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MidAmerica XXXII

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

DAVID D. ANDERSON, EDITOR
MARCIA NOE, ISSUE EDITOR

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In Honor of
Mary DeJong Obuchowski

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PREFACE

On May 12, 2005, members of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature gathered in East Lansing for the thirty-fifth annual meeting of the Society. This year's conference hosted the first annual Midwestern Film Festival, in addition to the Cultural Heritage of the Midwest Symposium and the Midwest Poetry Festival.

At the awards banquet on Friday night, prizes were given for best poem, story, and essay read at the 2004 conference. Patricia Clark (Grand Valley State University) received the Gwendolyn Brooks Award for her poem "Astrid, Siggy, and Bert," and Michael Kula (Carroll College) received the Paul Somers Award for his short story, "Shag Carpet." The Midwest Heritage Prize for Best Essay went to Luchen Li (Kettering University) for "A Heart Enshrouded in the Landscape: An Impressionistic Reading of 'Big Two-Hearted River.'"

Margo LaGattuta (University of Michigan-Flint) won the Mark Twain Award for distinguished contributions to Midwestern literature, and Mary DeJong Obuchowski (Central Michigan University) won the MidAmerica Award for distinguished contributions to the study of Midwestern literature.

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LOST LUGGAGE

CLAIRE VAN BREEMEN DOWNES

I am the family luggage gone astray -
the crates of household goods
deep in the ship's hold
(the heavy silver and the Belgian linens -
the rocking-horse with the mane of real hair)

While they dawdled in Whitechapel
fiddling with visas pulling American strings
I set off on my own time.
My directions said *Johannesburg*. No change
of ticket came in time
to send me otherways.
No one had told *me* frightening tales
of wars of empire The ship was good enough;
the voyage, fast. The rotting warehouse,
confusion, and the pilfering - that was the delay.

I am not to blame
that I arrived twelve months tardy
and bedraggled at the shabby Grand
Rapids house, that the neighbors
assembled for the great sight
exulted secretly at my riddled carcass:
no silver no linens no
rocking-horse no no no

Sneering they went away
pretending to believe
saying to each other,
"We knew it all along.
They're just liars
and poor like the rest of us."

REVIEW ESSAY: HOW MIDWESTERN LITERATURE CAN HELP US ALL GET ALONG

MARCIA NOE

Timothy B. Spears's *Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City, 1871-1919* (University of Chicago Press, 2005)

Tom Lutz's *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value* (Cornell University Press, 2004)

Robert Dunne's *A New Book of the Grotesques: Contemporary Approaches to Sherwood Anderson's Early Fiction* (Kent State University Press, 2005)

William Barillas's *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland* (Ohio University Press, 2006)

Katherine Joslin's *Jane Addams: A Writer's Life* (University of Illinois Press, 2004)

David R. Pichaske's *Rooted: Seven Midwest Writers of Place* (University of Iowa Press, 2006).

In a small Illinois town, a Catholic priest apologizes for praising the local congressman; the legislator's long record of commitment to progressive causes turns out to include a pro-choice stance. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. quotes David Brock, the CEO of Media Matters for America as saying, "We're in a situation where you have 'red facts' and 'blue facts'" (*Vanity Fair*, May 2005, 215). Comedian Brian Regan observes of Atlanta's Interstate 285: "Everybody is either

going three miles an hour or 119. There really is nothing in between" (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 29 May 2006, C3).

"Nothing in between." How apt a description for the polarization that cripples American society today. Its sharp divisions originated in part in the urban-rural dichotomy that began to shape the American consciousness over a century ago and still informs the culture. The great migration from country to city that dominated nineteenth-century American life was reflected in books by Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Hamlin Garland and others who became part of a literary movement that Carl Van Doren dubbed "the revolt from the village." For decades, this societal shift has conditioned us to think in terms of either/or rather than both/and. Today Americans seem divided as never before: coupon clippers and welfare recipients, Ivy League graduates and high school drop-outs, Luddites and techno-geeks, Weight Watchers and Fat Pride members, Christians and non-Christians, CBS and Fox News. As we have all observed, these extremes generate acrimonious discourse and oversimplification of issues rather than reasoned discussion and efforts to find points of agreement, as exemplified by the range of responses to the terrorists' attack on the World Trade Center, from Ward Churchill's characterization of the people who worked there as "little Eichmanns" to Ann Coulter's recommendation for dealing with the terrorists: "invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity," (*The Washington Monthly*, <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0111.coulterwisdom.html>). The current hot-button issue—what to do about eleven million illegal immigrants—predictably has our citizens divided into four opinion groups, according to *USA Today*, which reported that in two of the four groups, most people believe removing illegal immigrants would hurt our economy while in the other two groups, heavy majorities think the economy would benefit from their departure. "The four groups are starkly at odds on basic issues, making it difficult to see common ground" (http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-05-29-immigration-split_xhtml)

Ah, common ground—that elusive piece of real estate so many of us covet but can never quite close the deal on. Six recently published books in Midwestern studies that focus on reconciling cultural opposites may be helpful here, providing insight into our own polarized society and suggesting ways to think in terms of both/and rather

than either/or, value multiplicity and diversity, and engage in nuanced thinking about the issues that concern us as a people.

Timothy B. Spears's *Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City, 1871-1919* emphasizes this both/and approach. Spears argues that the literary culture of Chicago during this period, particularly the connections that its writers formed with each other, must be viewed within the context of the migration from the rural Midwest to be fully understood. He sees the interaction between Van Doren's village rebels and Chicago over seventy years of the city's literary history as a mutually beneficial interchange through which the migrants gained maturity while the city became more diverse. For these writers, Chicago was a place to construct a successful American self that comprised both the small-town Midwesterner and the city dweller. It is this double-voiced quality in their writing, the unique perspective of the provincial/sophisticate, that Spears has made the subject of his inquiry. He shows how writers such as Willa Cather, Jane Addams, Floyd Dell, Sherwood Anderson, and Carl Sandburg infused their work with this dual perspective, rendering their writing more complex, nuanced and meaningful. Sandburg's inclusion of nature imagery, particularly that of the prairie, in his Chicago poems exemplifies this kind of double vision; Anderson and Dell's provincial experience formed the basis of their modernism. As Spears observes, "Modern consciousness was built around the emotions associated with crossing the border from one culture to another" (247).

Tom Lutz also sees Van Doren's village rebels taking the both/and rather than the either/or route, a standpoint he terms an ethic of cosmopolitanism. In *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value*, this kind of doubleness is shown to characterize the insider/outsider who is committed to both the local and the global, to aesthetic values as well as political ones in "an ethos of representational inclusiveness of the widest possible affiliation and concurrently one of aesthetic discrimination and therefore exclusivity"(3). Lutz argues that the best of the Midwestern writers possess this cosmopolitan vista and shows how it pervades classic regional texts, such as Garland's "Up the Coulee," a story about a pair of brothers—one having left the Midwest to become a famous New York actor and his sibling who stayed home to work the family farm. The implied author endorses neither choice because the tale provides oscillating perspectives on each brother's situation that complicate the tale and discourage the reader from taking sides. Similarly, Cather's *O*

Pioneers! offers a multiplicity of viewpoints on such topics as nature, science, rural life, and social conventions and celebrates the richness of a prairie culture comprising a variety of ethnic groups, among them French, Swedish, Norwegian, Russian, and Czechoslovakian.

As we are well aware, academia has suffered from polarization no less than other sectors of American society. One skirmish in the culture wars finds poststructuralists and formalists squaring off over questions of canonicity; like the previously discussed scholars, Robert Dunne in *The New Book of the Grotesques: Contemporary Approaches to Sherwood Anderson's Early Fiction* is concerned with reconciling opposites, in this case conflicting approaches to literature. Is a poem, play or story a self-contained work of art or a socially and politically situated text that can function as an agent of social change? Dunne zeroes in on the early novels and the masterpiece of one of Spears's migrants, Sherwood Anderson, to argue that just as the New Critics taught us to admire the innovations in fictional technique Anderson used in *Winesburg, Ohio* and his short stories, so today's theorists can teach us additional ways to read and value his work. Dunne draws upon the Foucauldian notion of insanity as a deviation from social norms that creates alienation to illuminate the grotesques of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Similarly, he shows how Gadamer's and Derrida's writings on language as an indeterminate source of meaning can help us see Anderson's creation of these grotesques as a critique of the search for absolute truth and demonstrates how, in *Winesburg, Ohio*, language fails to communicate meaning but does function, as Foucault has shown, to enforce social norms through various forms of discourse. Dunne states that the purpose of his book is to provide the foundation for new critical approaches to Anderson's work; refusing to see him exclusively from a formalist or a post-modernist perspective, he endorses multiple viewpoints, writing that "[t]here are indeed many more Sherwood Andersons waiting to be discovered for readers of the new millennium" (115).

In *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland*, William Barillas explores the ways in which Willa Cather, Jim Harrison, Aldo Leopold, Theodore Roethke, and James Wright have redefined the Midwestern pastoral tradition. Barillas carefully lays the groundwork for his study, complicating our understanding of pastoralism by providing an account of the ways in which it has been conceptualized throughout the development of American thought. He identifies two main pastoral traditions: con-

servative pastoralism, an uncritical nostalgia for a past rural paradise that has often disguised or excluded evidence of environmental abuse and exploitation, and progressive pastoralism, which has encouraged and supported environmental activism and protested the commodification of Nature. He also discusses two dominant ideologies of pastoralism: that of Jeffersonian agrarianism, which posits equal access to the cultivation of land as the cornerstone of American democracy, and that of Romantic pastoralism, which locates in the human connection with Nature the possibility for epiphany, transcendence, and spiritual fulfillment.

Barillas shows how the five writers he discusses are able to reconcile utilitarian pastoralism with romantic pastoralism, arguing that they endorse the ideology of Jeffersonian agrarianism as well as the Romantic tendency to revere sacred sites in nature for their spiritual value, but deplore the employment of the agrarian ideal in the service of conquest and commodification, arguing instead for stewardship and balance between human needs and Nature's need.

Barillas traces Leopold's evolution from the young man who reveled in the wilderness of Michigan's Marquette Island to the Yale-trained forester to the proponent of the land ethic, as revealed in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). Influenced by both Henry David Thoreau and Gifford Pinchot, Leopold united "apparently unreconcilable perspectives: materialism and idealism, science and spirituality, domestication and wilderness" (103). This double vision served Leopold well as Professor of Game Management at the University of Wisconsin, where he taught the people of that state that humans have ethical responsibilities not only to each other, but to the land and to the animals and plants that live on it.

Likewise, for Barillas, Wright's best poems derive their energy from his conflicted views of his native Ohio valley, sometimes portrayed as an idyllic garden and other times as violated and corrupted territory. "Wright finally placed his faith in poetry as his own best means to bridge the rift in paradise, to re-establish the vital link between person and place" (167). Barillas's Midwestern pastoral includes the urban as well as the rural. "In southern Michigan, you are never far away from either a factory or a cornfield," he states (xiii). Throughout the book, the emphasis is on reconciling opposites, on inclusiveness, on integration of self with place, people with nature. "The journey home is not only to self but also to community," he asserts (205).

Katherine Joslin's *Jane Addams: A Writer's Life* gives us an in-depth look at another of Spears's provincials. Joslin argues that the Cedarville, Illinois, native based her Hull House project on heartland values as well as on her experience of urban life, placing community first, resisting the dichotomous thinking of city against country, and striving instead for diversity and multiplicity. Her study of Addams is focused on her books and articles; "the best-known public woman in the world" (132) was also a prolific writer, and Joslin's methodology is to use Addams's writings to illuminate her life in ways that can move us beyond the dichotomized stereotypes of Saint Jane or Red Jane. She persuades us to appreciate the literary Addams, a storyteller who expresses her moral imagination by using literary techniques such as suspense-heightening description, embedded narration, development of characters, and multiple voices. She shows how, in *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902), Addams creates three urban female characters to demonstrate how male and female modes of thinking and speaking can be united to empower the New Woman, how street scenes, taken from her observations in Chicago, enliven *Newer Ideals for Peace* (1907), and how techniques of literary naturalism borrowed from Dreiser, Norris and Zola are employed in *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909).

Like several of the books discussed above, David R. Pichaske's *Rooted: Seven Midwest Writers of Place* emphasizes community, nature and, especially, the notion of a literary work as a reflection of its environment. Instead of building a theoretical framework for his book in his introduction, Pichaske positions himself as an anti-theorist who wants "to model a way for the literary critic to begin not with French deconstructionist theory—or with any theory at all—but with text, landscape, and biography—a way to privilege writers over theoreticians" (xviii). But even though he doesn't explicitly develop a theoretical basis for his analysis, the notions that good writing is writing that is rooted in place and that this kind of writing can cure what ails us are assumptions that ground his discussion of the works he considers.

Pichaske surveys the major works of Dave Etter, William Kloefkorn, Norbert Blei, Linda Hasselstrom, Bill Holm, Jim Heynen, and Jim Harrison, emphasizing how their Midwestern environments have shaped who they are and how they write. He demonstrates how their works enact the reciprocal process through which place shapes thought and art, and art and thought shape place, asserting that they

can show us how to find ways to reconcile our divided selves, mainly through re-establishing community, which they and Pichaske conceive of as an antidote for the sense of loss that pervades Midwestern writing and the alienation produced by a homogenized culture. “[D]issociation from place (both the natural environment and its human component, including our own history) is the root of post-modern anxiety, and reconstructing a sense of communal place—which would not necessarily have to be rural in the traditional meaning of that word—is our only real hope of regaining sanity” (264).

Pichaske shows us how Dave Etter’s poems offer an escape from the soulless America of Wal-Mart and McDonald’s. “In preserving the old names, old stores, old language, old characters, old ways, Etter is in one sense encouraging the sense of community that Americans seem to have lost somewhere around 1970, with the national ascendancy of a postmodern sensibility” (37). Linda Hasselstrom’s efforts to reconcile her rancher’s perspective with her environmentalist commitment and her vision of the symbiotic relationship between human beings and the land as the source of spiritual sustenance, Jim Heynen’s quest to develop “a distinctively rural American esthetic” (231) that, in his fiction, fuses innocence and experience, the natural and the human, and Jim Harrison’s struggle to reconcile the local with the universal, as his works enact what Pichaske calls the two great themes of Midwestern literature, departure and return, are examples of the ways in which these authors “confront and work to resolve, however tentatively, dislocations of time and place”(264).

The words “ethos” and “ethic” appear frequently in several of the books discussed here; like them, this essay is grounded in the conviction that a work of literature is more than an endless chain of deferred meanings or a well-wrought urn frozen in time. The ethical criticism of Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth asserts that stories, plays, and poems can and should help us figure out who we are, what we value, and what we should do with our lives. The power of literature to enlarge our sympathies, enable us to imagine alternative possibilities, and give us an empathetic understanding of people who are different from us can be transformative, unlike the chaos of video game playing, Internet surfing, text messaging and reality television watching that passes for cultural engagement today. In *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum cites Walt Whitman’s belief that “literary art develops capacities for perception and judgment that are at the very

heart of democracy” (96). Even a cursory glance at the state of public discourse today reveals that there are a lot of undeveloped capacities for perception and judgment out there. The books discussed above suggest some ways to begin.

The University of Tennessee
at Chattanooga

ART AND THE IMMIGRANT: THE OTHER AS
MUSE IN CATHER'S *MY ÁNTONIA* AND
RØLVAAG'S *BOAT OF LONGING*

JEFFREY SWENSON

Ever since Blanche Gelfant questioned Jim Burden's "vision of the past" in her seminal article, "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*," critics have debated how closely Willa Cather's perspective and opinions are allied with Burden's. Critics such as Paula Woolley and Mary Paniccia Carden, in the tradition of Gilbert and Gubar, believe Cather undercuts the authority of Burden's male perspective in favor of a female one. Other scholars, including Ann Fisher-Wirth and Demaree Peck, read this distance as wishful thinking, instead linking the artistic visions of author and narrator. These debates hinge on gender, on whether Cather identifies more with Burden-as-writer than *Ántonia*-as-woman, but there are other ways to read the text.

My Ántonia (1918) also revolves around the European immigrant experience, especially in how that immigrant experience influences artistry and writing. In this sense, the relatively neglected novel *The Boat of Longing* (1921, 1933) by O.E. Rølvaag offers an interesting comparative to *Ántonia*.¹ Rølvaag's *Boat* and Cather's *Ántonia* both include immigrant violinists—*Boat* with its youthful protagonist, Nils Vaag, and *Ántonia* with the despondent Anton Shimerda—and both Cather and Rølvaag view art as an artifact created out of experience of the Other.² But because Cather was born in America and Rølvaag was an immigrant, their perspectives on that experience are fundamentally different. Cather's and Burden's, on the other hand, are the same.

Rølvaag's and Cather's disparate attitudes towards immigrants are revealed in their depictions of immigrant artists. In *Boat*, Nils is first inspired by the influence of strangers and exotic foreigners, and when he emigrates from Norway to America he finds that his music thrives

in liminal spaces where he can exist both as an insider and an outsider. Rølvaag recognizes the artistry that arises in such liminal spaces, but concludes that the invisibility of the immigrant drowns this artistry in a sea of anonymity. In *My Ántonia*, Anton Shimerda's outsider status drives not his own artistry, but Jim Burden's, whose conception of Shimerda as mentor begins a pattern of appropriation that continues throughout the novel. Though Cather was, according to Susan Rosowski, "the first to give immigrants heroic stature in serious American literature" (45), she gives immigrants—and finally all her non-Anglo characters—stature only to capture it and use it as her own. Cather establishes an ethnic and racial hierarchy wherein the Anglo-Saxon Protestant figure—a figure she relates to—stands above the ethnic and racial Other. If Rølvaag's immigrants are invisible, Cather's immigrants are only as visible as she allows them to be.

Boat of Longing is one of Rølvaag's least-read works. First published in Norwegian in 1921, the novel was not translated into English until 1933, when interest in Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* series had created a demand for his work. The immigration story is told in four sections, the first and last set in a small fishing village in Norway, and the middle two in Minnesota. The novel primarily follows Nils, an idealistic violin player who dreams of fulfilling his artistic potential in the United States, but it also considers the impact of Nils's departure on Jo and Anna, the parents he leaves behind. The *Boat of Longing*, a ghost ship of local myth known to draw fishermen to oblivion, becomes the novel's central image, its mysterious appearance linked to the perils of immigration to the United States.

Living with his parents in an isolated cottage miles from the small fishing village of Dunjarness, Norway, Nils experiences singularly few foreign influences growing up. His first is an eccentric old fiddler who teaches him to play the violin, and his second is Zalma, a mysterious, raven-haired young woman and the sole survivor of a shipwreck, who comes to live with the Vaags. Early in the novel, the old fiddler comes to lodge with the family, and by the time he dies Nils knows all of his songs and has begun to compose his own. Nils's violin gives him a feeling of transcendence whenever he plays and composes, but it also makes him an outsider within his close family: "[H]e would sit for hours with his violin. His eyes would then take on a new look, dwelling upon something far away, beyond the border of any land. Jo didn't like this fiddling, for whenever Nils sat thus he would enter another world whither Jo could not follow."³

Nils's playing, though nourished by his life as a fisherman, separates him from his family.

Nils's art comes to full bloom under the influence of an exotic outsider and love interest—Zalma. Fishermen discover the dark-haired, foreign young woman in a small, isolated fishing station located on a rocky crag of an island far off the coast. A victim of a shipwreck, she fears the fishermen and flees from those who attempt to rescue her; she subsists on the rations they leave at the station. The fishermen fear her difference, her wildness: "The sight of her may well have been a disquieting one to these men, who were not easily frightened. . . . There was so little of the human about her . . . she looked more like a great black bird with its wings folded" (*BL* 13, ellipsis Rølvaag's). When the fishing season ends and the villagers decide she must be rescued from the island, Jo volunteers to take in the young woman. In a land of fair-haired Norwegians, Zalma's distinctly dark coloring continues to set her apart, as critic Einar Haugen notes, describing her as "an exotic creature with raven-black hair" (54). Though Zalma is clearly ethnically Other, Rølvaag leaves her ethnicity indeterminate until just before she leaves the family, when her wreck is identified as that of a Russian fur trading ship, and she is identified as "the daughter of a wealthy Jew, a goldsmith" (*BL* 32). Before this point, Zalma is simply Other in custom, language, and appearance, the embodiment of unspecified Otherness in Nils's cloistered world.

Though she cannot speak Norwegian, Zalma soon finds a connection with Nils, and their connection drives his music. During her stay with the Vaags, Zalma is friendly but silent, but when Nils plays his violin, she comes to life: "She stood harking to the tones; yet not to them, either, exactly, her look more like that of one straining to catch faint, far-off sounds, uncertain just what they are" (*BL* 19). Though Zalma slowly learns Norwegian, she expresses herself best without words whenever Nils plays his violin and composes songs for her. When Nils plays the composition he will later title "The Boat of Longing," Zalma is driven first to tears and then to laughter, finally embracing him. Paul Reigstad recognizes the multiple implications of this moment:

On one level, this scene conveys the realization of Nils and the girl that they are in love; on a deeper level, it represents Nils' consecration as an artist. When he embraces the "dark girl" and aligns his

spirit with her, he accepts the imaginative world she signifies: beauty, mystery, sorrow, elemental passion. (80)

The couple's love and Nils's art are inextricably linked; Zalma's "exotic" longings and "mystery" inspire Nils. Indeed, Raychel Reiff sees Zalma as "symbolic of the life of the creative imagination" (34), serving as a muse to Nils's budding artistic talent.⁴

Jo distrusts his son's romantic attachment to Zalma, believing she is "practicing her tricks on [Nils], trying to bewitch him" (*BL* 25). On a deeper level, however, he fears not so much Zalma the girl (who could, after all, be a suitable match for Nils) as he does Zalma the muse. Under her influence, his son becomes every day more of an artist and outsider. When village officials finally discover the identity of Zalma's wrecked Russian ship, Jo seizes the opportunity to send her home while Nils is away on an overnight fishing voyage. Nils returns to find Zalma gone, and soon after he decides to leave for America. He speaks of his emigration not in terms of his lost love, but of his art, believing that America is where he can become "that which is highest of all" (*BL* 70). When his mother asks him why he cannot stay in Norway, he states that he must go "because life is not in this place" (*BL* 69). In America, Nils seeks to explore the realm of difference, to develop his art in the role of the outsider.

In contrast to Nils Vaag, Cather's immigrant violinist in *My Ántonia* is older, no longer full of vigor, and defeated. Having given up on life, Anton Shimerda never plays his violin in America. It is a difference that signals Cather's attitudes toward art, the immigrant and the Other. Through her narrator Jim, Cather adopts the difference and artistry of the immigrant and then refines that artistic immigrant experience into a classical artistic model. Much like Nils Vaag, Jim draws upon the outsider as the wellspring of his artistic development; Anton is as much of an artistic wellspring to Jim as Zalma is to Nils. If Nils draws his artistic strength from an intimacy with Zalma, Jim simply appropriates Mr. Shimerda's experiences for his art.

From his first meeting with the Shimerdas, Jim is fascinated by Anton. His description of the old violin player is detailed, and those details mark difference, refinement, and skill:

I noticed how white and well-shaped his own hands were. They looked calm, somehow, and skilled. His eyes were melancholy, and were set back deep under his brow. His face was ruggedly formed, but it looked like ashes—like something from which all the warmth

and light had died out. Everything about this old man was in keeping with his dignified manner. He was neatly dressed. Under his coat he wore a knitted gray vest, and, instead of a collar, a silk scarf of dark bronze-green, carefully crossed and held together by a red coral pin.⁵

Jim makes note of the old man's "dignified manner" and neat dress, but this dress bears notes of the exotic, as he wears a "silk scarf of dark bronze-green" and a "red coral pin." Along with this refined difference comes a capacity for artistry in Anton's "calm," "skilled" and "well-shaped" hands, hands that denote Mr. Shimerda's value as a mentor, despite the fact that we never hear him play. Jim does not need him to play, for he gathers inspiration from the image and not the actual figure of the artist, as Woolley has argued: "Despite Mr. Shimerda's marginal status as immigrant, Jim respects him and his music because of their connection to European high culture. He repeatedly thinks of Mr. Shimerda in positive terms and dissociates him from the 'crowded clutter' and dirtiness of the Shimerdas' cave" (167).

Jim's attachment to this idealized image of Mr. Shimerda becomes apparent when Antonia claims that her father is unhappy in America, and that he never plays his violin:

"My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; for weddings, and for dance. Here never. When I beg for him to play, he shake his head no. Some days he take his violin out of his box and make with his fingers on the strings, like this, but never he make the music. He don't like this kawn-tree."

"People who don't like this country ought to stay at home," I said severely, "We don't make them come here." (MÁ 102)

Jim's conception of Mr. Shimerda as old-country artist, mentor, and romantic outsider conflicts with Antonia's description of the reality of an artist who does not revel in his outsider status. Though his experience as Other makes him a poignant figure to Jim, Mr. Shimerda drowns in the outsider experience and is artistically impotent. To deal with this artistic failure, Jim shifts between the experience of the immigrant outsider and that of the cultural insider; he identifies an idealized old-world image of his artistic muse while willfully ignoring Mr. Shimerda's new-world difficulties.

Indeed, when Mr. Shimerda kills himself, Jim is forced to rationalize the act and to appropriate the old man's noble Bohemian past.

