rolling in a car downhill into the "huge

. . . flat . . . purple" ocean (73) foreshadows the family discord and abuse in *Villy Sadness*, there is in *Home River* a still and present place in the eye of the storm as the book concludes in harmony. Family members bond together and with the land, and that bonding is enough to stay momentarily the rampage of nature and of each other.

Belonging to the right place is central to the crisis and resolution in *Villy Sadness* (1987). As in *Home River*, the setting is the fictional township of Hedmark, North Dakota, south of Fargo on the Minnesota border. The plot, told by fifty-three-year-old telephone operator Villy Sadness largely in flashback, describes his courtship of Ingeborg Revland and their six-months' married life on the farmstead of her parents. The story is Villy's search to come to terms with his wife's accidental death and with his own reasons for continuing to live. What he learns by carefully unfolding a painful and shocking sequence is that Ingeborg's last question to him before her death, "Where do I belong?" (109), is also his own question of himself, which his evocation has helped him answer.

The site Ingeborg and Villy had selected for their future home, the Lindgren farm, reminded Ingeborg of her grandmother's painting of a meadow in Sweden, and her exuberant remark to Villy, " 'I'm inside the painting!' " (87), sparked the most sensuous scene in the book. The site also is bordered by the river in which Ingeborg met her death, following an episode of family violence ignited by her alcoholic father. Villy is at the switchboard late one night, caught up in such reverie of his past, when remembered violence is shattered by present domestic abuse between Paal and Ida Malmlund, eight years after their appearance in *Home River*, which violence Villy watches from his second floor window.

Physically returning the next day to the Lindgren farm for the first time in thirty-two years, Villy recognizes that "Time is nothing. Place is the one preservative of memory; what was seen and smelt and touched abides in it. There's no remembering without some place, and all place is given" (88). Having finally concluded that Ingeborg is where she belonged, a part of the land and the river (since her body was never found), Villy's course is clear: he will buy the Lindgren farmsite after all, and "loaf in the lap of" such natural beauty (114) even as he

would have done had Ingeborg lived. It is where, he had said earlier, "I could perpetually rediscover myself in the details of the whole" (39). He is infused now with the pulse of life in a way that he has not been for three decades, in a way that not even the "magic of telephony, . . . [fingers] delighting in their contact with the planet's pulse" (9) had been able to give him. Having confronted hatred and loss and place and named them, he has at the same time secured his peace. He has come to know that "the *elan vital* we serve" (114) is a sense of place—"the sky, the earth-scented air, the bird-voices, the fields on fields of immature wheat, the tiny steeple midmost in the horizon" (29)—and that that joy "seems to lead away but takes us round and home" (114).

The story, spanning a day and a night in September 1953, had begun with the public announcement of the homicide of Villy's neighbor—"The news that Helmer Nelson has been shot is more upsetting than it should be" (7)—an inspired first line, which Nelson uses twice more in the book. The story ends with a very private epiphany and brings with it acceptance and release: "Death will do the synthesizing" (114).

Two short stories round out Nelson's publications. Appearing in *Everywhere: a New Journal of Poetry and Prose* published in Grand Forks, ND, "The Devil and the Hedins" (Spring 1987) and "The Nature Society" (Spring 1989) continue the use of North Dakota and Minnesota as setting but discontinue the preeminence of place as theme that has marked the best of Nelson's writing. If Nelson returns to awareness of Midwestern place as question and as answer, we will not yet have seen the best of his writing.

University of Minnesota

A CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF WORKS BY RODNEY NELSON

Oregon Scroll. Alamo, CA: Holmgangers Press, 1976.
The Boots Brevik Saga. Alamo, CA: Holmgangers Press, 1978.
Vigil. Bismarck, ND: Stronghold Press, 1982.
The Popcorn Man: A Norwegian Immigrant Verse-Play. Bismarck, ND: Stronghold Press, 1982.
Red River Album. Bismarck, ND: Stronghold Press, 1982.
The Green God: A Novella. Prentice, WI: Jump River Press, 1982.
Thor's Home. Whitehorn, CA: Holmgangers Press, 1983.
Home River. Fargo, ND: The North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1984.
Villy Sadness: A Novella. St. Paul, MN: New Rivers Press, 1987.
"The Devil and the Hedins," *Everywhere: A New Journal of Poetry & Prose.* Vol. 1, no. 2. Grand Forks, ND. Spring 1987.
"The Nature Society," *Everywhere: A New Journal of Poetry & Prose.* Vol. 1, no. 3. Grand Forks, ND. Spring 1989.

PLAYING PEDRO AND OTHER DIVERSIONS: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON LEISURE ACTIVITIES IN THE MIDWEST 1870-1910

PAULINE GORDON ADAMS AND MARILYN MAYER CULPEPPER

Boredom, that scourge of today's youth, was once held at bay with a myriad of activities. Midwestern diaries, memoirs, and other writings from 1870-1910 reveal a whirl of movement that enveloped the non-working time of people: rich and not so rich, urban and rural, male and female, native and immigrant. Some of this extra-curricular energy focused on social reform; some focused on self-development; most, however, concentrated on the pursuit of happiness.

Post-Bellum America, with its rapid industrialization, urbanization, and vulnerability to the peaks and sloughs of the business cycle, generated many a reform movement. These movements were filled with those who offered their free time to the service of their chosen crusade. Two such were Michigan women who, in the 1870s, 1880s, and early 1890s, devoted the liberated portion of their enormous energies to various reform groups, particularly the People's Party. Sarah E.V. Emery was definitely middle class. She had migrated to Lansing, Michigan, from a prosperous family farm in the Finger Lake district of New York State. She married a prominent Lansing book seller and realtor, had a stepson and a daughter who died young. Emery ran a large house; not only was she responsible for the well-being of her own family, but she took in boarders as well—four young women who worked as clerks in town. Emery had hired a girl to help with the varying demands of such a household and magically managed to carve out blocks of time away from work at home to lecture throughout the nation on Populist issues, to write two popular books on the economic significance

of the amount of money in circulation, and to publish a Populist newspaper. This was her way with leisure time.[1]

Similarly, Marion Marsh Todd put her free time to the services of humankind. Todd, an Eaton Rapids woman, was widowed while still in her thirties. That was in 1880. To support herself and her daughter, she became a lawyer and an editor. But, in addition to her family and professional obligations, she, like Emery, devoted her spare time to some of the reform movements current in her day. To aid the goals of economic reform and women's suffrage, Todd wrote five books that were well documented, cogently argued, and seasoned with wit.[2]

Emery and Todd are but just two of a small army of Midwesterners in the late nineteenth century who employed nearly the sum total of their leisure time in the service of their fellows. Many others, however, preferred to devote a portion of their time away from work in self-actualization. This took many forms: writing diaries, writing letters, writing poetry, reading and studying, playing musical instruments, joining literary clubs.

This self-development came in several guises. There are the diarists, for example. At times, those people who committed a slice of their free time daily to their diaries—a commitment they honored as loyally as to their daily toilet—are called mere recorders of minutae—no more, no less. Not worth reexamining in the light of history. And, at first glance, this may appear to be the disappointing truth. But on reflection, these diarists, in noting the weather, their states of health, their comings and goings, and, though rarely, noting their dreams, disappointments, thoughts, are really assessing themselves, reassuring themselves that, yes, they are alive; their activities make up a life, a unique and meaningful, if not significant life on the world's stage. These diarists, whether their addiction lasted one year, or six years or a lifetime, simultaneously regarded their small, leather bound companions as confidants, or as safe deposit vaults, or memory albums, or as appendages of themselves. Despite all the secretiveness that we associate with diary keeping, this was not always so. Take Loleta Dawson, for example, who, while a teenager, kept diaries in the early part of this century. Periodically, she and a girlfriend would enjoy reading sessions of each other's diaries. Whatever the cause or duration of the diary disease, it consumed much leisure time.[3]

Closely tied to diary writing is letter writing and one of the staples of the former is a comprehensive record of letters sent and received. Letter writing was the major form of communication aside from personal visits and consumed a sizeable portion of free time. Letters often surpassed diaries in information and reflection; at times they supplanted diaries as a medium for preserving personal experiences.

