

$\ln(\frac{1}{1-\alpha})/\ln(\frac{1}{1-\alpha}) = 1$ (for $\alpha = 0$)

David D. Anderson, Founding Editor, *Atrial America*
Marcia Noz, Editor, *Atrial America*

Polymer Electrolyte Membrane	Silver-silver Chloride
Nickel-zinc Electroplating bath	Anhydrous Hydrochloric acid
Inorganic Chemicals	Sublimed Sulfuric acid
Chemical Coatings	

DAVID D. ANDERSON, FOUNDING EDITOR
MARCIA NOE, EDITOR

2006

In Honor of
Guy Szuberla

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PREFACE

On May 11, 2006, members of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature gathered in East Lansing for the thirty-sixth annual meeting of the Society. Highlights included two panels that commemorated the centenary of Paul Laurence Dunbar's death, and the second annual SSML Festival of Films' presentation of *Fei Hu: The Story of the Flying Tigers*.

At the awards banquet on Friday night, Claire van Breemen Downes was honored with the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Prize for "Lost Luggage," named the best poem read at the 2005 conference. Guy Szuberla received the MidAmerica Award for distinguished contributions to the study of Midwestern literature, and David Diamond received the Mark Twain Award for distinguished contributions to Midwestern Literature.

With this volume *MidAmerica* gets a new look and a new editor, the first such changes in the thirty-six-year history of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature. The founding editor, David D. Anderson, and I will be working together with the Editorial Committee to bring our readers the best in contemporary Midwestern scholarship. While we expect to change the journal very little, we are always interested in our readers' ideas. A new feature that we would like to institute is an annual review essay that discusses recently published books in Midwestern studies, so if you are the author of such a work, please send it to Marcia Noe, 535 Elinor Street, Chattanooga, TN 37405.

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MARCH AFTERNOON TEA

ELLEN ARL

Fire in the fireplace
and tea
conspire to warm
our afternoon.
Looking out
across brown yards,
we watch the distant gold forsythia
wave in March winds.
A gentle line of planted bulbs
cuts through
our properties.
Otherwise,
there's little
to identify
your lilac sticks
from my Mock Orange branches
or my Don Juan rose
from your hedge.
I'm here,
it's even harder
to decide
what marks ownership.

Our lives grow
into each other.
The ivy
circling the dining room,
taken from a cutting
at a party,
winds through every house
in our neighborhood.

The Boston fern,
 fountaining
 in the front window,
 is cloned from the one
 across the street;
 and that spider plant
 hanging in the corner,
 I know it spun
 from mine.

But this crooked
 black stem,
 blooming
 the purest,
 softest,
 whitest
 orchid,
 so artfully set
 in the center
 of a tea table that is our lives—
 this orchid
 is
 totally and completely
 and only
 you.

University of South Carolina

AN ILLUSION OF UNDERSTANDING:
 LISTENERS AND TELLERS IN SHERWOOD
 ANDERSON'S *WINESBURG, OHIO*
 AND CARSON MCCULLERS'S *THE HEART IS A
 LONELY HUNTER*

MICHAEL MERVA

Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* are often cited as modernist texts that highlight alienation and the inability of people truly to communicate with one another. Critics agree that one of the main purposes of *Winesburg* is to show how "isolation is the essential human condition" (Burbank 71). Those writing on *Hunter*, a book published twenty years after *Winesburg*, note that McCullers has taken up this theme again. David Madden explains the era in which *Hunter* is set in the following way: "Despite the attempts of educationists to teach 'communications' and 'understanding skills,' society has not evolved conditions wherein one person's understanding of another is significantly increased" (Madden 129). But with texts such as these expounding the notion that humans are unlikely to achieve true communication, why is it that these authors, and authors after them, continue to write? No one can deny that the characters in modernist texts such as *Winesburg* and *Hunter* do have trouble communicating, but perhaps that trouble is not what the books intend for the reader to concentrate on.

In both *Winesburg* and *Hunter*, communication is emphasized by the use of one character that plays the role of a "listener." People in the town come to this listener to tell him things no one else seems to understand. However, it is obvious that the listener does not understand the tellers' ideas either. What the listener actually provides for the tellers is an illusion of understanding, a way for the tellers to feel the relief that comes with the realization that they are not alone. In

this paper, I will establish a basis for comparing the two listeners by noting similarities in the way they function in each book, especially how neither listener feels as if he understands what the "tellers" are talking about. I will then concentrate on two characteristics that seem necessary for a listener to provide the illusion of understanding: openness and objectivity. Finally, I will discuss how the difference in the books' endings can be attributed to a change in consciousness during the twenty years that separate *Winesburg* and *Hunter*. Each book takes the illusion of understanding very seriously; it becomes important in order for the tellers' well being. But whereas Anderson's book focuses on the necessity of the illusion for the psychological well being of his characters, McCullers's book views the illusion as something that literally can mean the difference between life and death.

MAKINGS OF A LISTENER

Both *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* revolve around a person who is always there for the outcasts of the town. This character will listen to these outcasts, even though no one else in town seems to understand them. By being there for a community of misunderstood individuals, this character provides hope that there is always someone who understands. But for both George Willard from *Winesburg* and John Singer from *Hunter*, the truth is that the listeners do not actually understand the town's people. The appearance of understanding is an illusion that they convey in order to provide much-needed hope to these outcasts.

George Willard is fascinated by the people who tell him stories. But this fascination does not stem from an understanding of the stories or the people; it stems from the fact that he does *not* understand them and therefore experiences fear and confusion when people relate their stories to him. Willard is "perplexed and frightened" (31) by Wing Biddlebaum, "awkward and confused" (42) by his mother, and "half-frightened and yet fascinated" (125) by Wash Williams. Yet time and again these people come to Willard. As Glen Love observes, "whether or not he actually shares in the aura of hope and life which infuses the natural setting becomes less important than their belief that he does" (49). Sometimes the characters themselves realize he does not understand them, as when Kate Swift admits to Willard, "It will be ten years before you begin to understand what I mean when I talk to you" (164). At other times characters realize it,

but as in the case of Wing Biddlebaum, still "hunger for the presence of the boy, who was the medium through which he expressed his love of man" (33). But most often readers get no indication either way, only the last words of the "teller" who must plead with Willard for understanding. This pleading indicates that although Willard "must live and die in uncertainty" (234) and may not understand the tellers, Anderson wants to remind readers that it is not the understanding that is important, but the telling and listening themselves that bring relief.

In McCullers's novel, John Singer also becomes someone who is believed to "understand," but in reality he is just as confused by those who confide in him as Willard is. Virginia Carr puts it simply: "He is their illusion" (26). At first, he indicates his confusion by ambiguous responses, shaking his head "in a way that might mean either yes or no," or shrugging his shoulders (47). But as the novel goes on, he becomes more straightforward, telling his own "listener" figure, Antonapoulos Spiros, that those who visit him are "strange people and always talking," (80) admitting that "he could not understand the people at all" (174). However, because he feels like he cannot even begin to communicate with anyone but Antonapoulos and because of his undying politeness, Singer dies leaving all of his "tellers" believing that he truly did understand what they were saying. Although his death depresses those who confided in him, it does give them hope that others may someday "understand."

But why would these two radically different people both have the same appeal? What is it about these characters that make people want to tell them their stories? Anderson and McCullers go about creating their characters in a very different way, but in the end two main traits define them as perfect listeners: openness and objectivity.

OPENING UP

Both Singer and Willard are unusually approachable. Neither character is ever shown turning away someone who wants to talk with him. Although at times Willard may feel uncomfortable and Singer may wish to remain aloof, the curiosity they have expressed in the past and their willingness to listen define their characters to the extent that the "tellers" feel comfortable, even when the listeners may not. Oftentimes, for those who have trouble opening up to people or who find themselves falling into disfavor with those they are speaking with, it does not take much curiosity and friendliness to provoke conversation. For a journalist like Willard, being open to the stories

of others comes with the job. In the case of Singer, simply staying silent and smiling is enough provocation for people to tell their stories to him.

At the simplest level, because Willard is a journalist, he has the task of "[striving] to mention by name in each issue, as many as possible of the inhabitants of the village. Like an excited dog, George Willard ran here and there" (134). He is always around; over and over we find that Anderson gives this excuse for why Willard and an outcast end up together. But in addition to his mere presence there is something about Willard that makes other characters open up to him. Some relate to his journalistic background ("I was a reporter like you here") (51) or wish they could ("Joe envied the boy. It seemed to him that he [Joe] was meant by Nature to be a reporter on a newspaper") (106). Others see themselves in George: "What happened to me may next happen to you. I want to put you on your guard" (125). For others it is never explained: "Something in the night drew them together" (218). Willard's journalistic background gives him the right not only to get their stories, but also to ask them questions, to get the whole story, to be curious about them. Most of the tellers have never encountered that type of curiosity and are therefore more than willing to share with him their stories.

John Singer's willingness to listen is explained by his friend Antonapoulos's absence and evidenced by his extreme generosity. Although at first he takes on a directly curious role, asking Blount "Are you a Republican or Democrat?" (59), there are almost no direct inquiries from Singer after this. But the loss of his friend and the fact that he seems to need "talking" around him in proportion to how much he would talk if he could, work together to make Singer the ideal "listener." Singer tells Antonapoulos that the visitors "helped take his mind away from his lonesomeness" (80). When Antonapoulos leaves, Singer needs people around, needs "talking" around, whether or not he can relate to the people. Therefore, he invites people in—both literally: "If you can not think of any place for him to go, he can go home with me" (23), and through his actions while they are there: "He had an icebox in the closet where he kept bottles of cold beer and fruit drinks. He was never busy or in a hurry. And always he met his guests at the door with a welcome smile" (78).

But even more than these physical manifestations of a willingness to be around the tellers, every character refers to Singer's eyes as "understanding." He is able to pull off this illusion through the

"excuse" McCullers gives him to be a "listener." Singer's "eyes" always "understand." Of course they do; he is reading lips, "understanding" with his eyes the words people are saying, although not necessarily their meanings. The illusion invites people to continue coming to him. We know he could easily not give this illusion, as again there are times when he pretends not to understand. But more often he chooses to, and this aids in the open atmosphere he creates.

EVERYONE NEEDS MORE THAN HELLO & GOODBYE

In order to show how universal the need for an illusion of understanding is, Anderson and McCullers create "teller" characters that fall into a number of different categories, based on the reason they need a person with whom to communicate. The one thing all of these characters have in common is that they want to communicate something that no one else has been able to understand. Often these characters are misunderstood or pre-judged by others in the community, but sometimes they just have secrets they do not feel comfortable telling anyone else. Anderson and McCullers create a wide variety of tellers in order to reach out to all types of readers and to show how important the illusion of understanding is for all people.

In *Winesburg* we meet a number of people who tell Willard stories they have not told anyone else in the town. Readers see this at the outset of the book; the very first time George Willard's name is mentioned, it is because "Among all the people of Winesburg but one had come close to him" (27)—the "one" is Willard, "him" is Wing Biddlebaum. Wash Williams, who "did not associate with the men of the town in which he lived" (122), tells "but one person (Willard) . . . the thing that had made ugly the person and character of Wash Williams" (123). Finally Tom Foster, who always remains silent in the presence of everyone (214), ends up confiding in Willard the reason for his drunken escapade.