In remembering Mr. Shimerda, Jim romanticizes his connection to the old country while appropriating his experiences. Jim takes Mr. Shimerda's memories as his own:

There, on the bench behind the stove, I thought and thought about Mr. Shimerda. . . . It was as if I had let the old man in out of the tormenting winter, and were sitting there with him. I went over all that Antonia had ever told me about his life before he came to this country; how he used to play the fiddle at weddings and dances. . . . Such vivid pictures came to me that they might have been Mr. Shimerda's memories, not yet faded out from the air in which they had haunted him. (MÁ 116-17)

Jim imagines the old man's memories as a freely given gift; he says the "vivid pictures came to me." In these Bohemian memories, Mr. Shimerda remains a happy and productive Bohemian artist, and Jim feels free to draw upon these exotic memories in his writing.

Both Nils and Jim seek out and immerse themselves in the experiences of the outsider, but where they move with those experiences is startlingly different. Nils leaves Norway to seek the experience of the outsider, while Jim learns to appropriate the immigrant experience to serve his own artistic longings. These formative experiences shape the way they develop as artists, and the way they use the experience of the Other to guide that art. For as Nils seeks to find liminal cultural space, one where he can exist in both Norwegian and chaotic American worlds, Jim seeks to create a hierarchy of difference, one that allows him to appropriate just the right kind of immigrant experience.

After *Boat of Longing* makes a rough transition between Norway and America, Nils finds himself awash in an American society where he is perpetually the outsider. In Minneapolis he lives in a hotel nicknamed "Babel" for the number of different languages spoken there, and his main diversion is to walk the crowded streets of Nicollet Avenue. He compares the experience of walking with the crowd to "gliding into the stream," but he always sees himself as a person apart from the sea of humanity: "Could he, too, he often wondered, become like these—as good and as happy—could he become one of them?" (BL 90). Unhappy with his job cleaning the floors of saloons, his lack of friends, and his stagnation as a violinist after a few months in America, Nils takes to wandering. In those wanderings he finds a place where he is not a complete outsider, and there his art flourishes.

One Sunday afternoon, Nils walks along Washington Avenue to the bluffs above the Mississippi River. Below the Washington Avenue Bridge he finds the Bohemian Flats, a small squatter community of ramshackle houses—a community of immigrants. Nils skips stones on the river and whistles a Norwegian folk tune. This attracts Kristine Dahl, an older Norwegian woman who invites him into her small and distinctly Norwegian home. Here, Nils finds a liminal space between Norway and America where he can play his violin. As Rachel Reif has noted: “When [Nils] plays ‘The Boat of Longing’ on [Dahl’s] dead fiancé’s violin, he immediately connects the legendary ship with the violin through which he now can make imaginary trips back to Norway” (36). Only in this mediated space is Nils able to connect to Norway, thus being both immersed as outsider in the American city and immersed as insider in the ethnic enclave that is Kristine Dahl’s home. His artistic production is necessarily connected to liminal spaces—spaces he can be both insider and outsider.

To further develop this liminal space, Nils seeks to draw from his own artistic heritage, thus bringing Norway into his American experience, mediating the outsider/insider dynamic. In his book *Immigrant Minds, American Identities* (2000), Orm Øverland discusses multiple strategies immigrants use to assert their value in American society, one of which “was to affirm the Old World identity and insist that it too was American” (2). Not coincidentally, one of Øverland’s examples of this phenomenon is Rølvaag himself, who in 1926 gave a speech to a group of Norwegian-Americans fixing Norwegian culture as a wellspring for American success:

He admonished his listeners not to listen to the voices that urged them to “tear down” the memorials to their own pioneer past in America and expressed the hope that later generations of Norwegian Americans would be able “to afford to have forefathers and the faith that the faith and works of the fathers would become a source of strength for the race.” (*Immigrant* 4-5)

Given Rølvaag’s sentiments, it is not surprising that Nils seizes upon his interactions with Kristine Dahl as well as the poetry of his drunken roommate, Karl Weismann, as a wellspring of Norwegian heritage when in Minneapolis.

Dahl’s home on the Bohemian Flats is a space that encompasses both the American and Norwegian experience for Nils, but

Weismann finds himself cut off and invisible in America. Rølvaag tempers Weismann’s consistent production as an artist with his doubtful though unmentioned prospects for publication in America. Still, though the poet is old and embittered, he has a fondness for Nils and aligns the young man with the characters of Norwegian myth in his poetry. Haugen notes, “The focus of Weismann’s often befuddled preaching to his protégè is the folktale of Espen the Ashlad and his quest for the princess who is imprisoned in the Castle of Soria Moria” (56). The poet writes a lyric version of the Soria Moria myth, wherein a young hero, Askeladden—the Ashlad, pursues the quest of winning the girl, the gold, and half the kingdom. Nils reads himself into the role of hero, as Weismann intends, but he doubts if he can slay the troll, a task metaphoric of triumphing as an immigrant: “The lad in the fairy tale became the lad in the poem; and the lad of the poem, himself. ‘I’ll never win there!’ [Nils] cried” (*BL* 138). Nils, frustrated with his beginnings in America, does not feel he embodies a mythic hero.

Both artists are lost within an American society that will not recognize them. Kristoffer Paulson observes that when Nils asks Weismann to translate the term “injustice,” a word he has heard shouted repeatedly to a crowd on a street corner, the poet talks about invisibility:

“Can you imagine a person,” he continued, “who walks about among fellow beings and is not seen by them? He meets one, stops and talks to him. He whom he addresses passes by in care-free complacency. He has not heard him, not seen him! . . .

“The lone one moves on. He encounters thousands, hails them, calls with might and main—only to find that not one among the thousand is even aware of his presence!” (*BL* 140-41, ellipses Rølvaag’s).

Paulson goes on to relate this invisibility to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, linking Ellison’s vision of “the Black’s loss of identity through his repeated expulsions from American society” to “immigrants’ existential hell, their complete loss of identity, their invisibility within American society” (54-55). The viewpoint of the outsider, while essential to the artist, becomes debilitating when that artist becomes so much the outsider that he or she cannot find an audience. When artists become invisible, their art no longer matters.

In the last scene of the section appropriately titled “Adrift,” Nils receives two pieces of bad news. Kristine Dahl has died over the win-

ter while he was at work in the lumber camps of northern Minnesota. She leaves him her husband's violin, but her death deprives him of his liminal performance space. Also, Per Syv, the man with whom he has immigrated, has snuck away with disreputable companions. Nils tries to find Per at the Great Northern Station before he leaves Minneapolis. There Nils encounters a Norwegian mother with five restless children, halfway through their long trip to North Dakota. With the masses of humanity passing them by, Nils finds a small audience in the family and plays to the children to pass the time: "Passers-by, curious, stopped to watch the group a moment and to listen before going on. Those occupying the nearest seats looked his way and smiled" (*BL* 230). As he becomes more involved in playing, the passing faces fade away, as does the setting, "—The passing faces dislimned; grew more and more unreal" (*BL* 231). Finally, Nils finds himself above the teeming masses that circulate around him—a transcendent artist: "—Now he himself sat on top of the peak, letting his thoughts rain like showers upon the human stream passing below in its endless trek upon eternity" (*BL* 231). The setting, one where he may be both the outsider (one looking with longing upon those around him) and the insider (with the Norwegian family), allows his art to flow. At the last, however, he is pulled out of his balanced state by the overwhelming reality of the outside world: "An unshaved face glistening with silvery stubble bent over his shoulder from behind. 'Your fiddle sounds right smart lad, but this is no concert-hall! Better put it up'" (*BL* 232). In American society, the concert hall is proper place for art, and Nils doesn't belong there. His audience and visibility are fleeting.

Øverland notes *Boat* is a "novel that leaves the protagonist at large in America . . . yet another character of the 1920s too weak to realize his ideals and dreams" (*Western* 355). Nils soon takes a job repairing rail bridges, and as such becomes a perpetual wanderer. He even identifies a home in the space where everyone is an outsider: "From that day on, Nils never entered the Great Northern Station in Minneapolis without feeling that he had come home; it was as if he had lived many years of his life in that place" (*BL* 243). In his wandering through the Midwest, he seeks out places where he can delve into his Otherness, at the same time seeking some kind of inclusion: "Happening to get to a city on a Saturday night, he would immediately seek out the city's busiest corner; and there he would stand searching and searching" (*BL* 243). Nils becomes an invisible man

—immersed in the art that grows from Otherness, but lacking an audience.

Jim has no such worries. His main difficulty is learning to appropriate the experiences of the immigrants from whom he draws inspiration. Jim seeks to take the memories of his immigrant friends and set them in appropriate classical modes, fitting them into an agrarian, pastoral tradition. Under the careful, classicist tutelage of Gaston Cleric, Jim learns first to regard and later to represent their immigrant experiences as a crop to be reaped and refined. This appropriation and refinement belie an implicit hierarchy, one which ultimately turns the Nordic Lena into a pastoral figure; the black Blind d'Arnault into the savage Other, and finally the Bohemian Antonia into the earth-mother—a gentle medium between the two racial levels—as ideal source of artistic inspiration.

When Jim moves from Black Hawk and begins his university study in Lincoln, he falls under the influence of Gaston Cleric, a young professor. As a purveyor of Latin, Dante, Virgil, and the "world of ideas," Cleric's influence is primarily classical (*MÁ* 292). Jim allies himself with this classical tradition and rethinks his Black Hawk childhood through its privileged gaze. And just as Jim sits studying Virgil's *Georgics*, Lena Lingard knocks on his door. With Lena's entrance, Jim begins to take his experiences with the immigrant "hired girls" and to refine them, making them suitable to a classical tradition. Even as Lena sits before him in his room looking "quietly conventionalized by city clothes," Jim refigures her as a pastoral maid: "I watched Lena sitting there so smooth and sunny and well cared for, and thought of how she used to run barefoot over the prairie until after the snow began to fly" (*MÁ* 300, 302). If Jim's youthful dreams were of a sexually powerful Lena wielding a reaping hook, he now associates her image with the pastoral, as Gelfant describes: "In his study, among his books, Lena's image floats before him on a page of the *Georgics*, transferred from a landscape of death to Virgil's bucolic countryside" (66). Gelfant argues that this association serves to both exalt and demean her, as Jim sets her image "afloat on pages of poetry that deals with the breeding of cattle" (68). Jim confines the exotic and sexually alluring ethnic Lena to the fields and the past, ignoring the sexually potent Lena sitting in front of him. In positioning Lena as a classic pastoral figure, Jim gains control over her presence, a control he obviously would not have in a sexual relationship with her.

Jim finds it easy to position Lena in this light due to late-nineteenth-century ideas about race and ethnicity. In *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998), Matthew Frye Jacobson discusses the popular conception of a racial hierarchy in an America swelling with immigrants: "Increasing fragmentation and hierarchical ordering of distinct white *races* (now in the plural) was theorized in the rarified discourses of science, but it was also reflected in literature, visual arts, caricature, political oratory, penny journalism, and myriad other venues of popular culture" (41). Degrees of whiteness ranged from Nordic and Protestant, to Southern or Eastern European and Catholic, to Jewish, and finally to black. Lena's Nordic background places her high on the racial hierarchy, so she slides easily into Jim's classical models. Lena finally grows "a trifle too plump," however, becoming Americanized like the Hardings and not Other enough to inspire Jim (MÁ 394).

On the other end of the spectrum lies Blind d'Arnault. As a black man and an artist, d'Arnault seems like a figure ripe for Jim's appropriating memory. While Jim does include his story in his narrative, there is something too Other about the piano player to appropriate fully. Jim couples respect with degradation in his description of d'Arnault: "He looked like some glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood" (MÁ 217). D'Arnault may be godlike, but he is "savage" and "glistening" at the same time, exciting and powerful yet ultimately primitive, too frighteningly different to inspire Jim's artistic experience. To Jim he is wonderful but low: "He was always a negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully. As piano playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses,—that not only filled his dark mind, but worried his body incessantly" (MÁ 215). D'Arnault's playing is barbarous, wonderful, and "real" to Jim, but "abominable" and unrevisable into a classical conceptualization. Thus, Jim positions d'Arnault as an interesting abomination, a southern grotesque drifting though his pastoral Nebraska landscape. As Blythe Tellefsen argues, "the black man is figured as both Other and lesser in order to assure whites of their own superiority. Blind d'Arnault is figured as 'harmless' and 'inferior' at the same time as his potential 'repulsiveness' is gestured toward" (235). Blind d'Arnault stands as an oddity in Jim's classical world, too savage to appropriate into classical artistic approaches, and thus he is rejected as muse and guide.

Ántonia, of course, is Jim's central figure in the novel and in his racial hierarchy. *My Ántonia* records Jim's careful appropriation of the Otherness of a little immigrant girl, finally becoming a narrative of her transformation into a Bohemian earth mother. In "The Shimerdas" section of the novel, Jim acts by turns as Ántonia's playmate, teacher, savior, and enemy, their experiences interweaving at moments so as to give the impression that they are seamless. When she moves into town, Jim remembers Ántonia, whose primary desire is to be "the kind of girl" he likes (MÁ 176). He later cultivates her ethnic distinctiveness, sending her "photographs of her native village" in Bohemia (MÁ 369). In the final section of the novel, Jim revisits "his" Ántonia, appropriating the earth mother whom he has "found . . . again after long years" (MÁ xi). She has become cheerfully rooted in the pastoral Nebraskan earth Jim has toiled to maintain in his mind, while also becoming more deeply Bohemian, having reverted to speaking primarily in her native language. For Jim, Ántonia becomes always already an immigrant, the Other. Wooley has discussed how Jim ignores Ántonia's stories, substituting his own:

Instead of responding to Ántonia's stories as constructed narratives, Jim thinks only of her voice. In this way he deflects his—and the reader's—attention from her creativity and emphasizes her lack of any apparent artistic craft; her words 'come right out of her heart,' unshaped by the formal conventions of elite art. (153)

Jim has no need of her craft; he only wants her stories and experiences so that he can use them and refine them into his own art. To Jim, and eventually to Cather, Ántonia is a wellspring of the outsider experience, a mother who nurtures with her exotic but never-frightening difference.

So Jim continually appropriates the experiences of the Other, implicitly viewing race as a hierarchical guide to Otherness, wherein the Nordic background of Lena is not ethnic enough, the black experience of Blind d'Arnault is too savage to appropriate, and the mediated position of Ántonia is finally the perfect balance between the two. This heavily structured yet implicit racial hierarchy implicates Cather in Jim's project of appropriation. Cather's appropriation is ultimately telegraphed through the prevalence of this hierarchy coupled with the modernist structure of the novel. *My Ántonia* is, after all, carefully structured, a novel fragmented yet ordered (following

the seasons), and a novel that takes immigrants as a subject while adapting them to classical models. This cultivated construction links Cather to a European artistic tradition, one very much like Jim's. In addition, the racial hierarchies within the text are so implicit that Jim's moves become Cather's, as the traditions she uses to "capture" her immigrant subjects are intimately tied to masculine and dominant literary traditions. As Ann Fisher-Wirth notes, "Jim is her fictive autobiographical persona; admitting the difference in gender, his perceptions, values, choices, and limitations are largely Cather's own" (54).

In the end, both Cather and Rølvaag seek to play in and about the boundaries between insider and outsider; both respond to the artistic draw of the Other. But their difference in status, as nonimmigrant and immigrant respectively, marks both their characters and their texts, for while Cather may play in the artistry of Otherness, she can always retreat to the security of her dominant position in the racial hierarchy or her security within a male literary tradition. If Cather, through Jim, works from the experience of the Other in an attempt to draw from the wellspring of difference, she also cultivates and refines that experience into a classic and male-centered artistic tradition. Perhaps this position was more comfortable than that of a female and lesbian outsider, or perhaps Cather felt she simply had no need to work outside a classic, masculine literary tradition. Rølvaag, despite his best attempts to portray an artist existing as both outsider and insider, recognizes the dilemma faced by the immigrant and outsider: To assimilate, to move into the mainstream culture may mean the loss of art, but not to assimilate may mean to lose one's audience, to perform art for a populace that cannot or will not see the Other. Cather and Rølvaag ultimately work at cross-purposes. Rølvaag seeks to make his invisible immigrant—and the transcendent art that grows from that experience—visible to his readers, while Cather seeks to make her immigrants just as visible as she would like them to be, always holding the controlling, filtering lens of interpretation and refinement. And finally, transcendent art is only as transcendent as its artist is allowed to be.

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NOTES

- ¹Cather and Rølvaag are most often linked in the context of their Midwestern pioneering novels, Cather's including *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia*, Rølvaag's including *Giants in the Earth* (1927) and *Peder Victorious* (1929). A prime example and insightful article is Paul A. Olson's "The Epic and Great Plains Literature: Rølvaag, Cather, and Neihardt," *Prairie Schooner* 55 (Spring/Summer 1981): 263-85.
- ²Edward Said uses the term "Other" in his foundational books in postcolonial studies, *Orientalism* (1979) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1992). While Said's focus is on Western nations asserting control of colonized peoples, a similar dynamic takes place in America's conceptualization of immigrants in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.
- ³O. E. Rølvaag, *The Boat of Longing*, 1921. Trans. By Nora Solum. 1933. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985. 17. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically.
- ⁴While many critics have discussed Zalma's influence as muse, few have discussed the reductive qualities of this classification. Rølvaag doesn't make much of Zalma's talents as a singer and dancer unless these talents somehow enhance Nils's artistic expression, and critics have done little to complicate this connection. While I lack space for such a move here, the connection of Zalma and Ántonia as artistic women reduced to the "muse" is fertile ground for further study.
- ⁵Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia*. 1918. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1995. 27. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically.

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RELIGION AND LITERATURE IN SINCLAIR LEWIS AND WILLA CATHER

JAMES SEATON

The relations between the arts, including literature, on the one hand and religion, medieval Christianity in particular, on the other are so close as to amount to identity, at least according to the author of the definitive eight-volume work *Spanish Adventurers in North America*, the only historian from the American Midwest to win the Oxford prize for history and the five thousand pounds that go with it. Professor Godfrey St. Peter actually makes two strong claims: first that art and religion "are the same thing, in the end," and secondly that the two "have given man the only happiness he has ever had" (69). Since Professor St. Peter did not make these assertions in his prize-winning work or in any publication at all, but instead threw them out during an extemporaneous exchange with a student after a formal lecture, it is possible that he might have qualified his statements before committing them to print, if indeed he would have ever considered putting in writing such strong statements on a subject so far beyond the area of his special expertise. In arguing for the virtual identity of art and religion, at least he would have been able to cite the philosopher George Santayana, who prefaced his 1900 work *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* with the claim that "religion and poetry are identical in essence . . . Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry" (3).

The question as to whether St. Peter would have been willing to enter in the philosophical debate over the relations between literature and poetry in writing is not only unanswerable but fortunately immaterial, since the answer to the question as to whether his creator Willa Cather shared his views seems clear, though, like other answers to questions about authorial intention, not so clear as to produce critical unanimity. The thesis that Willa Cather did believe that art and

religion “are the same thing, in the end, of course” gains support from the section of *The Professor's House* in which Tom Outland describes the Cliff City he and Rodney Blake discover when they make their way up the mesa of Cow Canyon while herding cattle in New Mexico. When Tom Outland first sees the ruins, it is the artistic quality of their buildings that strikes him:

Far up above me, a thousand feet or so, set in a great cavern in the face of the cliff, I saw a little city of stone, asleep. It was as still as sculpture—and something like that. It all hung together, seemed to have a kind of composition: pale little houses of stone . . . and in the middle of the group, a round tower.

It was beautifully proportioned, that tower . . . The tower was the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something . . . That village sat looking down into the canyon with the stillness of eternity . . . I can't describe it. It was more like sculpture than anything. (201-2)

He thinks, “I'd never seen a tower like that one. It seemed to me to mark a difference. I felt that only a strong and aspiring people would have built it, and a people with a feeling for design” (203-4). When the Catholic priest Father Duchene sees the ruins, he also notices the “feeling for design” evident in the buildings, but he links that feeling to a religious impulse:

There is unquestionably a distinct feeling for design in what you call the Cliff City. Buildings are not grouped like that by pure accident . . . I see your tribe as a provident, rather thoughtful people . . . making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man, purifying life by religious ceremonies and observances, caring respectfully for their dead, protecting their children . . . (220)

The ruins of the Cliff City tribe are suggestive evidence of the way in which both art and religion bring order and meaning to life. The ruins speak of a way of life far superior to the typical life of primitive man—“solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” in Thomas Hobbes's phrase. Like Tom Outland, the reader assents when Father Duchene says, “Like you, I feel a reverence for this place. Wherever humanity has made that hardest of all starts and lifted itself out of mere brutality, is a sacred spot” (221).

Willa Cather and Sinclair Lewis were contemporaries and both were authors from the Midwest who often wrote about the region, but

that seems to be about all they had in common. In *O Pioneers!* Cather celebrates the way of life created by farmers like Alexandra Bergson whose farm has “the order and fine arrangement” of a painting; Alexandra is a true artist, but her farm is her canvas, for “it is in the soil that she expresses herself best” (63). Carl Linstrum left Nebraska to become an artist, but when he sees her farm he realizes his mistake; he tells her, “I've been away engraving other men's pictures, and you've stayed at home and made your own” (87). In Sinclair Lewis's portraits of the Middle West only a generation or two after Alexandra Bergson's time, however, neither farming nor art of any kind nor religion is able to give any true significance to life. The Reverend Philip McGarry, one of the few thoughtful ministers in *Elmer Gantry*, marks the difference between the Midwests of Cather and Lewis when Lewis generously allows him to become a literary critic and score a point against Lewis himself:

Lord, how that book of Lewis', 'Main Street,' did bore me . . . and all he [Lewis] could see was that some of the Gopher Prairie hicks didn't go to literary teas quite as often as he does!—that was all he could see among those splendid heroic pioneers! (357)

Elmer Gantry itself is dedicated to H. L. Mencken “without profound admiration,” so the Reverend McGarry is quite right in linking Lewis to Mencken as exemplars of a philosophy that he implores his fellow minister Frank Shallard to avoid if he wishes to remain a minister of even the most liberal sort. McGarry knows that his friend could be a successful minister if only “you could lose your intellectual pride, if you could forget that you have to make a new world, better'n the Creator's, right away tonight—you and Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells and H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis . . .” (357). In the world of *Elmer Gantry*, religion—in particular American Protestantism—not only fails to give meaning and order to life, but also fails so completely that an observer of that world—a reader—would have to agree with H. L. Mencken that only boobs and morons could possibly fall for it. The movie *Elmer Gantry* gives the impression that the real issue is the personal morality, especially the sexual escapades, of Elmer Gantry himself. In the book as well as the movie, Gantry is continually on the lookout for available women. In the passage that concludes the novel, Elmer's professional ability allows him to continue leading his congregation in prayer even as he notices in the church choir “a new singer, a girl with charming ankles

and lively eyes, with whom he would certainly have to become well acquainted" (416). Lewis's target, however, is not merely Elmer Gantry himself, nor is it even the hypocrisy of those who denounce sin even as they practice it. Lewis intends to challenge Christianity itself, even when it is led by ministers who have the "longing . . . for decency and kindness and reason" (34), traits Elmer conspicuously lacks.

Frank Shallard is such a minister, but in an all-night conversation with his friend McGarry, he comes to the conclusion that Christianity itself, even at its best, is fundamentally flawed. The Jesus of the Bible is not "an especially admirable character," despite the "splendid stories" he tells, even though he is what is called "a good fellow, fond of low company" (363). Frank comes to what seems to him the obvious conclusion that "far from the Christian religion—or any other religion—being a blessing to humanity, it's produced such confusion in all thinking, such secondhand viewing of actualities, that only now are we beginning to ask what and why we are, and what we can do with life!" (363). And at dawn the next morning, Frank makes his final and ultimate point:

My objection to the church isn't that the preachers are cruel, hypocritical, actually wicked, though some of them are that too . . . And it isn't so much that the church is in bondage to Big Business and doctrines as laid down by millionaires—though a lot of churches are that, too. My chief objection is that ninety-nine percent of sermons and Sunday School teachings are so agonizingly *dull!*" (364)

Just as it seems clear that Professor St. Peter speaks for Willa Cather in asserting the identity of art and religion, so there is little doubt that Frank Shallard speaks for Sinclair Lewis in his denunciation of Christianity and religion in general. When ideas are advanced in a novel, the first step in analysis should be to consider whether or not the ideas are supported by the entire novel's dramatic evidence, rather than to examine the ideas in themselves, as though they were presented in an independent essay. Professor St. Peter's ideas are borne out by what Tom Outland and Father Duchene have to say about the ruins of Cliff City. In contrast, Frank Shallard's indictment of Christianity, and particularly his "chief objection," are not borne out by *Elmer Gantry*. In itself making "dullness" the "chief objection" to American Christianity has intellectual validity. Although this "chief objection" may seem trivial next to the other charges Frank

Shallard makes, it is indeed key for the sort of truly radical critique Lewis intends. If it is impossible for anything interesting to be said using the concepts and vocabulary of Christianity, then it must be the case that Christianity is simply irrelevant to human life. We are bored by what does not concern us, by what has nothing to do with our lives. If the only issue were bad ministers exploiting churches, then the issue would be not religion itself but rather its false friends. If, on the other hand, religion itself simply has nothing relevant to say about human life, then no change of personnel could make any difference.