Another consumer of free time in the self-development category was reading. One of the items recorded in most diaries is the books read though rarely is any critical evaluation appended to the listed book. Lillie Hallifax was a Jackson County, Michigan, rural schoolteacher during the 1870s. Reading was a source of great pleasure to her. The diary records reveal an odd assortment of books that engaged her attention in the five year period that they covered: *The Curse of Clifton, Mormonism, Ethlyor's Mistake* ("a good book"), *Lucy Boston, The Curiosity Shop,* Pope, *Claudia, Bunyan's Complete Works, The Mill on the Floss, Benjamin Franklin, Helen's Babies* ("which is quite a book"), *My Wife and I.* Although she wrote on August 30, 1877, "I think a good book has a great influence over me," what that specific influence might have been is never disclosed. Nor did she comment on the content or style of the book. Lillie particularly enjoyed reading aloud with friends, an activity that invariably brought laughter and tears if the text were "the least bit sad or touching." (January 23, 1876)[4]

Edna Davis worked in her family run boarding house in the 1890s in Lansing, Michigan. She kept a diary for two of those years and included are the titles of some of the books she read: *On Her Wedding Morn, Her Only Sin, An Old Folks Wooing, Chords and Dischords,* Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter.*[5]

Not all the reading was as frivolous as the previously listed titles suggest. Lillie Hallifax, the young schoolteacher, also wrote about reading books on U.S. history, physiology, geography and other subjects that would not only enhance her personal knowledge, but her professional competence as well.

In her 1890-91 diary, Nettie English of Manchester, Michigan, an inveterate reader, recorded having read Macaulay's *History of England,* Henry Drummond's Writings, the *Life of Charles Sumner, Jane Eyre, Vanity Fair,* much of Scott and Dickens.[6] Eighteen year old Ollie Wilcox of Three Rivers, Michigan, in

his 1892 diary lists among the sizeable number of books he has read: *Sexual Science* by O. S. Fowler; *Kenilworth, Ivanhoe,* and *The Pirate* by Sir Walter Scott; Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained; Don Quixote; Barriers Burned Away* and *What Can She Do?* by E.P. Roe, in addition to *Elsie Venner* and *Ramona.*[7]

Music was another leisure time indulgence recorded in diaries, an indulgence that added to self-development. Many an entry records musical evenings of piano playing or organ playing or viola playing or singing. Some entries were musical notations. Josiah B. Smith, for example, included some bugle tunes in his 1865 diary. They, no doubt, were tunes he had learned while a bugler in the Michigan Cavalry during the Civil War. Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, one of the major diversions during clement weather was the listening to band concerts on street corners, in parks, in village squares as well as in a variety of auditoria.

Clubs catering to an amazing variety of interests dotted the social landscape of the midwest. Different economic classes, both sexes, urban and rural dwellers, native born and immigrant—all founded, or participated in clubs. Though some of these clubs were fundamentally social in nature, they added a specialized dimension that enhanced the development of their members. Many clubs had specialized interests: Debating Clubs, Spelling Clubs, Singing Clubs, as well as the Epworth League, the Christian Endeavor, the Grange, the Masons, the G.A.R.

Although Helen Hooven Santmeyer's best seller . . . *And Ladies of the Club* focused national interest on the popularity and intrigue of a semi-fictional woman's club in Ohio, diaries, correspondence, and minutes of Michiganians document a *real* and omnipresent interest in clubs in communities throughout the area. In Lansing, in 1874, a small group of women "feeling that home and society demand of the women of today the broadest and fullest culture; and being well assured that our usefulness and enjoyment will be increased by such culture. . . . united for the sole purpose of study and mental improvement."[8] Thus was born Lansing Woman's Club, a group still committed to these goals and still meeting regularly each Friday afternoon in their own clubhouse.

While some groups adhered to extremely formal, staid agendas, other clubs successfully blended their intellectual interests with their social interests. The 1898 minutes of the Crickets on the Hearth Club of Benton Harbor, Michigan, (begun in 1884) noted that on February 13, the "club enjoyed their annual midwinter jollification."[9] During the year members were required to respond to roll call by revealing their pet aversions; or by answering the question, "To whom is the world most indebted and why?"; or at still other times with rhymes or appropriate quotations. Moments of frivolity were tempered with more serious programs on "American Art Galleries," "Art as a Popular Educator," or discussions on "When does a child's education begin?" "Does reading exert more influence on the character than associates?" "Is moral force or legislation most efficient for the suppression of vice?"

There were still other clubs, of course, that interwove not only social and cultural interests but altruistic purposes as well; for example, the young women's Vesta Club founded by the schoolteacher Lillie Hallifax in 1878. The Vesta Club set about presenting social and Calico Hops to raise money for the purchase of library books.

Testifying to the widespread popularity of women's clubs was the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Michigan State Federation of Women's Clubs held at the Athenaeum in Jackson, Michigan in late October of 1899. There, some seven hundred delegates representing 112 clubs met to participate in sessions ranging from topics such as "Art in Home and Decoration" to "The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and other Correspondence" as well as reports on the meeting of the International Congress of Women held in London in June of that year.[10]

Women, however, certainly possessed no monopoly on clubbing. Many groups were designed to capture the interest of both men and women; one such is the popular U and I Club of Lansing, Michigan, (begun in 1885). It numbered governors, Supreme Court Justices, academicians from Michigan Agriculture College, and representatives from all of the professions among its members and still continues its Monday evening meetings today. Another example out of many co-educational clubs was the Southern Washtenaw Farmer's Club which served as- cultural enrichment for many devoted and often highly

literate residents of southeastern Michigan. These clubs were not restricted to the middle or upper classes nor were they restricted to native born Americans. For example, German immigrants in Lansing, Michigan founded the Liederkranz Society where they could celebrate and perpetuate their old world culture in their own clubhouse.

The club mania seemed to seize all ages and areas. Young Ollie Wilcox, a seventeen year old high school student, devastated by a winter cold in 1891, noted in his diary that "this is the first time I ever staid [sic] out of Literary Club."[11] Even a work-study student at Michigan Agricultural College in 1877 reported parting willingly with 50 cents of his hard earned money (a half day's wage when he had a job) to join the Union Literary Society during his first months in college.[12]

For most members, their club or organization provided a necessary social outlet; for many it became an extended family offering bonds of friendship and camaraderie; for some it was a welcome release from the confines of family; and for still others it served as "continuing education" or as a welcome creative outlet. Clubbing—literary, social, cultural, athletic, whatever—claimed another slice of the leisure pie.

One is tempted to ask, at this point, if there were any time remaining to simply pursue a carefree, non goal oriented good time. The answer is a resounding yes. Judging from the diaries, memoirs, and other writings of that era, it was in this last category, the one loosely labeled the pursuit of happiness, that most people spent most of their free time.

For the sportsminded there was baseball, an activity which early on proved to be popular with participants and spectators alike. In the summer time there were endless games of croquet, picnics, berrying expeditions, buggy and boat rides and bicycling ad infinitum. Now and then, and probably more often than recorded, a hayride was enlivened by a mischievous young lady who scandalized her friends by not wearing her corset.