In *Winesburg* it is these friendless characters that are encountered most often, but also reaching out to Willard are people who arouse distaste in the town simply *because* of their personalities, often because they are so outspoken about their lives. Doctor Parcival, for instance, is described as wanting to "make everyone seem despicable," (55) and believes that after ignoring a request to see a dead child, that there would be "talk of hanging" him (56). Joe Welling, who envies Willard, is described as "a man who is subject to fits . . . who walks among his fellow men inspiring fear . . . Men watched him with

eyes in which lurked amusement tempered by alarm" (104). McCullers picks up most on these types of characters when she needs "tellers" for Mr. Singer to listen to in *Hunter*.

Richard Wright's review of *Hunter* describes McCullers's characters as living "in a world more completely lost than any Sherwood Anderson ever dreamed of" (17). Jake Blount and Dr. Benedict Copeland both possess a specific kind of exaggerated personality. These characters try repeatedly to excite the interest of those around them but usually drive their audience to fear or laughter. Of Blount, we know that he is continually talking and trying to convince people to see his version of the truth but gets nowhere: "I been all over this place. I walk around. I talk. I try to explain to them. But what good does it do?" However, when it comes to Singer understanding: "You're the only one . . . The only one" (129). Dr. Copeland is estranged from his family because of his belief system and the way he tries to impose it on them. According to his daughter, "Everybody is scared of you . . . Willie says he remember when he were only a little boy and he were afraid of his own father then" (66-67). Both these men find solace in the home of a deaf mute who does not express the disgust they are used to but instead gives the illusion that he understands them.

Finally, in both books the "listener" encounters characters that do not tell "stories" or "beliefs," but instead secret dreams and hopes. Interestingly, in both books these characters are female. In *Winesburg*, George's former teacher Kate Swift has "a passionate desire to have him understand the import of life, to learn to interpret it truly and honestly," (164) while Willard's mother Elizabeth prays to God that "[i]f I am dead and see him becoming a meaningless drab figure like myself, I will come back . . . I will take any blow that may befall if but this my boy be allowed to express something for us both" (40). In *Hunter*, Mick plays the younger version of these women, a girl full of secret hopes and wishes she cannot express to anyone except the mute, Mr. Singer: "Now there was this secret feeling between them. She talked to him more than she had ever talked to a person before" (207). With these three types of "tellers," readers get a good sense of the fact that all different kinds of people feel comfortable with their respective listeners, that listening is universally needed.

OBJECTIVITY LIVES AND GROWS

Naturally, those who have stories, beliefs, or hopes that they cannot tell anyone else would be attracted to people who are objective or nonjudgmental. Openness in itself is not enough to provide these tellers with a reason to share their secrets; a person can appear open but react unfavorably towards certain ideas or actions. Interestingly, both authors build from their characters' open personalities to create a sense of objectivity. Furthermore, the illusion they are providing is emphasized by a second-layer illusion. For Willard, his journalistic background doubles as the possibility of "story-teller," while for Singer, the death of his own listener figure amplifies the importance of the illusion for even the listener.

George Willard is a journalist, a job that is defined by its attempt to be objective, just tell the facts, and never include the opinion of the writer. But this job also is that of "story-teller." Many critics suggest that the re-telling of stories is the primary reason Willard plays the role of listener in *Winesburg*. However, this is so only because the re-telling would foster and replicate the illusion of understanding in all those who are told the story. At times, when the tellers are aware that Willard may not completely understand them, as in the cases of Enoch Robinson, Kate Swift, and especially Elmer Cowley, this promise of communicating their story to others drives them to tell it; not simply for "immortality," whatever that means in terms of these characters, but for the understanding they will receive *through* the eventual readers of the stories. Nowhere do we get any indication that those in the town are changed after they speak with Willard. It is only the "telling" that the reader sees, and although there is a certain amount of relief that comes directly from this telling, the idea that Willard may spread the stories to others is what provides the most hope to the town's people. Anderson uses the foreword to *Winesburg*, the "Book of the Grotesque," as a way to emphasize the fact that these stories may be re-told.

Some readings suggest that Willard is in fact the old man in the "Book of the Grotesque," and that these stories have been written by him, that this book is itself the "re-telling" of the stories. Although this reading gives the stories immortality, the aspect of this immortality that is important is that by re-telling the stories, the illusion is continued and/or multiplied. If simply telling a story to a supposedly objective reporter can make some people feel this illusion, then the objectivity of the story itself and the way in which readers will read

a story without judgment, with more sympathy than they would have had if they had had to interact with the original storyteller, should provide a lasting and satisfying illusion for the teller that *somebody* is always understanding them. As Rex Burbank observed, "The point of view of the omniscient author—of the mature George Willard recalling tenderly but with detachment of time and place his small-town youth—softens the tone; it permits the town and the grotesques to emerge as objects of compassion rather than of attack" (77).

McCullers rewrites Willard's character with the purpose of emphasizing not the immortality of the stories, but what happens when the teller is denied understanding. The objectivity and non-judgment are still there, but this time there is no need for the excuse of journalism. Instead, we are presented with a character that is deaf and mute, who usually just does not respond to his tellers and in this way does not judge them. Mr. Singer is much like a wall—not because he is emotionless or cold, but because one talks *at* him while receiving little more than a smiling visual image, which in the case of Singer is enough in return. We get the first impression of this detachment on the second page of the novel when, instead of judging his friend Antonapoulos for stealing from his cousin, he "[stands] very straight with his hands in his pockets and look[s] in another direction" (2). Whenever people would visit him "Singer was always the same to everyone. He sat in a straight chair by the window with his hands stuffed tight into his pockets" (79). At one point he is even described as "wooden" (247). David Madden calls him "a willing, attentive, supposedly comprehending listening-post" (139). But because he never responds, he never judges, and thereby he achieves the objectivity the tellers need to create for them the illusion. But his physical state also provides the listeners with a second layer of "illusion," this time based simply on the word "understanding."

There is a world of difference between understanding words and understanding the full import of the words, the meaning of the words on a deeper level. In Robert Heinlein's science fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, this distinction provides the basis for a half-human Martian to revolutionize the way human beings relate to each other. In the Martian's native language, to understand something fully is to "grok" it, and when we "grok," we communicate in a more significant way than when we "understand." However, on this planet there is no such term to differentiate understanding words

from understanding the concept words are trying to explain. To emphasize the double meaning of understanding, McCullers uses a deaf mute as the listener, a person for whom the act of understanding words has always been the primary task. The card he hands out to people who do not know him states: "I read lips and understand what is said to me" (47). Characters ask him, "Do you understand?" and when Singer answers affirmatively, the "listeners" assume, even are sure that "the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him" (81). Although he does "understand" what they say to him, as evidenced by what he tells Antonapoulos about them, he certainly does not "grok" what they are attempting to communicate. Or as Richard Cook puts it, "Singer may 'listen' to his visitors, but he does not understand them" (38). Readers learn that he is "hopelessly confused in his mind" about the nature of the quarrel between Blount and Copeland, and in reference to Mick, "she said a good deal that he did not understand in the least" (275). Yet all of these characters indicate that "[o]nly Singer understood the truth" (244). McCullers's rewrite of Anderson's Willard reflects the view that accurate communication is even more hopeless than it was during Willard's time.

NEW BEGINNINGS, OLD ENDINGS

Perhaps the most radical difference between these characters comes at the end of each book. While Anderson's book ends with Willard moving on to a bigger town, McCullers's ends with the death of Singer. What would cause these two authors to choose such radically different fates for their characters? Furthermore, what are the ramifications of these fates—what do they say about the "illusion" and how we as readers are to view it? Surprisingly, in spite of the very different historical contexts the books were written in, the point both of them are trying to make is the same: The "illusion of understanding" is a necessary part of communication and ought to be understood as such. Any despair linked to the word "illusion" pales in comparison to what happens without this illusion.

The end of *Winesburg, Ohio* is carefully constructed to give a view of optimism about the future. For all the sadness within the book, for all the characters that are left behind, the book is, as Malcolm Cowley says in the introduction, "far from the pessimistic or destructive or morbidly sexual work it was once attacked for being" (15). The last page of the book shows Willard leaving Winesburg, remembering it fondly, but also looking forward to what

lies ahead. For Willard, the future holds better things than the past. The illusion he has provided for the town's people is not viewed as a negative thing—it is what has given hope to the tellers that their stories will be read and they will be understood by others. Illusion or no, understanding is necessary and on some level possible, and *that* knowledge leaves us with hope.

McCullers, on the other hand, attempts to get readers who are more jaded to see the same thing. With the country slowly coming out of the depression and World War II looming on the horizon, hope is the last thing on anyone's mind. Therefore, McCullers gives us an ending that, as Julian Symons notes, provides "[t]he idea that illusions can offer desirable enrichments to human lives." But instead of showing what happens when there is a possibility of continuing the illusion, McCullers's ending shows what happens when one is unable to keep up the illusion.

If Willard is able to give hope through a second level of the illusion, the option of further storytelling, McCullers is also able to show the extent of despair through a different type of second level, the ultimate denial of storytelling. The endings are in this sense foreshadowed throughout the whole of both books. Where Willard is the journalist and always has the second-level storytelling for his "tellers" to look forward to, the second-level for Singer is a dead-end: another deaf-mute who does not even possess the characteristics for being a listener. Antonapoulos is not objective; when Singer tries to entertain him with sketches, he ends up "[hurting] the big Greek's feelings, and he refused to be reconciled until Singer had made his face very young, and then he tried not to show his pleasure" (5). Nor is there any indication that Antonapoulos is curious: "It was seldom that he ever moved his hands to speak at all" (2). He watches Singer either "lazily" (2) or "drowsily" (7), or is "not interested" (80). Antonapoulos is even more wall-like than Singer, which is what causes Singer to state in almost the same words three times over the course of five pages that he "never know[s] just how much his friend understood all the things he told him" (2, 6, 7). But the need for the illusion of understanding is actually emphasized because Antonapoulos is a poor excuse for a listener. Antonapoulos was all that Singer had; he was the only person who could provide Singer with the illusion. Readers only know the extent of what this means to Singer when Antonapoulos dies and Singer decides life is not worth living.

Singer's death is the ultimate in despair—again, not because it deals with the illusionary nature of understanding as a negative thing but because it emphasizes that even when the illusion is insufficient, as in the case of Singer, it is a necessary part of being human, so necessary, in fact, that in some cases its denial results in the erasure of the human. If we cannot tell, we may as well not exist. Especially in an era where the idea of accurate communication is being questioned more and more in the arts, McCullers's novel makes a persuasive case for the importance of maintaining the illusion.

