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*edited by*  
DAVID D. ANDERSON

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in honor of  
William H. Gass

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## PREFACE

As *Midwestern Miscellany* moves confidently into its third decade as a means by which members of the Society share their interests in and insights into Midwestern writers and writing, it is again a miscellany, its essays ranging in subject matter from the common elements in representative Midwestern poets to those in novels as disparate in time and yet as similar in substance to Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*; they range, too, from appraisals of writers as diverse as Mari Sandoz to Lucien Stryk to Saul Bellow, even as they explore the elements that make each an indentifiably Midwestern writer. Each essay explores part of the mosaic that makes the literature of the land between the mountains truly Midwestern.

Suitably, *Midwestern Miscellany XXII* is dedicated to William H. Gass, Distinguished University Professor of the Humanities and Director of the Writing Center at Washington University in St. Louis, author of *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* and *Omensetter's Luck*, and recipient of the Society's Mark Twain Award for 1994.

October, 1994

DAVID D. ANDERSON

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POEMS OF POPULAR COMMON GROUND:  
FOUR VOICES OF THE MIDWEST

JAMES R. SAUCERMAN

Epigraph: "To settle a territory is . . . equivalent to consecrating it." (Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*)

What does one expect in the poetic depiction of life in the rural Midwest: church? Boy Scouts? landscape? seed catalogs? love? humor? hope? death?

It's all there, in the poems of the four Nebraska poets of whom this is a sampler: William Kloefkorn, Ted Kooser, Greg Kuzma, and Don Welch. Among the themes portrayed with the vigor of plains diction and crystal pure imagery are the humor of daily life, the love humans share, the comforts of place, the religious impetus, the sometimes harsh edge of life on the plains, and the dying. In their regional particulars, the poems are like a preserved and restored American village where repairs, reinforced structures, repainting, and regained coherence of the once merely ordinary surroundings force a concentrated focus on certain highly expressive imagistic lines.

The titles all but tell the story: "Kicking the Can," "Driving Back Home in My Wife's Father's Old Chevrolet," "Practicing Baptism" (on a cat, as it turns out), "Spring Plowing," "The Widow Lester," "The Feedlot Buffalo," "Upon Finally Winning Something Big at the Fair," and "So This is Nebraska."

But these four poets offer more than sentiment and curious artifacts; they offer *life* in all its spoken and unspoken intensity.

Henry David Thoreau writes in *Walden* "I perceive . . . we live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things" (65), suggesting that we do not give full value to the particulars of our lives. He goes on to write "Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind

the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man"; but, (Thoreau goes on to say) we are mistaken if we believe truth does not exist in the present moment merely because the present, familiar environment seems common place (65).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom some persist in remembering only as an idealist, writes in the essay "Experience," "of what use is genius, if the organ is too convex or too concave, and cannot find focal distance within the actual horizon of human life?" (329). These four Nebraska poets do find focal distance within the actual horizon of human life and they penetrate the surface of local experience to reveal the often hallowed universals resident in that experience.

One striking illustration of the power of understated, plain diction is Ted Kooser's poem, "The Widow Lester:"

I was too old to be married,  
but nobody told me.  
I guess they didn't care enough.  
How it had hurt, though, catching bouquets  
all those years!  
Then I met Ivan, and kept him,  
and never knew love.  
How his feet stunk in the bed sheets!  
I could have told him to wash,  
but I wanted to hold that stink against him.  
The day he dropped dead in the field,  
I was hanging up sheets in the yard,  
and I finished. (*Common Ground* 110)

Part of this "penetrating the surface of things" arises from the human interaction with the world in such a way as to sacralize both place and event. Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and The Profane*, writes that "To settle a territory is, in the last analysis, equivalent to consecrating it. . . . It supposes the choice of the universe that one is prepared to assume by 'creating' it" (34).

The farmer in Ted Kooser's poem, "Flying at Night" does not articulate that thought but *he acts out its truth*. The narrator of the poem, flying between the constellations above and their localized imagistic mates below him on earth thinks of the paralleled order and of our roles within it. "Five billion miles away a galaxy dies" and the farmer below "feeling the chill of that distant death,/ snaps on his yardlight, drawing his sheds and

barn/back into the little system of his care" (*Common Ground* 122). In this way he fights off the anxiety "in which nonbeing threatens being" with death, emptiness, and guilt (Tillich 41) as so many of the characters in these poems must.

Gretl and Hulda, in Don Welch's poem "Old World Germans of SE Avenue C," (*Common Ground* 247) spend their December "in hibernative shawls" looking through seed catalogs from which will generate, under their later care, life in *their* part of the ordered universe. And it is a hallowed life, for people's lives are hallowed by a kind of original religious participation in life caused by the sometimes even unrecognized spiritual manifestations.

Another of Kooser's poems, "So This is Nebraska," presents a more exuberant harmony. The poem is filled with local images: gravel road, telephone lines, redwing blackbirds, broken tractors, meadowlarks, hollyhocks, and an old pickup that "kicks its fenders off/and settles back to read the clouds. . . ."

You feel like that; you feel like letting  
your tires go flat, like letting the mice  
build a nest in your muffler, like being  
no more than a truck in the weeds,

clucking with chickens or sticky with honey  
or holding a skinny old man in your lap  
while he watches the road, waiting  
for someone to wave to. You feel like

waving. You feel like stopping the car  
and dancing around on the road. You wave  
instead and leave your hand out gliding  
larklike over the wheat, over the houses. (*Common Ground* 113)

The religious, celebrative spirit is here, and the poem ends with the hand in benediction over both the God-built and the human-built.

Another of Kooser's short poems depends on commonplace diction as does "The Widow Lester" but is filled with love: "Christmas Eve."

Now my father carries his heart  
in its basket of ribs  
like a child coming into the room  
with an injured bird.

Our ages sit down with a table between them,  
eager to talk.  
Our common bones are wrapped in new robes.  
A common pulse tugs at the ropes  
in the backs of our hands.  
We are so much alike  
we both weep at the end of his stories. (*Common Ground* 113)

The rural Midwest can also be a comfortable place where little, unspoken pleasures help the world cohere, a place where the police might bring a runaway dog home in the police car, for this is Crete, Nebraska, Greg Kuzma tells us. The poem ends

I think the police liked picking the dogs up.  
It gave them a chance to ride in the car with a dog.  
Otherwise they are not allowed to.  
Riding with a dog can be quite a pleasure.  
I have often done it myself. (*Common Ground* 212-213)

Greg Kuzma's poem "Mother" suggests with homey images the painful separation of divorce after 20 years and the accompanying loss of coherence. What is left for him (faded drapes, the dog, the rug worn through) and what she takes (antique demitasse, three-shelf table) evolves to the tiled floor which she contemplates taking half of and since "he'll/ never match the color, will have to take/it all up or live with the fact underfoot." The poem ends with painful, simple understatement:

You leave the floor and everything he  
built, up late, in the cellar scraping  
or sawing or joining, while you, upstairs,  
sat among the blend of promises and  
gifts, and never thought of this. (*Common Ground* 175)

Nonetheless, the poet, if not the characters in the poems, recognizes what Martin Heidegger calls the "radical duality between human and the nonhuman," between the sense of his own existence and the surrender to that outer public necessity in which the "individual constantly obeys commands and prohibitions of the outer public world" (214).

Love, as ever, is part of this sense of one's own existence, even the curious communication of adolescent love in Bill Kloefkorn's poem "Virginia Mae Galloway," excerpted here:

Loved her so much  
I tossed her lunchbucket  
deep into D.S. Simpson's cowlot,  
.....  
Later, in the lunchroom, Virginia Mae Galloway  
sat radiant in her suffering,  
a cluster of disciples  
asking what and who and why.

.....  
Exactly what she told them  
I should never know,  
shall never care.  
Only that precisely after school,  
under the bridge near Marvel Roderick's greenhouse,  
Virginia Mae Galloway was there. (*Winter*, 38)

Bill Kloefkorn, especially, has created several personae who voice the Midwest world, among them Alvin Turner, ludi jr, and Looney. Alvin Turner as farmer, makes the best of bad situations, fights flood and rock, buries a child and a wife. Looney knows he is mentally deficient, knows that the kids tease him (throw firecrackers at him to see him dance on the Fourth of July, throw rocks at the outhouse while he sits afraid to come out); but he receives their attention, nonetheless, and because of that *he is somebody*. His part of the world is held together by ties with others. Even Mr. Terrell, the small town car dealer, talks with him "like one man almost to another," Looney says. Mr. Terrell, whose God (General Motors) out performs God himself, and who, Looney tells us, "smells like the inside of a Chevy,/says that some looneys don't have necks/because at some point on the assembly line/ a part got lost or misplaced." Looney's voice goes on . . .

And the pity of it all,  
according to Mr. Terrell,  
is that unlike a new car or a new pickup,  
both of which Mr. Terrell,  
who is a dealer,  
mentions that he has on hand,  
the looney can't come back  
at the manufacturer  
with a kind of guarantee.  
That's why he himself

is damn proud to be associated  
with General Motors,  
Mr. Terrell says,  
which stands like a mountain  
behind everything  
it has the good will  
to create. (*Common Ground* 41)

The familiar localized images and diction combine with literary allusion, to enhance the present moment in "The Dying of Miss Valerie Teal."