The novel itself, however, does not support the charge of dullness, since the case it makes against religion is premised on the supposition that Elmer Gantry is a typical and characteristic product of American Christianity. Yet if the "chief objection" to "the church" is that "ninety-nine percent of sermons" are dull, then Elmer Gantry himself, the novel's star exhibit of religion's folly, must be judged not guilty. Whatever Elmer's sins, nobody in the novel complains that his sermons are dull. They may be sensational, vulgar, illogical and manipulative, but they are not dull. Elmer explains his technique early in the novel to his classmates at seminary: "What gets 'em and holds 'em and brings 'em to their pews every Sunday is the straight gospel—and it don't hurt one bit to scare 'em into being righteous with the good old-fashioned Hell!" (88) The novel makes it clear that it is really true that Elmer Gantry's sermons hold the attention of his audiences in a way that the intelligent, learned discourses of the well-meaning Frank Shallard do not. Frank tells Philip McGarry that the main reason his congregation does not object when he propounds his liberal notions is that "[t]hey're not enough interested to realize what I'm saying!" (358)

Why is it that a sermon focusing on "good old-fashioned Hell" is more likely to hold one's attention than a nonjudgmental, inclusive discourse affirming that all will be saved in the end? Surely more is involved than the accidental fact that Frank Shallard is a poor speaker and Elmer Gantry a good one. Since this is a literary question, perhaps George Santayana, who shares with Professor St. Peter the view that religion and poetry are in essence the same, may have something to offer. Santayana, a philosophical materialist and an atheist, argued in his *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* that the imaginative power of the Christian conception of a judgment sending souls to either heaven or hell for eternity is derived from its "symbolic truth" (62). We each have only one earthly life, and throughout that life we

make decisions with consequences for either the better or the worse. Whatever suffering we endure or whatever happiness we enjoy has its own reality and, once experienced, that reality cannot be changed. Excuses can be made, mistakes can be corrected, memories may fade and vanish, but whatever has happened has happened once and for all. As Santayana puts it, "every loss is irretrievable and every joy indestructible" (64) in our earthly human life, and thus the "harshness of the doctrine of eternal judgment" is "a consequence of its symbolic truth" (62). The doctrine that all will be saved, on the other hand, though a pleasant fantasy, corresponds not at all to the reality of life on earth. Frank Shallard is a good man and an intelligent one, while Elmer Gantry is a crude vulgarian, but *Elmer Gantry* the novel affirms what Sinclair Lewis and his spokesman Frank Shallard deny, that the doctrine of eternal judgment preached by Elmer Gantry is relevant to human life in a way that Frank Shallard's well-meaning theological liberalism is not.

If *Elmer Gantry* today seems more a sociological study than a novel, if its value seems to lie more in its evocation of the habits and attitudes of a particular place and time than in any dramatization of perennial human dilemmas, perhaps that is because Lewis's indictment is all too successful. If religion were simply the con game it seems to be in *Elmer Gantry*, then one cannot help wondering why it did not disappear long ago. The novel ends with Elmer Gantry more successful than ever, ready to move from Zenith to a big church in New York City and to become executive secretary of the National Association for the Purification of Art and the Press. A reader of the novel sees through Elmer from the beginning, yet the members of his various congregations and the public at large never do. The inescapable conclusion is that the world of the novel is made up of people who are not nearly as intelligent or perceptive as the reader or the author. It is difficult to care much about people who allow themselves to be ruled by such obvious frauds as Elmer Gantry. We may feel sorry for them, but we cannot consider them our equals.

In attempting to understand why *Elmer Gantry* now seems dated while *The Professor's House* or *O Pioneers!* is as fresh as ever, we might return to the second thesis of Professor St. Peter. In asserting the virtual identity of art and religion, Godfrey St. Peter claims as well that it is through art and religion that man has achieved "the only happiness he has ever had" (69). This happiness, St. Peter makes clear, is not the happiness derived from pleasant fantasies of wish ful-

fillment, nor the kind of relaxation to be enjoyed when one realizes that nothing one can do makes any difference. Instead, St. Peter argues, art and religion both make happiness possible by bringing home the importance of every human life and the responsibility this imposes on each individual. "I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no importance—you impoverish them," argues St. Peter. Thus people could be as happy in the medieval world as today, despite all our technological advances:

As long as every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals on Easter Sunday was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God, glittering angels on one side and the shadows of evil coming and going on the other, life was a rich thing . . . And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives. (68)

It is hard to believe that the individual lives of the characters of *Elmer Gantry*, including that of the protagonist himself, are especially important, since the characters do not seem to possess the ability to make responsible decisions for themselves, unlike the reader or the author. Unlike the reader or the author, they are controlled by social forces bigger than themselves, especially the force of religion, itself apparently in league with and perhaps controlled by other dominant forces, especially big business. In contrast, readers of *The Professor's House* or *O Pioneers!* are likely to grant to Godfrey St. Peter or Alexandra Bergson a moral weight equal to their own. And one can go even further. In reading the stories of characters like St. Peter or Alexandra Bergson and taking them seriously, we are encouraged to take our own lives more seriously than we otherwise might. Literature, like the kind of religion described by Godfrey St. Peter, conveys to us a sense of the irreducible "mystery and importance" of every human life, an awareness always in danger of being lost and always in need of renewal.

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EMBRACING CONTRARIES: THE COMPETING
NARRATIVES OF TOM MCGRATH'S
LETTER TO AN IMAGINARY FRIEND, PART ONE

JAMES M. BOEHNLEIN

Revolutionary poet, autoworker, Rhodes scholar, typographical jokester, Whitmanesque—these and many other approbations are often associated with Thomas McGrath, the “best” American poet about whom very little is known. Well, actually, a good deal is now known about Tom McGrath’s life and poetry. Considerable scholarly assessment, however, has only recently positioned McGrath among the ranks of major American authors. His *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* is now favorably compared to William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, and, of course, Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself* for its contributions to American mythopoesis.

Born near Sheldon, North Dakota, in 1916, Tom McGrath grew up on the family farm in the Red River Valley. In 1939, he graduated from Moorhead State and took an MA from Louisiana State in 1940. A teaching career soon followed at Colby College and a stint in the US Army from 1942 to 1946. From 1947 to 1948, he studied at Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship and later taught at Los Angeles State University. In 1953, McGrath, a lifelong Marxist, refused to testify before the House’s Committee on Un-American Activities and lost his job at Los Angeles State University.

During the 1950s, McGrath worked blue-collar jobs, traveled, wrote film scripts, criticism, novels, and poetry. He returned to teaching at C.W. Post College in 1960 and in 1962 took a position at North Dakota State University. In 1969, he began to teach at Moorhead State, from which he would eventually retire in 1981. He would die in 1990.

Like many great American poets who pursue an epic tradition, McGrath emphasized the struggles that exist within his speaker,

struggles manifested in the land and in the exigencies of living conditions. Unlike his colleagues whose aesthetics were, for the most part, nurtured in academia, McGrath’s poetics were hard earned, forged in the factory and harvested on the farm. Quintessentially a Midwesterner, he embraced and amplified the proletarian themes often associated with *Song of Myself* while gesturing toward a more transcendent reality, evident in, say, *The Maximus Poems* and *Paterson*. As Diane Wakoski avers, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* is “an attempt to see America, American history, and mythology, as well as economics and politics, through a semi-autobiographical screen, one that allows the power of personal poetry while attempting a much bigger statement” (qtd. in *The Revolutionary Poet* 59).

These combined concerns of the self and the social inform an understanding of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend, Part One* in which McGrath’s speaker invokes the often contrary nature of American identity and experience. The twelve sections of *Part One*, the focus of this essay, begin and end in Los Angeles. In Section One, the physical and spiritual struggle, only to complement their warring tendencies and to offer a mythic antidote for the harsh and graphic issues confronting the persona:

—“From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east.”
I am in Los Angeles, at 2714 Marsh Street,
Writing, rolling east with the earth, drifting toward Scorpio,

Thinking, Hoping toward laughter and indifference.

“They came through the passes,
They crossed the dark mountain in a month of snow,
Finding the plain, the bitter water,
The iron rivers of the black North.

Horsemen, Hunters of the Hornless deer in the high plateaus of
that country,

They traveled the cold year, died in the stone desert.”

(*Letter I & II*, 1)

In this stanza, McGrath’s voice is that of a poet, launching out with the language that has longed teased thought and reality. He speaks of emigrants here and equates their journeys with those of his own. His life, like theirs, seeks a sustaining myth. Yet, the exigencies of life prevent this myth from taking hold. The emigrant lament, in essence, becomes his:

Took them? They came—
 Past the Horn, Cape Wrath, Oxford and Fifth and Main
 Laughing and mourning, snug in the two seater buggy,
 Jouncing and bouncing on the gumbo roads
 Or slogging loblolly in the bottom lands—
 My seven tongued family.
 How could I escape? Strapped on the truckle bars
 Of the bucking red-ball freights or riding the blinds cold
 Or sick and sea-sawed on the seven seas
 Or in metal and altitude, drilling the high blue
 I fled.

(*Letter I & II 3*)

In Section Two, McGrath's speaker invokes:

Great God Almighty, but the troubles of the stinking street!
 First neighbor on strike since Come Monday, and Second
 Neighbor on strike Come Tuesday.

Eggs are dearer,

Bread has entered Marsh Street's realm of value,
 And shuffling past Salsipuede Avenue
 The Age of education comes round the corner . . .

(*Letters I & II 7*)

McGrath's speaker continues to comment on the reality existing around him. The sense of life collapsing against the ineffectual "a-temporal colloquies" drives him to question his post-Enlightenment world of immanence. Perfectibility escapes one who lives in a waste land. Also, the promises of the Transcendent fall on deaf ears hardened by "Anarcho-solipsist contraventions." As if to validate his own reality, McGrath ends Section Two by retracing his own life:

Out of imperfect confusion, to argue a purer chaos . . .
 I've lived, truly, in a Custer's Massacre of sad sacks
 Who sang in my ears their histories and my own.
 And out of these ghosts I bring these harvest dead
 Into the light of speech . . .

(*Letters I & II 9*)

Section Three proves to be one of McGrath's most intensely personal passages, for he traces his life in the Red River Valley in idyllic and harsh surroundings:

Out of the whirring lamp-hung dusk my mother calls.
 From the lank pastures of my sleep I turn and climb,
 From the leathery dark where the bats work, from the coasting
 High all-winter all-weather Christmas hills of my sleep.
 And there is my grandfather chewing his goatee,
 Prancing about like a horse. And the drone and whirl from
 the fields

Where the thresher mourns and showers on the morning stillness
 A bright fistful of whistles.

(*Letters I & II 11*)

This quasi-romantic setting underscores the "weather of childhood" and its beautiful innocence before the hardened realities beset the speaker as he matures. Again, McGrath describes various studies in contrast that are to be read as mutually inclusive. Thus, the above innocence is suddenly jarred by labor unrest on his father's farm:

That night the men all left.

Along toward morning
 I heard the rattle of Fords. They had left Cal there
 In the bloody dust that day but they wouldn't work after that.
 "The folded arms of the workers" I heard Warren saying,
 Sometime in the future where Mister Peets lies dreaming
 Of a universal voting-machine.

(*Letters I & II 23*)

The realities of a strike, its physical and moral damage, support the narrative continuity maintained throughout *Part One*. In this stanza, the figure of Cal is beaten by McGrath's uncle, a man who finds Cal's politics unsavory. For the young McGrath, however, Cal represents a mentor, a masculine role model. As Diane Wakoski suggests:

Cal recurs throughout the long poem, always as the image of the dream, the ideal of both manhood and what a world of brotherhood could be. But Cal's politics set him apart from the other farm hands, and during the threshing season he is beaten badly [. . .]. During the scene of the fight, Cal is portrayed as a figure falling and rising, to fall and rise again, covered with blood. (60)

By reconciling these oppositions, McGrath's text amplifies this alternating structure of primal innocence and knowledge. Furthermore,

McGrath now establishes the narrative structure that holds the text together throughout *Part One*.

In some respects, Sections Three, Four, and Five complement one another, for they treat features of the *Bildungsroman*. Sexuality, education, and home life, respectively, position the speaker as one searching for meaning in the hardened realities of youth:

Coiffeur of dream, oh bright improbable gold!
The blonde haired women, crowned as with surplus light,
Curls crisp as lettuce on their bellies porch
And slick and secret when the armpit yawns—
Hair! Dimension of heat!

(*Letters I & II 25*)

These erotic passages suggest the necessity of physical gratification in a world of uncertain futures. Yet McGrath is quick to realize that sexuality raises him above *eros*. Perhaps arguing for a purer *agape*:

O small girls with your wide knowledge, you led me
Into the continent of guilt and forgiving, where love is;
Through the small gate of your sex I go into my kingdom.
Teachers of men! O hot, great hearted women
The world turns still on the axis of your thighs!

(*Letters I & II 30*)

The theme of education, like that of sexuality, figures prominently in Section Five of *Part One*. Education, though, becomes a false, superficial experience for the speaker. Moorhead State is a “surrogate college” where “They hadn’t learned to read, / To write, to think, to wipe their asses properly—/ To teach!” (*Letters I & II 34*). Again, the speaker understands education as its etymology suggests: that which is “drawn” from the student, not repositied.

The homecoming of Section Six is couched in an elegiac tone. The language becomes softer, less harsh than previous sections. Sights and sounds dominate this section in which the speaker lies quietly, alone, drawing in the atmosphere of foreclosure and hope: “Back and busted from another of [his] universities,” the speaker listens as “The wind is sharpening its knife on the shakes of the roof / Far / Dark / Cold / [he is] a journey toward a distant wound” (*Letters I & II 42*).

This midpoint of *Part One* invokes a quiet, meditative response to McGrath’s “pseudo-autobiography.” As Bernard Engel suggests, “The boy [speaker] had come to understand that life goes on no mat-

ter what happens to the individual. Throughout *Letter*, McGrath has one eye cocked at the moon and sun and stars. Their presence seems to remind him that human life is not the whole of existence, that there are other, perhaps greater participants” (83-84). Yet, these visionary experiences are short-lived, for the speaker’s restlessness draws him to another odyssey of sorts.

Sections Seven to Eleven, then, become a compendium of centrifugal forces that draw the speaker outward: “Westerly / To the golden apples of the Oregon. / That’s how I saw my boyhood disappear / In a used-up Ford on Highway Number Ten / Toward Devil’s Lake and land’s end” (*Letters I & II 44*). This trip, however, becomes an education as he witnesses the wintry depression landscape of “WPA farmers” and the labor conditions and fights for survival: “[McGrath] manages to catch the feel and temper, the oddities and backbreaking effort, the diversity of bosses, the humor that arises not from brow-beaten acceptance but from pride in survival [. . .]” (Engel 86).

McGrath’s quick cuts from one subtopic to the next are apparent in Sections Nine, Ten and Eleven in which we follow the speaker in an odyssey of commentary and argument. South to Louisiana State University and North to Maine, the speaker presents “as his central problem, the presentation of the ways we ‘went wrong’” (Engel 87). Again, these issues are couched in seemingly irreconcilable opposites, yet McGrath believes that accepting these bifurcations as inclusive offers a realistic antidote to “what went wrong”:

Yet, in the shifting light, love seemed enough:
By the wavering fire as the long hunt went by us.
And seemed enough as I hitch hiked north in the heavy summer
Through the Kansas wheat, toward the rust-red roaring harvest of the
high

North—
Enough to sale *love*: and all those masterless men
To become their masters in the commune of mystical toil:
Round-dance:
Lauds toward a newer sun.

(*Letters I & II 68*)

Sections Ten and Eleven continue the speaker’s odyssey, emphasizing World War II and its aftermath. McGrath’s wartime experience in the Aleutian Islands becomes another angle from which he presents “ways we went wrong”:

Everything externalized; everything on the outside;
 Nowhere the loved thing, or the known thing.
 In the night of the army, the true sleepwalkers' country
 All are masked familiars at the death of strangers—
 It was the strangeness moved us.

In the cold blur of the

rain

The bombers call: "Fireplace, Fireplace, do you read me,
 Fireplace?"
 Call and come in: great truck-loads of the dead,
 And the crazy medics, with needles stuck in their arms,
 Come down to greet them.

(Letters I & II 76)

These horrors of war witnessed by McGrath's speaker become muted
 by the indifference with which he finds his homecoming after the
 war:

Country full of strangers in their queer costumes . . .
 And a hurrying clapperclawing their lack . . .
 Bandits . . . murderers in medals holding hands in the catch-as-
 can dark
 With the carking, harked-back-to, marked-down virgins of the
 stark

Little towns
 Where, once, their paper histories dropped on the thin lawns
 And rocking porches of the dead-eye dons and the home-grown
 Dream-daddies
 Now stiff with their war-won monies.

(Letters I & II 89)

Here McGrath's speaker returns to a "country of strangers," to a sense
 of loss. He does not share in the "victory culture" of 1945, for he
 sees that he was instrumental in perpetuating the myth of democracy
 that, in his mind, wrecked havoc.

Section Twelve offers an arresting coda to *Part One*, for most of
 it is couched in a form of beatitude, a form of prayer that invokes
 blessings on a selected few. Its purifying message provides an anti-
 dote to the anger of the previous two sections:

Blessed be the birds of the high forest hung on a wing of song;
 Blessed be the long sin of the snake and his fangs blessed;
 Blessed be the fishing bear in his shine and fury;

Blessed be flower and weed: shoot, spike, rhizome, raceme, sepal
 and petal;

The blued-out wildlings; metallic, green marsh-hiders shy; high-
 climbers,

Low-rooters.

Beast, bird, tree, stone, star: blessed, blessed.

Like Gerard Manley Hopkins, Tom McGrath seeks to recover the
 hidden "inscape" that he believes is the real American self. Yet, "[the
 object of his verse] is neither to resolve a problem nor to conclude an
 action but to achieve the keenest, most open realization possible"
 (qtd. in *The Modern Poetic Sequence* 11). No final resolution
 becomes apparent, only the reality of existence: flawed, incomplete,
 haunted by contradictions. As Bernard Engel insists, "McGrath's self
 is as harried and nervous as the selves of his peers. But he insists on
 the possibility of change by an act of the will" (91).

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AUGUST DERLETH'S SELF-PROMOTION

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Most publishers expect writers to promote their books at bookstore autograph sessions, at scheduled public readings, and, when possible, on radio or television interviews. Such self-promotion fits within the realm of what most of us would consider normal activities for those seeking to increase sales of their work. Wisconsin writer August Derleth autographed his books—indeed, many of them are more commonly found autographed than without inscription. He also gave public readings, and he participated in both radio and television interviews. Had Derleth been content with this level of literary salesmanship, his promotional activity would draw little or no interest from would-be biographers, critics, or even general readers, but Derleth had a lifelong flair for the theatrical. From his early adulthood on, Derleth was both delighted and determined to craft a flamboyant image and to use that image to increase sales of his books. He did not wear his silk cape and brandish his cane on the streets of tiny Sauk City to escape notice. He was a character, and he promoted himself and his publications with panache. Yet sometimes his inclination for the dramatic and unconventional led him to cross the line of appropriate behavior and to engage in seemingly unethical or potentially self-destructive behavior.

Even in his youth, Derleth sought attention. In high school, he cultivated a pompadour haircut, his wavy brown hair brushed high from his forehead. One class photo shows his hair pushed up twice as high as his broad forehead. Later on, though still in high school, he began sporting a lorgnette and sometimes a monocle. His friend and mentor in those days, weird fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft, urged Derleth at length to adopt a more conservative, adult style of dress, observing that such deviations as Derleth's from the norm represented adolescent behavior—or what some lesser men did to advertise their wealth or attract a woman. Lovecraft concluded:

That, then, is why I think you'll outgrow your present sartorial amusements. What is juvenile is the fact that such things are capable of giving you pleasure at all. Your lorgnette, robe, and alpaca overcoat correspond to my Jesse James whiskers and policeman's badge and cowboy hat of thirty years ago, and my boiled shirt and black coat and vest of twenty years ago . . . or to the powdered wig, silver buttons, and buckled shoes. All of which you will possibly concede with perfect readiness . . . Go ahead, son, and don't let the old folks spoil your good time! I'm merely putting my estimate on record for future reference—so that you'll see what a prophet Grandpa was after you've outgrown the golden mists of the late teens and early twenties. (13 December 1930)

Although the monocle and lorgnette did represent juvenile affectation and were eventually forsaken, he would never put aside the cape, the sandals, and other forms of eccentric dress that identified him as someone special. Derleth must have listened to Lovecraft's advice never to let anyone spoil his good time in terms of dress. If individuals tried to do so, they had to pay for the privilege. Unlike most literary figures who arrive at speaking engagements dressed to suit the formality of the occasion, Derleth had established a sliding scale for speeches with substantially higher fees if he were expected to come to an engagement wearing a tie, a jacket, or both.

Throughout his life, Derleth prided himself on his scrupulous honesty as a publisher and the co-owner of Arkham House Press, yet as a writer, he allowed himself certain exceptions to customary ethical behavior when it came to his own work.

One of his first ethically questionable plans was hatched during the brief period in which he relocated to Minnesota after his graduation from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and involved a pseudonym within a pseudonym. The *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature* lists Stephen Grendon and Tally Mason as two pseudonyms Derleth used during his career (Grant 142). Indeed, Derleth adopted these spare names in order to publish multiple stories in the same magazine. *Weird Tales*, for example, routinely accepted only one story per author per issue. Derleth could place two in a single issue—one under his own name and one using the pseudonym Grendon. Later, when he worked on *Mystic Magazine* for Fawcett publications, Derleth proposed a variation on the pseudonyms to increase his income. He wrote to his best friend Hugo Schwenker:

I write articles and sell them to my magazine so that the two editors above me will not know they are mine. So I send them to you, say, and you send in the manuscript, which is ostensibly written by you, for your name appears in the upper left corner, tho' a nom de plume appears beneath the title. I receive the ms., and write a report on it; my associate-editor then writes his report on it. Of course they are favourable. Then comes the job of convincing the senior editor in chief of all magazines here that it is just what we want—which is comparatively easy to do, since he is a jackass, and we know something about the subject, which he doesn't. (23 November 1930)

Derleth never had the time to put his plan in action—*Mystic Magazine* folded shortly after he made this proposal. What it suggests is a willingness on Derleth's part to bend the rules for cash and to create identities to deceive gullible editors, jackasses or not.

A few years later, in 1941, Derleth apparently bent the rules even further. That year, Derleth's first collection of macabre short stories saw publication under his own Arkham House imprint. The stories, written during the 1930s for *Weird Tales* and other pulp magazines, have little to recommend them, a fact that a review of the collection published in the Madison, Wisconsin, *Capital Times* makes clear. Few readers must have paused at the end of that review to take note of the reviewer, an improbably named Romily Devon. His assessment of the collection matched Derleth's own—that these are good stories but nothing beyond simple entertainment. Romily Devon closed his review with a backhanded compliment: "Someone in the Dark will not add a fraction of an inch to his stature, but these stories of the supernatural will be relished by all lovers of occult fiction" (18). Who was Romily Devon? Derleth was the literary editor of the *Capital Times*. Was he a friend of Derleth's who graciously consented to write a review so that Derleth did not have a problem with conflict of interest? The August Derleth Collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin contains what must approach 100,000 letters written to August Derleth from the 1920s until his death—Derleth saved every scrap of paper and made carbon copies of his responses to letters he considered significant from either a personal or legal standpoint. Nowhere in that extensive archive exists a shred of correspondence from Romily Devon or any copies of letters to him. Was he Derleth? Some four years later, Romily Devon made another appearance in the *Capital Times*, this time to offer a positive review of Derleth's collection of poetry *And You, Thoreau*. A reader

would later accuse Derleth of using the name Romily Devon and writing a review of his own book. Derleth denied it, but Romily Devon never published anything in the *Capital Times* or any other publication again.

Derleth may have chosen to end Romily Devon's writing career abruptly, but he developed a fresh approach to generating publicity for his works. In 1940, Derleth published *Bright Journey*, a historical novel set in the Northwest Territory during the first half of the nineteenth century. The novel traces the experiences of the protagonist, Hercules Dousman, from his youth on Mackinac Island through his career in the fur trade working for John Jacob Astor, to his settlement in Prairie du Chien with his marriage to Jane Rolette and his construction of the Villa Louis. Dousman, Rolette, and many of the other characters in the novel are historical figures, and the work combines fiction and history to present a picture of life in the Wisconsin Territories. In the late 1950s, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin induced Derleth to create a sequel to *Bright Journey* with the expectation that it, too, could be sold at the refurbished Villa Louis, now a State Historical Society of Wisconsin tourist site. Derleth agreed, and in 1958, Duell, Sloan, and Pearce released *The House on the Mound*, the sequel to *Bright Journey*.

Derleth reviewed his own novel just before its release in the *Capital Times*. One might assume that Derleth would be capable of reviewing his own work—he had before as Romily Devon. But what makes Derleth's review of *The House on the Mound* worthy of notice is his assessment of the book's value. He explained that the novel

might serve as an object lesson for would-be writers in how not to write a novel. It is actually history and biography cast loosely in the form of a novel and it demonstrates depressingly—now that I see it in print—how faithful adherence to history and biography, when the author elects to use real people under their own names in his work, can stultify his imagination and such fictive skill as he may possess. In my considered judgment, (I have never been particularly noted for false modesty), *The House on the Mound* emerges as a dull and rather tiresome novel. (Rev. of *House* 11)

He was not complimentary about his earlier work, *Bright Journey*, either. "I must confess," he writes, "that I was appalled at the great profusion of incident and detail in that book: I could hardly get through it." Derleth advised his readers that they might expect to be

“informed,” but it would be unlikely that they would be “entertained.” For those who seek entertainment, Derleth recommended his forthcoming novel for juniors, *The Moon Tenders*, which he claimed “is one of the few books I have written into which I can look again with pleasure. That is something I cannot truthfully say about the bulk of my work” (Rev. of *House* 11).