The historical placement of these two books could explain a lot about the different ways they approach the concept of illusion. In *Winesburg*, published upon the armistice of World War I, George Willard is shown riding hopefully into the future, using the stories he has gained with his "illusion of understanding" to give others the same satisfaction of understanding. In *Hunter*, published upon the brink of the US entering World War II, McCullers rewrites the importance of this illusion by exaggerating the consequences of what happens to a person when the illusion is denied. Can a historical/political view give us a clue as to what happened to this illusion in the years since World War II? The ability to interact with other cultures is now at an all-time high—it is no longer a possibility to pretend that countries on the other side of the world do not really exist. But the possibility of a multi-cultural society depends to a great extent on an illusion that we can accurately understand people who have grown up in a completely different culture, with different social mores and customs. If it used to be alienating to talk to one's weird "neighbor" in an Ohio town of a few thousand, how alienating is it now to talk to a "neighbor" from the other side of the globe? But alienation has fallen by the wayside in this discussion; "understanding" is now the key word—an understanding that must be incomplete but at the same time *must be*. Studying the texts of the modernist period that deal with this issue, like *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and also looking at the way postmodern texts have treated the same problem in the intervening years may be able to help us all understand how we are supposed to (pretend to) understand "others": with openness, hospitality, curiosity, fascination, and above all, non-judgment.

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WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS AND
HUMANISTIC CRITICISM

JAMES SEATON

The reputation of William Dean Howells has never recovered from his image as "the Dean," the symbol and presiding spirit of the post-Civil War genteel culture whose hypocrisies and pieties are thought to have vitiated American literature until the 1920s breakthrough. Van Wyck Brooks, H. L. Mencken, and Sinclair Lewis, among others, made the discrediting of Howells a key part of their campaign to liberate American literature from the taboos and pieties of the genteel tradition. In response, Howells's defenders have pointed to his lonely campaign against the execution of the Haymarket anarchists, his sympathetic interest in socialism, and his advocacy in literature of a democratic realism about and for the many rather than the few. According to this defense, Howells is best understood as a "humanist." In *William Dean Howells: The Realist as Humanist*, William Alexander emphasizes Howells's compassion as a defining quality. Howells is a "humanist" if "the term is taken as deriving primarily from 'humane'" (6). Comparing "the master and the dean," Henry James and William Dean Howells, Rob Davidson contrasts James's emphasis on aesthetic standards to "Howells's humanistic compassion" (230), which led him to favor "a more socially informed, humanistic realism" (250). Davidson's Howells is a "democratic humanist" (273) who celebrates the "humanistic, democratic ideals of the common man" (272). Paul Petrie argues that for Howells, morality was always more important than aesthetics and, furthermore, it was "specific social-ethical goals . . . which for Howells comprised literature's *raison d'être*" (3). Petrie argues that Howells's belief that literature should serve the common good led him to, in Petrie's words, "subsume literature's aesthetic value within its use-value" (17-18) or, more radically, to see "aesthetic excellence

itself as a function of the literary work's success in pursuing its social-ethical goals" (18).

The portrait of Howells as a compassionate man willing to challenge the political status quo on behalf of what he saw as the cause of humanity is true as far as it goes. This defense risks, however, presenting Howells as a good man but a poor literary critic who either could not or would not distinguish between literary mediocrity and excellence. The trouble with this view is not only its inaccuracy in regard to Howells, but, even more importantly, its implicit acceptance of the notion that compassion and intelligence, especially aesthetic intelligence, are somehow at odds, that one finally has to choose between caring about people and caring about art. Howells's actual literary criticism, however, demonstrates repeatedly that the belief that literature should serve the common good is not incompatible with, and even perhaps inextricably connected to, a commitment to high standards of specifically literary excellence. Both the belief and the commitment are central to the humanistic tradition in literary criticism that goes back at least to the Renaissance scholars who turned to the literature of ancient Greece and Rome for both aesthetic pleasure and insight into human life. Howells is better understood as a critic in this humanistic tradition than as a "humanist" who qualifies for the term only because he is more caring, more "humane," than other writers or critics.

Howells owes his reputation as the spokesman of the genteel tradition primarily to his supposed failure to appreciate literature that confronted openly the realities of life, especially the sexual realities. In his 1930 Nobel Prize lecture Sinclair Lewis singled out Howells as the critic whose influence had done most to keep American literature under the control of the genteel tradition:

It was with the emergence of William Dean Howells that we first began to have something like a standard, and a very bad standard it was. Mr. Howells was one of the gentlest, sweetest, and most honest of men, but he had the code of a pious old maid whose greatest delight was to have tea at the vicarage. He abhorred not only profanity and obscenity but all of what H. G. Wells has called "the jolly coarsenesses of life." (14-15)

For Sinclair Lewis in 1930 the choice in American culture lay between "Victorian and Howellsian timidity and gentility in American fiction" and, on the other hand, "honesty and boldness and

passion of life" (7). "Timidity and gentility" have not had a good press in the succeeding decades, while "honesty and boldness and passion" are still terms of praise, so Lewis's verdict against Howells has remained influential even as Lewis's own literary standing has declined. Is it the case, however, that Howells's criticism reveals a bias in favor of "timidity and gentility" as opposed to "honesty and boldness and passion"?

It is certainly true that he defended the American and English refusal to focus on what Howells called "the passion of guilty love" (II 121) with the explicitness and detail of French fiction.¹ In the United States and England, unlike Europe, observed Howells, the primary audience for novels was young women; "If the novel were written for men and for married women alone, as in continental Europe," the case might look "altogether different" (II 119). Despite his recognition that the issue was in part merely a matter of differing customs, Howells was ready to defend the American custom not on the basis of morality or decency but instead because it was finally more honest, more true to actual life, certainly life in the United States: "convention for convention, ours was not only more tolerable, but on the whole was truer to life." To those critics calling for "passion," Howells replied that they

... would seem to have no conception of any passion but one. Yet there are several other passions: the passion of grief, the passion of avarice, the passion of pity, the passion of ambition, the passion of hate, the passion of envy, the passion of devotion, the passion of friendship; and all these have a greater part in the drama of life than the passion of love, and infinitely greater than the passion of guilty love. (II 121)

Howells denied that there was any conspiracy of silence denying "these most important realities of life," arguing that American novelists have simply "kept a true perspective in regard to them; they have relegated them in their pictures of life to the space and place they occupy in life itself, as we know it in England and America" (II 121). Arguing that he did not oppose the treatment of illicit sexuality in itself but instead the exploitation of the theme's fascination for the sake of "cheap effects," Howells asserted that "[I]f by any chance . . . any American should now arise to treat it on the level of *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, he would be absolutely sure of suc-

cess, and of fame and gratitude as great as those books have won for their authors" (II 119).

In a 1902 essay asking "What Should Girls Read?" Howells went further, questioning the whole notion that the determining issue regarding the fictional treatment of sexuality and violence should ever have been the moral welfare of the young, unmarried women who made up the majority of the novel-reading public. After all, Howells reminded his readers, the book generally considered to have the best moral influence on the young is the Bible, and yet "There is no book which more openly tells the human story than the Bible" (III 235), with its tales of "murder, incest, adultery, rapine, treachery, cruelty, [and] revenge," all told in the sort of "plain speaking as no modern author could venture upon" (III 236). Like the Bible, "the very masterpieces of literature mirror some of the worst moods of the race; they paint its darkest passions, and remember its filthiest vices" (III 235). Howells is not prepared, however, to urge that young women be kept from reading either the Bible or literary masterpieces; instead he advises them to "avoid all books that bore; they alone are the really worthless books, in every branch" (III 237). Howells does make one exception to the freedom in reading he urges should be granted to young women: he closes his article by recommending that in reading newspapers a young woman avoid "the Woman's Page," since it seems "addressed to the lingering minority of her mind, and suppose[s] her in an immaturable intellectual infancy." (III 240).

Howells was well aware that the ordinary people whose basic goodness was an article of his democratic faith greatly preferred the "romanticistic" fiction he deplored over the realism he advocated. Although he called for a literature that told the unvarnished truth about the everyday lives of ordinary Americans, he knew that the ordinary Americans themselves were not interested, and Howells in one mood found their lack of interest justifiable: "the American public does not like to read about the life of toil . . . They have had enough of it . . . they know enough of it already, and far more than literature could ever tell them" (II 192-3). Sometimes his recognition that the realism he admired could not, despite his best critical efforts, compete with "romanticistic" literature in popularity led him to find less flattering reasons for the public's literary taste. When Howells's faith in the acumen of the ordinary person clashed with his own critical standards, it was the faith that gave way:

The appetite of youth, indiscriminating and uncultivated, remains the taste through life of a vast multitude of people who never mature aesthetically. . . . those who are able to enjoy and profit by what is first-rate are few indeed compared with those who are able to enjoy and profit by what is second-rate, third-rate, fourth-rate. . . . We must allow the children, the old children, as well as the young ones, their pleasure in what is inferior and mediocre. . . . Toys they must have, and cakes and ale . . . their weak intelligence, their gross appetites crave them. (II 138)

Howells reminded himself that the true critic should not regard the public "with contempt" but instead "will endeavor patiently to convert it to a taste for better things." He insisted, however, that "in this educative work criticism must never for an instant lose sight of the fact that a chromo is a chromo, and that all the joy in it of all the ignorant cannot change it into a work of fine art" (II 138).

Howells's opposition to "romanticistic" fiction did not prevent his recognizing the excellence of writers who were not part of the realist camp. Howells distinguished "romances" like *The Scarlet Letter* from the "romanticistic novel" that "professes like the real novel to portray actual life, but it does this with an excess of drawing and coloring which are false to nature." Instead of departing from surface realism to seek moral truth like Hawthorne, the romanticistic novel aims for surface accuracy in order to manipulate the emotions of the reader more successfully. The romanticistic novel "seeks effect rather than truth" (III 218). Romanticistic novels thus lack both artistic integrity and moral truth, qualities that for Howells were complementary and intertwined. For Howells, the most important aspect of realism was not mere verisimilitude in any case, though works that purported to describe accurately the details of everyday life might be held accountable to that standard. Howells valued realism, but his notion of that quality was capacious rather than restrictive, allowing him to recognize that Hawthorne rejected a surface realism only to point to moral realities. Hawthorne, Howells commented, "deeply felt, as every man of commonsense must feel, that material things are not the only realities; that they are perhaps the least real among realities" (II 96). Realism, for Howells, meant above all writing that was "true to human nature, the only truth possible, the only truth essential, to fiction" (II 137).

Perhaps the most important reason Howells was insistent on distinguishing between the mediocre and the truly excellent in literature

was his conviction that great literature told the truth about human life, especially the moral truth, while mediocre works either bored or lied entertainingly. Great writers like Zola might deal with subject matter that genteel society regarded as indecent, but Zola's artistic integrity ensured that "Zola's books, though often indecent are never immoral, but always most terribly, most pitilessly moral" (III 66). Howells, however, distinguished between literature's ability to reveal moral truth indirectly and the ability of an author, even one of the greatest, to provide explicit moral and philosophical guidance. The best writers, Howells believed, let their stories provide their own morals. And the best literature often had no clear moral, even an implicit one, but instead raised questions and encouraged reflection. After decades of reading and reviewing writers from throughout Europe as well as the United States and England, he concluded that "the authors who deal most profoundly with problems mostly leave them unsolved" (III 166). Howells repeatedly and emphatically held up the writings of Henrik Ibsen and Leo Tolstoy as models of the kind of realism he admired. Rejecting the criticism that Ibsen only revealed society's problems but supplied no answers, Howells argued that the artist's obligation was to achieve "aesthetic completeness," not to provide solutions or even definitive moral guidelines:

Artistically he is bound, Ibsen as a dramatist is bound, to give an aesthetic completeness to his works . . . but ethically he is bound not to be final; for if he forces himself to be final in things that do not and cannot end here, he becomes dishonest . . . What he can and must do ethically, is to make us take thought of ourselves . . . This is what Ibsen does, he gives us pause . . . (II 206)

Leo Tolstoy was Howells's hero, both for his fiction and for his attempt to live according to the ideals of the New Testament, but Howells was willing to assert that even Tolstoy was wrong when he attempted to explain the moral significance of his own literary works. *War and Peace* was the unsurpassed example of true realism, but not because of Tolstoy's opinionating throughout the novel: "When from time to time the author pauses and tries to tell why the things happened that he makes us see happening, neither he nor we are the wiser for his exegesis" (III 130). Howells thought that Tolstoy's own explanation of the moral of *The Kreutzer Sonata* was "deplorable," and, anticipating D. H. Lawrence's advice to "trust the tale, not the teller," advised his readers that "[i]f we were to recommend either the novel

or the author's gloss of it for the truth it could teach, it must be the novel" (II 157).