Miss Valerie Teal is dying tonight.  
She is in her room, alone, repeating  
Chaucer. Under soft Mazda lamplight  
She works at strange words, memorizing  
April. I see her sitting there,  
Her clean bare feet tucked up and out  
Of sight against the warmth of inside thighs.  
She is intense, giving all her bursting fairness,  
And all her eyes, to medieval rhythms.

It is a trip that she is taking  
Alone, while I too sit alone  
And listen to the April rain:  
It strikes the mind  
Like slim nails deftly driven,  
Piercing the roots of droughted March  
But dampening my own dark pilgrimage. (*Common Ground* 39)

"Man is the being who is immediately present to the world and who must live out his life in and through his inescapable relationship to the world" (Olson, 136). In the face of this necessity, Bill Kloefkorn and his characters encounter organized (Protestant) religion.

The preacher in one of Kloefkorn's poems (*Winter*, 19) is an example. The protestant, evangelical preacher is both holy and commonplace, full of "the glory and the wonder and the horror of the Lord" and of the "chicken-fried steak, hashbrowns and coffee" we see him eat in the corner booth of Thelma's Diner following the service, illustrating as a preacher perhaps should, what is holy and commonplace in all of us. The preacher is only a man, after all, perhaps a lonely man; but, like the rest of us, a

mix of holy and unholy, not hypocritical at all. The first line, "Smell the preacher," brings together the two parts of human self perception, body and soul: the Billy Budd problem (An "angel of God" who must hang for the temporal indiscretion of killing the master-at-arms right in front of the ship's captain), the Archie the Cockroach syndrome.

Another version of the same role occurs in "My Mad Uncle's Mad song for Christmas." On Christmas morning "a man-child injured at birth" spoons snow ice cream he has made into cereal bowls

Then he went out and put them down in the yard. What followed was the most absurd good love song of all. My mad uncle hovering over the bowls, singing down to the barn. Telling the guineas and all the rest of the faithful to come. (*Common Ground* 262)

One of Bill Kloefkorn's more successful personae, ludi jr, who is Boy Scout young, also uses religion to confront his "inescapable relationship to the world." In the poem "ludi jr is told not to stay any longer in the amen corner." (He is the same ludi jr who earlier "disguised as a square knot infiltrates the Boy Scouts," and who in another poem dreams of the girl in the next pew during the sermon, and who "with his spy glass discovers cindy kohlman's" pubic hair when she finally comes to the window of her house, and who another time "runs all the way around his paper route without stopping," throwing papers on roofs, through screen doors.) In "ludi jr is told not to stay any longer in the amen corner" we find this---

that good delegation  
from the pentacostal church  
turning its hat in its hand  
saying  
ludi jr  
you make too much racket  
you make it that is  
at the wrong time

and ludi jr says  
hallelujah!

and the good delegation says  
yes but you say it at the wrong time



and ludi jr says  
amen!

and the good delegation says  
yes but at the wrong time  
you got to keep quiet when you should

and ludi jr says  
glo-ree!

and the good delegation says  
there are times to be quiet ludi jr  
you see the lord jesus christ loves a joyful sound ludi jr  
but only in the right spaces

and the good delegation  
talks on and on.  
ludi jr shouting  
halleluja! and amen! and glo-reee!  
right into the middle of things

until by and by  
the good delegation  
puts on its hat and leaves

and in the minutes that follow  
is ludi jr like a stone

quiet smooth unmoving  
and on the inside darkened  
and alone (*Common Ground* 50-51)

All this can lead, as it often has in American literary humor, to a certain irreverence, unless one realizes that *life itself* is holy, not any *one* particular manifestation of that life. One of Kloefkorn's recent poems, "God as a Boy Enjoys Himself at Recess," is an illustration. It begins with the following lines:

Swinging with Evelyn Turner,  
prettiest girl in the fourth grade,  
God feels a sympathy he'll not feel again  
until he gives his only begotten son.  
Now he stands facing Evelyn,

each in turn pumping the swing,  
Evelyn's blonde hair bobbing,  
her large eyes blue as the sky  
they take turns rising into. (*Sand Creek* 9)

The particulars in these poems become more than artifacts—as they take on symbolic values of a way of life—as they become sacralized.

The treasured voices of these poems we may have met before in the Midwest; and the treasure house we may find to be our own, or a neighbor's down the street, or a farm shed in the glow of a yard light, somewhere.

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SISTERS IN A QUEST—  
*SISTER CARRIE AND A THOUSAND ACRES:*  
THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY  
IN GENDERED TERRITORY

MARGARET ROZGA

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* each have as their main character a woman in search of a place for herself. Aside from this basic quest motif, however, what is most apparent are the differences: Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, a turn of the century work, is narrated by a third person voice whose pronouncements figure in the novel almost as prominently as do the voices of the main characters; *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley's late twentieth century novel, is narrated by the main character, Ginny Cook Smith. The main and title character in *Sister Carrie* is a young Wisconsin woman who leaves home to seek her fortune in the Big City. Ginny in *A Thousand Acres* is an Iowa woman who marries young and stays on the farm until she is almost forty, leaving as the last desperate attempt to find herself rather than the first. Ginny's relations with her family in Iowa, especially with her sister Rose, are intense; Carrie, on the other hand, though she is identified in the title by a familial term, rarely thinks of her parents once she leaves home. She stays briefly with her sister upon first arriving in Chicago, but sees quickly that her value in that household is due almost exclusively to the contribution she is expected to make to their finances. Thus the works are different in their point of view, as well as in demographic situations of their main characters.

Perhaps the most obvious link between these works is the presence of a Caroline, who, in each work, leaves home after high school. Each Caroline is also someone who comes alive in performance. But this link seems de-emphasized or coincidental.

Ginny notes that Caroline's name, like her own, was "taken from a book" (94), but she does not specify what book. Caroline Meeber, known by her nickname Carrie, of course, plays a major role in Dreiser's novel. Caroline Cook is rarely called Cary and, when she is, the name is spelled thus with a -y. Nor is Smiley's character the major focus in *A Thousand Acres*, though she complicates the plot and serves as a point of contrast to her sisters.

The more important link between the two works is in their underlying purposes. Both works are revisionary, in the sense that Eileen Teper Bender uses the term to describe the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates. That is, they rethink patterns of earlier fictions. Critics have noted how *Sister Carrie* inverts the Horatio Alger, Jr. story pattern: rags to riches by way of virtue. Virtue for a woman means sexual abstinence before marriage; on such terms Carrie does not qualify. Thus *Sister Carrie* raises questions about the social structure and conventional morality of its day, including women's roles within that social and moral structure.

For its part, *A Thousand Acres*, as many reviewers have noted, reimagines Shakespeare's *King Lear* with Larry Cook as the twentieth century Lear, Caroline as the contemporary Cordelia, Ginny and Rose replacing Goneril and Regan, and Harold Clark somewhat akin to Gloucester. He has two sons, Loren and Jess. Though both of Harold's sons were born within the same legal marriage, Rose and Harold each see Jess as something of a bastard, each for his or her own reasons. In reconstructing such a plot, Smiley also raises questions about the social structure, focusing especially on women as daughters. She seeks to understand several related issues in late twentieth century terms: what would drive two out of three daughters to irremediable conflict with their father; how can a man still be absolute ruler of his domain, and if the kingdom and acquisition of more land is the primary value, then what roles are possible for women? Her work concludes not by upholding the image of the dutiful daughter but by questioning patriarchy.

Both Dreiser's Carrie and Smiley's Ginny are essentially without a place of their own for most of their stories. The places where they reside are within some man's circle of relationships and on some man's property. Their stories are not tales concluding like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with a resolution

"to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest," though they, especially Ginny Cook's, become stories of exploring or searching for a "no man's land." That phrase has, in the light of these works, more positive connotations than is usually the case. What makes the difference between seeing that phrase as signalling a place that is terrifying and indicating something more hopeful is one's gender and class. Male characters who do not enjoy upper class status, like Hurstwood, in the second half of *Sister Carrie* and Ty and Pete before their marriages into the Cook family in *A Thousand Acres*, may be well-advised to be cautious about identifying with social definitions and conventions. But the main characters are female. Though each achieves a different degree and quality of self-definition, their stories suggest that a woman's identity may be better found by moving against, rather than following or embodying, prevailing myths about women.

The degree to which Carrie Meeber in *Sister Carrie* achieves self-definition has been a matter of critical debate. Stories such as hers, of young women from small towns or rural areas moving to big cities to try their luck, were familiar in both nineteenth century life and fiction. David E. E. Sloane, for example, discusses Joaquin Miller's 1886 novel, *The Destruction of Gotham* as a particularly relevant example of the convention. Dreiser, of course, inverts that convention insofar as his character eventually achieves financial success despite her "fall." "Fallen women in American novels," Sloane notes, "paid the price of sin—death, bitter and impoverished or luridly painful and ugly, rather than rising to wealth and public appeal." (39) In *Sister Carrie*, as Ellen Moers also finds, there is a contrary cause and effect in operation. She writes, "For Carrie's sexual adventures hardly destroyed her; instead they stimulate the unfolding of her temperament much as the sun's light and heat bring the plant to flower." (146) But, she goes on to note, Dreiser's first readers were offended by such a suggestion of a natural process of growth, seeing it instead as vice rewarded.