Each locality had its popular picnic grounds, frequently located near a river or a lake. In Lansing, Leadley Park, a popular amusement center on the Grand River near the Waverly Bridge, was opened in 1892 and was accessible by a river steamer or a trolley line. The park was spread out over several acres and contained a hotel with 31 sleeping rooms, a dance and banquet

hall, a huge picnic area, a bath house and swimming areas, a barn built to accommodate 40 horses, in addition to outdoor stalls for 166 teams. In the warmth of summer, picnickers could visit, listen to music, dance or stroll amid the hundreds of lanterns and gasoline lamps that illuminated the grounds. In later years, a roller coaster and ferris wheel were added. There were strict rules that "No liquors of any description will be served on the grounds, and brawlers and loafers will not be permitted. . . ."[13]

The snows of winter brought with them forts, snowball fights and sledding for the youngsters and sleighing and skating parties for their elder siblings. Young Ollie Wilcox in his 1891 diary records splitting wood all morning until about three in the afternoon when he hied himself off to join about a hundred other young people for skating on the pond until almost 11 p.m. (No need to join the weight room boys that day!)

Universally, and incessantly, there was visiting and being visited—before breakfast, before, during, and after dinner (usually the noon meal) and supper. No telephones meant that one could expect guests any hour of the day or night and in the case of inclement weather one had to be prepared to put up guests for the night. Visiting meant card playing (Pedro was the most popular game), musical renditions, reading aloud, gossiping. Visiting and letter writing were the telephones of that era. But not all visiting was informal. High spots were the frequent parties, dances, socials given in private homes or hotels. There were, of course, anniversary parties, birthdays, graduation celebrations, donations and victory galas such as the "jollification meeting over the election of Grover Cleveland and Adlai Stevenson to the office of President and Vice-president of the U.S."[14] attended by Albert and Edwin English in 1892.

In lieu of Baskins and Robbins franchises, there were ice cream socials. These ice cream socials, fortified by mountains of homemade cakes, were popular means of augmenting a church or club treasury, where, incidentally, a $10.45 evening's profit was deemed a huge succcess. Family reunions involving fifty or more people demanded weeks of planning, scores of wounded feelings, and interminable choruses of "My how you've grown" and "Well, gracious, you haven't changed a bit."

Although Lyceum shows, lectures, fairs, circuses, and theatricals were open to almost anyone with the price of admission,

usually a 5 cent to 25 cent charge, towns of any appreciable size reflected a finely honed social stratification. In some high schools, there were fraternities and/or sororities that very well may have made life a living heaven or hell for the "ins" and the "outs." Often parents with the commodious homes and incomes to match recognized the advantages of supervising their teen agers' activities close range and urged their young people to bring their friends home for dancing and partying. Suzie Baird Dean fondly recalled dancing out "two beautiful carpets" in their parents' living room before she and her two sisters were married.[15]

Social life in Lansing involved not only the more well-to-do but also the publicly prominent: governors, judges, members of the legislature and other state dignitaries in addition to important Michigan Agricultural College officials. These festivities of the social or political elite were usually described in elaborate detail by the local press. On January 15, 1879, the *Lansing Journal* reported:

> The finest social event of the season, and one not soon to be surpassed, was the reception given last evening by Hon. and Mrs. O.M. Barnes at their residence on Main Street at the head of Capitol Avenue. The stately building at the head of the Avenue was brilliantly illuminated and presented a most attractive picture suggestive of light and warmth and the generous hospitality of the host and hostess, whose doors are ever "on the latch." Mr. and Mrs. Barnes received their guests in the spacious hall between the east and west parlors, greeting with stately courtesy and warm cordiality perhaps not less than 600 guests between the hours of 7 and 10.
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> Elaborate refreshments were served from 9 to 12 in the dining hall, whither the guests repaired at their leisure. The gathering was probably the most brilliant one ever assembled at the Capitol, embracing not only the beauty and chivalry of the Capitol City itself, but a large number of notables from abroad, including state dignitaries, members of both houses of the Legislature, many of whom were accompanied by their wives, and also many leading representatives of both political parties, called here by the approaching Senatorial election. Ex-Secretary Zachariah Chandler and Governor Charles M. Croswell were among the honored guests on this occasion, which will long be remembered as one of the most brilliant in the social life of the Capitol City.[16]

Although it would still be almost a century later before jet setters made their appearance on the travel scene, the post Civil War boom in railroading and the consequent bargain excursion fares offered as an impetus to rail travel considerably expanded the average American's vistas. Trips to visit family back East, to visit the great Chicago World's Fair of 1893, or extended group excursions such as that taken by the Heber Le Favour Post of Milford, Michigan, to Washington, D.C. in 1892 were not uncommon. More frequent, however, were day trips into nearby towns for business or pleasure. Many Michigan residents were anything but sedentary. Jackson, Michigan, for example, in 1877 boasted 128 trains arriving and departing daily. Despite the problems and inconveniences of train travel, it provided mobility and was always diverting. Hattie Foote Austin, of Milford, Michigan, introduced her "exciting" trip to Washington, D.C. in 1892 by detailing in her diary "Accident No. 1 when the porter accidentally caught his foot in Mrs. Thomas dress and tore off some trimming," a minor tragedy which was quickly compounded by Accident No. 2 when the lunch basket came tumbling down from the luggage rack while the train was backing up in Toledo. These mishaps were later followed by the complications of undressing (remember the long gowns and voluminous petticoats) in an upper berth.[17] Since dining cars on many trains were either nonexistent or inadequately staffed or supplied, food was often procured from vendors in the railroad stations or nearby restaurants—all of which resulted in a great many temporarily lost husbands and missed trains as cars were switched, backed up, side tracked, or moved out. Lillie Hallifax provided a colorful description of the vendors passing through cars on one of her frequent trips.

"A young boy who looks as though he had a pitchfork for a back bone continually goes through the train selling first Detroit papers, then chestnuts, oranges, apples, Chicago papers, gumdrops, hickory nut meats. An aged man came tottering in at [the] Marshall stop and his line of business was pop corn of which we could have all we wished, but mind you not unless we paid the stamps [*sic*]. We purchased a [quantity] and passed our opinion on it as being very good."[18]

All this unleisurely leisure, even when casually inspected, signals two conclusions. First, non-working activity manifested

an almost irresistible social dimension. People could scarcely get enough of other people. They read together, sang together, sleighed together, danced together, played croquet together, sewed together, of course, ate together, competed at cards together. On and on this togetherness went. Even the reformers concentrated on "making life better" for others. True, a few siphoned off a portion of their free time to retreat into the isolation of writing and reading but even these solitary pursuits were sometimes shared.

A second conclusion to be drawn is that most non-working activity was not passive even though certain spectator entertainment was popular. People travelled, talked, played, performed, created more than they observed others doing the very same things. Inactivity was, as it were, maddening—a state to be avoided in the name of sanity. Contemplation was unAmerican. Serenity was alien. Those Americans would most certainly have been sympathetic to George Herbert when he wrote, "He has no leisure who useth it not."[19]

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NOTES

1. See Pauline Adams and Emma S. Thornton, *A Populist Assault: Sarah E. Van De Vort Emery on American Democracy 1862-1896* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1982).
2. See Pauline Adams and Emma S. Thornton, "Todd, Marion Marsh," *American Women Writers from Colonial Times to the Present*, vol. 4. Ed. Tina Mainiero (N.Y.: Frederick Ungar Pub. Co., Inc., 1982), pp. 148-149.
3. From a forthcoming biography of Loleta Dawson Fyan by Emma S. Thornton.
4. Lillie Hallifax diaries, 1874-1879, Lillie Hallifax Papers, Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, East Lansing, Michigan.
5. Edna Davis diaries, 1894-1895, Haskin Family Papers, State Archives—Michigan History Division, Lansing, Michigan.
6. Annette English diaries, 1890-92, English Family Papers, Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, East Lansing, Michigan.
7. Ollie Wilcox diary, 1892, Ollie Wilcox Papers, Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, East Lansing, Michigan.
8. Constitution and By-Laws of the Lansing Woman's Club, June 4, 1874, rpt. 1980.
9. Crickets on the Hearth Club minutes 1898-9, Lowe Family Papers, Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, East Lansing, Michigan.
10. Program from The Fifth Annual Meeting of the Michigan State Federation of Women's Clubs held at The Athenaeum, Jackson, Michigan, October 31, November 1 and 2, 1899, Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, East Lansing, Michigan.
11. Ollie Wilcox diary, 1891.