Henrik Ibsen and Leo Tolstoy were two of Howells's heroes, whose work, along with those of other Russian, Scandinavian and also Spanish and Italian writers, he championed for American readers and in so doing did much to dispel the "the stuffiness of safe, sane, and incredibly dull provincialism" that Sinclair Lewis believed was not overcome until his own generation. But Howells of course also championed American authors, and none more so than Henry James. The notion that Howells was only willing to commend "realism" that affirmed a genteel moralism cannot withstand a reading of Howells's always admiring comments on James's fiction. Howells praises *The Tragic Muse* as "a novel which marks the farthest departure from the old ideal of the novel" (II 152) and thus, by implication, a novel closest to the new ideal promoted by Howells. But what makes this novel so new? Howells observes approvingly that in it "no one is obviously led to the altar; no one is relaxed to the secular arm and burnt at the stake. Vice is disposed of with a gay shrug; virtue is rewarded by innuendo." Speaking to those searching for a straightforward moral, Howells suggests that the modernity and aesthetic success of the novel were both evidenced in its dramatic demonstration of the dilemmas of contemporary morality: "In the nineteenth century, especially now towards the close of it, one is never quite sure about vice and virtue: they fade wonderfully into and out of each other; they mix, and seem to stay mixed, at least around the edges" (II 152). In praising a collection of his friend's short stories, Howells again commended James for refusing to point a definite moral: "The things [James's stories] for the most part end vaguely, diffusing themselves and ceasing upon the sense without insistence upon a definite intention; and this is to my mind one of their rarest charms and the subtlest proofs of their unrivalled artistry" (II 225). Howells consistently praised the artistic restraint James demonstrated in refusing to tell the reader what to think. *The Princess Casamassima*, for example, is "a great novel" (II 47) and it is all the greater because "Mr. James forbears, as ever, to pat his people on the back, to weep upon their necks, or to caress them with endearing and compassionate epithets and pet names" (II 48).

Howells, like other critics in the humanistic tradition, insisted both that literary works should be judged on literary criteria alone and also that those same works were relevant to pressing moral, political

and cultural questions. Thus when Howells praised the work of the African American writers Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt, he made a point of writing that his praise was a tribute, first and foremost, to the sheer literary excellence of their work. It was indeed impressive that each had overcome handicaps caused by racial discrimination, but Howells rejected any suggestion that because of those handicaps their work should be evaluated by a different and lower standard than that by which the work of other writers was judged. Paradoxically, only by insisting that their achievements be measured without reference to their race or ethnicity could their work stand as evidence that African Americans were as capable of literary excellence as any other group. Thus in commending Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, Howells assures his audience that he would "scarcely trouble the reader with a special appeal in behalf of this book" unless he was ready to commend it for its "literary art . . . for what it was in itself," rather than because it is the work of a poet who was black, whose "father and mother were slaves," who had to work, "before and after he began to write poems," as "an elevator-boy." Howells is happy to observe that Dunbar is esteemed "for the things he had done rather than because as the son of negro [sic] slaves he had done them." Howells's admiration for Dunbar's poems is "positive and not comparative"; they are not just good poems for a black man to have written, but good poetry, period. They seem to Howells "evidence of the essential unity of the human race, which does not think or feel black in one and white in another, but humanly in all." Yet even Howells's eagerness to find evidence of the unity of humanity does not overwhelm his readiness to find something else in Dunbar's poetry, which he describes as "a precious difference of temperament between the races" that is "best preserved and most charmingly suggested" in Dunbar's dialect poems, the best examples of his "essentially refined and delicate art" (II 279-280).

In an article on the fiction of Charles Chesnutt, Howells recounts the cultural achievements of African Americans—"Mr. Booker Washington the first American orator of our time, fresh upon the time of Mr. Frederick Douglass . . . Mr. Dunbar among the truest of our poets . . . Mr. Tanner, a black American, among the only three Americans from whom the French government ever bought a picture"—but insists that his own "more universal interest" in Chesnutt is based on "the more than promise he has given in a department of literature [the short story] where Americans hold the foremost place."

In literature, Howells asserts, "there is, happily, no color line" (III 234). In declaring that in literature there was "no color line" Howells was making a claim in his May 1900 *Atlantic Monthly* essay similar to the famous assertion made by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, also published in 1900: "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas" (90). Both Howells and Du Bois were well aware that many, no doubt most, critics, editors, publishers, and professors were ready to enforce a color line in literary matters as well as elsewhere. Both, however, wanted to make the point that literary and intellectual excellence has in itself nothing to do with color or race. Their assertions declared an ideal and announced their own allegiance to that ideal; neither pretended that the ideal had already been reached.²

William Dean Howells deserves to be remembered as a contributor to the humanistic tradition of criticism, not as the spokesman of the genteel tradition in American culture. The originator of the phrase "the genteel tradition" and also its most penetrating critic, George Santayana, criticized its hold on American culture not so much because it inhibited enjoyment of "the jolly coarsenesses of life" as because it discouraged honest inquiry in favor of an orthodoxy that was "often simply a way of white-washing and adoring things as they are" (108). The two traditions, the humanistic and the genteel, were inevitably at odds, since the humanistic insisted on inquiring about human life through literature and, in doing so, arriving at ideas, doubts and reflections that the genteel tradition was pledged to ignore. Likewise, Howells's determination to judge literary works on their own merits was bound to bring him into conflict with the prejudices of the day. William Dean Howells maintained his critical integrity over decades of public controversy and debate; he was, as James Tuttleton put it in a fine essay, "a reviewer whose judgment could be trusted." Howells's criticism transcends the era in which it was written, the era of the genteel tradition; it deserves to be ranked with the still vital work of his colleagues in the humanistic tradition, figures like Matthew Arnold, Irving Babbitt, Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling. Like Howells, these critics believed, in Joseph Epstein's phrase, both "that nothing was quite so important as literature and that literature could never be treated as an end in itself" (31). Howells's criticism, like theirs, remains vital today in the era of postmodernism and multiculturalism, an era with its own certainties, taboos and pieties, against which the humanistic tradition's inquiry

into human life through literature continues to raise questions, doubts and cause for reflection.

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NOTES

¹All quotations from Howells's writings are taken from the three volumes of his *Selected Literary Criticism* listed in the Works Cited. Quotations from Howells are identified by the number of the volume in Roman numerals and the page number enclosed in parentheses.

²For another view of Howells's treatment of racial issues in general and Chesnutt's fiction in particular, see William L. Andrews's "William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt: Criticism and Race Fiction in the Age of Booker T. Washington."

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THE MIDWEST, *THE NEW YORKER*, *THE ONION*, AND SOMETHING FUNNY

GUY SZUBERLA

The cartoonist Jack Ziegler once dubbed the Midwest the "butt of 1000 cruel and tasteless jokes." The *Saturday Review* cartoon in which Ziegler bannered this punch line doesn't name a single one of the "1000 cruel and tasteless jokes."¹ With good reason, Ziegler depends upon his readers knowing and remembering the old setups and putdowns. What makes these jokes familiar and funny, what gives their principal character types a life without end, are some perdurable but fallible generalizations about the Midwest. Before resenting the usual distortions and the laugh lines, it's useful to remember one thing Constance Rourke said in her celebrated study of American humor: "Humor is a matter of fantasy" (*American Humor* 20). In short, the Midwesterners who are the butt of certain jokes exist in a fantasized world, a place fictionalized, exaggerated, and distorted for laughs. They can, for example, be as eccentric, insular, and naïve as the Wisconsin characters in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977). Or they can be made to match the bizarre and comic behavior of the high school students in *Heathers* (1989), a movie set in a fantasy Ohio where tipping over cows is good clean fun and drinking Perrier marks a man as suicidal and homosexual.

If, in other words, the Midwest did not exist, if there were no Midwesterners, certain cartoonists, standup comics, and humor writers, along with many creators of film comedies and musicals, would have had to invent them. Maybe they have. This essay concentrates on the image and idea of the Midwest in two national magazines known for their humor. Looking through the cartoons in old *New Yorkers*, reading back issues of *The Onion*, it's not hard to see that the jokes about the Midwest depend upon several fixed ideas and some unchanging characterizations of the place and its people. That Midwesterners embody the all too normal and middling middle class,

that they inhabit a bland and boring fly-over country between the glamour of the two coasts, that, despite its cities, suburbs, and industrial sprawl, the caricatured Midwest remains farm country peopled by hicks and hayseeds—all these exaggerations and distortions, in shifting permutations and combinations, fill out the standard jokes about the Midwest.

THE MIDWEST IN *THE NEW YORKER* CARTOON

From *The New Yorker's* beginnings, jokes about the Midwest and Midwesterners have been a recurring feature in its cartoon humor. The magazine's founding editor, Harold Ross, said as much when on February 21, 1925, he launched the magazine: "[*The New Yorker*] has announced that it is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque" (2).

Between 1925 and 2004, *New Yorker* cartoonists created 68,647 cartoons. David Remnick, the current editor of the magazine, contends that the accumulated cartoons constitute "the longest-running comic genre in American life" (*Complete Cartoons* 7). True or not, these cartoons hold a rich and informative treasure trove of humor, wit, and passing attitudes. All sixty-eight thousand odd have been collected on the two CD-ROM disks that are packed inside one heavyweight book, *The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker* (2004). With the search tools provided on the disks, it's fairly easy to pick out the eighty or so cartoons that carry jokes and jibes about the Midwest and Midwesterners. Some translate Ross's Dubuque wisecrack straight to the page. Still others turn jokes about the Midwest and Midwesterners on their heads, undercutting East Coast hauteur and simple-minded prejudices about the "heartland." It's useful to remember that in Ross's time three Midwesterners—James Thurber, William Maxwell, and Peter DeVries—played an important part in editing cartoons at the magazine's Tuesday afternoon "art meetings" (*Complete Cartoons* 8).