Negative reaction in Dreiser's own time to his inversion of this story line may say more about the critic's investment in the social convention than about the literary quality of the novel. Sloane so argues: That critics hated this aspect of the book even in its softened form is telling evidence of the strength of established social and economic forces working against reform, and

the unwillingness of contemporary Americans to confront the sexual and personal problems inherent in labor conditions. (44).

Since Dreiser's time some critics, Sloane among them, continue to see the novel as undermining the idea that work and conventional virtue bring success, without attaching a negative evaluation of such an effort. Instead such critics focus on how skillfully Dreiser conveys his intentions. Sloane believes that Carrie's ascent to financial success "is part of the crucial exchange of roles that really reflects Dreiser's naturalistic philosophy at its most subtle." (55) He argues that Carrie's success, and Hurstwood's decline, are the result of "comparable social chances and perversities" (58), but his evidence is sometimes ambiguous, rather than a clear guide to Dreiser's intentions. Sloane labels as Dreiserian, for example, the newspaper reviewer's analysis of the audience response to Carrie's performance: "The vagaries of fortune are indeed curious" (SC 354, Sloane 58). The implication seems to be that the audience might have as easily taken a fancy to another player. Indeed they may have, but Sloane himself also notes that the narrator focuses on Carrie's particular sexual appeal: "It was the kind of frown they would have loved to force away with kisses. All the gentlemen yearned toward her" (SC 353, Sloane 58).

Her sexuality and, more to the point, her society's sexism, are the more specific elements influencing Carrie's chances from the moment she senses "a certain interest growing in that quarter" when Drouet is seated behind her on the train (SC 2). Several critics have noticed how pervasive is the sexual harassment, though they don't always use that phrase, in the early work place scenes of the novel. On her first lunch break, for example, Carrie is appalled at the "Familiar badinage among the men and girls" and "feared that the young boys about would address such remarks to her—." Surviving that, she finds another form of the same thing once back at her work station, "when another young man passed along the aisle and poked her indifferently in the ribs with his thumb." (SC 32) The other women at the shoe factory tell her simply not to mind. Sloane summarizes the nature of the work place: "men cast lustful eyes on her and make veiled propositions; wages are inadequate; female companionship is low and coarse, even when other factory girls are kindly intentioned." (44) At least with Drouet, Carrie receives

more ample compensation and, as Ellen Moers notes, some warmth (149). But she is still a sex object.

The responses of both Drouet and Hurstwood to Carrie's performance in *Under the Gaslight* for Drouet's Chicago lodge share in the sexual nature the reviewer sees in the responses of the men in the New York audience. Drouet is described as being "beside himself. He was resolving that he would be to Carrie what he had never been before. He would marry her, by George! She was worth it." (SC 150). Hurstwood's response is similar: "He could have leaped out of the box to enfold her. He forgot the need of circumspectness which his married state enforced. He almost forgot that he had with him in the box those who knew him. By the Lord, he would have that lovely girl if it took his all." (SC 151). Carrie's theatrical success, then, is more than a matter of chance. It has the same basis as her rise to the position of mistress, first to Drouet, and then to Hurstwood. The men in the New York audiences seem similar to Drouet and Hurstwood, but at a more anonymous level.

The financial success, then, may say more about the audience than it does about Carrie. Carrie herself, however, does more than simply change her financial situation. Barbara Hochman sees Carrie move from one kind of longing to another:

"From Dreiser's point of view, while some modes of desire give rise to a feeling of hunger or need that impels the self toward others (and generally leaves it inextricably entangled as a result), certain other modes provide the self with a sense of plenitude that becomes, in turn, a source of power and autonomy." (53)

Carrie's relationships with both Drouet and Hurstwood are of the first type; her longing for the theater of the second. Hochman goes on: "only in the theater playing the role of another woman, can Carrie be sure of maintaining the distance between herself and those members of the audience to whom she was 'a delicious little morsel. . .'" (53) In other words, Carrie learns a way to survive that doesn't involve the conventional conclusion, being devoured. Donald Pizer summarizes: "Carrie's relationship with men eventually become encumbrances hindering her further search for fulfillment." (8)

Once Carrie has managed to secure some space for herself, she faces the question of what to do with that space. That is the

position she is in at the end of the novel. She is affected by Ames' assertion that playing in comedy may not be the highest use of her talent. Still she is in an ironic position. First having earned recognition when she speaks the unwritten line, "I am yours truly" (340), Carrie is not truly who she seems. She is not really Carrie Madenda, that being a name given her by Drouet to cover the awkwardness of their relation as concerns his lodge brothers. That name gets her a room at the Wellington where her name "is worth something" (357), but it is not her identity. She is not really the young woman without much life experience her room mate assumes her to be. She has not been in a position to demand the kind of roles Ames tells her in his "preachments" she should be doing (386). Nor is she as indifferent to conventional morality as Dreiser's first readers seemed to believe. If she were, Hurstwood could not so easily convince her to stay with him simply by promising marriage and then deluding her with an illegal ceremony. She has, in fact, not yet defined herself or thought enough about the meaning of her experience to develop her own values.

In the half dozen or so years covered by the time of the novel, Carrie has demonstrated how far toward self-definition one can go when one's primary motivation is negative; she has been moved more by her immediate fear of poverty than by an abstract conception of what she is or could be. As she sits at the end in her rocking chair, the narrator says, "she was now an illustration of the devious ways by which one who feels, rather than reasons, may be led in the pursuit of beauty." (399) Through these "devious ways," that is, ways she does not consciously and/or explicitly name, she has achieved a space of her own; more conscious thinking both conceptually and metaphorically, is needed for her to name that space for herself, that is, to affirm her own identity.

Almost a century later, Jane Smiley offers in the first person narration of Ginny Cook Smith at least the beginnings of such a naming process. Initially, Ginny's identity is as much defined for her as is Carrie's, probably more so since Ginny is surrounded by family. She is the eldest daughter of Laurence Cook, largest landholder in Zebulon County, Iowa. The plot of her story echoes the plot of *King Lear*, with the father distributing the land to the daughters while he still lives, and cutting off the

youngest daughter in a fit of pique. Yet Smiley, like Dreiser, alters the traditional story with which she is working. Some of the incidents are modified. The blinding of Harold Clark, for example, is done by more devious means than are used with Gloucester. Other incidents do not take place at all; Caroline, unlike Cordelia, lives, though her father thinks her dead; Ginny, unlike Goneril, does not poison Rose, though she intends to. Instead Rose dies of breast cancer probably caused, by the same factor that keeps Ginny childless, the poison that the father has spread across the land, ironically in order to increase fertility.

Like Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, as well as like Shakespeare's *King Lear*, it is a work in which much happens. But it is essentially Ginny's story, and the main point of interest is how Ginny grows from her identification with her father's view to a view of her own. In Zebulon County family relationships and land define the world. Early in the novel, we are presented an inventory of who owns what and with what, if any, encumbrances. (4) Except in the case of the Ericson's, who fail as farmers, the land is identified as the father's. Certainly within the Cook family, the father is the absolute ruler. As Ginny describes her childhood belief he is even god-like. She says when she was in first grade, she thought her father defined the categories of both farmer and father. "To really believe that others even existed in either category was to break the First Commandment." (19)

Within this family configuration, siblings, sisters can play a special role. When their mother dies, Ginny and Rose take over the rearing of Caroline, and, as she becomes a teenager, arrange for her to have more freedom and social life than they did. In fact, as Ginny gradually rethinks her childhood, under the pressure of her father's increasingly difficult behavior and Rose's questions, she realizes that they protected Caroline from the incest they themselves suffered. Once Ginny realizes that she had suppressed memories of the incest, she rejects the paternalism that she sees as the underlying cause. Caroline, however, has been protected by her sisters and so cannot understand their bitterness. Rose says about Caroline's relation to their father, "Being his daughter is all pretty abstract for her" (60). Nor can Ginny's husband Ty understand Rose's anger. Given their different states of experience, no easy solutions exist for their conflicts.

Even Ginny and Rose are divided by the jealousy that arises when both are attracted to Harold Clark's son Jess.

Ginny thinks "there was, in addition, no escaping being sisters" (345). At this point in the novel, she might like to escape sisterhood; her relationship with Rose is still strained. She and Rose make peace, however, before Rose dies. Ginny is the only one to hear Rose's final accounting of her life: her "sole, solitary, lonely accomplishment" was her ability to insist on seeing and naming reality for herself. "So all I have is the knowledge that I saw! That I saw without being afraid and turning away, and that I didn't forgive the unforgivable. Forgiveness is a reflex for when you can't stand what you know. I resisted that reflex." (355-356) Ginny finally is less intractably angry, but she has become equally courageous in standing firm. Her farewell conversation with her husband Ty indicates as much; she can still be firm in her understanding of what events mean and who she is.