Needless to say, Derleth’s publishers, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, were not bubbling with delight. Charles A. Pearce sent the *Capital Times* a letter in which he referred to *The House on the Mound* as “an engrossing major work by one of America’s most important and versatile writers” (qtd. in Hunter 11). “This is the first time,” Pearce wrote, “we have known an author to bludgeon his own work. Fortunately, he did it with a blunt and dull instrument and, for the most part, he missed his aim.” Pearce went on to argue that Derleth was likely tired from the effort of writing the novel and consequently not the work’s best judge. The exasperated Pearce concluded, “Will someone please button-hole August Derleth one day soon and tell him—on behalf of all readers as well as his publishers—that it is people, not fictive skills or historical facts or a writer’s hard labor—but people that make a good novel: and that readers of novels, like humans generally are very interested in people and read his books for the people in them? (qtd. in Hunter 11). *Capital Times* reporter John Patrick Hunter recorded Derleth’s response to Pearce’s assessment—an opportunity to saddle up his high horse:

The function of a review is to assess books for the reader: he does not review books for the author. If the author is pleased with a review, at the same time that the reader is informed, fine—but the author’s feelings are not legitimately a concern of the reviewer, I know, perhaps better than any reader and than most authors just how much work and pain go into a book, but in the final analysis, I write reviews for the potential reader and bookbuyer. (qtd. in Hunter 11)

What are we to make of Derleth’s review of *The House on the Mound*? Nowhere in his voluminous correspondence does he ever admit that he concocted this plan to increase the sales of the novel. In fact, he routinely denied it to his friends. In a June 17, 1958, letter to Derleth, poet Felix Stefanile responded to Derleth’s review of *The House on the Mound*. “I was flabbergasted by your tour-de-force, your tongue-in-cheek review of your own book, *The House on the Mound*. A kind of grouchy insouciance informed the whole piece,

if such a thing may be. It is the closest thing to yawning and bragging, at one and the same time, that I have ever witnessed.” Derleth responded that he would not call the review tongue-in-cheek since he meant exactly what he said about the novel. He had been urged by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin to write the sequel to *Bright Journey*:

I didn’t much want to write it, and I suppose the fact that I was finally boxed into a position to write it made it possible for me to see it in its true perspective. I wrote the review solely to set forth my position on the novel as objectively as possible, and I could see it plainly because I did not feel very strongly about it one way or the other. I don’t think much of *Bright Journey* or *Restless is the River* or *The Hills Stand Watch* (not yet published), or even *Wind Over Wisconsin*, which had a mild popularity (11,000 copies) and is still selling slowly. Compared to *Evening in Spring* or *The Shield of the Valiant*, the historical novels do not seem to me to have much to commend them. (20 June 1958)

Still, one must be somewhat suspicious of Derleth’s past behavior and his penchant for promotional enterprise. Could it have been simple chance that Derleth’s book review should be published on the same day that John Patrick Hunter reported at length on the letter the *Capital Times* had received from Duell, Sloan and Pearce? From the timing of the response by Pearce to Derleth’s review, it appears as if they had advance notice of the review.

How did other reviewers feel about the novel? *Kirkus* echoed Derleth: “Overly detailed, plodding in pace, this effort though worthwhile in theme makes dull reading” (198). The *New York Times* took something closer to Pearce’s position:

The simple truth is that not much does happen in this novel, and yet it is given stature by the goodness of the people involved. Dousman and his charming wife are persons you can love and respect . . . Mr. Derleth writes with deep love of his home state, from its admission to the Union in 1848 to Dousman’s death twenty years later. His is a regional novel of a high order of excellence. (Hass 19)

I have not found figures regarding sales, but *The House on the Mound* is one of Derleth’s least expensive books in the collectors’ aftermarket. The State Historical Society continues to be the largest buyer of reprints of the pair of novels, a testament to the effectiveness of Derleth’s promotional instincts. August Derleth found it easy to use

pseudonyms both to publish his material and, when he deemed it necessary, to review it. Even more remarkably, he found a way under his own name simultaneously to criticize his work for dullness and to boost sales.

One can marvel at Derleth's nerve, using pseudonyms and false identities to increase his potential sales to the pulp magazines, inventing a literary critic to review his work in Madison's *Capital Times*, and, some years afterward, delivering a negative review of one of his own novels. These promotional activities are certainly in keeping with the man who dressed to be noticed on the streets of his hometown and charged audiences extra to be seen in a suit and tie. At the same time, Derleth's promotional urges verged on the self-destructive. Had the search for Romily Devon resulted in the discovery of August Derleth's hand, his tenure as book editor at the *Capital Times* might certainly have ended. His dissatisfaction with the marketing of his novel, *Shield of the Valiant*, clearly contributed to the end of his relationship with Scribners, a decision that resulted in a decade-long interruption in his Sac Prairie Saga and a serious blow to his literary reputation. Derleth was always scrupulously honest in his dealings with the authors his Arkham House press published, but, ironically, it seems he felt no obligation to embrace the same level of propriety when it came to himself and his fiction.

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THE NATURE OF LEARNING IN
GARRISON KEILLOR'S "DROWNING 1954"
AND "AFTER A FALL"

JANET RUTH HELLER

"Drowning 1954" originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1976 and was republished in Garrison Keillor's 1981 anthology *Happy to Be Here*. A shortened version of the essay also appeared in a major text for undergraduate writing classes, *Writing with a Purpose*.¹ "After a Fall" originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1982 and was republished in the revised edition of *Happy to Be Here* in 1983. Unlike many of Keillor's essays, "Drowning 1954" and "After a Fall" take the form of memoirs in first-person format (Lee 124). In an interview with Peter A. Scholl, Keillor said that he valued both of these essays highly (95). I use "Drowning 1954" in my freshman writing classes as a model for autobiographical essays about overcoming a fear. But this narrative and "After a Fall" also have a lot to say about bad teaching, overly rigid interpretations of life experiences, and the true nature of learning. They are also typical of the use of irony, the self-deprecating humor, the parody of previous writers, and the rejection of orthodox values seen in much of Midwestern literature.

"Drowning 1954" focuses on the preadolescent Keillor's fear of swimming. After the persona's cousin Roger drowns, Mrs. Keillor enrolls her twelve-year-old son in a swimming class at the YMCA in downtown Minneapolis. However, the instructor has rules that make the class no fun for children: "Absolute Silence, No Splashing," and "no swimming trunks" (272). So the boys ring the pool, naked and shivering. Furthermore, the teacher intimidates the frightened narrator and the other students by standing by the side of the pool above them and "yelling at those of us who couldn't swim, while we thrashed hopelessly beneath him" (273). Keillor gives examples of what he ironically calls the teacher's "personal attention" to the

frightened students, which consists of insults. “‘You’re walking on the bottom!’ he would shout. ‘Get your legs up! What’s the matter, you afraid to get your face wet? What’s *wrong* with you?’” (273). The narrator develops a full-blown phobia about swimming, replete with nightmares of drowning.

However, when the boy asks his mother to let him quit the swimming class, she will not listen and insists that he continue to take the bus from his suburb to downtown Minneapolis. Desperate, the child decides to occupy his time with more appealing activities, including visits to the public library, where he examines “the Egyptian mummy and the fossils and a facsimile of the Declaration of Independence,” and trips to “the WCCO radio studio to watch ‘Good Neighbor Time’” (273). The boy feels “dazzled” by the local radio stars and imagines news anchor Cedric Adams “swimming in Lake Minnetonka—a powerful whale of happiness and purpose” (274). Dramatic irony is strong at this point in the story because the reader or audience member knows that Keillor will grow up to be a nationally known radio star with his own radio show, *Prairie Home Companion*.

A child with a strict religious upbringing, the boy feels guilty for deceiving his parents. The adult narrator describes his younger self as “ashamed” and sure that “God would punish me for my cowardice and deceit” (273). He lumps himself with the social outcasts he sees downtown: “I was . . . closely related to the bums and winos and old men who sat around in the library and wandered up and down Hennepin Avenue.” In a parody of Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, Keillor describes the boy’s daily memory of “some poor ragged creature, filthy drunk at noon, [who] would stagger at me wildly out of a doorway, with his arms stretched out toward me, and I saw a look of fellowship in his eyes: *You are one of us*” (274). Adapting the slippery slope argument common in sermons and religious tracts, Keillor conveys the boy’s guilty introspection about his “one misstep” that would surely lead to his “utter damnation”: “Drinking and all the rest of the bum’s life would come with time, inevitably. My life was set on its tragic course by a sinful error in youth” (274). Keillor adds ironically, “Even as I worked at the deception, I marveled that my fear of water should be greater than my fear of Hell” (274-75). Again, dramatic irony builds during this section of the essay because readers know that the high-strung boy will grow up to become a successful writer and radio show host, not an alcoholic bum.

The following summer, the boy tries swimming in both a lake and the Mississippi River with his friends. Suddenly, he learns on his own to execute the various strokes, to dive, and to swim underwater. Keillor conveys the boy’s relief with religious imagery: “I felt restored—grateful that I would not be a bum all my life, grateful to God for letting me learn to swim” (275). A year after the swimming class fiasco, the protagonist achieves his goal and no longer has to feel guilty and sinful. However, his parents cannot share his pride and joy because they still believe that he learned to swim the previous summer in the YMCA class.

At this point, the essay shifts gears in time and perspective. Most of the essay is from the child’s point of view; however, the last paragraph focuses on the adult narrator’s point of view. Keillor is now a parent, and his seven-year-old son has inherited his father’s fear of swimming. The child’s tension reminds Keillor of his old phobia. Keillor now sees the “imperial swimming instructor at the YMCA” as a symbol for “powerful people who delight in towering over some little twerp who is struggling and scared, and casting the terrible shadow of their just and perfect selves” (275). As a famous shy person, Keillor resents those who exploit the timidity and vulnerability of those lower in the pecking order.

Keillor imagines a surreal and comic revenge on such power trippers, and he shifts to second-person pronouns for this apostrophe:

The Big Snapper knows who you are, you bastards, and in a little while he is going to come after you with a fury you will not believe and grab you in his giant mouth and pull you under until your brain turns to jelly and your heart almost bursts. You will never recover from this terror. You will relive it every day, as you lose your fine job and your home and the respect of your friends and family. (276)

In a parody of the reversals in classical dramas, Keillor portrays the bullies of the world reduced to terrified wimps. He ends the essay ironically: “You have fifteen minutes. Get changed” (276). The swimming teacher’s commands are transposed into a demand that bullies try to change their lives before they suffer the fate of the wimps whom they have tried to intimidate.

In his biography of Keillor, Michael Fedo quotes Lloyd Hackl, an English teacher at Lakewood Community College in White Bear Lake, Minnesota, who heard the author read “Drowning 1954” at Lakewood. “Coming from a man who was supposedly a humorist,

there was a real darkness in his reading of 'Drowning 1954.' His attitude about the swimming instructor who bullied the kids seemed venomous" (85). This is evidence that the story evokes strong feelings in the author.

Peter A. Scholl points out similarities between this essay and works by Mark Twain and E. B. White. Like the protagonist of Twain's "Story of the Bad Little Boy" (1865), the young Keillor does not get severely punished for nonreligious behavior. However, Scholl observes that Keillor differs from Twain by refusing to undermine completely the grounds of Christian morality and theology. While Keillor's audiences often cheer when he reads his condemnation of bullies in the final paragraph of "Drowning 1954," the author views this passage as mere "empty threats." Furthermore, the boy's deceit does have some negative consequences. Scholl quotes Keillor's own analysis of "Drowning 1954": "It's a story about deceit and weakness and you pay the price for deceit. In the story, the price that he pays is that he steals from himself the pleasure of the accomplishment once he learns how to do it [swim]. Moreover, this is a lesson that the young son of the narrator will have to learn for himself, and nothing a father can do will protect him from suffering such lessons." In their personal essays, both Keillor and E. B. White manifest a "self-deprecatory humor" with "an undercurrent of melancholy." The conclusion of "Drowning 1954" resembles the conclusion of White's "Once More to the Lake" (1941). Both concern fathers of young sons, and both fathers try to come to terms with their limitations (Scholl 96, 98-101).

However, Keillor's essay differs from White's in having a more bitter tone. "Once More to the Lake" conveys a nostalgic view of White's childhood vacations from the perspective of the adult writing a memoir during World War II. While the fathers and sons in both works have a close relationship, Keillor refers to his own son in only the last paragraph (275-76); this male bond is the focus of White's essay, and White recalls his own father, often confusing past and present father-son relationships (644-49). Also, Keillor emphasizes the tension between the male child and his mother, who refuses to let him stop taking the sadistic swimming lessons. Women are often unsympathetic characters in Keillor's prose. In contrast, White does not even mention the mother in his essay.

What are the lessons of this story for professors, for parents, and for leaders in general? First, Keillor implies that we should not force

young people into an experience; we need to wait until they are ready. The boy in this story learns to swim by himself at age thirteen, one year after his mother tried to push him into this experience. Secondly, Keillor insists that adults should listen to children's complaints and not assume that adults always know best. If adults are deaf to children's concerns, the youngsters will simply learn to hide their emotions and reactions. Communication channels need to remain open. Thirdly, Keillor seems to argue that children often can solve their own problems. We need to trust them to do this. Finally, he argues that the learning situation needs to be validating and stimulating for children to learn anything. Teachers need to get down in the water with their students and guide them directly, instead of standing high above them and screaming. Mere bullying and power tripping simply alienate one's audience.

"Drowning 1954" uses many specific names of Midwestern places. The first paragraph is crammed with proper nouns like "Lake Independence," "the West River Road bus," "our home in Brooklyn Park township" (272). Keillor refers to "downtown Minneapolis" (272, 275), the public library there (272), "the WCCO radio studio" (273-74), and specific streets in Minneapolis: "Hennepin Avenue" (273, 274), "La Salle Avenue" (272), and "Ninth Street" (272). He describes radio host Cedric Adams as "the most famous man in the upper Midwest" (273) and imagines Adams swimming in "Lake Minnetonka" (274). Keillor finally learns to swim in "the Mississippi River" (275) near his home.

According to David D. Anderson, Midwestern literature often contains paradox and a rejection of orthodoxy (16). Both themes characterize "Drowning 1954." While the child in the story dreads the traditional religious consequences of lying to his mother, the adult narrator realizes that playing hooky from his swimming lessons brought him into contact with the radio community, which was Keillor's eventual destiny. Ironically, the child found very profitable ways to spend time that would have been wasted in the ineffective swimming class. Keillor also uses repeated *m*, short *i*, and *r* sounds to undercut the importance of the incompetent "imperial swimming instructor" (275). Thus, this essay fits two aspects of the Midwestern literary tradition.

"After a Fall" catalogues various falls that Keillor has had since 1949 but focuses on episodes during Keillor's adolescence and adulthood. As in "Drowning 1954," Keillor challenges religious orthodoxy

by emphasizing that one should not interpret falling as a divine punishment for human pranks. Rather, falling is a universal human experience that even has comic aspects. In the earlier story, he highlights his shyness and powerlessness; however, "After a Fall" highlights his awkwardness and the resulting embarrassment. Being a tall person, Keillor argues, makes one likely to fall: "One misstep and down he goes" (254). Both stories emphasize this vulnerability to error.

Falling hurts one's ego the most when the mishap takes place in front of an audience. Keillor begins "After a Fall" by recounting a recent pratfall in front of a young woman jogger who smiled (251-52). He resents this smile and interprets it as a feminist commentary on male ineptitude (252).² The fall and her reaction make him feel "old and achy and ridiculous and cheapened by the whole experience." He now realizes that he did wrong to laugh at his son when the younger man tripped over a shoelace (253). Keillor also remembers falling as he ran onstage when *Prairie Home Companion* traveled to a makeshift stage at a junior college in southern Minnesota. He imagines Howard Cosell interviewing him after the injury, as if Keillor were a famous athlete (254-56). Despite the humor and embarrassment that falling creates, Keillor is glad that he has escaped serious injuries and avoided landing on his two-year-old son when he fell in 1971 while trying to install a second-story storm window (256-57). Keillor feels lucky that the ladder, the window, or his tall father did not hit the boy, and both laughed and clapped when they realized that everyone was okay (260). Jason has grown up to be a tall and somewhat awkward young man like his father (253). Both "Drowning 1954" and "After a Fall" stress similarities between Garrison and Jason Keillor.

Keillor ends "After a Fall" by focusing on another public fall, this time in front of friends. When he was nineteen, he and five college pals decided to strip and use Donna's father's sauna, taking advantage of her parents' absence. Everything went well until one of the boys turned on the shower, which "jumped out at us like a snake and thrashed around exploding ice-cold water. He fell back, someone screamed, I slipped and fell, Donna fell on top of me, we leaped apart, and meanwhile the nozzle danced and flew from the force of the water" (258). Both Keillor and Donna had been raised in fundamentalist Christian homes, so she cries, "God! Oh, God!" (258). Unlike the jogger, Donna is deeply upset by their mutual fall. The author has more respect and sympathy for Donna's insistence that the experience

is not funny (259) than for the jogger's alleged feminist smirk. Twenty years later, Keillor addresses Donna from his calmer vantage point and tries to console her in the last paragraphs of "After a Fall":

We were young. We meant well. We wanted to be natural and free. It didn't mean we were awful. God didn't turn on the cold water to punish us for taking off our clothes—Tom did, and he didn't mean it, either . . . Write me a letter and let me know how you're doing. I would like to hear that you're doing well, as I am, and that our night of carnal surprise did you no lasting harm . . . God writes a lot of comedy, Donna; the trouble is, He's stuck with so many bad actors who don't know how to play funny (259-60).

Scholl points out that the title of the essay and the snakelike shower nozzle are literary allusions to Genesis and the naked teenagers are new Adams and Eves (97). However, Keillor departs from Genesis by portraying humans as bumbling rather than sinful, and he depicts God as a struggling writer, much like himself.

Perhaps Keillor was thinking of Mark Twain's adaptation of Genesis in "Extracts from Adam's Diary" (8-16) and "Eve's Diary" (20-33). Both writers present women's and men's different views of Eden and the Fall. Twain has Adam complain that Eve talks too much, will not leave him in peace, and complains when he takes risky actions like "going over the [Niagara] Falls" (8-9). Both Keillor and Twain set their new Edens in the United States. Both writers reject orthodox interpretations of Biblical and modern events.

So what has Keillor learned from his many falls, and what is he trying to teach his readers and listeners? He has concluded that it is too traumatizing to assume that every mishap is a divine punishment for our sins. We need to see the glass as half full instead of half empty and to be grateful that our falls have not seriously injured anyone we love. From the perspective of middle age, falls even have a comic aspect, which we find hard to acknowledge.

Both "Drowning 1954" and "After a Fall" attack overly rigid interpretations of life experiences by using irony, self-deprecating humor, and parody. The tone and techniques make both essays typical of modern Midwestern literature.

NOTES

¹The current edition of this text does not contain any essays by Keillor. See Trimmer, Joseph F. *The New Writing with a Purpose*. 14th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

²Keillor's insistence that the woman who stops to help is a hostile feminist does not seem justified by the details that he includes. His interpretation seems to be a projection of his own conflict with some women.

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SUBURBAN SELF-ALIENATION: LOUIS BROMFIELD'S *MR. SMITH*

JAYNE WATERMAN

In an untitled manuscript Louis Bromfield writes frankly and at length about what was to be his last novel, *Mr. Smith*:

It is a good novel and it is a true novel but it is certainly not a "happy" novel and one does not read it as a means of escape . . . it is written about Americans in the midst of American life, of the middle class, of the suburbs indeed of all that life which we like to think "representative" and sometimes deceived ourselves into believing is a "happy" life and a satisfactory one. In general this "average" middle class American life is none of these things.¹

As Bromfield's synopsis confirms, in *Mr. Smith* the ideals of suburban American life are denounced, so belying the illusions of modern archetypes and exposing the superficial substance of middle-class living. And at the heart of this suburban depiction lay the pathology of psychological trauma, alcoholism, drug addiction, adultery, illness, death, and suicide. Yet at the same time, the novel reclaims and reconstructs the nostalgic myths of an earlier pastoral life. Exploring these issues in detail, Bromfield's literary suburbia is examined as a complex and paradoxical space that inscribes a version of America that is both destructive illusion and constructive mythology.

Bromfield's 1950s rendition of 1940s suburban living is a bleak, cautionary tale that articulates despair at the loss of America's traditional norms and the torment of modern Man's disintegration. *Mr. Smith* follows the life and death of the ordinary, middle-class insurance businessman, and American Everyman, Wolcott Ferris. Charting Ferris's experiences, from his Midwestern suburb of Oakdale—"the torrent of mediocrity and uniformity" (219)—to his wartime South Pacific island jungle experiences—"a wild and extravagant beauty" (29)—the juxtaposed, flashback narrative is relayed as a journal manuscript. Cutting between the imprisoning,

manicured grass of the suburb lawn and the fatal liberation of the primordial jungle, *Mr. Smith* offers a critique of America, its life and its land, through a paradigm of seeming suburban normalcy.

Despite *Mr. Smith's* literary shortcomings, the novel's theoretical ramifications are far-reaching in their projection of ordinary America. In his biographical essay for the Nobel Prize in 1930, Sinclair Lewis praises the average, noting that novelists must not always "assert all American men are tall, handsome, rich, honest, and powerful" (279), but must also listen "to the normal daily drone of what are to me [Lewis] the most fascinating and exotic people in the world the Average Citizen of the United States (292). Bromfield's *Mr. Smith*, usually dismissed by literary critics, can be interpreted in relation to the idea of ordinary suburban normalcy and, therefore, take its place in American literary history.

Published in 1951, the text's backdrop is the suburban build-up to, and consequences of, World War II. Yet it is a novel also inspired by the 1947 blueprint of New York's Levittown with its pioneering assembly-line construction of suburban houses. Bromfield sets out to portray suburbia in all its daily drudgery and pressured conformity by producing a text that chronicles the encroaching "Suburban Age," comprising the dysfunctions of the individual, family, marriage, and nation. This typically male-centered narrative of the suburbs continued to develop after *Mr. Smith*. In this literary legacy, Bromfield's postwar fiction engages with the suburban tropes of a durable genre. In a sense, Bromfield's *Mr. Smith* becomes a bridge between Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922) and John Updike's "Rabbit" tetralogy (1960-1990), resonating with much of the suburban fiction in between: Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), John Cheever's short stories from the 1940s to 1960s, which have become synonymous with the American middle-class suburban landscape, and Richard Yates's explosive *Revolutionary Road* (1961). The illusions and realities of the pastoral, the ordinary, everyday normalcy, and underlying anxiety and alienation are the mainstay of twentieth century suburban literature. Yet this American literary history, which encompasses "Babbitt" to "Rabbit," is missing a representative "Smith."

In this conceptual light, to broaden the analysis further, *Mr. Smith* is also closely aligned to themes and interpretations depicted by the photographs of Bill Owens's *Suburbia* (1973) or the recent *New York Times* article on literary suburbia entitled "Heading Home to Adultery and Angst" (1 Apr. 2004). The newspaper article discusses

the significance of a new generation of American authors who have rediscovered suburbia, such as Jane Smiley (*Good Faith* 2003) and Tom Perrotta (*Little Children* 2004). The conjunction of *Mr. Smith* with these photographic and journalistic examples highlights how key suburban tropes found in Bromfield's work also speak to the American arts today.

Lewis's *Babbitt* and its suburb of Floral Heights is, of course, an antecedent to *Mr. Smith*. The "dimmed and muddy colors" (8) of Ferris's house clearly recall the Babbitts who revel in muted tones chosen by "the decorator who 'did all the interiors'" (15) and so articulated the same "tan-colored voice" for all of their community (35). Ferris is disgusted by such muted designs and instead praises the old aristocratic home of his East Coast friend Frank Saunders and the Victorian home of his lover Mary Raeburn. The suburban décor is a manifestation of Ferris's fears because it signifies enclosed and stifling "gray-flannel" minds: something "Poe might well have dissected" (149).

Although "*Mr. Smith*" and "*Babbitt*" have significant similarities, Bromfield's "*Babbitt*" is not an imitation of Lewis's work. Instead, the figure is used as a symbol with which to measure the pathological changes in American life:

When I am writing of these men I am not writing of Babbitts. There are no more Babbitts. They belong to a certain phase of American life and that phase has passed . . . Babbitt in his way was crude but healthy. The sickness of which I write and which spreads and grows constantly is quite different. I know of what I am speaking; and I am frightened for a whole nation and a whole people (199).

From its beginnings, the suburban went hand in hand with the psychological and the pathological. In *The Suburban Trend* of 1925, Harlan Douglass discusses the dysfunction of suburbia, the "peculiar psychology of the suburban people," the "[p]ossible abnormalities . . . of the suburban trend," and the lack of "normal social relationships."

In 1920, American "normalcy" was added to the language following the mistaken remarks of Warren G. Harding, who spoke of America's postwar needs: "'not heroics but healing; not nostrums but normalcy; not revolution but restoration'" (qtd. in Allen 41-42). Normalcy has since become a more negative and indeterminate term with the ability to convey the duality of opposed meanings. Bromfield recognizes the double-edged nature of all that is "normal."