The New Yorker's eighty odd Midwest-themed cartoons are necessarily various, inflected by period tastes, topical interests, and the idiosyncrasies of the individual artists. Squeezing them into general categories, as I'm about to do, can distort their sense and kill the jokes. At the same time, such classifications can help define what *The New Yorker* cartoonists imagine when drawing the Midwest and Midwesterners. For discussion purposes, for help in organizing an unwieldy body of material, the magazine's Midwest cartoons will be placed under four large general headings: (1) hometown hubris: the exaggerated impor-

tance Midwesterners attach to their small towns; (2) the Midwest as farm country, Midwesterners as farmers; (3) the Midwest as a place of no cultural significance, a bland, boring "fly-over country"; (4) the Midwest as the home of "heartland" values and ideas.

Midwestern Hometown Hubris

Within a year of Ross's declaration, Ralph Barton transformed "the old Lady in Dubuque" into a middle-aged flapper (12 December 1925).² Barton, who in 1925 also illustrated Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, cartooned the "worthy dame" in Dubuque dancing the Charleston, tossing a martini shaker, sporting bobbed hair, and wearing a fashionably short dress (plate 1). Barton assumed that his readers would see the joke in the improbability of the character and the

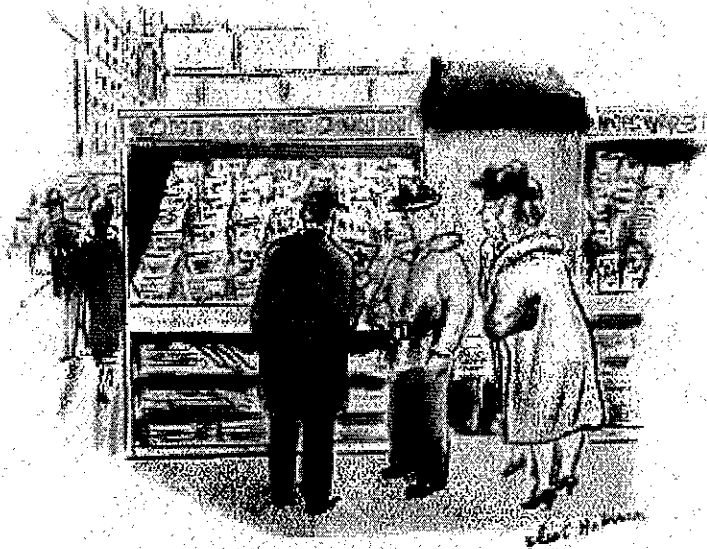


Plate 1. Ralph Barton. "DISTURBING EFFECT OF THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS ON THE OLD LADY IN DUBUQUE, AS REVEALED IN A CHRISTMAS CARD RECEIVED BY THE NEW YORKER FROM THAT WORTHY DAME," *The New Yorker* (12 December 1925): 274.

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impossibility of such a transformation. Once in a great while a sophisticated and urbane Midwesterner makes an appearance in a *New Yorker* cartoon, but they are rare creatures. Midwesterners are much more likely to be presented as farm people or out-of-towners, laughably out of touch with big city reality. Almost inevitably, they act like Jack Lemon's Harry Kellerman, the hapless hero of Neil Simon's screenplay, *The Out-of-Towners* (1970). Kellerman, a junior executive from Twin Oaks, Ohio, travels to New York to claim a promotion. In the big city, he tries in vain, and usually with disastrous and laughable consequences, to assert his own exaggerated sense of self-importance.

One pattern for cartoonists was set early in the magazine's history. E. McNeerney, in a 1926 cartoon titled "THE OPTIMIST," had a young woman ask a New York newsy for a copy of "the Fork Rapids *Sentinel*" (13 April 1926). Almost twenty years later, Helen E. Hokinson repeated the joke, using two little old ladies who might well hail from Harold Ross's imaginary Dubuque (plate 2). The



"Why, it's about halfway between Topeka and Kansas City!"

Plate 2. Helen E. Hokinson, *The New Yorker* (13 April 1946); 28.
©The New Yorker Collection 1946 Helen E. Hokinson from cartoonbook.com. All Rights Reserved.

more befuddled of the two explains to the newsstand operator that the newspaper she wants comes from a town "halfway between Topeka and Kansas City" (13 April 1946). Somehow, none of these perplexed Midwesterners understands the comic insignificance of their hometown.

Diminution, that old standby of rhetoric and humor, animates the jokes in these and many related *New Yorker* cartoons. The small-town Midwesterner, attempting to hold on to self-respect in New York, becomes smaller because he is in New York and, of course, because he is in a *New Yorker* cartoon. One fine example of diminution dates from the hard times of the Depression era. In the cartoon, a grim-faced and gnomish man bends over the papers scattered on his desk. His secretary primly announces that he has a visitor: "He says he just got in to town from Toledo and saw your name in the phone book and it's the same name as his and he thinks you two ought to get together" (5 August 1933). It's not difficult to guess the appearance of the unseen small-town visitor or the degree of his naïveté. It's certainly easy enough to anticipate the bum's rush that awaits him.

Over the next sixty years or so, *New Yorker* cartoonists continued to take jabs at self-important small-town Midwesterners. Henry Martin's cartoon of a couple driving into a small town typifies the general spirit if not the usual setup (13 April 1968). In it the woman reads a sign at the side of the road: "ENTERING A SMALL TOWN IN THE MIDWEST." She says to her husband: "Say, isn't this where Rudy Dillworth came from?" At one stroke, we are given the image of the generic small town in the Midwest and the comically inflated identity that Rudy Dillworths find in such no-place places. The particulars of this kind of insult humor may have played itself out by the 1980s and 1990s, since such standard put-downs began to disappear into self-conscious and self-reflexive literary parodies. Charles Barsotti's 1990 cartoon, a classic of this genre, deftly combines a poke at small-town Ohio cuisine with a quickstep parody of drawing room comedy (4 June 1990). A wife, turning from a fax machine, says to her husband: "Darling, Mother faxed her tuna-casserole recipe all the way from Ohio." She's dressed in an evening gown, her hair is marcelled, and she wears a pearl choker and bracelet. Her husband, in a blazer and what must be flannels, also seems to have stepped out of a 1920s play. Expressing gratitude for the casserole recipe, he replies: "Thank God, just in time for the Ambassador's visit." The joke depends, as so many do, on an unexpected shift in the frames of semiotic reference.

Barsotti jumps from Mother's recipe for tuna casserole to the elegant drama of the Ambassador's visit, from small-town Ohio to high society and the world of diplomacy.

The Midwest as Farm Country

In his suggestive study, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989), James R. Shortridge points out that the Midwest has historically held "contradictory images." What he refers to are the contradictions between the "pastoral definition of the Midwest" and those definitions of the region's identity that have and have not "excised" its large cities and industrial life (11). His chapter on "Rural Imagery in an Urbanizing Nation," accordingly, emphasizes that "three interrelated themes" have come to compose "the Midwestern image": 1) rural sections initiated, and have held strongly to, "the traditional pastoral view"; 2) the business community advocates ideas of the region based on "material and technological success." The third perspective, he attributes to Easterners: "they gradually came to ignore the urban side of the Middle West and reinterpreted its rural world. The Middle West was synonymous with agriculture in this view, but it was occupied more by yokels than by noble yeoman" (49). Through the eyes of the Midwest's rural residents, such reinterpretations amount to derisive "Eastern laughter," and they respond to it with "rural self-righteousness" (49-53).

If anything Jack Ziegler's cartoon, "Walk of the Stars: Jasperville, Illinois," seems far too exaggerated, much too fantastic, to provoke such a self-righteous response. "Walk of the Stars" (13 May 1991) shows a farmer dressed in bib overalls and a straw hat; he walks down a star-studded path, a pale imitation of Hollywood's Walk of Fame (plate 3). In contrast to the Hollywood original, this walk winds between fenced-in pastures and farm buildings. The first star on it reads: "Ogden Pratt: Tractor Pull, 1956" and the second: "Lefty Buck: Knot tying Champ, 1964." Ziegler's cartoon has defined the Midwest through a series of negations—whatever it is, it's not Hollywood, not the home of celebrities, not glamorous, not, by any pop culture standard, significant.

Not all *New Yorker* cartoons showing the Midwest burlesque it as a rural place and fill it with yokels, as Ziegler does. But, even when its cartoons deflate or invert such unreal notions, the *idée fixe* of the pastoral Midwest lurks in the background. Consider a 16 December 1939 cartoon by Alan Dunn. The setting's a gallery for a "WPA

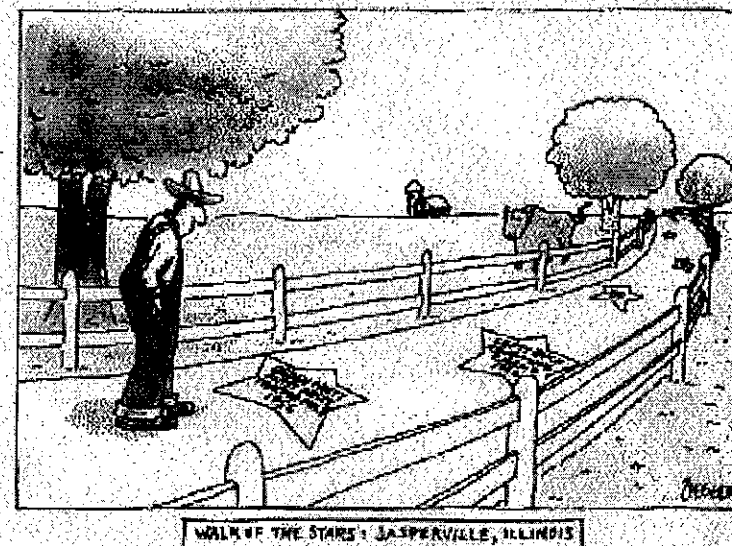


Plate 3. Jack Ziegler, *The New Yorker* (13 May 1991): 376.

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Regional" art exhibition (plate 4). Hung on its walls are four paintings of traditional rural scenes: a farmer on a tractor, a farmer hoeing, a hip-roofed barn, an unplowed field with a silo and other farm buildings. These paintings surround a fifth, much larger canvas, a picture of a naked man pursuing an equally naked woman. The two could be figures drawn from ancient myths, Daphne and Apollo in a Midwestern glade. A well-dressed couple, strolling through the gallery, calls our attention to the painting's comic incongruities. The woman puzzles over the large canvas: "Now would that be the Ohio Valley?" For her, and for Dunn and his audience, the Midwest resides in images of farmers and farmland, stereotypes dutifully represented in the four regionalist paintings.³

New Yorker cartoonists are capable of mocking these stereotypes and those who believe in them. But many of these comic reversals wind up reinforcing the idea of a rural Midwest. For example, Perry Barlow shows a New York delegate at a national convention. He's talking to two stylishly dressed women, delegates from Iowa: "I suppose you folks are raising a lot of hogs out there this year" (22 July

Such dismissive views generally present the Midwest as flat and featureless, a place of no cultural significance and little interest. Richard Rhodes, in his *Harper's* essay, had written of Kansas as "Cupcake Land," "well-scrubbed and bland," a world circumscribed by "conformity to the narrowest standards of convention" (52, 56). Flying over or driving quickly through it only makes sense. About eight years before the Rhodes essay, Robert Mankoff gave *New Yorker* readers a plausible image of Kansas as a no-place place. He drew a conventional highway or gateway sign, a greeting to trucks and cars entering Kansas: "WELCOME TO KANSAS OR SOME STATE VERY MUCH LIKE IT" (26 February 1979). Not too surprisingly, Mankoff sketched the background as a blank landscape, erasing local details and every identifiable feature.