She is more than the daughter of Laurence Cook, certainly more than a sex object, though that is what her father's system of thinking would make of her. Hints of this gradually build through the novel. If men are the landowners and acquisition of more land is the primary value, then women come to be seen as a means to that end. Ginny's father is the product of such a marriage to secure land claims. At age thirty three, John Cook, who had earned "through sweat equity, a share in the Davis farm," married Edith Davis, age sixteen. (15) Laurence, born when his mother is eighteen, eventually thinks of women in terms of livestock. His youngest daughter, planning marriage at age twenty-eight, is old to be a "breeder" (13). Even the women take it for a joke at first, but the dangers of such thinking become clearer. In this light, a sure sign of trouble in Ginny's marriage is that on the night she is most sexually aroused with her husband, she cannot help but think of herself as "a sow" (164). Later, after the night of the storm, even though Ginny's been stripped of her illusion that everything will be all right, she thinks, "I felt another animal in myself, a horse haltered in a tight stall, throwing its head and beating its feet against the floor, but the beams and the bars and the halter rope hold firm, and the horse wears itself out, and accepts the restraint that moments before had been an unendurable goad." (198).

The affair with Jess Clark, whatever kind of bastard he may otherwise be, is an action that helps to break Ginny's ties with her father and his way of thinking. She begins to ask questions. For example, Larry tells her a story about neighbors whose disabled son had to do his plowing "as straight as the other boys," or be whipped and concludes that "the boy did his share, and he respected himself for it. It was the old man's job to see to that." (175) Instead of adding this to the mythology of fathers Ginny has inherited, she now asks her father, "How do you know?" At this point, however, she has trouble standing firmly on her question. She says, "When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished." (176)

Other factors help Ginny develop a point of view she can remember and stand on firmly. Her father's behavior becomes more vicious and more difficult for Ginny to justify in her own mind. He calls her a "bitch" and "barren whore," thus hurling at her as an insult her own greatest unhappiness, her inability to have children. She is dumbfounded; "shock was like a clear window that separated us." (181). Nor does Ty defend her, a fact that also realigns her thinking. Only Rose can speak. She calls this accusation "beyond ridiculous." (181) Rose's resistance shores up her own. As Ginny tells her before Rose dies, "without you to goose me. I just fall back into this muddle." (354)

But it is without Rose that Ginny leaves the farm for St. Paul, believing in terms of Jess that Rose, "had done me in" (304). Then when she realizes that she and Ty have very different ideas about what to do after winning the court case with Caroline, she lets Ty have everything for a thousand dollars. In St. Paul she submerges herself in the routine of her job as a waitress, "that blessing of urban routine" in which she says, "I forgot I was still alive." (336) But the quiet of the routine and the space in St. Paul allow her to consolidate her point of view. When Ty stops to see her before leaving for Texas, she articulates that clearly in terms that contrast her initial identification with the family myth. Her first person plural now appears in quotes, a way to show the distance she herself now feels from that identity:

I can remember when I saw it all your way! The proud progress from Grandpa Davis to Grandpa Cook to Daddy. When 'we' bought the first tractor in the county, when 'we' built the big

house, when 'we' had the crops sprayed from the air. . . . You see this grand history, but I see blows. I see taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did. I see getting others to pay the price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was. . . ." (342)

Even though she has not at this point reconciled with Rose, Ginny gives Rose credit for helping her to see "what my part really was" (342). She also understands the incest as part of the system rather than an isolated aberration. The "beating and fucking us," she says, "were part of the package, along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what" (343). She has, that is, developed a stance on which she can and does firmly stand. Thus she goes further than did Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, not only finding a space for herself, but developing the kind of thinking needed to establish a firm sense of her identity.

Not only does Ginny evaluate what has happened in conceptual terms, but throughout the novel, she develops a symbol system to replace the animal imagery of her father's view. From her early childhood, she had been fascinated by the underground water system, the network of drain tiles used to make the land workable as a farm. But she was punished for trying to hear that water forced underground, "squatting on one of those drainage well covers, dropping pebbles and bits of sticks through the grate." (47) Her father had no fondness for what had been; he "always spoke of the land his grandparents found with distaste—those gigantic gallinippers, snakes everywhere, cattails, leeches, mud puppies, malaria" (46). His pride was in subduing that land. As a child, Ginny learned to take pride in being the heir of that drained land, but as her story unfolds, she catches sight of pelicans and thinks the sight teaches a lesson about "what is below the level of the visible." (9)

Much of her own life has been submerged, in particular her desire to keep trying to have a child. Having that underground current in her life Ginny feels in possession of "a whole secret world, a way to have two lives, to be two selves. I felt larger and more various than I had in years, full of unknowns, and also of untapped possibilities. In fact, I was more hopeful after the two last miscarriages than I had been after the first." (26)

It is not just the sense of an underground life that connects Ginny to the water drained from the land. That water had been poisoned by the fertilizers spread over the land, and those same toxins bring on Ginny's miscarriages and Rose's cancer. When she returns to the farm before it is auctioned, one of sounds she hear is "the eternal drip and trickle of the sea beneath the soil" (365). She counts as part of her inheritance "the loop of poison we drank from the water running down through the soil, into the drainage wells, into the lightless mysterious underground chemical sea, then being drawn up, cold and appetizing, from the drinking well in to Rose's faucet, my faucet." (370) That water drained from the fields did not disappear but went underground and became poison. Ginny's own secret life, too, became poisoned and awaits a cleansing and reemergence. The British story transplanted to American soil requires revision. Ultimately, it is not a King Lear story that lives here; the child of the exploited land now in exile, no longer a dutiful daughter, no longer innocent, fashions a revision and readies herself to present a new mythology.

Dreiser's Carrie, and Smiley's Rose and Ginny are characters from works written over ninety years apart. But they are sisters in a kind of quest. If Carrie is left in a state of melancholy, Rose rejects that, telling Ginny, "We're not going to be sad. We're going to be angry until we die. It's the only hope." (354) Rose is angry to death. Ginny, however, takes another step in her thinking. She also see the danger of anger, jealousy and possessiveness because she has lived those emotions as well as been their victim. Hers is a double consciousness: she was part of "Ty's good little planet" where "you don't have to remember things about yourself that are too bizarre to imagine" (303); she also was a victim of that world. The canning jar of poisoned sausage helps her to remember both. Thus it is her safeguard against becoming like her father, "the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all the others." (371)

Ginny, more consciously than Dreiser's Carrie, seeks a no man's land, a place where no one can exercise his, or her, "lust to run things exactly the way he [or she] wanted to no matter what" (343). Of course, neither has yet found it. But both have a sense of how to work toward that end. Dreiser's Carrie at least knows not to exercise her position as star merely seeking

her own pleasure. She rejects Lola Osbourne's view that the cold and the snow are only means for a sleigh ride. Ginny, having dealt with Caroline who fears Ginny will say something to "wreck my childhood" knows "there are just some things you have to ask." (364) The first person narration in this novel indicates Ginny can explain her view to any one ready to listen.

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FROM LIFE TO ART:  
THE SHORT FICTION OF MARI SANDOZ

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Having grown up in Nebraska, I had heard the name "Sandoz" often—but not, I'm ashamed to admit, in a wholly literary context. While I was aware of Sandoz as a writer, I associated her name more with the university dormitory named after her than with her craft.

In indulging my desire to examine an unfamiliar author, I stumbled (as I so often do) upon a more difficult task than I had imagined. Initially I thought that I could immerse myself in Sandoz's short stories and the intent of my paper (to determine the author's "place" in the history of the short story) would somehow fall "naturally" into place. Then I discovered that, although several of her short writings had eventually been collected, the lack of success of her early short fiction had caused this writer to temporarily give up her craft in despair!

Trying to "place" Sandoz's writings seemed futile—their lack of popularity, among other things, indicated that they did not occupy a niche in the genre that could be easily identified. So I decided instead to explore two of her short stories ("The Vine" from 1925 and "The Smart Man" from 1928) to try and identify in them some of the important themes that were projected from aspects of her life and which occur in some of her longer biographies and historical novels.

One of these is the withdrawn, somewhat alienated nature of the writer that she frequently brings to characters in her stories. Mari Sandoz was born to a mother who, due to her pressing responsibilities on the sandhills homestead, had no time to give her daughter any physical affection; nor did Mari witness any affection between her parents. Contributing to this alienation was the unforgettable beating her father gave her as a baby for

waking him by crying (Stauffer 22), and the isolation imposed upon her because Jules (Mari's father) hardly ever let the women of the family leave the farm.

Due to the rather violent character of her household, Mari learned early to hold herself away from the center of attention, becoming instead a close observer of what went on around her. Her keen observations were most often centered on the natural environment of the rolling Nebraska sandhills in which she lived, a location which represented isolation and harsh living through a wild, desolate beauty:

. . . even as a small girl she loved the earth and had a strong sense of belonging to it. She loved to walk barefoot in the dust or mud, to feel she had the right to this direct contact with the land. She formed close emotional ties with the prairie, the bluffs, and the river . . . (Stauffer 26).

Perhaps Mari responded to nature in such a visceral way as a result of her lack of emotional connections with her immediate family. In any case, she believed throughout her life—and indicated in much of her writing—that intuition was of more use than intellect in reacting to natural surroundings, that excessive reasoning could put one out of sync with nature and unable to fully recognize its distinctive qualities. She illustrates this opinion in several of her writings.

Lack of recognition was something Sandoz hoped would not happen to the unique communities of her vast sandhill region. While her own isolation may have contributed to her somewhat withdrawn nature, she realized that that very isolation was what allowed the scattered communities of the sandhills (both Caucasian and Native American) to retain their distinctive characteristics. She worried that "The hinterland is trading its individuality for cheap imitations of that which is mediocre, the tawdry of our commercial centers" (36). Mari viewed the past as a crucial guide to the future, and as such felt strongly that it ought to be preserved. In order to do this, she often re-created the past in her stories, as she wrote her memories of the communities in which she lived.