As Ferris observes of his family: "they were the most normal and healthy of children, but in another they were becoming mere monsters of 'normality'" (190). The extraordinary, it seems, co-exists with such perfect ordinariness.

On an abstract level, *Mr. Smith* can also be viewed as a polemical tract that, for all its literary shortfalls, works within the legacy of the jeremiad, adapted from biblical lamentations of Jeremiah. For the Puritans in the American wilderness, the jeremiad called them back to God's original purpose and spoke to the improvement of personal and national religious health. A fundamental expression of American discourse that has been reconstituted in philosophical, political, and secular terms, it is within this jeremiadic mode that Bromfield's *Mr. Smith* operates, reverberating the paradigms of America's national norms, represented by the suburb and the pastoral.

Certainly, *Mr. Smith* is not apologetic about its anti-industrialist, antimaterialist, antisuburban tirade, but this harangue does not exclude concern for individual, communal, and religious progress. Opening his journal, Ferris states that it is written for his individual self "as a kind of purge" (6), but to his friend in the prologue Ferris also expresses concern for his fellow man: "If you think this could be published I'd like it. It might help some other poor bastard with the same disease as mine" (5). In fact, *Mr. Smith* is as much a critique of individual shortcomings and the hope for personal improvement as it is concerned with the state of the nation's public life and health.

Ferris is forced to search for his lost self in the primitive wilderness and primordial darkness of the South Pacific and war: "this exploration into what I am and how I came to be what I am. It is like exploring the jungle itself. One goes on and on, deeper and deeper as one new dim and misty vista opens into another" (35). This neurotic, Conrad-like modern search for self delineates solipsistic tendencies, but Ferris is also the tortured, American Everyman: "I was just another of the myriad Mr. Smiths (265).

Understanding the sterile and destructive formulation of national norms, archetypes, and myths offers a counterpoint that equates national discourse to mere expectation and illusion, or in Ferris's words a national discourse that expresses an America "fearful of facing the truth" (52). Rather than the horror of his suburban "comfort," Ferris seeks the experience of a genuine fear in order to feel alive. This fear resides in the terror of a primitive landscape wilderness: "It is these awful sounds, this mystery, this hostile terrifying feeling of

the awful jungle, which binds us all together far more than any other factor in our existence' (63). Within its carefully planned streets and perfect houses, the suburbs actually represent a loss of "real" landscape. In this sense, the suburb becomes an antimyth in its mythic attempts to reclaim the land. It also becomes not an American dream but an American dystopia.

In these ideas of a national mythology, the suburb is read ultimately as a microcosm of America. It is significant that in *Mr. Smith* Ferris looks back and charts the history of his fictional Midwestern microcosm. This "history" registers changes from frontier village to town, and "when the automobile came and changed the element of space into that of time, they moved out a little way into suburbs like Oakdale" (37). In this new spatially distanced relationship a more urgent need for mythic narration and closer ties to a lost landscape develops. Ferris expresses the desire "to find again a wild country" and realizes that to do so "one would have to search the wildernesses of the earth" (43). He also realizes that the "root" of this search "must lie deep in the puritanical Protestant past of all that is our culture" (114). Ferris's mythic "journey" represents such a search that re-enacts, but also inverts, the Puritan diaspora and errand into the wilderness.

The foundation of such American pastoral myths resides not only in biblical and Puritan beginnings, but also in the myth of an Arcadian Golden Age. Ferris's longings are aligned with Jeffersonian tradition: "I kept thinking back to Jefferson and his faith in the common people" (177). The yeoman-farmer ideal of land ownership and everyday contact with nature is the ideal that informs the suburban quest to own a house and a garden. Douglass theorizes that:

The suburbanite plants, cultivates, and harvests as the farmer does though on a diminutive scale; that he mows the lawn, tinkers with the automobile, and tends the furnace; that he enjoys his own sunshine and shade, his own birds and children, is unquestionably important and gives his life a wholesome distinction not born of city pavements (236).

In the pastoral nostalgia of the back-to-the-land movement and the permissiveness of the agrarian myth, a search for a sense of place defined meaning in America. It is a meaning that continues to hold the American imagination and a meaning that informs Bromfield's work, including *Mr. Smith*.

The pastoral ethos of a Jeffersonian landscape is reborn within the suburbs: the nation as suburb rewrites itself by remythologizing earlier myths. The idea of the garden is one of the most all-encompassing symbols that trace the lineage of pastoralism in American thought. By Ferris's time the garden is a fragile heritage that embodies the crisis of self for all suburban "Smiths." It is why Babbitt feels the need to seek adventure in the outdoor life of Maine and why Ferris, resembling the acts of his Puritan forefathers, is driven to find peace in the wilderness of a foreign land. For Ferris, the garden has simply become an illusionary birthright composed of country clubs and garden clubs: "[m]ost of them had no garden at all," Ferris notes of his fellow suburbanites, "or their gardens were entirely planted and cared for by working gardeners" (123). Trapped in the garden "wasteland" of suburban self-alienation, Ferris sees little option to escape other than in the assurances of a wartime death. Yet even in death he becomes a mythic symbol: an ideal hero of suburban normalcy, which he had always hoped, but was never able, to truly escape. It is this suburban legacy that authors and artists are still grappling with today.

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NOTE

¹Bromfield, Louis. "Untitled: Non-Fiction", Incipit: "I am inclined to think ...". Louis Bromfield Collection, Ohio State University Archives: np

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A DENTIST NO MORE: THE DESTRUCTION OF
MASCULINITY IN *MCTEAGUE*

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In a time of burgeoning gender studies, the definition of masculinity has been called into question. Just as women studies has struggled with the question of what femininity is and how it can be portrayed, recent studies of masculinity have attempted to discover what lies beneath the labels of "manhood" and "masculinity." Theories proposed and developed by psychoanalysis and sexology have contributed much to contemporary notions of the masculine identity. Much of psychoanalytic thought began developing as the nineteenth century drew to a close; thus, works of literature created at that time present an interesting area for this study. Frank Norris's *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* (1899) is often credited as a work of pure American literary naturalism, but the novel also creates an interesting portrait of the development and destruction of one man's masculinity. The ultimate downfall of the central character, McTeague, occurs in direct conjunction with his reliance upon the masculine roles of breadwinner and wage earner. Essentially, his masculine identity exists conterminously with his identity as a dentist.

The linking of masculinity with men's positions as breadwinners and wage earners was long ago socialized into the collective consciousness of Americans. As Theodore Cohen suggests in *Men and Masculinity*:

Throughout much of the history of the industrialized United States, men's adult roles have centered around their performance as workers. In the absence of any formalized rites of passage, the transition to manhood was defined largely by taking and keeping a job. To be a man meant to earn a steady wage, the size of which helped determine one's masculine worth. Without gainful employment, adult men were seen as failures in the ultimate demonstration of masculinity and manhood. (302)

Within the same text, Lillian Rubin goes a step further, claiming that "for a man, work is likely to be connected to the core of the self. Going to work isn't just what he does, it is deeply linked to who he is" (290). Coincidentally, McTeague's descent into violence and murder begins once he has lost his career, suggesting a loss of his masculine identity.

To understand how McTeague's masculine development becomes so interlinked with his profession, we must turn to the psychoanalytic theories that serve as a blueprint for the development of man. According to Christopher Blazina in *Cultural Myths of Masculinity*, analytic theorists built upon theories of sexology and Freudian myth "carrying forward the notion that in order to become a proper man a boy needs to break away from emotional dependence and receive instruction from an older man" (67). And as Nancy Chodorow has suggested in her study of psychoanalysis and female development, the young male identifies himself as masculine by rejecting all characteristics associated with the feminine. He must identify as masculine by "learning not to be womanly" (Chodorow 108). The boy achieves this distinction through his separation from the mother and subsequent experiences with a male role model with whom he can counteridentify.

Each of these critics' concepts is based in theory originally suggested by Ralph R. Greenson in his 1968 article, "Dis-Identifying from Mother: Its Special Importance for the Boy," wherein Greenson distinguished the important difference between the maturation process of boys and girls. According to Greenson, a male youth "must dis-identify from the mother and identify with a male figure" in order to "develop a male gender identity" (372). Greenson contends that this process results in the distinction that "men are far more uncertain about their masculinity" than women are about their femininity (371). Ultimately, men experience insecurity about their gender identity because it is rooted in a disidentification process, while the feminine gender identity is created in the image of the mother, never going through the evolution of retreat and reidentification (370). During a particular case study of Greenson's, a young boy suffers great trauma in his masculine development because of his mother's extreme possessiveness and his father's absence and disinterest (372). The maturation process of young McTeague is similar as his mother takes the more dominant role in his life and development.

McTeague experiences separation from his mother after the death of his father, when he begins to travel with a dentist who is supposed to train him professionally. McTeague's previous experience with his father prepared him to link masculinity and manhood with vocation because "[f]or thirteen days of [every fourteen] his father was a steady, hard-working shift-boss" of a mine (2). McTeague learned from an early age that a man's identity is intrinsically linked to his profession. McTeague's mother is also identified as "overworked" yet she remains "fiery and energetic . . . filled with the one idea of having her son rise in life and enter a profession" (2). When McTeague experiences his separation from his mother, he is submerged in a life as a dentist's apprentice, at his mother's insistence. These formative years create a man incapable of identifying himself outside of his capacity as "the dentist." Clearly, McTeague's identity is well-grounded in both his capacity as a dentist and his separation from his mother. After his mother's death and the opening of his own "Dental Parlors," McTeague feels "that his life was a success, that he could hope for nothing better" (3). He believes that he has achieved the ultimate sense of fulfillment as a man.

Thus, McTeague's masculine identity develops simultaneously with his skills as a practicing dentist, as he interlinks his masculinity with his capacity to do his daily work. Norris suggests this as early as page nine when McTeague loses his name and becomes instead "the dentist" (9). The link between a man's identity and his profession also spreads beyond McTeague to other characters in the novel. Those who live and work on Polk Street establish its hierarchical order. Men who are laborers, and therefore make up the lowest class, are the earliest to rise for work. Men who work in the shops as clerks are the second to appear on the scene as McTeague watches from his window above, and the men who manage those shops and stores appear last, as they are of the highest order in the microcosm of Polk Street life (6).

While dentistry has provided McTeague with his identity and place in life as a man, the novel also suggests that his identity is incomplete. His education, as both a dentist and a man, is called "haphazard" (12) and a "sham" (28). In the beginning of the novel, McTeague appears satisfied and content, but it soon becomes clear that an element is lacking in his life. Until McTeague meets Trina, his only pleasures are "to eat, to smoke, to sleep, and to play upon his concertina" (2). The example of masculinity and self-identification

set for McTeague is inseparably linked to a professional capacity, and he only realizes the remaining aspects of his masculine self through Trina and the reintroduction of femininity into his life.

McTeague's underdeveloped identity as a man becomes evident when he takes Trina as a patient. McTeague's identity as a dentist formed only after his separation from the female (his mother), and his life of contentment continued devoid of female interaction. Indeed, "girls disturbed and perplexed him. He did not like them, obstinately cherishing that intuitive suspicion of all things feminine" (23). Thus, Trina serves as McTeague's "first experience" of female interaction:

With [Trina] the feminine element suddenly entered [McTeague's] little world. It was not only her that he saw and felt, it was the woman, the whole sex, an entire new humanity . . . that he seemed to have discovered. His narrow point of view was at once enlarged and confused, and all at once he saw that there was something else in life besides concertinas and steam beer. Everything had to be made over again. His whole rude idea of life had to be changed. The male virile desire in him tardily awakened, aroused itself, strong and brutal. (27)

When Trina enters McTeague's world, he becomes aware of a lack in his identity. This revelation, however, is not without flaw as it also brings a "disturbing element" into McTeague's life. McTeague's initial encounters with Trina suggest the masculine ego's innate fear that an intrusion of femininity will destroy masculinity. As Christopher Blazina has noted, because masculinity develops through a process of separation from the feminine, there remains a "traditional analytic paradigm that [femininity] comes to represent a potential danger that may cause the [man] to lose his masculine identity" (68). And to return to Ralph Greenson's theory of masculine development, "each sex is envious of the opposite sex; but the male's . . . contempt seems to be particularly destructive in regard to his gender identity" (371). McTeague's avoidance of the female and then his disturbance when Trina enters his life imply the masculine's unconscious fear of the feminine.

Ironically, while McTeague's fear of femininity appears discreetly, Trina exhibits an outright "intuitive feminine fear of the male" (33) at various points in the text. Ultimately, Norris leads the reader to believe that McTeague will destroy Trina and, as McTeague does eventually murder Trina, the reader's suspicions are realized. A reading of the text focused on McTeague's masculine development,

however, suggests that it is McTeague's masculinity, interlinked with his capacity as a dentist, that is ultimately destroyed.

The ultimate downfall and demise of Trina and McTeague begin when the latter finds himself unable to continue practicing dentistry, a circumstance that suggests his loss of masculinity. Further, McTeague resists this loss by refusing to understand the notice that he receives, and he turns to his wife for guidance. After reading the formal notice, Trina must explain to McTeague that he has no formal education and, therefore, can no longer practice dentistry. After Trina conveys this information to McTeague, he grasps for his waning identity, turning to her in an attempt to reaffirm himself, asking, "What do you mean, Trina? Ain't I a dentist? Ain't I a doctor?" (261). Essentially, he is asking his wife "Ain't I a man?" a question that Trina noticeably neglects to answer. McTeague also voices his fear of emasculation when he takes the State of California's actions as their attempt to "make small" of him (267), a phrase which he uses throughout the novel whenever he feels his masculinity has been called into question.

McTeague continues to resist any change in his daily routine and "only by slow degrees" does he resign his profession (268). Even after he has turned away all of his patients under the guise of retirement, McTeague continues to go to his "Dental Parlors" daily, attempting to maintain some aspect of his former routine. His eventual relinquishment of the "Parlors," however, does not end his decline. McTeague must turn to his wife for financial support, which only compounds the situation and the damage to his male ego. Trina has maintained her profession carving wooden animals for her uncle's toy company and also possesses the five thousand dollars she won from the lottery; they will survive off her wages and the interest from her winnings. Because of Trina's greed and desire to maintain her savings, she forces the couple to move from their comfortable rooms to a one-room apartment and then sells their possessions. However, just as McTeague had clung to his "Dental Parlors," he attempts to reassert his waning masculine dominance by refusing to surrender a select few of his possessions. Those that he prohibits from being sold are his concertina, his canary in its cage, and his golden tooth, which hung outside of his "Dental Parlors." Each of these items represents either his life before Trina or his dentistry itself, suggesting that he has now separated his attempts to reaffirm his masculinity from Trina and, consequently, from the feminine

realm. However, each of these items represents his attempt to preserve his masculinity and will ultimately represent an aspect of his eventual destruction.

The gilt tooth to which McTeague clings serves as further evidence that his masculinity is defined by his dentistry. The tooth is introduced as McTeague's "ambition," and "his dream" is to have a "huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs" projecting from the corner window of his Dental Parlors (*McTeague* 4). While phallic imagery is often metonymous with the masculine ideal, the gilded tooth represents the masculine ideal for McTeague. The tooth also represents the incomplete nature of McTeague's masculinity, as it first appears in the novel as his ultimate ambition and dream. Trina eventually fills the void in McTeague's masculinity and provides him with the gilded tooth he desires. The very description of the tooth when McTeague receives it suggests ideal and phallic qualities:

How immense it looked . . . The thing was tremendous, overpowering . . . Even McTeague himself, big boned and enormous as he was, shrank and dwindled in the presence of the monster . . . The dentist circled about the golden wonder, gasping with delight and stupefaction, touching it gingerly with his hands as if it were something sacred. (147-148)

McTeague gains a sense of wholeness once he owns the tooth, as it represents "his sign, his ambition, the one unrealized dream of his life" (147). Just as Trina represents the feminine representation to enhance his masculine identity, the tooth justifies his dental vocation, which is synonymous with his masculinity. Additionally, McTeague's downfall occurs simultaneously with the deterioration of the tooth itself.

When McTeague loses his ability to practice as a dentist, he vainly attempts to retain as many characteristics of his former self as possible; similarly, when another dentist wishes to purchase the gilded tooth from McTeague and Trina, we again hear McTeague's defensive mantra, "'You can't make small of me'" (278). He refuses to give up the tooth because, in doing so, he would relinquish the symbol of his manhood. His sense of masculine completeness is fulfilled by this surrogate phallus and he, therefore, refuses to surrender it. Similarly, when McTeague seeks validation from Trina, asking her "'Ain't I a dentist,'" he attempts to assert the gilded tooth as proof of his identity,

telling her to just look at "the gold tooth" she gave him (261). Just as a penis can define a man, the golden tooth defines the dentist.

McTeague finally obtains employment with a company that constructs dental tools, a position which suggests a decline in social standing and in masculinity. Previously as dentist, McTeague used these tools, but now he merely constructs them. Similarly, no longer the "golden wonder" (147), the tooth now sits in one corner of the room "monstrous" and "distorted," although, like McTeague, it retains a hint of its former self as it remains somewhat "brilliant" and "shining" (288). Just as McTeague occupies a position of lesser vocational quality, so the tooth's value also declines. But McTeague soon finds himself unemployed once again and, as he devolves into a world of violence and alcoholism, the tooth deteriorates further and is repurposed as a table. No longer shiny and golden, the tooth has dulled and been forced into a corner, now "enormous and ungainly" (337). The phallic symbol that at one time represented McTeague's masculinity and vocation is now being used as a surface upon which Trina can pile "the plates and greasy dishes . . . to have them out of the way" (337). Since McTeague's masculinity has deteriorated so badly that he no longer identifies himself and his masculinity with the tooth, and he decides to sell it to the other dentist after all.

In addition to the symbolic representation of McTeague's masculinity in the novel, McTeague's own actions depict a man in limbo with regard to his own masculine identity. According to psychoanalytic writer Karen Horney, the male sense of masculine identity is constantly on shaky ground. In an attempt to salvage their masculinity, men have two options: they can either distance themselves from the feminine or engage in hypermasculine behavior in order to compensate for the threat to their masculinity (357). In Norris's novel, we witness both of these actions after McTeague has lost his ability to practice dentistry. Immediately following McTeague and Trina's relocation to a humbler home and McTeague's failure to procure steady employment, his feelings for Trina begin to recede, signaling his withdrawal from the female. He no longer sees anything "extraordinary about her" and "it is no longer a pleasure for him to kiss her and take her in his arms"; "he [does] not dislike her" but he also "[does] not love her" (284). But McTeague's indifference and the distance he attempts to put between himself and Trina do not work, and he eventually resorts to hypermasculine behavior.

While looking for employment, McTeague drinks whiskey with friends, attempting to establish a sense of masculine camaraderie to heal his wounded masculinity, feeling that he “deserved a little consolation” (293). Later, however, he returns home, drunk and angry at being caught in the rain without money for carfare. He unloads his anger on Trina, exhibiting the hypermasculinity of a drunken and violent rage. When Trina wallows in the prospect of McTeague remaining unemployed, she asserts that they will have to find a cheaper place to live, but McTeague will hear none of it. He grasps for his masculine role as the head of the household by exclaiming: “‘We’ll just see about that. You’re going to do just as I tell you after this, Trina McTeague’” (299). But when his words fail to quash Trina’s assertiveness, McTeague resorts to the threat of violence. Only after Trina watches his hands become fists that are as “hard as a wooden mallet,” does she choke back her words of anger toward him (300). Once McTeague feels confident that he has reclaimed some aspect of his masculinity through this display, he retreats to the bed where he wants “to be let alone” (301). The hypermasculinity again regresses into the avoidance of the female, as McTeague seeks the solace of seclusion.

Later in the novel, McTeague attempts his retreat from the feminine through a more drastic measure by leaving Trina for a longer period of time. After robbing her savings, he escapes from the feminine realm that he feels has been stifling his wounded masculinity, only to discover that he must return to Trina again for salvation. He has spent all of the money he took from her and now has nowhere to go. As his attempt at isolation has once again failed, he resorts to the hypermasculine violence that he exhibited before. This time, McTeague becomes enraged at Trina for selling his precious concertina. The concertina has appeared in conjunction with McTeague since the very beginning of the novel and, thus, represents another aspect of his identity. Each Sunday before meeting Trina, McTeague would relax in his Dental Parlors and play upon the concertina “some half-dozen very mournful airs” (2), which brought him a sense of contentment and also portrayed him in a light of sentimentality to the reader. The “lugubrious airs” that McTeague plays carry him back to his youth and conjure memories of a simpler time (2).

According to Philip Acree Cavalier’s interpretation of *McTeague*, “the concertina preserves McTeague’s connection to his former life as a car-boy at the Big Dipper Mine and also helps to stabilize his identity as a dentist . . . When Trina sells the concertina, McTeague

loses the connection to both his past life” and the masculinity he has created for himself (138). What Trina viewed as the simple selling of unneeded property speaks to McTeague as the ultimate destruction of his masculine self. The eruption of violence that ensues leaves Trina dying on the floor, suffocating in her own blood, as McTeague flees San Francisco. After all attempts have been made at reestablishing his masculinity, McTeague follows the only remaining course of action: he returns to his childhood home.

At this point in the novel, McTeague appears to be tapping into his internal awareness of identity. Rather than continuing on the path of isolation and hypermasculine destruction, he returns to the place where his masculinity was initially established: the gold mine where he grew up with both his father and his mother. By returning to a time before he was a dentist, McTeague attempts to negate his previous maturation and start over in attempting to achieve a masculine identity. By returning to the point from which his maturation process began, McTeague attempts to regress and instigate the process of disidentifying all over again.

McTeague’s return to the mining country of his youth suggests a journey through an inconsistent and unruly wilderness. At times the landscape appears entirely “untamed,” while other times it is described as “intimate, small, and homelike” (379-380). McTeague’s final destination, however, is Nature’s manifestation of the battle between masculine and feminine:

In Placer County, California she is a vast, unconquered brute of Pliocene epoch, savage, sullen, and magnificently indifferent to man. But there were *men* in these mountains . . . fighting them stubbornly . . . with drill and dynamite, boring into the vitals of them, or tearing away great yellow gravelly scars in the flanks of them, sucking their blood, extracting gold. (380 emphasis added)

McTeague feels invigorated in his return to the mine as the area represents men raping the land of Mother Nature. Just as McTeague has asserted his ultimate domination over Trina by taking her life, he can continue his attempt at reasserting his masculinity by dominating the mountains of the Big Dipper Mine. Not only can McTeague reestablish his masculinity through the aggressive work in the mines, but he can also liken the experience to his dentistry work and tap into the masculinity he lost:

... there was a resemblance between [McTeague's] present work [in the mine] and the profession he had been forced to abandon. In the Burly drill he saw a queer counterpart of his old-time dental engine ... It was the same work he had so often performed in his 'Parlors,' only magnified, made monstrous, distorted, and grotesqued, the caricature of dentistry. (387)

The similarities between McTeague's new life in the mines and the life he abandoned foreshadow the ultimate destruction that this new life will bring. Because McTeague cannot separate his work in the mines from the work he did when he was a dentist, he fails to establish a new sense of masculinity; instead, he remains in a state of uncertainty, remembering the masculinity he once had and failing to replace it.

McTeague's greatest transgression in his attempt to reverse the maturation process lies in his inability to release an artifact that represents his identity as a dentist: the canary in the golden cage. Unable to give up the creature, he travels to the mines of his youth carrying the cage with him, but by clinging to this symbol of his life as a dentist—his previous masculinity—he cannot possibly negate that existence. Ultimately, the canary that he carries with him throughout his travels makes him obvious to the authorities, who follow him into the desert where he will ultimately die. According to Barbara Hochman in her book *The Art of Frank Norris, Storyteller*,

McTeague's return to the mines cannot protect him from change and death. His return to old ways for protection is futile, and as telling, is the impulse that makes McTeague cling to his canary, even though it will hasten his undoing ... His refusal to leave his canary behind is a measure of his inability to adapt, to change, and to make his peace with loss. (74)

While I agree with Hochman's assessment that McTeague's return to old ways is futile and that the canary represents an inability to adapt, I do not agree that he needs to make peace with loss. Hochman contends that McTeague loses his wife and fails to cope, while I argue that ultimately he loses his masculinity. He cannot possibly make peace with the loss of his gender identity, and his retreat into the mines is therefore doomed from the start. The canary in the cage merely serves as a catalyst for McTeague's eventual demise.

In the final scenes of the novel, as McTeague attempts to travel across Death Valley, it becomes apparent that he has lost control over

his actions. While he has found gold with a newly acquired accomplice and could quite possibly survive and begin a new life, his internal need to escape the man he once was propels him eastward into the dangers of the desert. The canary cage still gripped in his hands, he fights himself, struggling with the uncertainty of the desert before him. As McTeague moves deeper and deeper into the confines of the desert, his need for water becomes symbolic of his still-present need for rebirth. On the surface, he is attempting to outrun the authorities who are following him for murdering his wife, but on another level, he is running from his former self. The white sands and dry, desolate area in which McTeague spends his final hours depict an arena that cannot possibly accommodate his intended purpose of redefining himself.

Although the novel closes with McTeague still living, he is handcuffed to a dead body and without water, suggesting the weight of his flawed masculinity and his failure to achieve rebirth. In the final scene McTeague looks around him, his gaze finally resting upon the "half-dead canary chattering feebly in its little gilt prison" (442). The canary's entrapment in a golden prison suggests the phallic golden tooth, representing the bonds of the man that McTeague had once been closing in on him, a masculinity that entrapped him in a life doomed for failure.