Another *New Yorker* cartoon, this one by Warren Miller, turns ridicule of the Midwest back against East coast elitism (21 March 1988). A young New York City couple sits on a couch watching television; high rise buildings glimpsed through their apartment window identify the metropolitan setting. A bowl of popcorn, beer cans, and the remains of a Chinese takeout dinner are strewn on a cocktail table before them. The young woman is talking to her mother on the phone: "You don't understand, Mom. Our staying in and watching TV is not the same as you and Dad staying home and watching TV in Dayton, Ohio." What she's trying to say is that their dudding out before the TV in New York implies significant cultural choices, that they are part of a world superior to Dayton and the rest of fly-over country. Miller's cartoon sets up a situation that, in almost every detail, overturns her assumptions (plate 5).

Heartland Values

The cartoons that burlesque the idea of "the heartland" usually take gentle jabs at the Midwest. The primary target in these cartoons, more often than not, turns out to be "the heartland" as an overcooked cliché and stock metaphor. In some cartoons, then, it's not easy to tell if the Midwest and "the heartland" are seen as the same thing. Charles Barsotti's line drawing of an office setting and conversation falls into this category (7 June 1982). An executive speaks to his underling across a large desk: "But this trip, instead of flying straight back from L.A., stop over in the heartland. I want to know what they're thinking in the heartland." The speaker's implied definition of "the heartland" is expansive, if not impossibly and comically dif-



"You don't understand, Mom. Our staying in and watching TV is not the same as you and Dad staying home and watching TV in Dayton, Ohio."

Plate 5. Warren Miller, *The New Yorker* (21 March 1988): 238.

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fuse. His unchecked exaggeration, with his unblinking certainty, leavens the joke. Whatever his grand intentions about reading its heart may be, he's reduced the vast middle of America, along with the Midwest, to fly-over country.

"The heartland"—idea, image, and verbal—construct, builds upon a composite foundation of nostalgia and sentimentality. *New Yorker* cartoonists like to knock *nostos* and mimic sentimentality where they find it. Where they regularly find it, when toying with idea of "the heartland," is in a mythic Midwest. Two cartoons from the 1990s—one by Frank Cotham and the other by Dana Fradon—conjoin this fantasy Midwest with an equally imaginary heartland. In its foreground, Cotham's cartoon (9 May 1994) presents a car turning onto a side road. The driver and passenger, we are to assume, have read and observed a sign pointing in two directions: to the "Heart of America" and to a "Bypass." They are shown turning away from the "Heart of America," a place represented by open fields, a small cluster of trees, and some farm buildings set in their midst (plate 6). Through the simplified iconography of cartoon conventions, the Heart of America is equated with an "agri-centric"

Midwest. Fradon's cartoon, still another highway scene, pictures

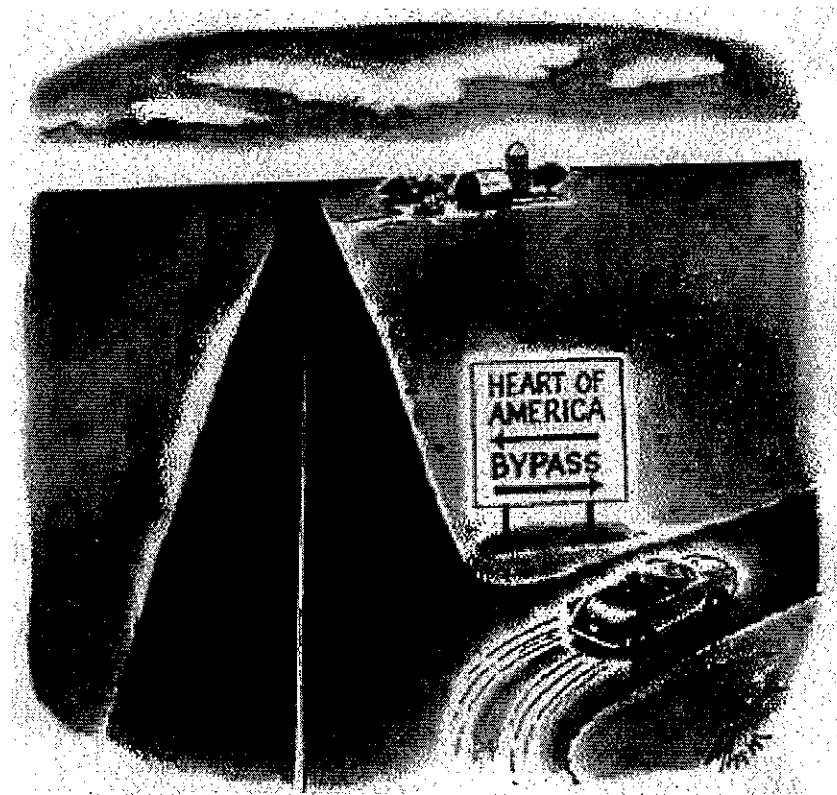


Plate 6. Frank Cotham, *The New Yorker* (9 March 1974): 281.
©The New Yorker Collection 1994 Frank Cotham from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

cars "Entering America's Heartland" (1 June 1992). The gateway sign directs them to choose among three directions: "Left Auricle . . ." "Aorta," and "Right Auricle . . ." The gag is framed by straight-faced literalism. But it drives home the joke with allusions to an agricultural Midwest—farmhouse, silo, and fields sit alongside the road to the Heartland.

Heartland jokes and cartoons about the Midwest probably owe some inspiration to one almost forgotten piece of vaudeville wisdom. In the 1930s, and before, the critical question for a touring act was: "Will it play in Peoria?" John Ehrlichman, one of Nixon's White

House henchmen, gets credit for reviving and recasting the old laugh line in the 1970s. William Safire, in *Safire's New Political Dictionary*, interviewed Ehrlichman about the Peoria maxim. According to Ehrlichman, Peoria, Illinois "personified—exemplified—a place, removed from media centers on the coasts . . ." According to the Nixon political doctrine, this was where "the national verdict [was] cast" (580). *New Yorker* cartoonist Lee Lorenz, at the time Ehrlichman's words first came into common circulation, drew a cartoon of a car driving into Peoria (5 August 1974). The driver and passenger stare at a sign: "ENTERING PEORIA: NOW PLAYING." What's playing is not written out legibly, but we can guess it's something agreeable to the people of the Heartland, that legendary place far from bi-coastal influences and media centers.

THE MIDWEST IN *THE ONION*

The Onion, as dedicated webservers know, pretends to be a newspaper and bills itself as "America's Finest News Source." Its writers like to cook up sensational, teaser headlines and dish up fanciful tabloid-style stories with them. Some of its stories are out and out fakes that should fool no one; others, despite their comic core and bizarre coloration, have slipped imperceptibly into the national news stream. *The Onion's* humor often runs toward the crude and the juvenile. It turns out just enough raunchy material to justify the warning at the bottom of the website's first page: "*The Onion* is not intended for readers under 18 years of age." Despite this open appeal to the prurient interests of teen-agers, its writers can be surprisingly subtle in their sophomoric excesses and chop-block logic. Consider three recent headlines: "Executive Gives Up Fast Track to Spend More Time with Possessions," "Wonder Drug Inspires Deep, Unwavering Love of Pharmaceutical Companies," (6 March 2006), and "Detroit Sold For Scrap" (6-12 April 2006).

"Midwest Discovered Between East, West Coast," first published 4 September 1996, reads a bit like a serious news report, a bulletin sent back from a bold expedition into the unknown. The quoted words of the expedition leader ring with the conviction and sententiousness of a John Smith writing in the glory days of colonization. Much of the story mimics old high school history books, complete with a 1940s style primary-colored map and trumped-up antique graphics (plate 7). A few scattered lines, written in the taunting vocabulary of our contemporary fashion police, ridicule the

Midwesterners' style of dress. The most striking passages send up

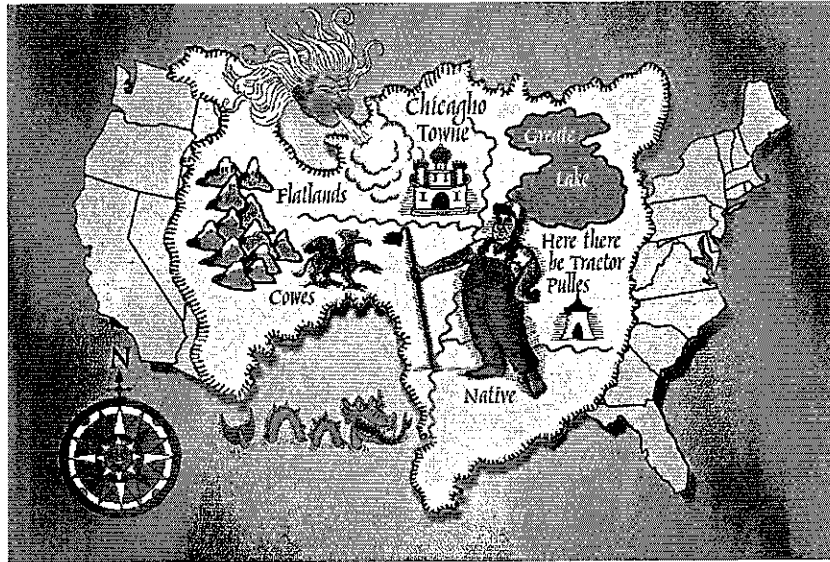


Plate 7. Map for "Midwest Discovered Between East, West Coast," *The Onion* (4 September 1996).

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an unusually clear sampling of the stereotypes and type characters that, in the purview of popular culture, represent the Midwest and Midwesterners. *The Onion* reports, for example, that the expedition blazed trails "through strange new regions, lands full of corn and wheat." Dirk Zachary of New York City, the expedition leader, proclaims with due pomp and ceremony that "we shall call this land the Midwest, [and] its primitive inhabitants shall be known as Midwesterners." The report, stressing the region's "backwards" ways, describes the people:

"The Midwestern Aborigines are ruddy, generally heavy-set folk, clad in plain non-designer costumery," Zachary said. "And, though coarse and unattractive, these simple people were rather friendly, offering us plain native fare such 'Hotdish' and 'Casserole.'" Despite the natives' friendly demeanor, Zachary's men quickly slaughtered all Midwestern tribesmen they encountered "just to be safe."

The Onion's map and story burlesque the Midwest and Midwesterners as simple farm folk, living "agri-centric lives" on the "Flatlands." The play of scale in the accompanying map of the United

States, no doubt, owes something to Saul Steinberg's famous *New Yorker* cover, "View of the World from 9th Avenue." Steinberg, filling his foreground and middle distance with a Manhattan street scene, reduced the rest of the country to a small green rectangle marked U.S.A. Like Steinberg's cover, *The Onion* map represents an East Coast view of the comic insignificance and hinterland existence of the Midwest.