Sandoz does this in her short story "The Vine," in which she places her characters, Meda and Baldwin, in a typically shabby (though relatively neat) sod house in the sandhills. It is sur-



rounded by soapweeds and seven miles from water, and its sand floor supports only a bed, two-legged table, two chairs, and a stove:

“Not much to dust,” Baldwin had said. What mattered dust, thought Meda, the yellow flaring up in her eyes. Even the walls would be dust if there were no roots to bind them into blocks (119).

Sandoz describes the harsh life of a sandhills homesteader in realistic terms in order to preserve its distinctive character for future readers.

She also re-creates, with specific vocabulary, the beauty of those desolate sandhills, describing that beauty as something Meda utterly fails to recognize, though “she knew every detail of that crude room” (118):

Meda couldn't see the narrow valley, wrinkled plush of russet bunchgrass between the lower chop hills with the wind ruffling the pile as it fitfully passed . . . She didn't hear the souging of the wind across the valley (117).

Sandoz chides her own character for not noticing the special aesthetic charm of her environment, for harboring her bitterness and dislike against any chance of appreciating the place at a level below the surface of her mind. While Meda attempts, in her memory, to recreate her own past in Indiana—“She cried for the bluegrass meadows” (119)—the author appears to deprecate that past as being perhaps not as “distinctive” (or interesting) as that of the sandhills. Sandoz clearly paints the attitude of Baldwin more favorably than that of Meda: “He believed in the somnolent hills; he was a part of their simplicity, their strength.” (119). Baldwin immerses himself in the place in much the way Sandoz did herself, while Meda holds herself aloof from it (though she acquires the yellow color of the sandhills in her angry eyes).

Meda cannot bear to let the sandhills life become a part of her, either mentally or physically. Even a routine chore, stoking the cookstove with cowchips, reviles her. “There was a curl of distaste on her lip even though her hands were hidden with mammoth cotton gloves” (120). Ironically, Meda, in leaving the participation in the land to Baldwin, attains a characteristic of

the author in becoming an observer of events. She shuns attention from her husband; she makes sure to have supper ready when he walks in the door, avoids conversation, and of course hides her covert watering of the glory vine.

While Baldwin represents, in part, the author's immersion in and enjoyment of the sandhills where she lived, Meda exemplifies, in an extreme manner, the measures of withdrawing self-protection that Mari Sandoz undertook in order to escape the pressures of her home life. When Baldwin, in a short-lived fit of temper, kills her green vine with the spade, Meda retreats directly into insanity:

She didn't notice him, but looked down at her hands full of the withered, soggy vine . . . She shrank down into the rocker like a frightened rabbit, clutching the vine to her breast. “Who are you? You can't take my vine, my pretty green vine, you with the blue face” (125).

Emil, the main character in “Smart Man,” also illustrates to a degree the withdrawn nature of the author. While Sandoz hid herself to avoid the drama of her home, Emil shrinks from people to get away from their laughter at his expense. When he is in the presence of certain people, his mental handicap often renders him unable to act, like a horse “struck over the head too often” (129).

In this story, Emil's alienation is a result of his own naiveté; he's been “made a sucker by a woman in a fix” (135), and everyone in the county knows it. He can't bear to look at Noreen when he takes the baby's bottle in to her, he dodges into the shadows to try and avoid conversing with Web Watson, he ducks into some trees out in the hills to hide from a passing rider, and he flees into the countryside to escape the violence between himself and Noreen. While none of these attempts at self-protection succeed, at the end of the story he manages to overcome his nurturing instinct long enough to make sure no one can tell that the child is Web's and not his:

Kicking the stool away, he reached for his straight edge razor, heated it in the steam of the teakettle. Then he held the toes apart, and one after another slashed away all the paper-thin membranes (138).

Emil resorts to drastic measures in order to ensure that his situation won't remain the center of county attention. And having done that, he may be more able to forge an emotional tie with the baby, instead of being forced to remain apart from it.

Emil's deepest-rooted emotional connections, however, are between him and the land on which he lives. Though his predicament has, for the time being, rendered that land less familiar to him than it normally is—" . . . when he cleared the last ridge and looked down upon his buildings and fields they were as strange as the far hills had been" (135)—we are given ample evidence that Emil, like Mari Sandoz, possesses a visceral link with nature. After Noreen first informs him of her pregnancy (and he believes the child is his), he leaves the house to experience the silence:

He climbed to the top of his highest alfalfa stack, the smell of the new hay sweet about him, and sat there a long time. And that night the stars were very close and the earth cupped itself into a bowl around him (133).

When Emil retreats from the soddy after his later confrontation with Noreen, ". . . like a wounded animal he sought the shield-chophills, farther and farther from the signs of man" (130).

Emil's ties with nature are also indicated in the metaphors and similes with which Sandoz punctuates his thoughts. The entire page of description of the first encounter of Emil and Noreen is littered with comparisons to nature: Noreen wears a dress "with no more under it than a fringe of bluestem growing in a barbed wire fence," her red-polished nails look "like the claws of a hawk gorging on a pullet, her eyes "searched the crowd like a hunting coyote's," and she plays up to the men "like a pretty red heifer in heat for the first time and making all the old cows stand back" (131). The prevalence of nature references with respect to Emil's thoughts is a memorable way for Sandoz to represent her own valuing of such a deep-seated response to the environment.

The author also wants the simple way Emil lives to be memorable to her readers. She describes his routine morning chores in illustrative detail:

At the steamy bang of the door behind him a chorus of hog noises rose from the pens on the slope, followed by a romping

of Poland Chinas to the feed troughs . . . head down, he walked carefully along the icy boards laid end to end across the frozen mud of the yard, the steam from the pails trailing in powdery clouds behind him to the low barn (127).

Sandoz also portrays Emil as scorning Web, the mailman, who wears useless fancy clothes and "mak[es] fun of folks in sensible working gear" (128). The author perhaps felt that she had to deprecate certain city customs in order to warn rural dwellers not to bury their own way of life.

The characters of Meda and Baldwin in "The Vine" and Emil in "The Smart Man" all represent, in differing degrees, several of the facets of Mari Sandoz's philosophy of life. The author makes it a point in each story to valorize the rural way of life in northwestern Nebraska, and to preserve details of it for her readers. She also illustrates, through Meda and Emil (whether or not it is a conscious illustration), her own penchant for withdrawing from any central action, her preference for remaining outside and observing what went on. Baldwin and Emil, in turn, embody Sandoz's passion for nature, her insistence that a response to it must be intuitive and all-encompassing.

Perhaps it is just this—Sandoz's need to insert her own "life philosophy" into her stories (she was a teacher, after all)—that made her short fiction so unpopular with most readers. But the insights into Sandoz's character that are yielded by the presence of these aspects of her life in her stories may change our perspective on just how valuable these stories are. They may have been worth little or no money in the years that they were written, but they are priceless for anyone interested in having more glimpses into the life of the author.

Del City, Oklahoma

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>By 1933 (after over ten years of writing), Mari had written two books, several articles, and over seventy short stories, and had earned only \$250 in sales and \$75 in prize money. Helen Stauffer states that

In the fall of 1933 she gave up. Very thin, malnourished, suffering from migraine, Mari . . . called in three friends . . . to help her gather up her stories, carry them to a wash tub in the back yard of the Boston [in Lincoln] home, and burn them (88).

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PORTRAIT OF A POET AS A YOUNG MAN:  
LUCIEN STRYK

SUSAN PORTERFIELD

In 1947, two years after returning from the Pacific where he had served during WWII, a twenty-two year old Lucien Stryk published his first essay, "The American Scene versus the International Scene," in a student journal at Indiana University. The article criticizes the climate of post-war America, what historians would later call the attempt at "normalcy" that characterized the peculiarities, even excesses, of the decade immediately after the War.

Conscious of its tremendous strength and its own unblemished virtue, the undefeated champion of the world hangs up its gloves and decides to relapse into its indolent mental habits of sublime self-adoration, self sufficiency, regional self-righteousness, and inflated egotistic super-nationalism. The inevitable reversion to the romantic conception of the American Garden of Eden, of the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, new cars and refrigerators, in a world ravaged, gutted, atomized, agonized, miserably cold, terribly afflicted, and ravenously hungry is the most horrible manifestation of our national escapism and moral inertia.

The disquiet Stryk exhibits here is not typical of the ethos informing his later work. Few of his reviewers have failed to praise the calmness of his tone, how balanced his manner even in the face of brutality. But the mood of "The American Scene" is quite different.

His disdain for a society blinded by its own myth and insensible to the suffering of others belongs to a young man certain that the world can be made better. His urgency belongs to a young man only too aware that he is lucky to be alive. Given his recent experiences as a soldier, the despair, which verges on outrage, is understandable. So too is the irony, which more than

anything else, reveals the impatience of youthful idealism. Shortly after writing this piece, Stryk would leave the United States to spend the next several years abroad, studying in Paris at the Sorbonne and then at the University of London.