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TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD: THE
METAPHOR OF FAIRY TALE IN THE POETRY OF
LISEL MUELLER

LINDA NEMEC FOSTER

It was because of my love of fairy tales that I first met Lisel Mueller. In 1977, I was accepted into the low-residency MFA program for writers at Goddard College in Vermont. The program's first director, Ellen Bryant Voigt, suggested that I work with Mueller because I wanted to concentrate on writing a sequence of poems based on the Russian witch, Baba Yaga. I agreed and, more importantly, Mueller agreed to work with me, and a longstanding friendship was born.

Mueller's own love of fairy tales and myth has been a significant source for metaphor in her poetry. Judith Kitchen argues that "[Mueller's] sense of history gives her poems a rare philosophical intensity." I would add that her sense of the universality of the fairy tale to explore the human psyche gives her poems a metaphoric brilliance. And in the center of this brilliance is the power of the fairy tale—and, indeed, of the poem—to transform.

Mueller was a student in the graduate program in folklore at Indiana University where she studied myth, fairy tales, and traditional ballads. As Mueller said in an interview: "Of course, as a German child, I was brought up on the Brothers Grimm; but I reread and studied them at Indiana. It seemed as though I had found some kind of metaphoric world that I could draw on for the imagery in my poetry." This metaphoric world is especially apparent in her book, *The Need To Hold Still*, which won the American Book Award for poetry in 1981.

I will discuss this collection momentarily, but it is essential to know that this theme of the transformative power of fairy tale and myth is present in all of Mueller's books—even in those very early

poems. Consider the poem "The Midnight Child" which was written around 1960 and included in her book, *Dependencies*.

Then the moon threw pebbles
on the small boy's window
and took him past sleeping dogs
into the night of black roses
and small shivers of grass.

Into the shoreless night.
Through faceless wax daisies,
through clover, hint of honey
in the drained, bleached fields.
To the edge of the woods, and there
to wait in weeds and shadows.

His cheeks still warm with kisses.
And when the beast came out
between the trees, all hide,
all claws, all bloodshot eyes,
the child was not afraid.
And would have left that place
quiet and sure, until
he saw the beast slip off
his hairy skin, become
a gathering of whiteness
and small shivers of flesh, a
naked human shape
alone and ignorant
in a thin patch of light.

And then the cry, the child's
runaway voice, the heart
wild in the net of the moon. (47)

Even in this early poem, we can see Mueller developing a style that is rhythmical yet free of any excess. As later noted by Stephen Corey in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, this style is part of her impulse toward "legend-making" (742). In "The Midnight Child" there is certainly the legend of the Bogey-Man, the evil lurking in the shadows. But there is also the vulnerability of the parents: what frightens children the most is the fact that parents cannot always protect them. And, indeed, the parent is totally absent from the landscape

of this poem: a reality that characterizes many traditional fairy tales (e.g. Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, and Cinderella).

In this early collection, *Dependencies*, there are other poems that reflect Mueller's legend making: namely, "The Blind Leading the Blind" and "The Mermaid." But I have chosen to reprint "Moon Fishing" because in its language, rhythm, pacing, and tone it is as pure a fairy tale as one can hope to discover in American poetry.

When the moon was full they came to the water,
some with pitchforks, some with rakes,
some with sieves and ladles,
and one with a silver cup.

And they fished till a traveler passed them and said,
"Fools,
to catch the moon you must let your women
spread their hair on the water-
even the wily moon will leap to that bobbing
net of shimmering threads,
gasp and flop till its silver scales
lie black and still at your feet."

And they fished with the hair of their women
till a traveler passed them and said,
"Fools,
do you think the moon is caught lightly,
with glitter and silk threads?
You must cut out your hearts and bait your hooks
with those dark animals;
what matter you lose your hearts to reel in your dreams?"

And they fished with their tight, hot hearts
till a traveler passed them and said,
"Fools,
what good is the moon to a heartless man?
Put back your hearts and get on your knees and drink as you never
have,
until your throats are coated with silver
and your voices ring like bells."

And they fished with their lips and tongues until the water was gone
and the moon had slipped away
in the soft, bottomless mud. (*Dependencies* 15)

Notice how the structure of the poem is patterned after the classic fairy tale: specifically, the three times advice is given by the passing travelers. The number three was very significant in the telling of tales and assumed a magical property, a mystical connection to the universe. (Pythagoras called three the perfect number). Moreover, the poem's language is rich with the imagery of transformation—the moon as a silver-scaled creature, the women's hair as glittering nets, the men's hearts as dark bait. The closure is particularly effective as the men attempt to transform themselves into the very thing they are stalking—the moon.

In another book, *The Private Life*, one poem truly resonates with Mueller's love of the fairy tale as a public persona (i.e. poet) and a private person (i.e. mother): "Reading the Brothers Grimm to Jenny."

Dead means somebody has to kiss you.
Jenny, your mind commands kingdoms of black and white:
you shoulder the crow on your left,
the snowbird on your right;
for you the cinders part
and let the lentils through,
and noise falls into place
as screech or sweet roo-coo,
while in my own, real world
gray foxes and gray wolves
bargain eye to eye,

and the amazing dove
takes shelter under the wing
of the raven to keep dry.

Knowing that you must climb,
one day, the ancient tower
where disenchantment binds
the curls of innocence,
that you must live with power
and honor circumstance,
that choice is what comes true
O, Jenny, pure in heart,
why do I lie to you?

Why do I read you tales
in which birds speak the truth
and pity cures the blind, and beauty reaches deep
to prove a royal mind?

Death is a small mistake
there, where the kiss revives;
Jenny, we make just dreams
out of our unjust lives.

Still, when your truthful eyes,
your keen, attentive stare,
endow the vacuous slut
with royalty, when you match
her soul to her shimmering hair,
what can she do but rise
to your imagined throne?
And what can I, but see
beyond the world that is
when, faithful, you insist
I have the golden key—
and learn from you once more
the terror and the bliss,
the world as it might be? (*Alive Together* 73)

Commenting on this poem, Kitchen writes in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* that “[t]he old stories contain in them a possibility for understanding the present, and the child demonstrates this with implicit faith.” Mueller has said that her poetry is very rhythmic. You can surely hear it in this piece that also happens to be the last rhymed poem that Mueller wrote. I am especially intrigued by the very formal tone of the language; it almost has the effect of a Shakespearean monologue, yet it is certainly grounded in the contemporary world.

Now I want to concentrate on the book I mentioned earlier, a book of poems that is particularly noted for its stunning use of the fairy tale motif: *The Need To Hold Still*. Discussing this collection, Kitchen writes:

... Mueller was able to mine the traditional stories for metaphor. In fact, metaphor becomes the ‘second language’ in this book. She examines fairy tales to see what can be applied to contemporary life; in the process, contemporary life is also examined as the source of new legends. The domestic provides a context in which to test the larger implications of myth.

Some poems that reflect this theme are “The Story,” “Sometimes When the Light,” “Found in the Cabbage Patch,” and “Why We Tell Stories.” But I want to discuss specifically a selection from the pivotal sequence in the book, “Voices from the Forest.”

This sequence consists of eight persona poems that resonate with the imagery of traditional fairy tales and the contemporary myth reflected in them: Hansel and Gretel and Jack and the Beanstalk; Beauty and the Beast and Rumpelstiltskin; an anonymous witch and the hunter in Snow White; the False Bride and the Third Son; brothers and sisters and Cinderella’s mother (her real mother, not the wicked stepmother). Here is an excerpt from “Voices from the Forest” that startles us with its familiarity.

3. A Voice from Out of the Night
Remember me, I was a celebrity,
the famous beauty. All mirrors confirmed me,
the panel of judges ogled me
and cast a unanimous vote.
I was asked my opinion
on marriage, men, abortion,
the use of liquor and drugs;
that was a long time ago.

When my voice deepened
and a bristle
appeared under my chin,
when my blond hair
developed gray roots
and my waist thickened,
the rumors started.

When my legs became sticks
and small brown toads
spotted the backs of my hands
everyone believed them.

I was accused of devouring children
and mutilating men;
they said I smelled of old age
and strong home remedies.
They cast me into the forest
but come to me secretly, in the dark,
in their times of trouble.
What could I have done to convince them I was not guilty?
Loss of beauty was all
the proof they needed.

Young wives in love with your men, kissing your babies: this
could be a warning, but what is the use?

Husbands will flee you,
 sons will turn on you,
 daughters will throw up their hands and cry, "Not me! Not me!"
 (*Alive Together* 135)

Note how Mueller deftly weaves the voice of the witch of traditional fairy tales with a voice closer to our modern age: a voice of the older woman lamenting a culture that deifies youth.

Although not as dominant, the transforming power of myth is also present in Mueller's later books: poems such as "Bedtime Story" and "Film Script" from *Waving From Shore* and "Tears," "Immortality," and "Captivity" from *Second Language*.

The next poem I would like to discuss, "After Whistler," is a particularly moving one from this latter book. It is a short piece that took Mueller twenty drafts to complete. What I find amazing about it is that without hinging on a traditional fairy tale, Mueller creates a poem of pure transformation that resonates with the very modern world, not the ancient one. Also, note how the idea of transformation is reversed: not an animal that changes back into being human, but a human that should have been an animal.

After Whistler

There are girls who should have been swans.
 At birth their feathers are burned;
 their human skins never fit.
 When the other children
 line up on the side of the sun,
 they will choose the moon,
 that precious aberration.
 They are the daughters mothers
 Worry about. All summer,
 dressed in gauze, they flicker
 inside the shaded house,
 drawn to the mirror, where their eyes,
 two languid moths, hang dreaming.
 It's winter they wait for, the first snowfall
 with the steady interior hum only they can hear:
 they stretch their arms, as if they were wounded,
 toward the bandages of snow.
 Briefly, the world is theirs
 in its perfect frailty. (*Alive Together* 166)

Lisel Mueller's poems that resonate with the emblems of the fairy tale are indeed mythical because they represent emotional states and progressions in our psyche that function as a metaphoric language, a language of images for the wordless soul. Myth may not provide us with all the answers to our lives, but it can be the connection between our past and our present, our present and our future.

One of Mueller's most famous poems, "Why We Tell Stories," connects these three facets of time in the context of the fairy tale. It first appeared in *The Need To Hold Still* and has been widely anthologized. The language is pure and essential; the metaphor is universal yet deeply personal; it is the perfect closure to this essay. Here Mueller truly transforms the world.

1. Because we used to have leaves
 and on damp days
 our muscles feel a tug
 painful now, from when roots
 pulled us into the ground

 and because our children believe
 they can fly, an instinct retained
 from when the bones in our arms
 were shaped like zithers and broke
 neatly under their feathers

 and because before we had lungs we
 knew how far it was to the bottom
 as we floated open-eyed
 like painted scarves through the scenery
 of dreams, and because we awakened
 and learned to speak
2. We sat by the fire in our caves,
 and because we were poor, we made up a tale
 about a treasure mountain
 that would open only for us
 and because we were always defeated,
 we invented impossible riddles
 only we could solve,
 monsters only we could kill,
 women who could love no one else

 and because we had survived
 sisters and brothers, daughters and sons,

we discovered bones that rose
from the dark earth and sang
as white birds in the trees

3. Because the story of our life
becomes our life

Because each of us tells
the same story
but tells it differently

and none of us tells it
the same way twice

Because grandmothers looking like spiders
want to enchant the children
and grandfathers need to convince us
what happened happened because of
them

and though we listen only
haphazardly, with one ear,
we will begin our story
with the word *and* (*Alive Together* 150)

Grand Rapids, Michigan

NOTE

This essay is a slightly revised version of a presentation I gave in March of 2004 at the Associated Writing Program's annual conference in Chicago. The presentation was part of a panel discussion I moderated, "A Celebration of the Poetry of Lisel Mueller." Four panelists (including myself) presented papers that discussed several aspects of Mueller's poetry: the importance of history and language (both English and German); the theme of family, specifically that of the mother/daughter relationship; the narrative and lyric styles of her work; and the metaphoric use of fairy tales and myth. This latter topic was the subject of my presentation and, subsequently, this essay. Throughout the essay, I use six of Mueller's poems to highlight my analysis. After conferring with Ms. Mueller and her publisher, Louisiana State University Press, I decided to quote the poems in their entirety in order to highlight Mueller's unique rhythm and pacing: two characteristics that reflect the essence of fairy tale as significantly as the power of metaphoric language. All poems are reprinted by permission of Louisiana State University Press from *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems* by Lisel Mueller. Copyright 1996 by Lisel Mueller.

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THOROUGHLY MODERN CARRIE: THEODORE DREISER, MODERNISM AND THE HISTORICAL MOMENT

MELANIE ENGLAND

Near the turn of the twentieth century, the industrially developed world teetered on the precipice of modernity — especially in the United States. Urban opportunities drew rural sons and daughters to new industrial cities like Chicago in ever increasing numbers in the years after the Civil War. Factory wages, streetcars, and a myriad of shops crammed with ready-made goods enticed many young women to abandon country domesticity for the excitement and opportunities offered by city life. Mass urbanization altered the face of America and wrought profound changes in lifestyles, personal relationships and society. Theodore Dreiser's novel, *Sister Carrie*, published in 1900, reflects many of the anxieties associated with modernity, as the protagonist, Carrie Meeber, leaves her Columbia City home for Chicago, and "the threads that bound her so lightly to her girlhood and home were irretrievably broken"(1). As the novel opens, Dreiser posits city and country as opposites and throughout the text continues to present polarized pairs, contrasting abject poverty with luxurious wealth, exploring ideas of free will and determinism, and employing a diction that abruptly shifts from elevated hyperbole to camera-eye realism. Dreiser's dichotomies crystallize in the relationship between Carrie and the omniscient narrator, a character in his own right, who steps out of the dialogue to present a choric commentary, like a foil, illuminating and intensifying Carrie's modern, outrageous behavior and her urban environment.

While the narrator seems to cling to nineteenth-century ideas, Carrie emerges as the prototype for the modern protagonist: existential woman alienated and alone in a hostile and chaotic universe. Carrie, like many young women of her era, rejects her rural home for the excitement and opportunity offered by the city of Chicago.

Caring little for ideas, her "imagination trod a very narrow round, always winding up at points which concerned money, looks, clothes or enjoyment," and her mind remains focused on extrinsic acquisitions rather than intrinsic values (39). From the beginning, the narrator posits two paths for Carrie: "Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse" (1). Carrie chooses the second path and, in a shocking disregard for Victorian morals or convention, lives with her lover outside of marriage. The narrator's mild judgment expresses an almost parental concern for Carrie, and he places his focus on the ideal world rather than on the material, fixing his role as a character commenting on the novel's action.

Dreiser's narrator speaks with a distinct voice, firmly distinguished from that of the author himself. Recognizing Dreiser's use of an omniscient persona as separate entity, Shawn St. Jean describes the text as "filled with intrusive disquisitions by the narrator," suggesting that through the narrator's contradictions the author "struggled along with his protagonists with the meta-question: [...] What forces influence (or control) the lives of human beings?" (240). St. Jean dismisses the intervening narrator as a literary device that "allows us to circumvent a major critical mire [associated with *Sister Carrie*]: whether the overt philosophy peppered throughout Dreiser's novel forms a consistent or even coherent system of thought and provides a reliable index to its themes" (240). I would suggest, however, that the contradictions, the unresolved tension between pairs of opposites—including "the meta-question" of free will and determinism illustrated by the polarization of Carrie and the narrator, rather than signifying incoherency, as St. Jean suggests—provide a thematic unity throughout the text.

The structure of *Sister Carrie*, as Karl F. Zender notes, is critical to uncovering much of its meaning. Zender suggests that the novel is "a dialectic of character and circumstance in which Hurstwood contributes to his own destruction each step of the way" (63). As a student of the classics, Dreiser, as Zender argues, created a tragedy in the tradition of *Hamlet* or *Othello* with a distinctly "modern" twist: "a structural doubleness [that] suggests in turn an ambivalence over the idea of identity" (64). Zender maintains that Dreiser drew the characters of Carrie and Hurstwood as polar opposites and created the tension between Carrie's rise in fortunes and Hurstwood's decline as an "innovative use of tragic structure" (64). The pairing of oppo-

sites appears throughout the novel, and while Zender contends these dichotomies point to a modern tragedy with Hurstwood at the center, Dreiser clearly draws Carrie as the novel's protagonist.

Although Carrie's rise and Hurstwood's fall roughly coincide and certainly count as one of the work's many paired opposites, Carrie and her narrator present striking philosophical contrasts. Carrie's sojourn in the city of Chicago effectively eliminates her connection with her rural Columbia City home, leaving her with only a fleeting "touch of regret at parting" from her parents and "the familiar green environs of the village"(1). Once in Chicago, Carrie quickly rejects the dreary life and limited prospects of her "staid and solemnly adapted" sister Minnie, and leaves her with a short letter of explanation and nary a backward glance (38). Meanwhile, the narrator indulges in a monologue, averring that,

A lovely home atmosphere is one of the flowers of the world, than which there is nothing more tender, nothing more delicate, nothing more calculated to make strong and just the natures cradled and nourished within it. Those who have never experienced such a beneficent influence will not understand wherefore the tear springs glistening to the eyelids at some strange breath in lovely music. The mystic chords which bind and thrill the heart of the nation, they will never know. (63)

Poor Carrie, though, cares little for home or family affiliations, and gravitates toward the warm, comfortable life offered by her lover, Drouet, and away from the harsh, monotonous existence offered by her sister, Minnie. In the act of becoming Drouet's mistress, Carrie forgets her past, ignores the morals and values of traditional society, and embraces materialism. While the narrator poetically eulogizes ideas and feelings, Carrie shops — and finds "in the store [...] that shine and rustle of new things that immediately laid hold of [her] heart" (54). She emerges as a modern protagonist, living independent of family ties and searching for material success, while the narrator proclaims the sanctity of the home, wistfully expressing antiquated nineteenth-century values.

Paired as opposites, then, Dreiser's "intrusive" narrator and Carrie illuminate the counterpoise between free will and determinism. He soliloquizes that although "untutored man is but a wisp in the wind [...] we have the consolation of knowing evolution is ever in action, that the ideal light cannot fail" (57). Man is on a contin-

uum between ignorant bestiality and enlightened reason, the narrator asserts, and only progressive evolution, education, and exercise of free will can raise him from the depths of ignorance and depravity into the light of reason. Carrie, as he explains, acts on impulse to satisfy her immediate desires rather than a considered deliberation of her best course of action. She is obviously "untutored" and ignorant. The criticism implicit in the narrator's diatribe rests in Carrie's inability to analyze her feelings and resist the magnetic pull of material pleasures, while his capabilities, on the other hand, encompass a clear understanding of the scientific method and the ability to conduct a "liberal analysis of Spencer and . . . modern naturalistic philosophers"(68). The narrator connects himself with free will, intelligence and reason while condemning ignorant, impulsive Carrie to the indifferent forces of a deterministic universe, further emphasizing the author's theme of polarization.

Even Dreiser's diction reflects a dichotomy between object and subject, the narrator and Carrie. The narrator himself seems to speak with two distinct voices, effectively doubling the opposing pairs. As the omniscient narrator describes "a modern restaurant of fashion," he illustrates

the fact of the lighted chamber, the dressy, greedy company, the small, self-interested palaver, the disorganized, aimless wandering mental action which it represents—the love of light and show and finery which, to one outside, under a serene light of the eternal stars, must seem a strange and shiny thing. (36)

When presenting the narrator's choric commentary, Dreiser uses the language of the educated elite: full of aphorism and euphemism, multiple clauses, often resorting to affected British spelling, hinting at perhaps an Oxford education for his intrusive counterpart. Yet, later in the story, as Carrie encounters a beggar,

The plea was that of a gaunt-faced man of about thirty, who looked the picture of privation and wretchedness. Drouet was the first to see. He handed over a dime with an upwelling feeling of pity in his heart. Hurstwood scarcely noticed the incident. Carrie quickly forgot. (103)

In the preceding passage, Dreiser uses short sentences and realistic camera-eye description; his narrator's voice seems more akin to journalism than to the wordy, pedantic style of his earlier commentary.

When compared, the two passages exhibit both diverse writing styles and the polarization of rich and poor so common to the urban environment of the late nineteenth century.

As he relates his narrative with two distinct voices, Dreiser suggests that Carrie, too, harbors a duality. As she contemplates her freedom from poverty and her new life with Drouet, Carrie "looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse. Between these two images she wavered, hesitating which to believe" (70). The external, material Carrie improves and thrives in her new circumstance, while her inner voice offers a counterpart to her success. Carrie chooses to ignore her own ideals, as well as those of society, and embraces the superficial image reflected in her mirror.

Dreiser's pairing of opposites involves overt comparisons, characterization, and language. Thematically and structurally, the novel repeatedly presents a dialectical argument that remains unresolved at the end. The hyperbolic narrator returns in the final pages to find Carrie materially successful, independent, and in the prime of her acting career. Despite her lack of education, free will, and family ties, Carrie succeeds. Yet, as Carrie enjoys her career and the advantages the city offers those with money, the narrator assures us that "[a]mid the tinsel and shine of her state walked Carrie, unhappy" (368). All the trappings of Carrie's modernity, her material success, "her furniture and bank account" leave her deeply unsatisfied, yet completely unaware of the source of her unhappiness (368). The narrator philosophically laments "Oh, Carrie, Carrie! Oh blind strivings of the human heart! Onward, onward it saith, and where beauty leads, there it follows" (368). Carrie remains trapped in sterile and unfeeling modern material existence, while the narrator ineffectively spouts aphorisms that contain little meaning for her. The ideals of the narrator seem as distant to Carrie as her long-forgotten home in Columbia City.

The dichotomy between Carrie's modernism and the essentially ineffective and out-of-date choric narrator remains forever unresolved. On the last page we see Carrie, alone, in her rocking chair, reflecting the woes of a modern protagonist, "dream[ing] such happiness as [she] may never feel" (369). Ultimately, the choric narrator juxtaposes his ideals with Carrie's materialism; he reveals the gap

between the material world and the realm of ideas, so evident at the turn of the twentieth century.

Dreiser suggests two distinct worlds in *Sister Carrie*: the material, physical world, and the world of the mind or ideas. Carrie lives almost completely in the material world, only vaguely aware of her mental processes. The narrator, on the other hand, exists only in the intrinsic realm of ideas: he has no physical form or characteristics; he is only a voice. Modernity, as Harmon and Holman explain, "implies a historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, loss, and despair. It rejects not only history but also society of whose fabrication history is a record. It rejects traditional values and assumptions, and it rejects equally the rhetoric by which they were sanctioned and communicated" (325-326). Once Carrie leaves home for the city, her history and any traditional values she might have had disappear completely, leaving her with only a craving for excitement and a longing for the tangible trapping of success. She is caught in a web of materialism. As a commentator, the narrator extols traditional values like home and family, nineteenth-century ideas that seem out of place in the modern, cosmopolitan city. At the end of the novel, Carrie's material world and the narrator's ideal world remain distinctly separated.

Hegelian dialectics, often used as a philosophical method or as an explanation of reality, requires a thesis, an antithesis, and ultimately a synthesis of the two opposing components (146). While Dreiser consistently presents thesis and antithesis in the form of paired opposites—urban and rural, rich and poor, free will and determinism—he leaves the tension between them dangling, the pairs un-synthesized. Carrie's success in New York City contrasted with the extreme poverty of Hurstwood and his comrades in the Bowery seems less than an outrage, and more like an acceptable component of the urban landscape. Although plagued with a deficit of free will, and at the mercy of determinism, Carrie finds material success well beyond the scope of her own imagination. Some critics characterize Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* as an inconsistent work in terms of style and diction; however, Shawn St. Jean remarks that the author "would become famous for the painstaking research that went into [his] novels" (240). With this in mind, Dreiser's theme of failed Hegelian dialectical synthesis seems hardly accidental.

Theodore Dreiser's careful construction of *Sister Carrie* points to a break from the traditional philosophy of the nineteenth century, and to a recognition of modernity. Hegelian synthesis ultimately fails

because the models, ideas, and even the language of the nineteenth century had little meaning in the modern world. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859 and widely disseminated during the last half of the century, threatened the very foundations of Christianity. Advances in physics ultimately led to the destruction of much of the Newtonian world order, rendering obsolete many of the concepts that underpinned the philosophy of the era. Mechanization and the factory system radically changed not only the way people worked, but where they lived, drawing many people from their farms into cities. Overcrowded urban centers like Chicago teemed with masses of humanity. Rather than encouraging affiliations among people, the crowded conditions of the city served to polarize rich and poor, depersonalize relationships, and engender a sense of anonymity and inefficacy among its inhabitants. *Sister Carrie* reflects many of the anxieties and social problems produced by modernity and the phenomena of mass urbanization. Dreiser, through the language and the structure of his book, expresses the apprehensions of a rapidly changing society, and the ultimate failure of nineteenth-century philosophy to provide answers to the questions posed by modernity. Carrie Meeber may indeed be one of our first modern heroes.