When this story and the fake map were published in 1996, *The Onion* and its writers were solidly planted in Chicago. Starting out in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1988 as a free paper, *The Onion* initially drew its small staff from University of Wisconsin dropouts and graduates, Midwesterners all. According to Geoff Keighley of CNN, "the publication remained a Midwestern secret until 1996, when it launched its [web] site, and gained international recognition" (29 August 2003). Since 2000, its writers and main offices have been located in New York City. Whether its rude Midwestern origins or its current address should condition our response to this particular joke are questions that need not be answered directly. What may matter more is the fact that *The Onion* writers are retelling some old jokes about the Midwest. They do so with an awareness of the established narrative conventions and out-of-date cultural beliefs trailing behind their jokes and story lines. In the end, it's hard to decide whether they are lampooning Midwesterners' simple ways or parodying and satirizing the self-satisfied style and attitudes of East Coast put-down artists.

THE BI-COASTAL AND THE MIDWESTERN

Nothing that's been said until now should suggest that either *The New Yorker* cartoonists or *The Onion* writers somehow distilled the character of the Midwest. What they and others of like minds have often done through their cartoons, caricatures, and one-liners is something quite different. Seeking to ridicule and burlesque the Midwest and Midwesterners, they have fallen into that old American habit of projecting their own character through "antithetical definition" Sociologists, anthropologists, students of ethnic historiography, and literary critics sometimes speak of such acts of self-definition as "dis-sociative," as "boundary-constructing processes," and as "contrastive strategies."⁶ Those who hold to such a perspective identify themselves by marking off the boundaries between their group and others. Werner Sollors, in *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986), summed up these ideas and attitudes with an old formula: "Whatever we are, we are not like them."

Sollors, following and quoting Frederik Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), contends that such boundary making defines the group but "not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (27).

Many of the cartoons and much of the humor pointed at the Midwest, in other words, tell us more about the bi-coastal regions than the supposed character of the heartland. The Midwest and the Midwesterners, the place and people written into these jokes, are fitted into a fantasy world and on the other side of a constructed borderline. The fantasy agrarian Midwest—the world of tractor pulls, heartland values, casserole cooking, and dowdy clothes—plays into the fixed idea that those in the bi-coastal regions represent all the good cosmopolitan, urbane, and stylish virtues. This Midwest and these Midwesterners are, of course, inventions, social constructions, and high-flying fantasy, necessary pieces and players in bi-coastal humor and the borders that are to mark off regional identities.

Why do we laugh at these jokes? What's so funny? Those old questions, whether posed by theorists of humor or stand-up comics, seldom lead to satisfying and final answers. For some years now, analyzing regional humor and humor that plays off of regional differences founders on one built-in and insuperable difficulty. Many readers across America assume that regional differences have disappeared or no longer matter. The jokes, caricatures, and burlesques characterizing the Midwest and Midwesterners in *The New Yorker* and *The Onion* seem to address such readers. They fold the old insult jokes about Midwestern farmers, small-town boosters, and the region's retrograde sense of style into parodies, comic quotations, and self-reflexive mock epics. In the end, it's almost impossible to say if, tempered by this postmodern age, we laugh at strained jokes about the Midwest and Midwesterners. It's just as likely we are laughing at the creaking sound of the old comic conventions. It's even more likely we laugh at the bi-coastal jokers who can give any credit to such fantasies and fictions of the Midwest. A closing caveat: every one of these considerations, however plausible and well reasoned, will disappear in a good laugh and sometimes will be forgotten in a suppressed chuckle.

The University of Toledo

NOTES

¹Jack Ziegler, "Welcome to the Midwest: Butt of 1000 Cruel and Tasteless Jokes," *Saturday Review* 11 Jan. 1975: 5.

²References to *New Yorker* cartoons will be given parenthetically in the text. All cartoons cited in section I. are from *The New Yorker*. Illustrations and dates are taken from *The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker* (2004), edited by Robert Mankoff.

³It's possible that Dunn is alluding to work by Thomas Hart Benton, a regionalist painter whose reputation was near its height in 1939. For an example fitting Greco-Roman figures into regional settings, see Benton's painting titled "Persephone" (1938-39; Nelson-Atkins Museum).

⁴See William Baker, "Mark Twain in Cincinnati: A Mystery Most Compelling," *ALR*, 12 (Fall 1979): 299-315.

⁵The full text of "The View from Fly Over Country" can be found on the first page of *The Red Moon Journal*. David Garcia, the webmaster, identifies himself as a Chicago artist, a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a member of "the vast right wing conspiracy." The website of this journal can be found at: ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/red-moonproject/redmoonjournal.html

⁶For these quotations and the bulk of the ideas in this and the following paragraph, I have drawn heavily on "We Are Not like Them," a section of Werner Sollors's *Beyond Ethnicity* (26-31).

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ROCK/RIVER: LORINE NIEDECKER'S OBJECTIVIST POETICS OF THE NATURAL WORLD

JONATHAN IVRY

The Rock River originates in the wetlands of the Horicon Marsh northwest of Milwaukee, meanders through south-central Wisconsin, and crosses over into northern Illinois before eventually emptying into the Mississippi. Long before the arrival of the white settlers, the Rock River watershed sustained the surrounding Native American communities; when the Europeans arrived, they established their communities on the banks of the river, in such towns as Watertown, Fort Atkinson, Janesville, and Beloit. Today, like so many rivers flowing through small-town America, the river no longer dominates the local economy. Indeed, because the river bypasses the metropolitan areas of Milwaukee and Madison, many residents of southern Wisconsin have little awareness of the river. Thus, one might be tempted to say that the Rock River is a bit like poet Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970), a regional point of interest (a Midwestern poet who lived and wrote in rural Wisconsin), a minor tributary of the larger mainstream (one of a small group of poets known as "Objectivist").

To make such a comparison, however, would be wrong on multiple counts. To begin with, Niedecker's life and work expose the critical biases in such terms as "center" and "periphery," "mainstream" and "regional." Even more important, to employ the Rock River in the service of a rather glib metaphor is exactly the kind of lazy rhetorical gesture that the Objectivists rejected. Objectivist poetics first and foremost affirms the particularity and self-identity of the natural environment as separate and distinct from verbal constructs that seek to subordinate that environment to trope. This careful attention and respect for the river *qua* river rejects both a mythic and romanticized view of nature, and anticipates the recent eco-critical turn in nature writing.¹

The rejection of metaphor, however, is a complicated gesture. As William Carlos Williams suggested in his emblematic, anti-figural poem, "The Red Wheel Barrow," "so much depends" upon how we perceive the objects that make up our world, whether they are reduced to figural positions in the service of some other poetic argument. Niedecker's poetry follows the Pound-Williams-Zukofsky tradition that resists the impulse to render the world metaphorically, a poetics that instead values the integrity of the specific detail, object, and historical moment. Her poetry seeks to study and celebrate the richness of the particular, whether of her natural environment or the local speech of her community. Yet can poetry ever fully resist the pull of metaphor?² Language, after all, relies on figural displacement. Names take the place of things; abstractions push thinking beyond language's initial act of naming. Metaphor intrudes onto perception and expression. Anti-figural poetry has to work hard against the presumption of metaphor that language and literary history have conditioned readers to assume lies behind every articulation.

Niedecker's use of the Rock River in her poetry provides an interesting case study of how Objectivist poetry responds to the natural world. The river poses a particular challenge to a poet resisting the pull of trope, as perhaps no feature of the natural landscape has been so relentlessly understood in figural terms as the river. Much like the forest, the river occupies an almost primal, archetypal position in the history of human civilization.³ As far back as Heraclitus, the river has symbolized temporality and flux. Mythological rivers marked the boundary between life and death. In the Bible, rivers are associated with the cleansing power of baptism. In American literature, Twain, Whitman, Stevens, Eliot, Hughes, and Crane have all used rivers as central tropes in their work. For T.S. Eliot, the Mississippi was a "River God," a "treacherous and capricious dictator...the only natural force that can wholly determine the course of human peregrination" (xii). In the opening lines to "The Dry Salvages," Eliot writes: "I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river / Is a strong brown god - sullen, untamed, and intractable."

Niedecker's river poems stand in stark contrast to the sort of mythmaking we find in Eliot and others. Her small slice of the Rock River, flowing just outside her cabin on Blackhawk Island, is no transcendent "River God," though it is, to be sure, a powerful force of nature. Instead, Niedecker's poems attend to the specificities of the natural world through careful, precise wording. At the same time,

despite her Objectivist allegiances, Niedecker does not fully escape the pull of metaphor, particularly in poems that link the river to her own biography. In these more personal poems, Niedecker tries to come to terms with her vexed family history through a discourse that integrates the river into this history. At the same time, we find Niedecker reasserting the anti-figural, Objectivist poetics of the natural world in a series of late poems whose subject is the landscape of Northern Wisconsin, far removed from the Rock River. The "Lake Superior" series of poems focuses attention on the geology and history of this region. The history of the hard rock in these poems contrasts with the figured pathos of the biographical river poems. If the river exerts a slippery pull toward figural projection and subjective affect, the "rock" of the "Lake Superior" poems becomes a sturdier focal point for an Objectivist-based poetics of the natural environment.

THE RIVER

Niedecker's slice of the Rock River flows just outside her cabin on low-lying Blackhawk Island, about four miles west of Fort Atkinson, in south-central Wisconsin. The "island" is, in fact, a two-mile-long, narrow spit of land that juts out into Lake Koshkonong, bounded on one side by the river and on the other side by a marshy area known as Mud Lake. Named for Chief Black Hawk of the Sauk Indians, the region surrounding the island played a small part in the atrocities of the Black Hawk War of 1832, when American militias routed a retreating and desperate Sauk nation across northern Illinois and into southern Wisconsin, a shameful history Niedecker was well aware of, as is clear from this 1937 letter to friend and fellow poet Louis Zukofsky: "Chief Black Hawk . . . lost his women and children in the swamps where I live so the white army wouldn't find 'em. After I read about the Black Hawk War I don't think much of white people" (Penberthy 128).⁴

Niedecker's family was among the earliest white settlers of the island and worked both in local tourism and the carp fishing industry. Both industries collapsed after the Depression, and to this day, Blackhawk Island remains surprisingly rustic and undeveloped. Today, Niedecker's small cabin remains under private ownership; its significance to American literary history is noted by a Wisconsin Historical Marker placed by the road. Visiting this rustic spot, one develops an appreciation for how isolated this poet was, not just from

any literary community but also from the main town of Fort Atkinson itself. Living for most of her life on Blackhawk Island, for many years without even running water and electricity, Niedecker must have experienced the rhythms of the natural world in ways unfamiliar to most of her poetic peers of the time. Although she was an ardent naturalist, with a deep knowledge of the plant and birdlife on the island, Niedecker never romanticized her relationship to the natural environment. Regular flooding brought the waters of the river up to and occasionally into her modest cabin, giving her intimate, first-hand knowledge of the potentially destructive power of the river. But unlike Eliot, Niedecker did not romanticize the river as a "strong, brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable." Her respect for the river-in-itself instead found poetic validation in Louis Zukofsky's Objectivist poetics and its rejection of metaphor, which Niedecker first encountered in Zukofsky's essay, "Sincerity and Objectification." This essay, along with an assortment of illustrative poems, appeared in a special issue of *Poetry* that Zukofsky edited in February of 1931. Shortly after reading this essay, Niedecker wrote to Zukofsky in New York, initiating a friendship and correspondence that lasted until her death in 1970.⁵ Zukofsky's Objectivist program situated the rejection of metaphor in terms of a new scientific—an *objective*—understanding of the world. Zukofsky's poetics is decidedly anti-mythological, and the affinity with science emerges in the definitional head note Zukofsky places at the beginning of his essay, "An Objective," a revised version of the essay that first appeared in *Poetry*: "*An Objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to focus. That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars*" (*Prepositions* 12, italics are Zukofsky's). Poetry is understood in the same terms as optics, both insisting that the object of vision might be brought into sharp focus without the subjective complications of an observing subject. Zukofsky writes, "writing occurs which is in the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody" (12). By contrast, figural language turns poetic vision away from its proper object, producing, for Zukofsky, the "mirage" of seeing. "The disadvantage of strained metaphor," Zukofsky writes, "is not that it is necessarily sentimental (the sentimental may at times have its positive personal qualities) but that it carries the mind to a diffuse everywhere and leaves it nowhere"

(14). Metaphor, then, undermines the clarity of vision true poetry seeks.