Obviously, somewhere, sometime, between this first effort and the rest of his life, he found, as he wrote in "To Roger Blin" (*Awakening* 1973), "a path,/a way, the art/ to make life possible." That way was the way of Zen. Although he would not find it for many years, he shows himself predisposed in "The American Scene," to Zen teachings, despite or perhaps because of his unrest.

His dismay is counterpointed, for example, by both tremendous energy and a great desire either to find or, if necessary, to create essence. That he accuses the United States of suffering from "spiritual poverty" indicates that he valued spirituality, thus, that he hoped for its grace in his own life. His need for purity, an essential of Zen, he hails in "pure science," calling it a "knight in armor," and contrasting its mission to serve the country and the world, with "selfish, rapacious people" whose wartime patriotism was motivated by the sales of munitions. Despite his use of irony, he feels great compassion for mankind, evident in his socialistic leanings and in his hope that pure science will one day ease the world's suffering. That he insists upon the affinity of all men and women is affecting, considering his recent experiences on Saipan and Okinawa—so too is his quoting of John Donne: "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind." The quotation is meant to support a call for internationalism. It also shows Stryk's inclination to perceive interconnectedness, which later serves to sensitize him to Zen belief in the relatedness not only of all people but of all things.

It is revealing that even this early in his career, Stryk would set up a dichotomy between internationalism and regionalism, because both will influence his future work. His life was affected by the dichotomy as well. He was born in Kolo, Poland in 1924, for example, but managed to escape the tragedy the country endured during the 1930s and 40s because his family moved to the United States, specifically to Chicago, in 1928. Most of his early memories are about the South Side of Chicago. Poems, like "A Sheaf for Chicago" (*Notes for a Guidebook* 1965) show him to be a true child of that city. Here is section II of that poem.

In a vacant lot behind a body shop  
I rooted for your heart, O city,  
The truth that was a hambone in your slop.

Your revelations came as thick as bees,  
With stings as smarting, wings as loud,  
And I recall those towering summer days

We gathered fenders, axles, blasted hoods  
To build Cockaigne and Never-never Land,  
Then beat for dragons in the oily weeds.

That cindered lot and twisted auto mound,  
That realm to be defended with the blood,  
Became, as New Year swung around,

A scene of holocaust, where pile on pile  
Of Christmas trees would char the heavens  
And robe us demon-wild and genie-tall

To swirl the hell of 63rd Place,  
Our curses whirring by your roofs,  
Our hooves a-clatter on your face.

He has, in addition, lived most of his life in small-town Illinois, and the region infiltrates his work.

But because he is also a world traveller, he often writes about his experiences in foreign countries as well. *Notes for a Guidebook* contains such poems as "The Mine: Yamaguchi" and "Moharram," that reflect his lengthy stays in Japan and Iran, where he taught. Others pieces, among them, "Torero," and "The Road from Delphi" evolved from his trips to Spain and Greece, just as "The Blue Tower," in *Of Pen and Ink and Paper Scraps* (1989), records his visit to Strindberg's home in Sweden where Stryk had gone on a reading tour. The lovely sequence, *Bells of Lombardy* (1986), grew from his trips to Italy, while "Paris" (*The Pit and Other Poems* 1969) or "Museum Guards (London)" (*Awakening*) are set in France and England where he attended university. In "Away," he chides himself for his wanderlust: "Here I go again,/want to be somewhere else—/feet tramping under desk, . . ." His hunger to see the world pulled at him from the beginning and often ended in his finding fare for his art.

Still, his poetry is just as likely to be about the Midwest as about Paris. "Return to DeKalb" (*The Pit*), "Fishing with My Daughter in Miller's Field" (*Awakening*), and "The Ordinary" from *Collected Poems: 1953-1983* (1984), chronicle his life as well as his appreciation of the Heartland. "Waking Up in Streator" is a good example.

I am wakened by a poem  
I have never heard, in

a town never visited  
deep in Illinois. Last

night, due to read poems  
500 miles away—now

shaggy from dreams—I  
remember a friend, long dead,

who grew up in Streator,  
played football, talked tough,

scorning all dreamers.  
Yet one night, late,

loosened by beer, confessed  
he'd once written a poem.

He listened to the sound of the region and found himself in love with its harmonies. Finding other writers with an ear for music, he edited two books of Midwestern poetry, *Heartland: Poets of the Midwest, I and II* (1967, 1975).

Readers of Stryk's work may thus be surprised by his apparent quarrel with regionalism in "The American Scene." He objects, however, not to a clear-sighted depiction of region but to the spirit of isolationism, so prevalent after the War, that led art to romanticize rural, middle America. This kind of pandering to sentimentality, like the paintings of "blue-overall-clad giants and sickly-sweet, properly-bonneted maidens" that he uses as examples, earns his scorn. What he seeks is an art unafraid to see the region wholly and cleanly and what is also significant, one that is willing to acknowledge the future as well. Grant Wood, he says, opts to paint only a rurally idyllic Iowa. But to

Stryk, Wood's vision ignores the beauty of the state's "superbly efficient farms pouring out floods of golden wheat, like Ceres bestowing a bountiful blessing on America and humanity, through the dynamic effort of its fields, farms, towering silos, and the mighty vertical expanse of its grain elevators." His complaint seems to be against the kind of art Clement Greenberg calls kitsch, that is, with art that reinforces the *status quo*.

For a young man like Stryk, all energy and idea, home from the War and poised to leap, his country's apparent preference for keeping "things as they are," must have seemed stifling. The world had gone through trial by fire. So had he. After that, anything must have seemed possible. That both he and the world now possessed a future was a wonder and meant opportunity. By the time Stryk wrote this essay, he had, in spirit at least, already left home. Soon, he would actually leave to study abroad. But he would always return to the Heartland.

He went to Paris in 1948 where he lived the Left-Bank life of the student at a time when existentialism and the Deux Magots were *a la mode*. Once there he furthered his pursuit of art, studied philosophy under Gaston Bachelard at the Sorbonne and entertained an attraction to phenomenology. He met various artists, James Baldwin, Roger Blin, and enjoyed the companionship of other young intellectuals who frequented the cafe Mabillon, among them, Jean-Paul Baudot, the French Resistance fighter of the gripping poem, "Letter to Jean-Paul Baudot, at Christmas" (*Awakening*).

Friend, on this sunny day, snow sparkling  
everywhere, I think of you once more,  
how many years ago, a child Resistance

fighter trapped by Nazis in a cave  
with fifteen others, left to die, you became  
a cannibal. Saved by Americans,

the taste of a dead comrade's flesh foul  
in your mouth, you fell onto the snow  
of the Haute Savoie and gorged to purge yourself,

somehow to start again. Each winter since  
you were reminded, vomiting for days.  
Each winter since you told me at the Mabillon,

I see you on the first snow of the year  
spreadeagled, face buried in that stench.  
I write once more, Jean-Paul, though you don't

answer, because I must: today men do far worse.  
Yours in hope of peace, for all of us,  
before the coming of another snow.

In his tiny room on the Rue de Buci, Stryk read and studied and began seriously to write poetry. He recounts in the third section of "Rooms" (*Bells of Lombardy*) how he would

read through the dictionary, stalking  
new words for verse scrawled on

used paper bags, old envelopes  
airmailed from home, to the beat  
of the asthmatic radiator. How I

would love to climb those stairs once  
more, see where it all began. Making  
a bold check, in the g's, for granadilla—

From Paris, he travelled to England in order to attend the University of London. There he continued to study and write; began to freelance, married Helen Esterman, a Londoner, to whom most of his books are dedicated, and became a father. He also published his first book of poetry, *Taproot* (1953).

The poems in *Taproot* are formal in structure and traditional in subject matter; throughout them rings the same note of unrest that tolls in "The American Scene." But they also have its vitality. Deep within the patterning of this verse, in its attempt at order, one senses that Stryk still searches and that he remains unable to assume the incongruities of war. Consider this stanza from "Testament."

Give no reassurance, speak not  
Of war's necessity nor praise  
The beauty of its crimson snout:  
The earth is waste where iron fangs  
Have pierced, lies torn where it has coiled  
And leapt: victor and the fallen  
Now are one, and all is peace where  
Roots pluck down their skulls  
and all is peace.

Back in the United States, he attended the University of Iowa and received an M.F.A. in 1956. In that same year, Fantasy Press, which had published *Taproot*, brought out his second book of poetry, *The Trespasser*. These poems, like those of his first collection, are sharply self-conscious. Stryk would later find most of them unacceptable and included only a revised handful in *Collected Poems (1953-1983)*. It was his experiences in Japan, where he travelled after Iowa, that taught him to look again at his art.

He had been there briefly before. While still in the service, immediately after the War, he was stationed in Japan and found that the people he was told to fear and hate were far from being monsters. He was, in fact, intrigued by the country and resolved someday to return. From 1956 to 1958, Stryk was a visiting lecturer at Niigata University. During this first extended stay, he became seriously interested in Zen, roused by meeting a Zen priest, a potter. Stryk describes the effect of that meeting upon him in his essay, "Beginnings, Ends" from *Encounter with Zen* (1981).

The visit left an extraordinary impression. Home again, sipping tea from the superb bowl he made for me . . . I began making plans. Soon I was inquiring seriously into Zen, reading everything available, and, for my own pleasure and enlightenment, making very tentative translations of some of its literature, particularly poetry. I visited temples and monasteries, meeting masters and priests throughout the country and, most important of all, began to meditate. I sensed most strongly that I had found something which could make a difference to my future. The intuition proved right, for that encounter in the mountains was among the most important of my life.