12. Seneca Freeman Russell diary, 1877, Russell Family Papers, Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, East Lansing, Michigan.
13. Jane McClary, "Leadley's Park was area's finest resort," *Lansing State Journal,* May 20, 1984, p. 11, col. 1.
14. Annette English diary.
15. Suzie Baird Dean, Interview conducted by her daughter, Mrs. John Henry Dudley. n.d.
16. Juliette Bartholemew Stucky, "To Lansing With Love," Paper presented before the Historical Society of Greater Lansing, April 30, 1959.
17. Hattie Foote Austin diaries, 1892-1898, Austin Family Papers, Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, East Lansing, Michigan.
18. Lillie Hallifax diaries, 1874-1879.
19. George Herbert, "Jacula Prudentum," No. 49 (1651).

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JACK CONROY AND PROLETARIAN FICTION

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On October 24, 1929, the bottom fell out of a stock market already abandoned by a good many shrewed investors, but Americans not associated with Wall Street, Washington, or *Billboard* magazine hardly noticed for more than a year. Both the *Nation* and *The New Republic* denounced speculators and remained optimistic, while the *New Masses* ignored both the crash and the opportunity to point out the onset of the collapse it had predicted for so long.

But by late 1930 it was evident to most Americans that whatever was happening was more than readjustment, as politicians and pundits insisted, but a collapse of serious proportions, and decline continued; by early 1932 industrial production had fallen to half its 1929 volume, and early in 1933 the banking system collapsed, stock market prices were in single digits, and more than 12 million Americans were unemployed. For the first time in the American experience, an economic condition promised to loom as large as the Civil War in the American psyche.

But within a generation World War II had been fought and won, a new American prosperity had emerged, and the Depression, as the economic collapse of the 1930s became known, had almost disappeared from the American memory, disbelieved by those who didn't experience it and recalled with an almost nostalgic sentiment by many who did, who saw in it a somehow kinder, more virtuous America. In either case, the effects of the Depression—with a capital D—began to suffer from a problem with what David G. Pugh and others have defined as "believability," a problem noted earlier by Edmund Wilson.

In his preface to *The American Earthquake*, a documentary of the twenties and thirties published in 1958, Wilson com-

mented that it is difficult "for persons who were born too late to have memories of the depression to believe that it really occurred, that between 1929 and 1933 the whole structure of American society seemed actually to be going to pieces." It was the shock of this recognition, of this American Earthquake, as Wilson termed it, that gave rise to what appeared to be the sudden emergence of a literary movement that pridefully called itself proletarian, that flourished briefly, reaching its apex in the early 1930s, and then, confused or refuted by Stalinism, by the rise of Fascism, and the signing of a mutual non-aggression pact by Germany and Russia, faded into an oblivion that permits it to emerge only as a social, historical, or literary curiosity.

During its brief history, proletarian writing captured the leadership as well as the imagination of much of the intellectual establishment in the United States, and its effects, largely through the influence of the Federal Writers Project and the lively intellectual press of the period, were felt in every state of the forty-eight. In each, in states suffering from agricultural decline and industrial chaos, writers, young and not so young, proclaimed themselves proletarian and proceeded to write books—essays, poems, novels, plays—that they were convinced were truly proletarian.

Nevertheless, at the time and since, there has been a good deal of debate about the meaning of the term in a literary context. Although its origins are in ancient Rome and its use in English as a term for the lowest social and economic classes in the modern sense dates to the mid-nineteenth century, its literary meaning began in this century, and in use it has taken on connotations of social action and commitment rather than description. Almost invariably it has become read as Marxist, revolutionary, or communist.

What appears to have been its first literary use in America was, however, descriptive rather than ideological. For example, in *The New Republic* for September 20, 1917, in his review of *Marching Men,* Sherwood Anderson's novel of a purposeful revolutionary, Francis Hackett comments,

> The chief fact about *Marching Men* is not, however, its rhetoric, its grandiloquence. It is its apprehension of the great fictional theme of our generation, industrial America. Because the subject is barbarous, anarchic and brutal it is not easy for its story to be told. . . .
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> . . . it seems to me, the proletarian has had small place in American fiction. Under the ban of negligible ugliness, as the eminent novelists see it, comes the majority of the people. They, the eminent ones, have principally been the children of circumspect parents. . . . Outside their view lies the life of the proletarian except as it impinges on the middle class. . . . The proletarians are in a different universe of discourse. . . .
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> Where *Marching Men* succeeds is in thrusting the greater American realities before us, seen as by a workingman himself. It is . . . a narrative that suggests the presence in our fiction of a man who knows our largest theme.

When Hackett's use of proletarian literature as based on subject matter is applied to other novels of essentially the same generation—Stephen Crane's *Maggie,* Brand Whitlock's *The Turn of the Balance,* Frank Norris's *The Octopus,* or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle,* for example—it is evident that Anderson's novel was by no means the first American proletarian work of fiction, but it was apparently one of the first to be perceived as such. In *Marching Men,* Anderson's Beaut McGregor comes out of the working class to lead a mindless, non doctrinaire revolt against a dehumanized and dehumanizing system, ignoring economics in a search for the rebirth of freedom in America. However, classified in the context of a proletarian subject matter, it was to remain virtually alone until the call for a proletarian literature by Michael Gold and V. F. Calverton in the 1920s.

Four years after the publication of *Marching Men* and more than three after the October Revolution, an essay by Michael Gold appeared in the Feb. 1921 issue of *The Liberator,* the successor to the *Masses,* which had become a war casualty. In the essay, called "Toward a Proletarian Art," Gold made an emotional appeal in what he later admitted was "a rather mystic and intuitive" manner for a proletarian art and culture that would heed Walt Whitman's prophetic cry, turn to the social revolution now begun in Russia, and recognize that ". . . its secular manifestations of strike, boycott, mass-meeting, imprisonment, sacrifice, agitation, martyrdom, organization, is thereby worthy of the religious devotions of the artist." He

ended by proclaiming the cultural revolution by which a proletarian culture would rise from "the deepest depths upward." No mention was made of the working class—the revolution was for artists and intellectual—and the essay passed almost unnoticed.

By the mid-1920s, however, the concept of a proletarian literature had been taken up by leftist writers and critics, among whom the most prominent were Gold, writing in *The New Masses*, and Calverton in the *Modern Quarterly*. Both were Marxist, although both were often at war with doctrinaire Communists and both were at times called Trotskyites. Both sought to fuse in literature a new subject matter and an activist philosophy without surrendering to polemics and becoming propagandistic rather than artistic.