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AFRICAN AMERICAN DRAMA FROM THE MIDWEST

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The accomplishments of African American dramatists from the Midwest equal, if they do not surpasses, the accomplishments of dramatists of any other region. Actual origins of drama written by African Americans who grew up or lived in the Midwest during the nineteenth century remain obscure,¹ but with the accession of Langston Hughes to the forefront of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s, black Midwesterners entered the theatrical mainstream. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) became the first play by a female African American to open on Broadway, and in 1970, Charles Gordone's *No Place to Be Somebody* won the first Pulitzer Prize awarded to a black playwright. Adrienne Kennedy began carving out her uniquely lyrical, experimental dramatic territory with *Funnyhouse of a Negro* in 1964 and has continued in *The Ohio State Murders* and others of the Alexander Plays (1992) and beyond. August Wilson has produced perhaps the strongest body of work by an African American playwright, including *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986), *Fences* (1987), and *The Piano Lesson* (1990), all winners of major national prizes.

For reasons worth investigating and speculating about, the heartland has served as a rich ground for engendering black writers and especially black dramatists. From its early days, the Midwest has nurtured female and minority voices, in conformance with its predisposition toward greater class equality and advocacy of civil rights. While social structures in the South or Northeast tended to reinforce exclusive hierarchy, three forces, in particular, furthered equal rights in the heartland: 1) the predominance of family farms and businesses, owned by immigrants from various ethnic backgrounds; 2) factories employing workers of diverse traditions, treated more equally (though not entirely) than elsewhere; and 3) labor union movements in which blacks and whites fought alongside each other for economic justice.

The Midwestern dislike of social pretense and privilege did not, however, eliminate racism in the region. Even now Chicago remains one of the most racially divided cities in the country in terms of cultural geography. In the early part of twentieth century, race riots occurred in a number of major and mid-sized Midwestern cities. Klan membership and activity in states like Indiana were frighteningly high and deeply imbedded in the governing structure. The egalitarian predisposition of Middle America operated less as an opponent of racism than as an ideological platform on which equal civil rights for women and minorities could be persuasively argued. As plays from Langston Hughes to August Wilson indicate, Midwestern social structures did not eliminate racism, but they did facilitate experimentation by African Americans newly arrived from the South and East seeking to own property and forge a more hospitable life.

From its beginnings in the latter half of the nineteenth century in the plays of Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and others, Midwestern drama has been marked by signature motifs and aesthetics. Its plays are typically grounded in domestic realism, but in such a way that the routine material world spins off into realms more transcendental. Focus falls on the everyday rhythms of getting up, cooking, eating, going to work, cleaning, and going to bed, but these are generally emblemized into cyclical patterns of time, often but not always connected to natural rhythms of planting, weeding, fertilizing, and harvesting. The Midwestern stage home, unlike that of the Northeast or South, is not haunted by ghosts of the past but instead inhabits the present as a locus of solace and support grounded firmly in the environment, whether urban or rural. By and large, Midwesterners are depicted as practical, unassuming, hardworking and helpful, but not typically flamboyant or loquacious. Unlike the famous storytellers of the Northeast and South, Midwesterners prefer understatement and distrust outsized claims or ornamentation unsupported by facts.

African American drama from the Midwest exhibits many of these trademark features, but with notable additions. While the black Midwestern home as depicted on stage is integrally rooted in its social and natural environment, the history of slavery and its attendant ghosts is inescapable. In most plays by black Midwesterners, at least some of the characters have major ties to the former slave-owning states outside the heartland. Other major axes run toward Africa, the cultural origin and geographical lodestar defining black history,

and toward Harlem, which for many years set standards for ethnic pride and ascendancy, dynamic creativity and excellence. So while characters in plays by blacks living in the Midwest exhibit the pragmatic, egalitarian qualities of their Caucasian counterparts, the daily rhythms of everyday life often turn choric or transcendent through slave songs, gospel, or African dances or chants.

The most famous plays of Langston Hughes (1902-67) reveal the double pull of the South and Harlem. Born in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes spent much of his youth in Lawrence, Kansas, before moving briefly to Lincoln, Illinois, and then attending Central High School in Cleveland, Ohio, from 1916-1920. After he left for Columbia University in 1921, Hughes lived in many places around the world, yet he anchored himself firmly in the glittering Renaissance world of Harlem, where he served as a leading, perhaps the leading, representative. Yet as Duffy points out, "as a dramatist, playwright, and librettist, Hughes has gone unnoticed and unexamined" (2). Her pioneering book, *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*, focuses on the "proletarian" plays of the 1930s, which "share similarities in approach and theme with other playwrights" of the period (12).

Few of Hughes's sixty-odd plays and librettos are actually set in his native Midwest. *Mulatto* (1930), perhaps Hughes's best-known stage work, takes place in the Deep South, and others like *Scottsboro, Limited* (1931) and *Angelo Herndon Jones* (1935) deal with African American history in Alabama and Georgia respectively. *Little Ham* (1935), by contrast, is set in Harlem though it premiered in Cleveland; *Joy to My Soul*, originally set and performed in Cleveland, was relocated to Harlem in the revised version of 1954. According to Elda Forbes, most of Hughes's plays and librettos are "examples of African American resistance" and remain powerful through their accessibility (167).

Hughes's four Midwestern plays were written at the height of his association with The Gilpin Players at Karamu House in Cleveland in the mid-1930s. Two short vignettes, *Soul Gone Home* and *Mother and Child* (both 1936), draw on his childhood experiences, whereas the longer *Joy to My Soul* (1937) and *Front Porch* (1938) offer more wide-ranging portraits of African American life. Three of the four plays can be regarded as "shadow" comedies: plays structured formally as lighter comedies but shadowed by suffering and pain just off-stage. These works cannot be considered dark comedies in the

traditional sense because the outcome in each case is conspicuously positive. Yet the author reminds us throughout of the pain of poverty, exclusion, and social humiliation that frames or accompanies such pleasant outcomes. *Front Porch* opens these darker issues out, as social injustice leads to tragic consequences.

Soul Gone Home centers on "a tenement room, bare, ugly, dirty," where "a large, middle-aged woman . . . kneels weeping beside the cot" where her young son has just died (266-67). Suddenly, however, the dead son's voice accuses her, "You been a hell of a mama!" (267). He rises from the cot for a face-to-face confrontation: "Mama, you ain't done me right" (267). The son's accusations focus on undernourishment and TB caused by the mother's inadequate financial support. She counters by attacking his motives: "Here you come back to hant your poor old mama, and spoil her cryin' spell, and spoil the mournin'" (269). As two men arrive from the city health office, both scramble to get the pennies back on the son's eyes. After the body is removed to her elaborate wailing, the mother dresses up, polishes her make-up, lights a cigarette, and prepares to go out in the night to earn a dollar for his flowers: "You was a hell of a no-good son, I swear!" (270). The light-hearted ending with melodramatically overdone grieving brings to a close but does not resolve the central tensions of the interchange.

Mother and Child, a somewhat longer vignette, seems initially more satiric, as a group of ladies gather for a society meeting in Boyd's Center, Ohio. However, the gossip quickly turns to a mixed-race baby just born to a married white woman who maintains an affair with a black man. The couple was in love before, but they were prevented from marrying. Local whites have cut off black financial credit in general retaliation, and lynching hovers as a constant threat. The society women debate their own precarious futures: "I ain't never seen the white folks up in arms like they are today"; "Thank God, this is Ohio. It ain't Mississippi"; "White folks is white folks, South or North, North or South" (272). Some of the women blame the young black man for "foolin around with a white woman" (275). The consequences, in any case, are dire: "They liable to burn us Negroes' houses down" (276).

The general tension is eased only at the very end, when Madam President announces, "The March meetin' of the Salvation Rock Ladies' Missionary Society o' the African Heathen is hereby called to order" (277). As Sister Holt sings her hymn, "I shall not be

moved," Lucy Doves clucks, "Heathens, daughter, heathens," to which Sister Wiggins retorts, "They ain't in Africa, neither!" (277). Again, the play ends on a cheerful note despite an overall atmosphere of anxiety and even gloom. The real drama occurs off-stage—an interracial couple in love, breaking social taboos and rupturing the entire community. As in *Soul Gone Home*, which highlights the corrosive effects of enduring poverty, *Mother and Child* makes palpable the emotional threat to blacks when legal rights to own property, marry, and live in safety can be swept away at any time by reprisals from whites.

Joy to My Soul (1937), "A Farce Comedy in Three Acts," seems altogether more festive by comparison. Originally, the play was set and performed in Cleveland, but the revised version in *The Collected Works* has been relocated to Harlem. This full-length play is set in a "colored hotel" frequented by blacks but nonetheless owned by a white man named Steinbaum. A wonderful array of African American characters swishes through, and many of them are scam artists wearing outlandish costumes. These include Princess Bootoo, a midget, with her manager and Prince Ali Ali, ostensibly from Cairo, Egypt, but in reality J.C. Jones, forgotten husband of Madam Klinkscale, a medium who conducts séances in the voice of Minnehaha. A fan dancer named Sheba enters with a boxer named Coco and his trainer, Heavy. The colorful assemblage is gathering for "The Sphinx Convention," complete with a Ladies Drill Corps and parade.

Under the surface of elaborate comings and goings, however, the main conflict revolves around Buster Whitehead, a young oil millionaire newly arrived from Shadow Gut, Texas, to meet and marry the Lonely Heart he has corresponded with, Suzanne de Bailey (known locally as Suzy Bailey). Buster enters an atmosphere replete with shady dealers of all kinds, who attempt to waylay his money through gambling on cards, horses, boxing, and other rigged exchanges. The only character not pursuing Buster for his money is the honest Wilmetta, so it's not surprising that, when Suzanne de Bailey arrives, rather ugly and twice her announced age, Buster and Wilmetta run off together to a more fulfilling environment than Harlem. Except for the abandoned Suzy, relationships are renewed as the play ends in parade and celebration.

Joy to My Soul lacks the dark specters of *Soul Gone Home* and *Mother and Child*, yet a desperate cynicism underlies the entire social economy. No one except Buster has money, and those few who

work at the hotel earn next to nothing and are not respected. Most characters pursue gains through gambling or performing in circuslike get-ups for quick profit. Relations are fleeting and often conniving and duplicitous. Flamboyant costuming and performative excess both serve to disguise the deeply troubling economic reality. To most audiences, this darker element would probably not be apparent with sufficient attention to spectacle. But the play could be performed for today's public with that economic skeleton just visible underneath. Cast requirements for *Joy to My Soul* are large, adding a challenge, but the author provides a characteristically unsentimental examination of a wide spectrum of black life.

The debilitating economic forces shadowing the three earlier Midwestern plays receive front-and-center treatment in *Front Porch*, which is set in "a rather pretentious Negro home" in "an outer residential area in any large city in the North" (482). Sanders calls *Front Porch* "Hughes's only play depicting the world of a black middle class" (Hughes 481). References in the play indicate its location in industrialized Ohio during a period of divisive labor unrest. In contrast to the backyard scenes of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, also set in Ohio, *Front Porch* showcases the front of the house, with transformative comings and goings occurring on the street side. Only after the off-stage courtship scene do we learn much about the flourishing garden behind this Midwestern home. Yet the central dramatic focus falls on the clash between Mrs. Harper's desire for class respectability and the union-led fight for a livable wage.

Mrs. Harper, a teacher who hopes to become "the first colored woman in the entire state" to be promoted to assistant principal, complains about "working people" and "their union whims" and viciously attacks both the trucking strike and the desire of black teachers to "join that red teachers' union" (482). She wants her young daughter, Lucia, to "marry a decent man" (483). But Lucia has no illusions about her prospects: "How many colored men've got offices, mother? I'm going to marry a Spaniard" (483). Cantwell, Lucia's older brother, complains about "not enough colored folks around" and prefers their old neighborhood, where "we had more fun" (485). He wants to work for people whom his mother derides as "colored racketeers." Mrs. Harper, having worked hard to eclipse the legacy of her feckless dead husband, and having moved her family twelve years ago to this safe, mostly white, suburban enclave to

"escape that district of common Negroes" (494), has no patience for her children's complaints.

The contrasting perspectives come to a head when the eldest daughter, Harriett, meets a black union organizer named Kenneth. Harriett has graduated from college but can't find a teaching position. Her mother intends her to marry Donald, a conservative PhD student from the South who shares middle-class values. But Harriett becomes entranced by the energetic, capable dropout, to the horror of most of her family and neighbors. Kenneth's union "draws no color line. And they picket together," offering a potential way forward for blacks trapped in "all the worst jobs at the lowest wages" (486, 525). Harriett agrees to marry and run off with Kenneth, sharing his progressive social vision. But after the authorities arrest him and other strike leaders on trumped-up charges, family relations head rapidly downhill. Mrs. Harper demands that now-pregnant Harriett be sent to a doctor cousin in Cincinnati. By the time Kenneth is released for lack of evidence, Harriett is home dying of what appear to be complications from a mishandled abortion.

Cantwell sums up the essential struggle near the end: "Mother's world's built on a different dream, Kenneth—to escape from Boyle Avenue—not to change it. She doesn't realize that her dream and her whole world's crumbling, for white folks as well as for Negroes" (525). *Front Porch* recalls Tennessee Williams's proletarian Saint Louis plays of the same period, with intense focus on economic injustice. In Hughes's play, Harriett becomes the sacrificial victim in a struggle within the black community between the desire to escape to suburban, middle-class status and the need to stay put and fight for workers' rights for both blacks and whites. The relative lack of success of *Front Porch* probably resulted from bad timing (just before World War II) and from the subsequent shift in cultural ethos in the postwar years. Yet Hughes's activist vision is sharp and prescient, and *Front Porch* remains one of his most satisfying plays. It certainly deserves a contemporary hearing, given the recent grocery workers' strikes in large sections of the US.

When Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in 1959, the US was in the fertile stage of the Civil Rights Movement and ready to hear from this young, talented Midwesterner. Interestingly, this "old-fashioned" play continues many of the issues—absent union activism—presented in Hughes's *Front Porch*, only now the climate was right for a wider national hearing (Ashley

151). Like Hughes's play, *Raisin* has all the trademark qualities of a play set in the Midwest written by a Midwesterner: "the roots of her philosophical views lie in Chicago, the place of her birth" (Wilkerson, "Diverse" 59). The home, though urban, seems deeply imbedded in its environment, lacking the historical ghosts of the Northeast or South apart from the legacy of Big Walter that sets the play going.

In typical Midwestern fashion, domestic realism predominates, racinated in the rhythms of everyday life: cooking, cleaning house, getting dressed, going to work. But then the realism spins outward into more transcendental territory: in act two, the lighting shifts abruptly as Walter enters to deliver a great African warrior speech to his black tribal brothers, achieving "an unexpected majesty" (79). Mama's "ragged-looking old" plant is a beaten-down Midwestern icon of growth and fertility; in this case, the legacy of "acute ghetto-itus" has withered the plant, but Mama promises to re-pot it in the garden of their new home in the suburbs (121, 60). The pitiful remnant of nature thus serves to articulate not only hardship and renewal but also black aspirations for dignity, independence, and growth.

In addition to these emblematic Midwestern features, *Raisin* interrogates black experience in a way that captivated American interest and has since rendered the play a classic. From her vantage point in her native Midwest, Hansberry directs our attention both to the South and to Africa, two loci of primary relevance for African Americans. The South plays a more subdued role, associated mainly with the past, with something to escape. Stage directions tell us that, in *Beneatha*, "perhaps the Midwest rather than the South has finally—at last—won out in her inflection" (35). Walter Lee embodies the tormented legacy of slavery: "The world's most backward race of people, and that's a fact" (38). In this play, social progress seems firmly situated in the Midwest.

The more numerous African elements, by contrast, signal the future, though not without struggle between the polarities of African American identity. Beneatha cuts her hair and dons a Nigerian dress—yet she flourishes the wrong kind of fan and denies being an assimilationist. Walter Lee revels in his warrior incantations—until Ruth demands that he "get down off that table and stop acting like a fool . . ." (79). In a different mood, Walter Lee makes fun of "these new Negroes" and their "Committee on Unending Agitation" (112-13). The outside perspective of Asagai, a native of Nigeria, and his

high-minded efforts to persuade Beneatha to go with him to Africa, invigorate yet do not ultimately solve the problem of how to be black in America with dignity and confidence.

Hansberry's play ends positively yet uncertainly, as African American aspirations lead out from the ghetto infested with rats and wariness to the hopeful promise of home ownership in Clybourne Park. Hughes's *Front Porch* anatomizes the hollowness of that vision by depicting an isolated black family ultimately shredded in an alien and hostile environment. But the country had changed by Hansberry's time, enabling a more cautiously optimistic perspective. Like the feminist playwrights from the Midwest, Susan Glaspell and Rachel Crothers primarily among them, who blazed a trail for women in American theatre, Hansberry continued and expanded the national debate on-stage affected by Hughes. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, she began with the region she knew best, the Midwest, and expanded outward to more universal themes.

The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window (1964), Hansberry's second play, during whose run she died from cancer at a tragically early age, is set in Greenwich Village, where the gifted young playwright had relocated. Hansberry maintains a dualistic perspective on her adopted home; Greenwich Village is "the preferred habitat of many who fancy revolt, or at least, detachment from the social order that surrounds us" (*Raisin* 211). The setting features "jagged facades" and seems almost cinematic in its "arty pretentiousness and genuine picturesque assertiveness" (*Raisin* 211). This is definitely not the Midwest; yet Mavis is clearly linked to the region as a character that escaped Sinclair Lewis's book (*Raisin* 231). The play is both literate and literary, discussing everything from the ancient Greek House of Atreus to gay marriage, one of the first stage references to a social institution that only recently has emerged into the national glare some forty years later.

Hansberry's posthumous plays are both probing and intellectually daring. "Few had recognized the strains of militance in the earlier voice of Lorraine Hansberry The commercial success and popularity of her first play blinded some to her vision of light . . ." (Wilkerson, "Sighted" 8). Another Hansberry play, *Les Blancs* (1970), written in response to Genet's *Les Nègres* in May 1961, was completed by Robert Nemiroff, the playwright's husband and executor, and others (*Les Blancs* 41). Action occurs in Africa (Nemiroff suggests Kenya), where three brothers attempt to sort through the legacy

of colonialism. One brother, Tshembe, has studied in Europe and married a European. Another, Abioseh, has converted to Catholicism, which later leads to a clash of religions ("the temples of complicity," *Les Blancs* 81). Into this turbulent mix enters Charlie, a Midwestern writer from Twin Forks Junction, Nebraska, newly arrived by boat. As the inevitable violence erupts, the play's action interrogates the layers of colonial hegemony, including the well-meaning if complicit Mission staffed by whites and dedicated to providing medical care to natives. The dramatic structure of the play is confused—the key character Charles leaves well before what could become a climax—and *Les Blancs* ends in a blaze without resolving the conflicting issues. Yet on a certain level, the structural confusion may be appropriate to the subject. Hansberry's play remains one of the most important, and searing, stage presentations of colonialism.

What Use Are Flowers? and *The Drinking Gourd*, both written for television, exhibit few Midwestern features. The latter focuses on the complex racial environment in the South just before the onset of the Civil War and is striking for its essential "fairness" (Nemiroff *Les Blancs* 201). While the hardships of slave experience are presented, most vividly in the cruel blinding of Hannibal, who has dared to learn reading from the son of the master, Hansberry also portrays conflicted white slave owners and the sufferings of poor whites who "died eatin' dirt" (*Les Blancs* 269). By the end, Fort Sumter has been fired upon, and a soldier who resembles Lincoln announces that "Slavery is beginning to cost this nation at lot" to the closing strains of "Battle Cry of Freedom" (*Les Blancs* 309). *What Use Are Flowers?* is a one-act inspired by *Waiting for Godot*; action occurs on a "plain somewhere in the world; darkness and wind" (*Les Blancs* 318, 328). A Hermit who has been living the woods for fifteen years following an apocalypse meets a gang of boys who have become savages without language or basic skills. In both works, Hansberry again confronts the big questions with forceful intellect and assertive humanity. Her dramatic legacy is investigative and earnest, both Midwestern and universal.

The first Pulitzer Prize for Drama awarded to an African American went to Charles Gordone for *No Place to Be Somebody*, which opened in 1969 and received the award in 1970. The world of this play feels miles distant from Hansberry's comfortable, if weary Chicago tenement. For one thing, although Gordone grew up in Ohio, *No Place* bears no noticeable relation to the Midwest. The play

is set in Johnny's Bar in New York City, a hangout frequented by whores and numbers runners who maintain a tense relation with the neighborhood mafia. *No Place* is striking in many different ways, not least for its radical honesty. The dialogue does not hold any (bourgeois) punches: "Crackers cain't 'magine Niggers runnin' nothin' but elevators an' toilets" (5). When Johnny, manager of the bar, accuses Dee of being the "Wrong color be talkin' 'bout soul," the white prostitute counters, "Negroes. Think you gotta corner on soul" (8). This is a play in which one female can say to another, "Take your hands off me, you stinkin' cunt! Dirty black sow!" (83). Gordone was one of a group of black playwrights of the mid- to late 1960s, perhaps foremost among them Leroi Jones, who showcased intense black-white interactions with invective hurled from both sides.

Yet Gordone has been steadfast in a Midwesternly way in not wanting to reduce race to easy solutions: "Because I'm a playwright of color who does not write black plays, I've experienced some isolation" (Kolin and Kullman 170). Gabe, the narrator of *No Place*, is a "young fairskinned Negro" "working on a play," who punctuates the action with what could be called "street poems" (n.p., 3). This character, which seems a stand-in for the author in many scenes, attacks Johnny's "personal war . . . ag'inst the white man," saying, "You're wrong, John. You're so goddam wrong" (112-13). After a climactic shoot-out in the bar, Gabe kills Johnny, after which Machine Dog, a ghetto prophet, intones his street-lyrical vision. Gabe enters for the Epilogue as a woman in mourning drag: "Yes. The passing and the ending of a people dying. Of a people dying into that new life" (115). Gordone's mix of lyricism and street authenticity brought a vitalizing new element to Broadway at the end of the '60s that is almost inconceivable now.

Five years before Gordone's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, Adrienne Kennedy electrified the theatre world with *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964). Not since the experimental plays of Susan Glaspell in the World War I era or Thornton Wilder in the 1930s had a Midwestern playwright so clearly assumed the avant-garde mantle. Kennedy's plays are short, intense, lyrical, and haunting; as a poet of the theatre, she has created out her own unique blend of performance elements. "Adrienne Kennedy is one of the few accomplished black playwrights who employs the surrealistic mode of theatre" (Wilkerson, "Diverse" 68). Clearly influenced by Samuel Beckett in her stage aesthetic, she nonetheless goes beyond her forebear in

exploring questions of identity, race, and cultural appropriation. While Ohio has nurtured a variety of dramatists, from William Dean Howells and Eugene Walter to Gordone and Mari Evans, Kennedy is unique in showcasing her home state on stage. Lisa Jones rightly lauds her "out-of-kilter, lyrical, and drop-dead brilliant work for the American theater" (qtd. Kennedy xv).

Funnyhouse of a Negro is one of those rare works that overturns all expectations and conventions. Elinor Fuchs regards the early works as "mystery or passion plays" set in "a hermetic night world, a time of dreams, madness, and darkness of the soul" (76-77). The playwright also draws on "mythic elements of African ritual drama" (Meigs 173). Kennedy radically destabilizes conventional notions of character by featuring personalities from disparate historical periods and places who become one another. Sarah, the main character and stand-in for the author, becomes Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, among others, and vice versa. Jesus enters as a "hunchback, yellow-skinned dwarf," while Patrice Lumumba's "head appears to be split in two" (15). In this lyrical piece, repeated phrases functioning as refrains are allotted to changing characters: Sarah's father seeks forgiveness from her, while she says, "Wally, I want you to be Jesus" (23). As Fuchs insightfully notes, "Kennedy's plays do not so much progress as recircle" (78).

Kennedy is also radical in integrating her own autobiography into the dramatic action. Sarah is both the author and not the author, and "the dominant trope is the mirror" (Diamond 135). Her father is, according to Raymond, "a nigger who eats his meals on a white glass table" and also someone who "wanted the black man to rise from Colonialism" (26, 20). Patrice Lumumba, assassinated first president of the Congo, makes an appearance, in direct racial contrast to Queen Victoria, whose statue is "a thing of astonishing whiteness" and who "always wants me to tell her of whiteness" (14). Sarah, as Negro—"A faceless, dark character with a hangman's noose about her neck and red blood on the part that would be her face"—longs "to become even a more pallid Negro than I am now . . . I want not to be . . . My friends will be white" (14).

These racial intersections are enacted not only within the mind and body of Sarah "in textual strategies of resistance" but also across time and history (Forte 167). And they are rendered starker by dichotomous black and white lighting, a "ghastly white curtain" and a "tall, white and ghostly thin" character named Raymond, dressed

in black (11, 16). Further amplifying the racial oppositions are set locations from Victoria's bedroom to the Duchess of Hapsburg's chandeliered ballroom to the African jungle. Yet Sarah finds "there are no places only my funnyhouse" (15). The Midwest is also one of her places, one of her personalities. The distorting mirrors of black and white lead to a conflicted ending, in which the Landlady says, "The poor bitch has hung herself," but Raymond calls her "a funny little liar" and refutes the Landlady's claim that "Her father hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba died" (25).