The study that he made of Zen between this visit to Japan and his next stay there in 1962 served him well. It prepared him for what can only be called an epiphanic moment. Narrating the incident in "Making Poems," from *Encounter with Zen*, he tells how, while visiting the rock garden at the Jociji temple, he was chastised by the Zen master, Tenzan Yasuda, for asking inappropriate questions about the garden. His shame triggered a stern examination of self that exploded into revelation, transforming both his life and his art. To change one's poetry, one must first change the self.

Stryk understood that for Zennists who are poets, the poem itself is ancillary to the vision it both engenders and expresses. What is crucial lies behind or underneath a poem, perhaps surrounds it and lifts it into existence. The poem expresses the Zen man or woman, from deep self to the page and beyond. Stryk explains, again from "Making Poems":

Suddenly I became aware, *saw* with the greatest clarity: my failing in poetry was the result, in great part, of a grave misunderstanding concerning the very purpose of art. The Zen masters who had written the poems I was translating did not think of themselves as "poets" at all; rather, they were attempting to express in verse nothing less than the Zen spirit—and the results were astonishing. The poems, without any pretension to "art," were among the finest I had ever read, intense, compact, rich in spirit.

This revelation could not have come had Stryk not been preparing himself for it by studying Zen and translating Zen poetry. With revelation came responsibility and work. He began immediately to write new poems, different from anything he had previously written and to revise poems he had once considered finished. As he says, anyone "serious about a discipline like Zen learns soon enough that much of his life, certainly any art he may practice, is being changed by it."

How his life was changed is best seen by looking at his art. That nine years passed between *The Trespasser* and his next book of poems, *Notes for a Guidebook* (1965) is perhaps significant. His tone in *Notes* is less emphatic but more sure. Although he may continue to write about atrocities, when he does so it is with a quieter hand as in section three, "Survivors," from the poem, "Return to Hiroshima":

Of the survivors there was only one  
That spoke, but he spoke as if whatever  
Life there was hung on his telling all.

And he told all. Of the three who stayed,  
Hands gripped like children in a ring, eyes  
Floating in the space his wall had filled,

Of the three who stayed on till the end,  
One leapt from the only rooftop that  
Remained, the second stands gibbering

At a phantom wall, and it's feared the last,  
The writer who had taken notes, will  
Never write another word. He told all.

His poems also become tighter, leaner. He constructs them to sculpt the space of the page more subtly, often writing the three line stanza, using syllables as a measure, sometimes shortening one line to let in air so that the poems favor haiku.

Stryk's next collection of poetry, *The Pit and Other Poems* (1969), as well as subsequent books would also possess these same qualities of quiet force and conciseness. The energy so evident in "The American Scene" still exists, is still intense, but centered. As Joseph Parisi has written of Stryk's fifth book: "Tranquil strength pervades the short, evocative poems of Lucien Stryk's *Awakening* (1973). . . . Everywhere the benevolent influence of his Zen masters touches the clean, spare lines shaped with the elegance of an Oriental scroll painting" (*Poetry* 1973).

With clearer vision and focused energy he began writing more poems honoring the common, the ordinary. As he says in his "Introduction" to *Heartland II*, a "small town street known for years reaches through the universe: to the eye alive *nothing* is without its wonder." Thus, he can write "Lake Dawn" from the sequence, "The City: A Cycle" (*Collected Works*):

Slow spread of light  
beyond the tracks,  
fingering bare branches

of the oak. After  
thick year on year  
another chance to find

what dawn, rising on  
frosty air, will  
bring. Yesterday, ice

floes on the lake, a  
revelation: nothing's  
warmer than sun-webbed

snow, boots scorching  
on the crust. What  
will I learn today?

I thirsted seasons,  
dragging a leaden shadow  
into nothingness. Now,  
as fire meets ice, I see.

Stryk has written in his "Introduction" to *The Dumpling Field: Haiku of Issa* (1991) that Issa's empathy for living creatures is indicative of his ethos and "must become ours if we are to survive as humans." Issa reminds us, he says, "of the individual reality of each life destroyed." Stryk reminds us of this as well. The Swedish daily, *Dagens Nyheter*, reviewing a recent translation of his poetry identifies him as the "absorbed Westerner, with senses and intellect jointly linked to the object of meditation, . . ." His poems are "like a twilight zone where the border between the self and the world is dissolved . . ." Or, as the young poet, Walter Pavlich has written, a bit closer to home:

There are certain poets I consider world-poets. They speak with quiet power, personally and intimately to all people. In this group I would include Yehuda Amichai, Rolf Jacobsen, Tomas Transtromer, Lucien Stryk. Among their qualities are a reverence and respect for life. They show us the many sides of the world's capacity for self-harm and love. There is blood in their poems. From wounds. From wombs. (*Thinker Review* 1992)

In an interview, Stryk has spoken of a "curiosity and hunger . . . that will take a man very far across the earth looking for things, and this excitement about reality is part and parcel of the making of poems." His "excitement about reality," which is so evident in "The American Scene," took him far, led him to Zen, and through Zen taught him to look anew at the here and now. "All true men," he has written, "come to the very same conclusion, for it is the only sane one. If one cannot find fulfillment in the world around one, where it happens to be, there is no hope."

From our artists, we ask that they possess vision, of how to live and what to live by. We look to them for the "art to make life possible." What would the twenty-two year old veteran think, wonder, if told in 1947 that he would one day share his own vision with others and would himself create the art that creates life? Despite his hopes, his obvious joy in words, how could he know? That he would live, fully. That he would find "the way." That he would write poetry with the power to endure.

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NOTE

This essay is adapted from my book, *Zen Poetry, and the Art of Lucien Stryk* (Ohio University Press).

## SAUL BELLOW AND THE MIDWESTERN MYTH OF THE SEARCH

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Saul Bellow, nearly eighty, is not only the most distinguished of living American writers, having won three National Book Awards for fiction, a Pulitzer Prize, and the Nobel Prize in Literature as well as dozens of honorary degrees and lesser awards, but he is also one of the most productive and widely-read serious American novelists of this century. His most recent full-length novel, *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987), was on the *New York Times* Best-Seller List for more than three months, and three recent novellas, two, *A Theft* and *The Bellarosa Connection*, published in original paperback format in 1989, and the third, "Something to Remember Me By," published in *Esquire* (July 1990), have demonstrated no loss in creative energy or imagination, or, for that matter, significant readership. He remains, as he has been since the publication of his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944) one of the most provocative and demanding of American moderns.

Much of this provocation and many of the demands Bellow makes upon his readers are the result of the motif that recurs in almost all of his fiction from his first published short story, "Two Morning Monologues" (*Partisan Review*, May-June, 1941) to *More Die of Heartbreak* and two of the three novellas. This is the predicament of the adult American male caught up in the unfolding history of his time, yet temporarily suspended by circumstances in time and place. As he dangles between competing realities, he contemplates the changing nature of his life as it relates to the changing nature of the city, the nation, the world around him. These changes are made vivid through the course of the wars, violence, love, human exploitation, and geographical and social reality that surround him. Bellow empha-

sizes the complex motivation that drives his people to try to understand what is perhaps beyond human comprehension and certainly beyond human acceptance. Nevertheless, his people eventually come to a measure of understanding, however momentary that understanding may be in time, as momentary as his peoples' suspension between the conflicting realities, relationships, choices, or ideologies that make up their experience.

Because Bellow deals not only with the ultimate human dilemma of our time, the place of the individual in a society increasingly violent, random, and material, but because he is of Russian Jewish origins, critics have tended to categorize Bellow as an intellectual writer strongly influenced by Russian fiction, European philosophy, and Jewish values, and to critics of the sixties and seventies, he was sometimes a *Partisan Review* writer often linked with Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud as members of a Jewish-American school. On a number of occasions Bellow has rejected that categorization as too easy, as what he calls the "ghettoization" of American fiction, and more recently, in 1987, when he was introduced by Simon Perez, then Foreign Minister and former Prime Minister of Israel, eloquently and at length, to an international audience in Haifa as "a great Jewish writer," Bellow responded that it was "very gratifying for this American writer to be introduced so eloquently by the former head of this state." However, he does not deny his intellectual and literary relationships to European philosophy or writing, and he has commented on both on a number of occasions in lectures, essays, and interviews.

Nevertheless, implicit in both categorizations is the denial of an influence that Bellow himself has commented on several times in interviews, talks, and essays, an influence that is neither European nor Jewish but intrinsically American and Midwestern, part of a social, political, cultural, and literary complex that became Bellow's own when, in 1924, as nine-year-old Solomon Bellows, he became enamored of a place, a time, and a literature that he quickly made his own.

The place was Chicago, the time was 1924, and the literature was that which, stemming from Mark Twain and his Midwestern successors—Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, and Sherwood Anderson—had already begun to redirect the course of modern American literature through William



Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. Chicago not only became the setting for much of his work, but it became in a very real sense the focus of his own identity as well as his primary residence for most of his life; the 1920s, the most dramatic and dangerous decade in the history of that tumultuous city as well as of the nation, shaped not only his creative imagination but his awareness of the relationship between place and identity in his life as well as his work. The experience of that decade in Chicago is clearly reflected in his autobiographical comments and writings as well as in many of his works, as is the Chicago of the period in the works of his near-contemporary James T. Farrell or the Albany of the same period in the works of William Kennedy, whom he has so strongly influenced.