In 1926, in an essay in *New Masses*, Gold challenged Lenin's statement in *Literature and Revolution* that a true proletarian literature was impossible, that the proletarian dictatorship would disappear in the classless society before such a literature could evolve. He asserted that "It is not a matter of theory; it is a fact that a proletarian style is emerging in art," a style he was later to define in the term "proletarian realism." This style, he declared, "deals with the *real conflicts* of men and women . . . ;" it "must have a social theme or it is mere confection . . . :" it rejects "drabness, the bourgeois notion that the Worker's life is sordid . . . :" it must reject "all lies about human nature . . . :" it must recognize that "life itself is the supreme melodrama . . ."

V. F. Calverton's concept of proletarian literature was, however, less doctrinary than evolutionary as a natural, organic development in literature and a movement toward freedom in American culture. In *The Liberation of American Literature*, published in 1932, he wrote:

> What is needed in America today is a renewed faith in the masses. American literature has to find something of that faith in the potentialities of the proletariat which Emerson and Whitman possessed in the nineteenth century. It was Emerson . . . who was so enthusiastic about the civilization which was being created in the West by men in shirt sleeves, men of unexalted station and plebian origin, and who looked to that civilization with its democratic spirit to transform the country. It was Whitman who was ecstatic about the fact that it was democratic America which had elevated the poor man into the lord of creation, and had made the world recognize "the dignity of the common people . . ." But the faith in the common man which Emerson and Whitman entertained was faith in him as an individual and not as a mass . . . What we need today is a return to that faith in the common man, in the mass, but a faith founded upon a collective instead of an individualistic premise . . . In that belief lies the ultimate liberation of American literature—and American life.

Important to both Gold and Calverton was an insistence that the new literature be optimistic, that it celebrate the common man in the mass rather than as an individual, that it reject the prevailing naturalistic pessimism of American realism and return American literature to the note of affirmation that had characterized it in the past.

However, neither Gold's nor Calverton's pronouncements defined a clear path for proletarian literature to take, nor, significantly, did either Gold or Calverton see a place for the proletariat—the working class or its individual members—in the movement. Although both Gold and Calverton might reasonably have seen the movement as coming out of the proletariat—Gold began life as Irving Granich on Manhattan's lower East Side in 1894, an experience he described in *Jews Without Money* (1930), an autobiographical novel, and V(ictor) F(rances) Calverton began as George Goetz in 1900 in a Baltimore butcher's family—both saw the movement as intellectual and artistic, a continuation of the artistic revolution proclaimed by the Ivy League editors of the *Seven Arts* in 1916.

Nevertheless, critical and political battles over the nature and substance continued throughout the decade of the 1930s, echoes of which are with us yet. But before Gold had published his essay in *New Masses* in 1926, a proletarian literary movement had already begun, not in Greenwich Village, but among the proletariat, where it remained unnoticed by the intellectuals until after the egg laid in the New York Stock Exchange had begun to hatch. While Malcolm Cowley's young men and women were going to their exile in Montmartre and Montparnasse, or taking refuge in Greenwich Village, young writers who had come out of the proletariat or who remained in it had already begun to examine the human underside of the facade of prosperity and the human cost of the grandest spree in

American history, but their work was to pass unnoticed by the *New Masses* and the *Modern Quarterly*, just as it passes unnoticed in studies of what Alfred Kazen calls "The Great Liberation" of the 1920s. Yet more than all the critical essays that call for revolution in the 1920s, they foreshadow what is to come in the 1930s.

Of the novels that anticipate Gold's and Calverton's call and that point directly to the major accomplishment of Jack Conroy, especially in *The Disinherited* in 1933, are two novels: Lawrence H. Conrad's *Temper*, published in 1924, and set in the 1920s in a Detroit heavy-industrial plant, is the flip side of the Horatio Alger myth, and G. D. Eaton's *Backfurrow*, published in 1925, is the story of a young man's failed attempt to escape the drudgery of the farm for the promised intellectual and cultural fulfillment of the city.

Temper emphasizes not the function of the factory but its drudgery and dehumanizing mindlessness and repetitiveness, much as did Sherwood Anderson in *Marching Men* and in his later industrial journalism. In the background brutality engenders mindless but covert rebellion that occasionally becomes overt violence.

In the foreground, however, the protagonist, Paul Rinelli, an Italian-American imigrant, is determined that he will rise in the system to control it, snatching power and ultimately wealth not only from the system itself but from those who would deprive him of it.

Rinelli works in various parts of the factory, each department more brutal and demanding than the others, and, rather than rising in the system, he finds the power and fury of the furnaces becoming his own, becoming part of his nature:

> . . . the furnaces and the men breathed against each other. They stood hissing all night long, and there was deadly hate in the hot breath that each one breathed out. And there was a feeling, too, that some day this would have to end, that some day one of these breaths would fail, and every man knew that it would not be the breath of the furnace. . . .

Rinelli is transferred to the blacksmith shop after a fight, but he has learned something from the furnaces:

> . . . He hated now; the fire had taught him that . . . and some day he was going to get somebody good and proper. In the meantime he took it out on the steel. What a blow he could strike!

Finally, however, Rinelli fights with a burly Scots foreman, and for the first time he is not only beaten badly but humiliated. Transferred again to a small rolling mill, in a moment's inattention he reaches out for a hot steel rod. He grasps it and faints with pain. When he awakens in the hospital his hand is a misshapen mass; a kindly company, rejecting responsibility, nevertheless lets him become a night watchman, and in the dark hours, he is free to find whatever fulfillment he can.

Here, clearly, is the underside not only of the prosperity of the twenties, but of the myths that Americans have made their own: the significance of the individual, the open society, the Gospel of Wealth. Equally denied are the later myths: the survival of the fittest, the power inherent in common causes. The reality, Conrad makes clear, is power—the power of the machine and the furnace and of whatever it is—system or group or individual—that directs it.

Conrad points out the direction that later proletarian fiction is to take: the conflict between the exploiting system and the exploited proletariat or workman. Rinelli, the individual, fights without success, but without losing, until circumstances and a human lapse determine his fate.

In the same sense *Backfurrow* depicts the underside of the American myth of escape and fulfillment that had taken Europeans across an ocean, Americans across a continent and down a river, and countless young people—epitomized by Sherwood Anderson's Sam McPherson and George Willard, Theodore Dreiser's Carrie Meeber, Floyd Dell's Felix Fay, and dozens of other fictional portrayals—to escape the fullness and drudgery of the farms and towns and to seek fulfillment not in the West of American tradition but in the city, as had their creators.

In *Backfurrow*, the protagonist is Ralph Dutton, who, at sixteen, after his grandfather's death, goes to the city, Detroit, to rise and to enjoy its books, art, and music. But he finds little work, and that low-paying, and finally no work. Broke but not discouraged, he returns to the country to work as a farmhand and save for another assault on the city. But by twenty-one he is

married and at twenty-two he's a father and owner of the farm that had belonged to his father-in-law. The vagaries of weather, illness, and economics preclude prosperity or independence, and Dutton takes refuge in melancholy and finally a detachment from reality,and he sits, talking with his children, while his wife works the farm.

There is no sign of peace and pastoral plenty in the novel, but instead some of the bitterest portraits of farm life in American fiction. In fact, the publishing history of *Backfurrow* is similar to that of *Sister Carrie* a generation earlier. *Sister Carrie* had been accepted for publication by Walter Hines Page, then an editor at Doubleday. But on his return from Europe Frank Doubleday denounced it as a celebration of evil. He honored the contract, but refused to promote the novel, and it sold only a few hundred copies.

Similarly, *Backfurrow* was accepted at G. P. Putnam's while George Putnam was in Europe. On his return he was shocked by the graphic incidents in the novel. Eaton toned down some, and Putnam honored his contract but refused promotion or sale in the Putnam stores; the novel died quickly, to remain virtually unknown today.