Kennedy's haunting, nightmarish play won her an Obie Award and jolted American theatre with its eviscerations of race and identity using an entirely new stage aesthetic. *The Owl Answers* (1965) continues the experimentation with somewhat different focus. "The characters change slowly back and forth into and out of themselves, leaving some garment from their previous selves upon them to remind us" (29). The setting is a subway car, where diverse characters such as Shakespeare and William the Conqueror interact with Clara Passmore, a light-skinned Negro resembling the author. A White Bird speaks at one point mockingly as "God's Dove" (34). *The Owl Answers* interrogates with particular attention the notion of ancestry. A character identified as SHE announces, "I who am the ancestor of Shakespeare, Chaucer and William the Conqueror, I went to London . . ." (36). Yet SHE is also "the only Negro in London," of whom the Dead White Father, "The Richest White Man in the Town," asks, "If you are my ancestor, why are you a Negro, Bastard" (33). At the end a Negro Man tries to force her down on the High Altar as the Dead White Father watches, smiling. Clara attacks him with a butcher knife but suddenly becomes an owl as the altar is engulfed in flames. Again, Kennedy blends intensely personal conflicts with investigations about race, ancestry, and violation.

Both *A Lesson in Dead Language* and *A Rat's Mass* (both 1966) deal with children growing up, the first focusing on the classroom and the second set in the rats' house of "two pale Negro children" in "one of those Midwestern neighborhoods, Italians, Negroes and Jews" (47, 49). The children "hide in the attic like rats" and are told "The Nazis are going to get you" (50). *An Evening with Dead Essex* (1972) features one white Projectionist wearing black among an otherwise all-black ensemble dressed in light colors. This play is the first of Kennedy's to incorporate film elements, particularly a screen showing photos of Mark Essex, an actual historical figure who

returned from serving in Vietnam to encounter a still oppressive, racially divided society, prompting him to go on a murder spree. The Midwest features more prominently in Essex than in the earlier works; we are told that the title character "believed in those white Kansas faces," and on the screen appear the words "Midwestern face / Midwestern face / Midwestern face" (124). The deaths of the Kennedy brothers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. all are mourned. Like theirs, Essex's "quest for freedom" ends in death (132). This work exhibits a more Dos Passos-like documentary style that recalls and elaborates on Kennedy's earlier dramatic poem, *The Sun* (1968), written in memory of Malcolm and featuring his head and body flying into space.

A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White (1976) introduces cinematic references directly in the action, juxtaposing film screen stars with autobiographical experience. The setting is clearly Cleveland, which Clara's Father regards as "a place for opportunity, leadership, a chance to come out of the backwoods of Georgia. We Negro leaders dream of leading our people out of the wilderness" (66). The movie actors counter pointing the Negro characters "are romantic and moving, never camp or farcical" (62). They are subtly linked with the Father's "dreams how he was going up north . . ." (66). In typically audacious fashion, the playwright includes the film star Jean Peters writing and commenting on Kennedy's own earlier play, *The Owl Answers*.

The emerging political directness evident in *Movie Star* becomes more overt in the plays Kennedy pulled together as "The Alexander Plays," published in 1992. Both *She Talks to Beethoven* and *The Film Club* are set in Accra, Ghana, where the author lived with her husband, the biographer of Frantz Fanon. Not surprisingly, Fanon and issues of colonialism figure prominently. *Dramatic Circle* is a "dramatization of the events in the monologue *The Film Club*" (182). For the first time in these three pieces, Kennedy makes extensive use of suspense as a dramatic technique. Earlier she withheld crucial information with some regularity, but in these short plays, the specter of the disappearance and imprisonment of David, the author/persona's husband, hovers like the proverbial sword of Damocles. At the end of *Dramatic Circle*, David returns from his ordeal and recovers, but "for now he was lost in Blida" (196).

The three works set in Ghana exhibit not only more colonial and postcolonial focus but also more emphasis on direct narrative. The

latter characteristic surfaces with full force in *Ohio State Murders* (1992), commissioned for the Great Lakes Theatre Festival, in which Ruby Dee played the lead role at the world premiere (151). As in the African plays, action centers on a Kennedy-like character named Suzanne Alexander. But the location is now Ohio State University, where Alexander, now an older, successful writer, returns to present a lecture about events she experienced as a student at OSU years earlier. Student Suzanne has arrived on campus and, despite brilliant essays, is not allowed to become an English major but is forced instead to transfer to elementary education, whose courses she detests.

Ohio State Murders details in starkly understated fashion the descent of Suzanne and, to a lesser extent, her black roommate Iris Ann. The white girls in their dorm scorn both students, and Iris Ann rather quickly drops out, frustrated that she can't fulfill her dream of performing music rather than studying the intricacies of theory. Suzanne becomes enchanted by a tweedy young white professor named Bobby Hampshire, particularly his reading of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, whose dénouement Suzanne's own story comes to resemble. Hampshire finds Suzanne's essays "brilliant," but after two encounters, she becomes pregnant with twins and is expelled from the dorm. Although forced by her dismayed family to give birth in Harlem, Suzanne "didn't know why, but I wanted to return to Columbus" (162). The tweedy professor has largely disappeared to the sidelines, but fortunately, Suzanne meets David, "an extraordinarily handsome young black man. He looks like Frantz Fanon, whose biography he will one day write" (153).

By this time in the play, the narrative has nearly lulled the audience into complacency, just in time for the coups de grace. One twin, Cathi, is kidnapped from Suzanne's car as she takes the other twin, Carol, into the doctor's office; later, Cathi's body is found drowned in the ravine. After an extensive police investigation and much speculation, Suzanne and David return home one night to find Carol murdered and Bobby Hampshire dead of a self-inflicted wound. It turns out that Hampshire was obsessed with Suzanne and the twins. As a result of the murders, Suzanne develops a bleeding scalp and "thought I would die" (173). Political machinations lead to a news cover-up of the shocking events. At the end, the now mature, successful writer Suzanne says, "Good-bye, Carol and Cathi," and in response to a question posed at the outset, announces, flatly, "And

that is the main source of the violent imagery in my work. Thank you" (173).

This play is brilliant in an entirely different way than *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Kennedy employs litotic narrative and fractured realism organized as shards over interpolated time. The tone is very narrative, with almost no attempt at dramatic structure. The only drama emerges in the horrifying events themselves, revealed fully only at the end, after rather objective-seeming discussion. Kennedy uses similar techniques in *Letter to My Students and Mother 2000* (1994), where she anatomizes the senseless beating of her son in front of his aunt's house in Virginia because "he had a taillight out on his car" (202). In *Motherhood 2000*, the speaker imagines infiltrating a stage performance by the brutal cop, Richard Fox, playing the role of Christ, and striking him down with a hammer. Following a pattern seen in dramas by William Inge and other Midwestern playwrights, these works begin with understatement then erupt into sudden, violent thunderstorms leading to a horrifying conclusion.

Among Kennedy's recent plays is *June and Jean in Concert (Concert of Their Lives)*, winner of another Obie Award in 1995. The tone is nostalgic: "I was happy" and Father was one of Cleveland's leading civic leaders (242). While Cleveland is celebrated, Father's ancestral home in Montezuma, Georgia, is also revered as a town "like the drawings we were given in Sunday School of Jerusalem" (254). Unfortunately, one of the twins, June, "jumped or fell off the upstairs porch" there (25). For the remainder of the play, the other twin, Jean, sits intently reading and writing beside June's ghost, whom at the end she finally is able to see. *June and Jean* is another haunting play with strong connections to Kennedy's Ohio upbringing in which the author comes to terms with intense loss and pain.

Over her career of more than three decades, Adrienne Kennedy has established herself as a lyric experimentalist in the theatre. Her blend of autobiography, history, racial ancestry, multiple identities, and poetic intensity is unique in the American theatrical canon. "Kennedy's work seduces readers by its appeal to the enigmatic" (Hooks 179). Apart from the more accessible realism of late works like *Ohio State Murders* and *June and Jean*, her challenging plays are unlikely to ever become mainstream. But Kennedy's art has influenced academic and avant-garde circles in a radical and profound way. She has inherited Beckett's austere stage lyricism, bringing it to racial, historical, and intensely personal territory. Her revolution-

ary theatrical aesthetic offers a powerful counterpoise to the more mainstream visions of Langston Hughes and Lorraine Hansberry, and even the street music of Charles Gordone.

The premiere of Ma Rainey's *Black Bottom*, winner of the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play of 1984-85, signaled the dynamic entrance of August Wilson (1945-2005) to American theatre. Within three years, three more Broadway successes appeared from the same hand: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986), and *Fences* (1987), which won the Pulitzer Prize, as did *The Piano Lesson* (1987). Wilson went on to write *Two Trains Running* (1990), and managed to complete his cycle of ten plays focusing on the experiences of African Americans in his native Pittsburgh before dying of cancer in 2005. Wilson's *City of Steel*, located on the eastern fringe of the Midwest, seems decidedly part of the Rust Belt to which many southern blacks immigrated to find work and freedom. The playwright began his series after moving to Saint Paul, Minnesota in 1978, where *Jitney!* became "the first installment of his ten-play chronicle of African American history since 1900" (Shannon 54).

From that Upper Midwestern vantage point, and based on his upbringing in Pittsburgh, Wilson has been able to wield his discerning intellect to dissect the legacy of American slavery and the African heritage the slaves brought with them. Patricia Gantt acknowledges the Midwest as the locus of Wilson's creativity, but prefers to focus on the playwright's "southernness" (70). The South certainly figures as a region haunted by the ghosts of the Middle Passage, slavery, and the Great Migration. In his literarily constructed Midwestern setting, Wilson encodes the emigrational legacy of African American experience struggling to find its voice and freedom. He makes use "of the African oral tradition," creating "folklore that is recognizable in its surface familiarity" and therefore accessible to a wide range of audience (Bogumil 10; Harrison 50). While Marra sees in the plays an "ambitious history of black matriarchal overthrow," Kester evocatively describes Wilson's motivating impulse as the desire to "reformulate the African American poetics of history" (Marra 155; Kester 105).

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1984), set in Chicago in 1927, focuses less on the legendary title character, "the Mother of the Blues," than on the musicians and producers gathered to make her recording. The play announces a number of the playwright's major themes and concerns. Most of Wilson's literary work, in theatrical as in other genres, is strikingly lyrical, with an emphasis both on

music and song as well as on the rhythmic patterns of speech. In *Ma Rainey*, the Blues legacy from the suffering experienced in the former Confederacy has moved north and almost becomes a character in its own right. Escape from the South—Arkansas, New Orleans, Georgia—features prominently. Most dramatic is Levee's chilling story of his mother's brutal rape by a gang of white men when he was only eight years old living near Natchez. In trying to fight them off with his daddy's hunting knife, Levee was severely slashed and rushed to the midwife for emergency treatment. Levee's father died in a later confrontation with these men, and Levee himself lashes out in violence at the end of the play. In what has become a characteristic pattern, Wilson interpolates such searing personal narratives of oppression by whites into a general structure of dramatic lyricism.

Ma Rainey, in her sometimes bossy imperiousness—"Ma don't stand for no shit"—serves as an inspiration for the musicians, who wield much less power in their relations with Irvin and Sturdyvant, the white manager and producer (79). "Ma Rainey, among all the female characters in Wilson's plays, seems to be the only black woman who dares to defy the hegemony of males, be they white or black" (Bogumil 31). Ma astutely withholds her signature from the release forms until assured that she and the musicians will be equitably paid. The ending of *Ma Rainey* seems insufficiently motivated (a recurring problem in Wilson's work), but the character definition is sharp and convincing, and the dialect is lyrically and lovingly rendered. The playwright is successful in making the audience experience both the pain resulting from white oppression and exclusion (expressed lyrically through the Blues) and the rich variety and dignity of black experience.

From the perspective of traditional structure, *Fences* (1987) is the most dramatic of Wilson's plays and the one most focused on personal identity formation. Action is set in the yard of a "big-city neighborhood" where "the porch lacks congruence" and "fence-building materials [lie] off to the side" (n.p.). The setting recalls Langston Hughes's *Front Porch*, but in a struggling urban rather than middle-class suburban environment. The play spans the years from 1957 to 1965; Troy, a large black man retired from the Negro Baseball League, lives within a tightly connected nexus of family and near-family: Bono, his best friend whom he met serving time for murder; Uncle Gabriel, severely injured in the head during World War II; Rose, wife of some eighteen years; and two sons, Lyons and Cory,

by his two wives. Based in part on Wilson's own stepfather, Troy bears a grudge against the exclusion and discrimination he has suffered, both in baseball and on the job (Bogumil 9). In chilling detail, Troy describes how his beaten-down, hardened father found him at the age of fourteen with a young girl and beat him unmercifully. He fled north but couldn't find work and took to stealing to survive.

Fences is striking particularly for its generational conflict and gender tensions. Troy is dismissive and rough when Lyons (age 34) asks for a loan, and also when Lyons repays the loan. Troy is downright cruel in forbidding Cory to play football or talk with a college recruiter. Cory subsequently escapes to the US Marines but refuses to attend his father's funeral, still scarred by the abuse. Troy's treatment of Rose is not much better: though he professes his love, he conducts an affair with Alberta and brings home the baby for Rose to take care of when Alberta dies in childbirth. *Fences* understandably play a symbolic role—Rose sings, "Jesus be a fence around me every day"—and up to and including the ambiguous ending, we see before us a number of barriers, familial comings and goings, failures and renewals. The play comes across as a lyrical saga of an extended, makeshift family, one generation poisoning and challenging the next.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone, set in a boarding house in 1911, radiates African American experience in a steel mill context: "The city flexes its muscles" (n.pag.). Here, blacks newly arrived from the South are "foreigners in a strange land" (n.pag.). Seth owns the boarding house and makes pots and pans for a living from sheet metal brought by the itinerant Rutherford Selig, who also works as a People Finder for missing ex-slaves and relatives. Joe Turner showcases Wilson's abiding interest in African heritage, embodied most clearly in Bynum, a "conjure man, or rootworker" who conducts African-derived rituals and brings people together with his Binding Song. The call-and-response Juba dance at the end of Act I "is reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves" (52). "Songs . . . become equally important for Wilson in relocating the power of conversation within Afrocentric forms" (Harris 50). The play pulsates with incantatory rhythms which, in a different way than the Blues in *Ma Rainey*, enact African American experience with a more spiritual dimension.

Whereas *Fences* takes place in the front yard, *Joe Turner* features the kitchen and parlor, with typical Midwestern emphasis on cooking and eating, especially breakfast. The boarding house setting brings together a variety of male and female characters unrelated by

blood but seeking connections. Particularly striking is the frequency of abandonment stories told by both men and women. When Herald Loomis was kidnapped and imprisoned by the eponymous Joe Turner for seven years, his wife left their infant daughter with her mother and headed north. He has come to Pittsburgh to find her, and they do reunite through the auspices of the People Finder—only to part again, with the daughter being handed over to the long-missing mother. The play ends with Loomis slashing himself, then spreading his blood and becoming “shining.” African traditions richly infuse the stage action in this drama of lost and found, coming and going, incantatory transformation.

The Piano Lesson is the most haunted and haunting of Wilson’s plays. The domestic setting is again characteristically Midwestern, with domestic chores like cooking, eating, going to work, and even hot-curling hair becoming an emblematic part of the rhythm of the action. But this comfortable daily pattern struggles mightily with intersecting specters from the South: the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, and Sutter’s Ghost. “In both *Joe Turner* and *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson alludes to the African concept of Mantu, which is a belief that the spirits of the dead influence the living” (Jane Campbell qtd. Monaco 95). Sutter, a white landowner, commissioned Doaker’s grandfather to carve his family’s pictures on Sutter’s piano. When the carver’s son Boy Charles stole the piano to keep it in the family, Sutter burned his house and set fire to the railroad boxcar in which Boy Charles and his friends tried to escape. Since that time, the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog (Railroad) are said to have caused the mysterious deaths of area whites, including Sutter’s descendant, before the start of the play. Berniece, Doaker’s niece, struggles hard to keep that legacy of violence—including her husband’s death in the South three years ago—out of her house and life. But the Ghost of Sutter appears to the characters one by one and then collectively, haunting this Midwestern home with a southern cycle of vengeance.

The region of this play is presented as a location of opportunity. Newly arrived from Mississippi, Lymon refuses to go back: “They treat you better up here” (38). He likes “it up here real good” and longs to work at a job he wants (75, 77). Reverend Avery, trying to establish his own church, has found “opportunities for growth and advancement that did not exist for him in the rural South” (22). But the piano sits at the very center of the action as a palpable reminder of the family’s tortured history. Although Berniece is a talented musician, she

hasn’t played it for seven years, although she lets her daughter Maretha play. Berniece still mourns both for her mother, Mama Ola, who died seven years ago, and even more for her husband Crawley, who died four years later. Only at the very end, after Rev. Avery has attempted to exorcize Sutter’s Ghost, can Berniece finally sit down to play the piano, saying, “Thank you. / Thank you. / Thank you” (107).

The Piano Lesson enacts a fundamental struggle in African-American experience, embodied in the artfully carved instrument, between acknowledging and treasuring the past, for all its searing pain, and trying to construct a new, freer, and more equitable future. Boy Willie wants to sell the piano and use his half stake to buy the land he has farmed as a poorly paid worker. He is driven by the desire for equal treatment: “Ain’t no difference in me and the white man” (38). Berniece will have none of what she regards as a betrayal of her family’s history of sacrifice for mere money. Avery and Lymon are in the North carving out new lives for themselves, building new foundations. In creating the ancestral piano, August Wilson has fashioned a powerful symbol for the dilemma for African Americans in honoring the suffering of slave experience yet letting go of those mental and spiritual chains. The play enacts a struggle of regions, Rust Belt and South, but wherever blacks go to pursue opportunity, the haunting ghosts of slavery will make themselves felt and demand to be dealt with.

Seven Guitars, which opened in New York in 1996, continues Wilson’s Pittsburgh series, set this time after World War II in 1948. Mirroring *Fences*, action takes place in the backyard of an apartment house in the Hill District. Once again, a free-flowing structure encompasses the playwright’s signature mix of storytelling, ritual, and song, with particular emphasis, recalling *Ma Rainey*, on blues singing. The central character, Floyd, has earlier recorded a smash hit; the play is framed by his funeral at the beginning and end, with interior scenes articulating his quest to return to Chicago, where he enjoyed his first and only musical success, and to bring Vera with him in fulfillment of both personal and professional aspirations.

The drive to reach a place of opportunity and repose undergirds *Seven Guitars*, but the characters do not, for the most part, succeed in getting where they want to go. Canewell wants nothing to do with Floyd’s plan to go to Chicago, where he was arrested for playing his harmonica on the street: “the white man not going to tell me what to do no more!” (24). Hadley, a more disturbed and disturbing char-

acter, is haunted by racial injustice as well as debilitating tuberculosis. In a complicated mixture of iconography, Hadley declares, "the rooster is the king of the barnyard. He like the black man. He king" (61). He slits the throat of Miss Tillery's rooster, declaring, "God ain't making no more roosters" (64). At the end of the play, Hadley uses his machete the same way on Floyd to get the money he believes should rightfully be his. *Seven Guitars* thus ends and is darkened by black-on-black violence in a racial context where storytelling and lyric rituals serve to reinforce continuity and community.

Many scenes in this play are strongly gendered, as independent women confide in each other, echoing Ma Rainey in their economic savvy and refusal to be taken in by fast-talking men. The males interact with each other largely through storytelling and music. Although Floyd's guitar, Canewell's harmonica, and Red Carter's drums all languish in the pawnshop, the men nonetheless manage to sing and recount together in fragile camaraderie shadowed by poverty and the ever-present threat of arbitrary imprisonment by white authorities. *Seven Guitars* is a worthy successor to Wilson's earlier hits, combining gender and ritual elements in a nuanced meditation on post-war African American experience.

The remaining plays in Wilson's cycle are uneven, and the ones completed immediately before his death show evidence of haste. *Two Trains Running* (1992) is among the least dramatic of Wilson's plays. As Shannon indicates, "Wilson has grown increasingly didactic in his approach" (144).

Once again, the focus falls largely on male experience: "Black women do have appreciable roles in Wilson's dramas; however, they seldom are as developed as the men . . ." (Shannon 105). *Jitney* (1982), the earliest of Wilson's ten-play cycle, was revised in the 1990s and opened in New York for the first time in 2000. It relies on the character arias seen in the author's other plays but reveals an earlier phase of writing in its relative absence of music, ritual, and female characters. *Gem of the Ocean* has not yet been published.

Radio Golf, set in the Hill District in 1997, and thus the latest drama chronologically, has been published thus far only in the November 2005 issue of *American Theatre* magazine. This work embodies many of Wilson's signature strengths: a finely tuned ear for the rich variations of black speech; evocative "arias," or inset narratives, that reveal fascinating, often quirky intersections of history, longing, and self; and provocative disquisitions on issues central to

African American experience. One of the most original aspects of *Radio Golf* is the distressing rift between upper-middle-class black politicians and business professionals and those much less fortunate. The play also resonates through its many contemporary references. Unfortunately, however, it shows evidence of having been written in haste. Characterization is inconsistent, and the underlying structure and central conflict are murky. *King Hedley II*, published earlier in 2005, is less effective than *Radio Golf*, with weaker characterization.

The Midwest featured in the work of these playwrights differs substantially, reflecting intersections of autobiography, social history, and aesthetic assumptions. Hughes's Ohio plays represent but a small part of a much larger, multi-genre oeuvre devoted to civil rights issues. Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is classically Midwestern, but her posthumous plays move outward to more global concerns. Kennedy radically fractures personal, historical, and gender constructs in a lyrical aesthetic nonetheless increasingly grounded in her native Ohio. August Wilson took yet a different tack: in the cycle of plays set in his native Pittsburgh, the City of Steel becomes the crucible for race, class, and generational encounters incorporating both African and southern black experience.

The writers discussed here are by no means the only playwrights of African descent to emerge from the Midwest, only the most famous and nationally visible. Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the 1940 novel set in Chicago, achieved some success in a stage adaptation, as did *Saint Louis Woman*, a 1946 African American musical based on Arna Bontemps's novel, featuring music by Johnny Mercer sung by Pearl Bailey and others. Ohio-born poet and long-time Indiana resident Mari Evans has adapted several works for the stage. Virtually every major Midwestern city and many university communities now nurture young talent that may provide dramatic vision in the future. From the dramatic explorations of Paul Laurence Dunbar, cut off by his early death in 1906, through the popular accomplishments of Hughes, Hansberry, and Wilson to the streetwise art of Gordone and avant-garde vision of Kennedy and beyond, African American drama from the heartland has enriched and galvanized American theatre. The Midwest has served as a cultural setting somewhat removed, from which black writers can examine the legacy of slavery and oppression with particular clarity and dispassion, offering both penetrating analysis and a social context for renewal. As a group, these playwrights have forged a dramatic

legacy unrivaled in subtlety and complexity, cosmic irony and tragic pain.

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NOTE

¹The recent volume, *In His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Uncollected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, edited by Herbert W. Martin and Ronald Primeau (Ohio University Press, 2002), contains one complete play and two dramatic fragments, along with texts for musicals, but these are not set in the Midwest and exhibit few, if any, regional features. Since Dunbar's untimely death in 1906, manuscripts like the ones in this volume have been discovered as late as the 1990s, suggesting that the work of other early African American playwrights from the region may still be found.

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ANNUAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF
MIDWESTERN LITERATURE: 2003

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This bibliography includes primary and secondary sources of Midwestern literary genres published, for the most part, during 2003. Criteria for inclusion of authors are birth or residence within the twelve-state area that defines the Midwest. Fiction and poetry using Midwestern locales are included irrespective of their authors' ties with this region. Primary sources are listed alphabetically by author, including (if applicable) designations of locale within square brackets at the end of each citation. Secondary sources, usually journal articles, books, or doctoral dissertations, are listed by subject.

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Abbreviations used denoting genre and publication types:

A	Anthology	juv	juvenile fiction
bibl	Bibliography	lang	Language; linguistics
biog	Biography	M	Memoir
corr	Correspondence	N	Novel
crit	Criticism	P	Poetry
D	Drama	pub	Publishing; printing
I	Interview(s)	rev	Review essay
jrn	Journalism	S	Short fiction

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for distinguished contributions to Midwestern Literature

Jack Conroy	1926
Frederick Manfred	1929
Wright Morris	1932
John Voalser (Robert Traver)	1933
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Gwendolyn Brooks	1935
John Knoepfle	1936
Andrew Greeley	1937
Harry Mark Petrakis	1938
Dudley Randall	1939
Jim Harrison	1940
Don Robertson	1941
Ray Brubury	1942
Mona Van Dyke	1943
William H. Coe	1944
William Maxwell	1945
Sara Patchky	1946
Tommy Blount	1947
Joan Hardesty	1948
Judith Murray	1949
Virginia Hamilton	1950
Wilhelmina Scheinzig	1951
Don Gisholt	1952
Richard King	1953
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Mary O'Rourke	1956

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Bernard Dubley	1981
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Donald Pady	1984
Robert Bausecker	1985
Arthur Shumaker	1985
Gene H. Dem	1986
Kenny J. Williams	1986
Ray Lewis White	1987
Diana Harpell	1988
James C. Austin	1989
Phillip Gerber	1990
Bernard F. Engel	1991
Frederick C. Stern	1992
Jane S. Bulgerman	1993
Edgar M. Branch	1994
John E. Hallway	1994
Douglas Whitson	1995
Scott Donaldson	1996
Paul W. Miller	1997
Larry Lockridge	1998
Phillip Gosseliey	1999
Mary Ellen Caldwell	
Mary Jean DeMarr	2000
Elmer Suderman	2001
Ronald Prinslow	2002
Richard Price	2003
Marilyn Judith Auler	2004
Mary E. Long (O'Brien)	2005