Most importantly, however, Bellow was introduced to a literature that had come out of the Mississippi Valley in the late nineteenth century to provide a new language, a unique American vernacular, a new insight into the American character of those cast aside by the sweep of American destiny, and, of most importance, a new myth that simultaneously explains and gives direction to the forces of change, circumstance, and human determination, a myth that can be expressed, in Northrop Frye's terms, in "the only possible language of concern," that which goes beyond "evidence and sense experience" to unfetter the human imagination, spirit, and vision.

Bellow has commented on his discovery of that literature as well as his discovery of his profession and what would be the substance of his own work as a result of that discovery in both essays and lectures, most succinctly when he recalled his discovery of the public library as an integral part of his growing up in Chicago. From the library, he remembers, "I took home Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson. I didn't bring home the wisdom of Maimonides," and in so doing, he found himself as a Chicagoan, a Midwesterner, an American, and ultimately a writer.

The language was that which Mark Twain had remembered from his Mississippi Valley youth and through the *persona* and the voice of Huckleberry Finn had introduced to the literary mainstream through that group of young writers—Dreiser, Anderson, Sandburg, Masters—who found themselves in Chicago early in the next century and turned to Twain for the native sound, rhythm, syntax, and usage in which they wrote. To Twain

and his successors that idiom became the language of literature because it was the language of life in the towns, the countryside, and, by Bellow's time, the cities of Midwestern America.

The characters are those that Twain sketched as Huck encountered them in his brief but epic journey down the Mississippi from one fictional version of the Hannibal, Missouri, of Mark Twain's youth, St. Petersburg, Missouri, to another, Pikes-town, Arkansas. These were the people—Pap Finn, Miss Watson, Old Boggs, the King and the Duke, the Grangerfords, and dozens of others—who were ultimately to become the grotesques of Winesburg, the residents of Yoknapatawpha County, and finally those who inhabited Joseph's Chicago rooming house as well as the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Bellow's and Augie March's youth.

The myth that Mark Twain created in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and that he gave to American Midwestern writers as the basis of their own work is compounded of the form and structure of the novel and the nature of the American experience—Midwestern experience—personal experience—in Twain's time and our own. At the heart of Huckleberry Finn and the literature that it inspired is not place but movement, not stability but change, and not acceptance but a search.

As Huck and Jim float down the river of circumstance, suspended among the unfolding and often compelling realities of nineteenth century rural life on the banks of what had temporarily become the path of American destiny, confident and yet refusing to recognize the inevitable end of the trip, enjoying the illusion of a freedom that has no reality for either of them, Twain marks out the course that Midwestern American modernism was destined to take. The new generation of writers who came of age in the first decades of the twentieth century began a pattern of movement in their lives and in their works that gave form and structure and purpose to the literature they created and that rejects stability and permanence for a new, mobile reality rooted in the confidence that freedom exists and that somewhere they or their people can find it. The works that young Saul Bellow, still Solly Bellows, read in the twenties and early thirties is indeed a literature of movement, not by raft, but by railroad, for Carrie Meeber from Columbia City, Wisconsin, to Chicago and ultimately New York; for Sam McPherson

to Chicago and beyond; for Nick Carroway and Jay Gatsby to East and West Egg and the shining towers of the city. For Nick Adams and his *alter egos* to Paris and Pamplona and the Green Hills of Africa, the journey is more complex and varied but no less directed.

In making *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a great deal more than the boy's story that he initially intended it to be, and, after a good deal of indecision, a great deal more than the classic tale of romantic escape that it almost became, Twain made it simultaneously a metaphor for the American Old North-western experience that had created the Midwest by the middle of the nineteenth century, that had carried Twain himself down and up the river and then to the transmountain West before turning to the East. The Old West, that which was to become the Midwest by midcentury, was neither a goal nor a waystation nor a promised land, but, to paraphrase Archibald MacLeish, a place in the mind and imagination of those who came there and lived or died or went on, a place as elusive as it is eternal.

Huck's journey and those of his successors are as metaphoric as they are real, and both literally and metaphorically they must come to an end that falls short of either freedom or fulfillment, and that also demands either continuing the search, to the territories and beyond, or conversely, accepting the loss of freedom and potential fulfillment inherent in surrendering to the permanence of the places and institutions that enslave them.

Huck Finn's America, like Huck Finn himself, is pre-adolescent, and a maturing and sobering and consequent loss of exuberance and mobility is inevitable; for their twentieth century successors, however, neither maturity nor loss of innocence has limited either the determination or the faith inherent in the search; thus, Dreiser's Sister Carrie dreams on in her rocking chair, unaware that the dream, unrealized, will inevitably give way to the harshness of failure; Anderson's Sam McPherson returns to his wife with a brood of unwanted children whom they can love, unaware that time passes and that there is no permanence in human life or relationships; Hemingway's Robert Jordan dies unaware that both the cause and the war he has made his own are already lost.

For Saul Bellow's midcentury Midwesterners, the journey, whether literal or metaphoric, whether sweeping exuberantly

across continents or marking the sad course of tourist-sojourners in the East up and down the length of Fifth Avenue or across the lower harbor, or into the dim corners of the psyche in a lonely room, whether in a wartime Chicago or a Bucharest in fetters or temporarily away from their urban Chicago origins, or taking a brief high-tech journey to contemplate the edge of the cosmos before returning to earth and the vista of a gray winter lake and a decaying Loop, the search, like those of Huckleberry Finn and his modern descendents, comes eventually to river's end, to a new direction, and most importantly, to a new understanding.

For all of Bellow's people, however, ranging from a youthful Augie March to a middle-aged Henderson to a rapidly aging dean, and in all of their other incarnations, there is an intrinsic faith in the search, in the literal as well as metaphorical conviction that order and meaning and purpose can be found. Just as Huck Finn's and Mark Twain's forebears crossed the mountains and went up and down the rivers in their literal search for cheap land and an open society, a journey transmuted into myth in Twain's epic story, Bellow's people, literal and fictional, journeyed from the towns and the countryside and European ghettos to the great American cities and beyond in a later search not merely for change but for a fulfillment that goes beyond space and time and place and becomes instead a justification of the faith, the curiosity, the exuberance, the need that impelled them.

Just as Huck is convinced that he can escape into the territories if need be, as Sam McPherson is convinced that he can escape into love, and as George Willard is convinced that he can appease his hunger to see beneath the surface of human lives, as Robert Jordan, on a Spanish hillside, dies convinced that he has found a cause worthy of his life, Bellow's people—Joseph, Asa, Augie March, Henderson, Herzog, Albert Corde, Benn Crader and his nephew Kenneth—are convinced that they, too, can find the purpose, the understanding, the love that has thus far eluded them, just as it has permanently eluded those people—of St. Petersburg, of Winesburg, of Chicago—who were left behind, and whom circumstances have twisted and distorted into something at once less and more human than those who carry on the search.

But unlike the earlier seekers, whether they went down the river or to the city or to war or the East or beyond, Bellow's

people have come to a clearer perception of the nature of the search and the elements of chance, of circumstance, of reality that threaten it. Bellow's people—Joseph alone in his room in the middle of a war, Augie March in Chicago, in Mexico, adrift in a lifeboat, ranging across war-torn Europe, Henderson running off into the African savannah and the Arctic wilderness, Herzog temporarily with nothing to say, Albert Corde regretting but accepting the necessary return from the edge of the cosmos to the modern urban nightmare—are all aware that the search interrupted is the search threatened, that the acceptance of permanence in place or in spirit brings with it the final frustration of defeat and makes inevitable the distortions and limitations that have been the price of failure in a society in which fulfillment and understanding remain elusive promises rather than achievable reality.

Central to each of these novels is Bellow's faith, like that of Twain and generations of American Midwestern writers and seekers, in the search itself, in seeking fulfillment of the eighteenth century American promise in nineteenth and twentieth century American reality. That faith is in movement itself, in transcending space, not aimlessly, but deliberately, and in each of the novels movement is elevated into myth as it takes on at least the appearance of fulfillment.

As each of Bellow's people ponders the continuation of the journey that had become a search rooted in confidence that often ignores contrary evidence, each at the same time transcends or ignores or denies the deterministic evidence that threatens either his conviction or the continuation of his search.

Bellow's people age with the century and the complexity of the search, but equally clear to each of them, whether late-adolescent Augie March or retired journalist turned dean and about to turn again Albert Corde, is the perception that if the search has an end, that end is beyond either the comprehension or the grasp of those that seek it, and it becomes clear that whatever meaning can be found must be not in endings but in continuations. Each of Bellow's people has left the metaphorical river far beyond as he turns to a new dimension of the search, that dimension which Augie March exuberantly proclaims as, nearing thirty, he drives alone through the wreckage of a European war: ". . . Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort

of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate *terra incognita* that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America."

Like Huckleberry Finn's territory, Augie March's *terra incognita* and Albert Corde's *terra firma* both mark a new dimension of a search through the darkness of experience. At the same time, each is a clear reflection and a human manifestation of the limitless dimensions of a promise and a search at once American, uniquely Midwestern, and eternally and mythically if not literally true.

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