Dutton's antagonist is neither machine nor system, as in *Temper*; it is a cosmic force determined to degrade and destroy men, a force that leads Dutton's dying grandfather to cry out, "God damn you, God," that leads Dutton to let an escaped convict go unscathed, that sees gelding as a human as well as animal condition. The novel's conclusion is, like *Temper*'s not resolution but resignation to the cycle of life and defeat that passes from generation to generation.

Neither novel is, in any doctrinaire sense, proletarian; there is no suggestion of the attempt or even the desire to revolt except on the lowest, most immediate, inevitably doomed sense. Nor is there in any way a suggestion of escape in the face of the cosmic irony that permits neither pleasure nor promise, nor, as Sherwood Anderson sought in his novels, the promise of communion with another. Instead it is clear that in spite of wives and children, each protagonist will live and die alone. The relationship of each novel to Norris and Dreiser is clear, but in subject matter, in conflict, in the suppression of dreams and hopes, in the hopelessness and helplessness, that each young man finally must accept, there is clear foreshadowing of the economic earthquake that is to come.

By the end of the decade other writers emerged who were more clearly proletarian not only in their subject matter but in a clear call for change. Among these were the Rebel Poets, originally Midwestern, in which Jack Conroy began to become prominent, the writers of Haldeman-Julius papers out of Gerard, Kansas, and eventually *The Left* of Davenport, Iowa, and *The Anvil*, edited by Jack Conroy in Moberly, Missouri. This period has been defined in detail in essays by Douglas Wixson in *MidAmerica XI* and *Midwestern Miscellany VII*, in which the prominence of authentic proletarians, particularly Midwesterners like Conroy, becomes clear.

By 1932, while some of the major writers of the twenties, particularly Sinclair Lewis and James Branch Cabell, had gone into a decline, others, such as Fitzgerald, went to Hollywood, and still others, particularly Anderson and Hemingway, attempted to man the barricades with less than successful fiction and then turned to journalism — Hemingway's exotic while Anderson tried to wrestle honestly with the Depression—major publishers began to recognize the emergence of a new critically realistic literature of the Left and a new group of writers, many from the West, the Midwest, and the South, and some were authentic American proletarians.

Significant in this recognition was the announcement that the *Scribner's Magazine* $5,000 Short Novel Contest for 1932 was won by two young writers. The first was John Herrmann, expatriate fugitive from a family tailoring business in Lansing, Michigan, former editor of *transition*, husband of Josephine Herbst, and future member of the Ware Group in Washington, to which Alger Hiss allegedly belonged. Herrmann's story, "The Big Short Trip" depicts, a generation before Arthur Miller, a salesman who loses his business to a system in decline and his son to social revolution. The salesman can only accept the inevitable, knowing that he can neither cope with nor understand the new age. The story appeared in *Scribner's* xcii (August, 1932). The co-winner was Thomas Wolfe's "A Portrait of Bascom Hawk."

While *Scribner's* was recognizing the inevitable, essays by Jack Conroy, Jim Tully, and others began to appear in *The American Mercury*, under H. L. Mencken's editorship and with

his support if not sympathy. Tully had already published road-kid, hobo, underside fiction with Mencken's support; by 1933, the year in which *The Anvil* first appeared, Conroy, a refugee from the defunct Willis-Overland plant in Toledo, had returned to Moberly, where he turned the articles into a book and the book into fiction.

When Covici-Friede published *The Disinherited* in 1933, curiously it appeared between two other major but quite different works to emerge from the Depression, *Young Lonigan* (1932) and *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*(1934), both by James T. Farrell and part of the great trilogy that deals with the decline and fall of a young American. It appeared, too, in close proximity to two other quite different works of the Depression, Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) and Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935).

Farrell's novels and those by West and McCoy have much more in common philosophically with Conrad's *Temper* and Eaton's *Backfurrow* than with Conroy's *The Disinherited.* Conrad's Rinelli and Eaton's Dutton are victims not of the social system, whether in the country or the city, but of the emptiness of their own lives, the self-victimization of sex and of beliefs rooted in self-delusion, and the random violence of a universe reflected in the society around them. Neither writer sees any hope for salvation or fulfillment; the system, like the universe, simply is, and neither the individual nor a class can change it.

For West, too, reality is neither a changeable system nor a source of either belief or feeling, and to search for either will lead inevitably through suffering to the ultimate horror. Horace McCoy's novel, regarded in France as the great American Existential novel, is, like West's, neither a social protest novel nor a celebration of life or the proletariat or the revolution. Although its subject matter and characters are drawn directly out of a peculiarly American Depression phenomenon, the marathon dance, it is set in a dancehall on the Pacific south of Los Angeles, as far West as its people can go, and it lies almost within sight of the glitter of Hollywood. The people, caught up in a struggle for survival in the meaningless ritual of the dance, are hoping at once to be "noticed" and fulfill the Hollywood

promise, and to survive—the hour, the day, the dance. Individual after individual collapses, and yet the dance goes on, the participants the exploited, and their survival the result of the law of the jungle in its rawest terms—cheating, fighting, holding on, knowing that there is no place to go, the dance clearly as pointless as the world, indeed the universe around them.

Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* has much in common with the others: the failure of dreams and of myths, the stratification and exploitation of the working class, the victimization of individuals in an unfeeling system, the helplessness of the individual, the economic exile of people, the loss of faith of the sensitive protagonist Larry Donavan. The farms are as hopeless as Eaton's. The factories as brutal as Conrad's, the system as impersonal as West's and McCoy's; individuals, victims of exploitation and/or their own weaknesses, fall by the wayside. Bull Market, the prosperity of the twenties, never fulfills its promise to the workers, although many are mutely, docilely content, and little more than sustenance trickles down. But the Hard Winter, that of the aftermath of the crash, creates what are truly the Disinherited, exiles in their own land, without either illusions or hope. Deterioration, degeneration, and death become the dreaded reality for the Disinherited.

But there is a difference. Larry Donavan, son of a miner and heir to the nineteenth century American promise loses one faith—that in the Horatio Alger myth—as he wanders picaresquely through MidAmerica, from rural Missouri to Detroit and back again, but he finds another, the cause of organization, of revolution, of the means by which a people can reclaim their inheritance. The novel, unlike the others, ends on a muted note of confidence, or romantic faith in the human ability to triumph.

The Disinherited was seen at once as the true proletarian novel, celebrating the individual, denouncing the system, pointing the way to revolution and fulfillment. It was, as Michael Gold pointed out in the *New Masses*, "a victory against capitalism . . .", "a significant class portent, . . ." one of the "revolution-minded novels" that will make a difference.

Truly proletarian, nevertheless the novel rises above doctrine. It is at the same time a true portrayal of the underside of America that we choose too frequently to forget. It is neither a

period piece nor social propaganda, but a living picture of Americans in crisis, in torment, in a set of circumstances that are unbelievable yet real, a novel that of all the genre is deserving of the literary recognition that it has finally received, just as, in the 1930s, it provided the mark by which other young writers could measure their work.

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THE "UNCLASSED" REBEL POET

BERNARD F. ENGEL

The proletarian literature of Europe has found no match in the United States, where writing that presents working class people is likely to be in that tradition of humanitarianism that Vernon Louis Parrington, for example, inaccurately labeled Jeffersonian liberalism. Even during the Depression of the 1930s, few American writers proclaimed Marxism. One thinks of Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936), with its recognition of the radical Mac but refusal to name "the Party" that he speaks for, even of MacLeish's poem "Speech to Those Who Say Comrade" (1935), with its rejection of the term "comrade" unless it comes from one who has shared hard experience. Such writers as Howells, Garland, and Norris had a generalized, nontheoretical concern with the collective good. In the Depression, Dos Passos and Farrell joined Steineck in sympathizing with members of the underclass but remaining aloof from proposals for systematic reform. A few, all of them lesser knowns, did express social views associated with the far left—Robert Cantwell, Waldo Frank, Albert Halper, Josephine Herbst among them. Even these writers, however, usually avoided socialist or other systematic theories: their alleged radicalism is, by the standards of a European or Chinese Marxist, soft-headed because it arises from and expresses not an understanding of society as divided into rigid and hostile socioeconomic classes, but an empathy with the individual as one's fellow sufferer.

Certainly the humanitarian is the mode of Jack (John Wesley) Conroy (1899-). The radicalism of the verse in the three *Unrest* anthologies and in the periodical *The Rebel Poet,* all edited or co-edited by Conroy, is that not of Marx but of the romantic individualist. To see the poet as a rebel against what a

later generation would come to call the establishment is, indeed, to see him not as spokesman for a socioeconomic class, but as the defiant loner, the Prometheus who when unbound becomes, as Shelley tells us, not only free and "uncircumscribed" but also "unclassed"—not, one would suppose, the ideal situation for a bard or prophet of the proletarian state.

What Conroy and other radical poets were carrying on was the tradition, stemming from the more idealistic of the Puritans, that America should be different and better. In the 1920s and even the 1930s, artists and intellectuals were still reeling from the shock of the unchecked industrialism that had destroyed for many the faith that America was to be either different or better. Gone, so it seemed, was the hope for an American commonwealth that would be as a city upon a hill. Only one more in a world of nation-states, America seemed to be evolving toward the ancient system in which a handful of rich owners lord it over masses of workers destined to the condition of a peasantry.

Conroy's autobiographical novel *The Disinherited* (1933) illustrates the point. The speaker, Larry Donovan, moves from boyhood to young manhood in the period from the 19teens through the 1920s into the beginnings of the Depression in the early 1930s. He drifts from one short-lived manual labor job to another, from the coal mines of his boyhood town Monkey Nest (based on Conroy's own hometown, Moberly, Mo.) to such equally brutalizing work as general laborer in a railroad shop, ditch digger on a pipeline project, and bricklayer on a new highway.

Donovan knows despairing stretches of unemployment, hitches frequent rides on freight trains to track down jobs or rumors of jobs, enters bitter competition with hordes of others to catch the eye of an underboss who will take on perhaps five of them, and, when hired, undergoes toil that kills the spirit and is likely to maim or even destroy the body. Until the last dozen pages, however, this richocheting from disaster to catastrophe seems to make no difference in his thinking: there is nothing to indicate that Donovan sees need for basic change, nor even perceives that society is divided into economic classes, and there is only rare use of the jargon of porletariat and bourgeoisie and revolution. In the ending, however, we hear that Donovan, who has now read Marx, will go out to be a party organizer. He

appears to be impelled to this mission not by socialist theory but by hero worship for the organizer Hans, who, noting his fondness for poetry, tells him that "The kind of poetry we live and see is terrible as well as majestic, sometimes it's bloody and grim and it takes a stout heart to keep knocking away" (308).

This vision is again that not of socialist realism but of Tom Joad, the young romantic who is fascinated by what appears to be excitingly heroic individual action. The experienced—witness Mac, the organizer in *In Dubious Battle*—would tell him that the revolutionary must spend nineteen twentieths of his time organizing, making speeches, writing tracts, and pleading for money. Conroy's own attitude toward the scripture of most radicals is to the point: Daniel Aaron says of him that "He cared little for Marxism in 1933 and knew less," and quotes him as remarking some years later "Just to look at *Das Kapital* on the shelf gave me a headache" (xii).

The chief complaint in *The Disinherited,* indeed, is not that workers are an oppressed class, but that the work they do is always hard and often dangerous. What the novel does not envisage is what seems obvious to those of us who have hindsight—that the Roosevelt administration's establishment of the eight-hour day, unemployment pay, and health and safety rules in mills and factories would rather quickly blunt most protest. But it is useful to remind the reader that laxity in these matters could easily bring a justifiable return of reformist demands. For those who desire fundamental change in the economic system, it is instructive to see how strong the individualistic tradition in American life is, how easily a reform-minded president and Congress can act against specific injustices and thereby pull the fangs of any movement that is not grounded in careful and thorough theoretical understanding. Without that understanding, writers may continue, as Eric Homberger puts it, to equivocate, to be torn between hopes for structural change and satisfaction with simple application of humane principles.

Turning to the verse in publications Conroy edited or helped edit, it is necessary to remind oneself that anthologies and periodicals represent the tastes of their editors, not necessarily those of the majority of participants in a social movement. The reader will note immediately that many of the poems in the anthologies are not political in any obvious sense. Those that do

deal with or allude to the social system often seem to be advocating humane treatment of workers rather than fundamental change. Yet it is reasonable, in view of the fate of American radical movements, to deduce that the mildly reformist poems in the three *Unrest* anthologies, published annually from 1929 to 1931, and in the periodical *The Rebel Poet*, published in 17 issues from 1931 through October 1932, represented at least a strong faction in the purportedly radical thought of the time.

Unrest: The Rebel Poets' Anthology for 1929, gives 159 poems by 56 poets. If there is a prevailing note, it is not a cry for change in the socioeconomic system but a lament over the hardships and tiresomeness of work. Harold Bergman's "Rhythm of Work" is a typical selection, 19 lines beginning:

> This is the chant of the tired toiler:
> Get up, eat, go to work,
> Come home, eat, go to sleep,

Such recognition of the displeasures of toil is at least as old as Genesis. For a modern example, one may recall the report that Lee Iacocca, told of assembly line workers' complaints that their jobs are boring, supposedly said of life in the executive suite, "Hell, it's boring up here." No doubt there is a need to reform the ways we work. But boredom has rarely been the great concern of radical politics.

Most of the selections are deadly—often, one must say, deadeningly—serious. One of the rare touches of humor is in S. Bert Cooksley's "Out of Work," reprinted from *New Masses*, telling how a man in the hospital kills himself while the nurse is staring out the window. The second of the poem's two quatrains reads:

> They wondered where he found the knife.
> They ferreted the right address
> And stuffed his cheeks and wrote his wife
> That he was coming by express.

The poem is hardly a paean to radical thought: only the title gives it a social bearing.

Many other pieces have no obvious relevance to the political. Verne Bright's "The White Witch," subtitled "Salem—1692,"

is in the debunking mode, an allegation that a woman was burned to death as a witch "Because she held the loveliness / Of dreams within her eyes . . ." Ten short love poems by Harry Crosby were perhaps included because Crosby was moderately well known. The lyrics are given in the slightly experimental syntax Crosby was noted for; they have no political implications.

When there is a political cast to a poem, it is likely to be heavy-handed. Mary Jenniss in "Equality" states the ideal of equality in hiring, regardless of workers' ages, and then seeks to make the piece satiric by use of the ending line (printed in small capitals in the original) "Would god that a fable were truth!" This ending makes a reversal that seems propagandistic, rather than revelatory. Another note of hopelessness is in Joseph Kalar's "They Blow Whistles for the New Year," from *New Masses*. The 27 lines, which twice observe that "Men are flyspecks / on white parchment of life," note that as the New Year's Eve is rung in forty men—"miners, railroadmen, textile-workers," all apparently in jail at the moment—ask "what the hell is all the noise about?" One assumes an implication that the men are locked up for radical activity, but there is nothing in the poem to make this point directly.

As good a poem as any in the collection is Conroy's own "Journey's End," a salute to "Kokomo Joe," described as a restless wanderer who found no answers to his "quest" though he rode the rails from Arizona and Chihuahua to Alabama and on, until the icy night when a "railroad bull" stepped on his fingers, causing him to fall to his death. The poem asks if Kokomo Joe's quest continues. Despite the mention of the cop's meanness, there is nothing to make Kokomo Joe a representative of the proletariat: he is rather a loner driven by the restless spirit that finds no answers to its unstatable questions. The 29 lines of unrhymed verse are Sandburgian in their length (up to 15 syllables) and their tone of suggestive questioning, but they are less disciplined to everyday observation and expression—or, to put it another way, Conroy seems to want to escape the restrictions of Sandburg's colloquial realism.

Unrest for 1930, dedicated to Upton Sinclair, gives 84 poems by 64 poets. Conroy's contribution, "Dusky Answer," reprinted from *The Morada*, presents the answer of a black man from Georgia to an uncomprehending fellow worker who asks him

why he comes north to "take us white men's jobs" and work for less pay than whites get. The black man replies that in Georgia the glimmer of the fireflies is softer than the electric lights of the North, that the drumming of Georgia woodpeckers does not jar like the air hammers of the North, and that he misses his family. He has given no direct answer to the question, but "the droop" of his lips and the glint of his eye give the speaker the realization that "Something must be rotten down in Georgia!" A number of other poems in the 1930 volume focus on the situation of blacks (a note that appears also in *The Disinherited* as a black bricklayer is proud to be the pace-setter on a road gang until he collapses). John Owen's "Black Proletariat" is a 19-line urging to the thoughtful to:

> Strike from black wrists and legs the chains that bind,
> And conjure up new visions to the mind,
> That shall transcend race, colour, caste and creed—

At a time when both radicals and liberals frequently argued for humane but separate treatment of blacks, the idealism that would transcend considerations of race was unusual. There are not enough such pieces to suggest that their attitudes were typical. One may note, incidentally, that Conroy later edited books with Arna Bontemps.

Touches of Marxist diction do appear in a few pieces. Appealing to the memory of dead revolutionaries provided a topic for some. Samuel Moss in "The Red Flag" declares that the spirit of the dead—presumably, revolutionaries—will triumph under the red banner. Lilith Lorraine in "I Tell You that America Shall Rise," from *New Masses,* says in 16 lines that "poets are in exile, patriots hushed" but that

> . . . . . the Exiles will return,
> And if they falter in the ripe, red dawn,
> The phantom army of our glorious dead
> Will seize their fallen swords, and carry on!

Such appeals can verge on the fatuous, of course. Louise Burton Laidlaw's declamatory "To Comrades," appealing to workers as "Iron men, with iron fists, / And iron in their hearts," sentimentalizes working people as it urges them to unite:

> They are waiting for us, comrades—
> Come, we must not lag behind;
> We must join our hands together
> In the service of mankind.

The reader may recall both MacLeish's objection to indiscriminate use of "Comrade," and George Babbit's Rotarian notion of "service."

The anthologies give many poems on brakemen, miners, millhands, and hoboes—the working men of industrialized society—but they give few on farmers and on the situation of women. One exception is Lucia Trent's "Breed, Women, Breed!," 214 lines sarcastically urging women to raise men suited to the mechanized society, as in these lines from the second stanza:

> Breed for the bankers, the crafty and terrible masters of men,
> Breed a race of machines,
> A race of aenemic, round-shouldered, subway-herded machines!

Three prominent figures in the 1930 and 1931 anthologies are Tom Mooney, and Sacco and Vanzetti. Mooney, an independent labor organizer, was arrested on charges that he had bombed the San Francisco Preparedness Day parade in July 1916, and was sentenced to death in a case marked by sloppy handling of evidence. The sentence was commuted to life imprisonment; leftists, and even such normally Republican papers as the Portland *Oregonian,* argued that he should have a retrial. He was released in 1939, after years of contention. Observers on the left frequently saw him as the quintessential American: thus Lucia Trent, in "Tom Mooney," a 160-line salute that originally appeared in *Unity,* declared "You symbolize, Tom Mooney, / Our rightful heritage." The most substantial of several pieces on Sacco and Vanzetti is Lola Ridge's "Three Men Die," five pages of unrhymed lines subtitled "August 23, 1927," appearing in the 1931 volume. The third man of the title is a Christ-like spirit, and representative of labor, who consoles the two men on the night before their execution.

Sadness at what America has lost, recognition that the West is no longer an avenue of escape, and an anticipation of concerns about the environment appear in Gail Wilhelm's "Puget Sound: A Contrast." The 17 lines, from *New Masses,* say that the North-

west once was a beauty spot where the Indian was enthralled by the sunrise. But today the poem asserts, editorially enough:

> . . . . a munition plant
> Stands between trees and water,—
> evidence of America's progress,—
> a sprawling monument to civilization. . . .

Unrest 1931 has verse condemning lynch law, supporting strikers, attacking Chiang Kai-Shek as a traitor, and celebrating Debs. The most interesting note is its presentation of contrasting attitudes on the industrial era. Stanley Coblentz is expectably satiric in the 4-line "Machine Age," observing that we "make machines of wood and wire, which then / Are used to make machines of man once more!" But Sherwood Anderson is unexpectedly celebratory in "Machine Song: Automobile." The poem, running from pages 15 through 20, uses long lines in the mode of Sandburg to salute the automobile, and other machines as well, as convenient, and parallel to us in the fact that they wear out and their components are recycled. The conclusion asks if in this "new age" singers and painters will celebrate life in the factory: "Will you take the blue by the inside of factories at night as once you took sunlight and moonlight?" There is no apparent irony: rather, Anderson seems, like Hart Crane, to have been making the perhaps foredoomed effort to accommodate poetry to the machine age.

Verse in the periodical *The Rebel Poet* attacks standard targets—John D. Rockefeller, Mayor Jimmie Walker, the Salvation Army (which, following Joe Hill, the poets accuse of offering "pie in the sky"), the break up of the bonus march, and "munitions makers" (alleged, in the 1930s manner, to be the fomenters of war). The September 1932 issue opens with an editorial pleading for money, signed by Conroy, followed by a two-page "Open Letter" by Philip Rahv that eagerly predicts the coming of "the revolution":

> The extreme impoverishment of the working masses, so brilliantly indicated by the Marxian prognosis of the disease and death of capitalism, is now sweeping five sixths of the world's area . . . . The exploitative society of capitalism is nearing its end, and the world proletariat is preparing to rise . . .

Among reviews is Hoder Morine's comment on Upton Sinclair's *American Outpost,* an autobiography telling of Sinclair's first 30 years. Morine is sarcastic, relating the author's continuing membership in the Socialist Party—"made up of lawyers and retired real estate speculators"—to his dabbling with diets and nudity. The journal, printed as a newspaper approximately 8 by 10 inches in size, obviously was hospitable to those on the left, whether they were mildly reformist or forthrightly Communist.

The introduction to the 1930 volume of *Unrest* declares that poets are prophets and rebels, that they are "the pioneers of consciousness" and that the volume "is full of mental T.N.T. for blowing up Capitalism" (11). The hardbitten radical will realize that it takes more than slambang declarations to bring fundamental social change. The fulminations of these and other purportedly radical writers of the decade that brought the New Deal, however, surely helped bring on Roosevelt's reforms, the laws and policies that if not altering the structure of the socioeconomic system certainly make it more humane. Conroy and his peers spoke for the workingman at a time when few did. It was a major accomplishment to move this placid, enormous and at the time uncaring society to take heed of what was happening to the workers whose shoulders make possible its productivity. Looking back over the almost 60 intervening years, it seems apparent that the reformists, "uncircumscribed" by Marxism or other systematic doctrines, were in line with the governing socioeconomic tendencies of this century.

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