Zukofsky translated this scientifically based outlook into poetics by reconfiguring the word itself as one more object in the field of vision. The poem no longer represents the world through expressive language, but rather becomes a verbal construct, a self-contained object whose particular energies emerge from the words as objects themselves, and that takes its place alongside other objects in the world. How then can a poem speak of anything beyond an articulation of itself as verbal artifact? Zukofsky introduces the idea of "sincerity" to account for this problem of transference. The poem "think(s) *with* the things as they exist," suggesting that the poem as object and the world of objects travel alongside each other as parallel entities. Words do not "contain" or represent the world beyond themselves, but neither do they exist wholly apart from that world. Rather, the words of a poem exist *alongside* the world, moving along in time, harnessing energies that reconfigure those of the physical world.

"At any time," Zukofsky writes, "objectification in writing is rare" (13). Indeed, the Objectivist program requires that the poem perform an almost impossible balance, to create a verbal construct that somehow reconstructs the particular energies of the object ("thinking with the things as they exist"), while avoiding language that is simply representational or instrumental. In "A"-12, Zukofsky came up with a famous formula for this sort of poetics: "An integral / Lower limit speech / Upper limit music:" (138). Like the Objectivist poem, the language of mathematics, and of calculus in particular, is a pure abstraction the equations of which maintain an internal consistency wholly independent from the outside world; at the same time, those equations are precise formulas that *define* (not merely represent) the physical world outside language. The language of music is, for Zukofsky, similarly autotelic—internally consistent and self-contained while maintaining an obscure yet essential connection to the objective world.

Zukofsky's theories had a profound impact on Niedecker. Her 1955 essay on Zukofsky, published in the *Quarterly Review of Literature*, was one of the first academic assessments of his work, and clearly displays a deep affinity with his Objectivist principles.⁶ In the essay, Niedecker echoes Zukofsky's formulation concerning his poetics: "Zukofsky's greatest gift lies in transmuting events into

poetry," Niedecker writes, "The thing as it happens. The how of it happening becomes the poem's form" (From *This Condensery* 298), the key word here being "transmute." The poem becomes a verbal analog that runs parallel to the energies of the external world—"the thing *as* it happens."⁷ The form of the poem instantiates the movement of the object in the world; poetic form recreates within a fixed aesthetic object the dynamics of time and motion occurring in the world beyond the poem.

From the beginning, Niedecker seems to have intuited that Zukofsky's poetics, developed in the urban landscape of New York City, was particularly well suited to the rural environment of her home on Blackhawk Island. The doctrine of "thinking with the things *as* they exist" might well describe the experience of living alongside a moving body of water. Life next to a river provides a daily reminder of the competing energies of stasis and motion, between the solidity of the land and the flow of the river. Not surprisingly, in her essay on Zukofsky, Niedecker gravitates toward the river as a way of elucidating Zukofsky's thinking. She quotes from another writer, the novelist Lawrence Durrell, who, she writes, is "thinking now along the same lines" as Zukofsky: "Time has become...welded in space—no longer the quickly flowing river of Christian hymns moving from here to there along a marked series of stages. But an always present yet always recurring thing" (From *This Condensery* 292). This interplay of stasis and motion, of recursion rather than linear progression, is also echoed in a letter Zukofsky wrote to Niedecker, which he included within the text of "A"-12:

Dear L.N.

So your mother's dead. Today's
such a cool blue day the kind that
follows what we have all of life to
think about — — — Each writer writes
one long work whose beat he cannot
entirely be aware of. Recurrences
follow him, crib and drink from a
well that's his cadence—after
he's gone. (214).

The lines that immediately follow the transcribed letter equate the poem with the mystery of moving water as both whole and diffuse, single and multiple, static and in motion:

Like the sea fishing
Constantly fishing
Its own water.

The continuity—
Its pulse. (215)

Clearly, both for Niedecker writing about Zukofsky, and for Zukofsky writing to Niedecker, the poem itself serves as an objective correlative to the experience of moving water. Whether the river or the ocean, the Objectivist poem embodies a similar energy: always the same yet always different, always present and always recurring, always being and always coming to be. This new, nonlinear sense of temporal motion, Niedecker argues, permeates Zukofsky's epic poem "A": "We see that here," Niedecker writes, "is one who has always been coming to where he is" (From *This Condensery* 293). About his short poems she writes, "their energy sings in a new way, they move in a circular path . . . they seem to move in all directions at once—each of the smallest and the most quiet a field of magnetic force" (302). And "A"-II, which Niedecker writes is "probably the high mark of all of 'A' so far in construction, subject matter, and emotion of intellect" (299) itself contains two suggestive allusions to the river, both of which Niedecker quotes in her essay: "River that must turn full after I stop dying" (124) and later "Honor // His voice in me, the river's turn that finds the / Grace in you..." (125).

Niedecker's relatively late poem, "My Life by Water," (1967) provides an excellent example of Objectivist principles applied to a river poem:

My life
by water—
Hear
spring's
first frog
or board
out on the cold
ground
giving
Muskrats

gnawing
doors
to wild green
arts and letters
Rabbits
raided
my lettuce
One boat
two—
pointed toward
my shore
thru birdstart
wingdrip
weed-drift
of the soft
and serious—
Water (*Collected Works* 238)

The poem attempts to capture the dynamic play of the river in spring. The lines alternate from straightforward description to more obscure syntax—"Muskrats / gnawing / doors // to wild green / arts and letters"—as the poet seeks to render the river's activity in as sparse and vivid a language as possible. The words float down the page, like random objects the poet's eye might pick out on the water from her fixed vantage point on "my shore." The discrete placement of individual words disrupts the normative flow of conventional syntax, instead reaching for a more fluid sense of motion in which energies move both toward and from any single word, thinking with the river as it exists. Moreover, just as Zukofsky had emphasized "direction along a line of melody," the poem pays close attention to the sounds of the river as much as to the visible objects. The opening instruction to "Hear" culminates in the aural richness of the compound words "birdstart / wingdrip / weed-drift."

The final capitalization of "Water" is the one element that suggests a possible move away from the naturalized setting, toward something larger—water with a capital W. This move hints at metaphor, at some kind of transcendence operating through the details of the particular.

The "soft / and serious—/ Water" assigns a proper name to the obscure presence of something foundational, something that makes everything else in the scene possible. But unlike Eliot, Niedecker resists making the metaphysical leap. No "River God" in this scene. The mystery of the river *as* river is more than enough, without imposing any "mirage of seeing" onto the scene.

In a short poem from 1955, Niedecker composed a picture of the river in winter:

I sit in my own house
secure,
follow winter break-up
thru window glass.
Ice cakes
glide downstream
the wild swans
of our day. (167)

Again we have the primary Objectivist scenario of the poet observing the object from the outside, here looking at the chunks of ice from "thru window glass." The reference to "wild swans" may possibly echo Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole," yet the hint of figurative language backs away from the leap into symbolism central to Yeats's version of the natural world. The phrase "of our day" suggests the demythologized world that Niedecker inhabits; the ice floes may look like wild swans, but they do not project any symbolic valence beyond the simple observation of the object.

Yet another seasonal river poem is "Fall," a good example of Niedecker's delicate manipulation of sound effects.

Early morning corn
shock quick river
edge ice crack duck
talk

Grasses' dry membranous
breaks tick-tack tiny
wind strips (206)

The poem replicates the sounds of the fall morning through its own internal aural construct that is separate from but sympathetic to the aural experience of the objective river beyond the poem. We seem to "hear" sounds of the river evoked through the "tick-tack tiny / wind strips."

Of all the seasons, spring on Blackhawk Island was the most dramatic, bringing the annual floods that provided Niedecker with powerful examples of the dark Darwinian drama of survival. She writes of hearing "the wild / wet rat, muskrat / grind his frogs and mice / the other side of a thin door / in the flood" (208). For Eliot, the flooding of the Mississippi assumed a moral valence: "the subjection of Man gives Man his dignity" (xv). Niedecker, on the other hand, respects the power of the flood while resisting the impulse to sublimate the flood within a larger metaphysical significance. Her experience of the river during flood times is grounded in precise observations. In an August 1950 letter to Zukofsky, for example, she writes:

The birds and animals came close, practically inside the house because on two sides I had only a couple of feet of land. A flood in the summer here is like a tropical jungle. The Amazon flowed through just in front of my thick growth of dogwood . . . Living in the teeming tropics under jungle law I wasn't surprised one morning to find two blood spots on my cement steps and not far away a decapitated young rabbit. (Penberthy 170)

And at the end of the same letter, she adds:

Carp worked on the edge of the lawn and slapped the water at night. Lots of snakes of course, one disporting himself on a young willow like Spanish moss. I notice frogs get eaten in quantities by almost everything. Mozart's Air and Chopin much too delicate for this country but beautiful moonlight nights. (171)

Rather than seeing the hand of a transcendent River God in the power of the flood, Niedecker sees evidence of a Darwinian survival of the fittest—in the "jungle law" of decapitated rabbits and in the dance of survival as snakes and other animals edge closer to Niedecker's cabin. The cataclysm of a flood drives away all thoughts of human culture; the Mozart and Chopin of the Zukofskys' urbane existence is a much different sort of music than one finds in the natural world.

Niedecker's association of flooding with survival of the fittest rather than with mythological floods that reassert human subjugation aligns poetic knowledge with the kind of scientific methods and objective disenchantment to which Zukofsky was aspiring in his *Poetry* essay. Evolution, rather than metaphysics, becomes the dominant epistemological framework through which Niedecker refigures the relationship of the river to living creatures. She places the vari-

ous dramas of the human family, including marriage and the organization of patriarchal society, within this larger evolutionary context, as in this poem from the mid-1940s.

I rose from marsh mud
algae, equisetum, willows
sweet green, noisy
birds and frogs

to see her wed in the rich
rich silence of the church,
the little white slave-girl
in her diamond fronds.

In aisle and arch
the satin secret collects.
United for life to serve
silver. Possessed. (*Collected Works* 170)

The progression from river and mud to dry land and the church becomes not a *trope* for natural selection but rather an *example* of this evolutionary adaptation from the primordial, pre-symbolic natural state to the symbol-laden institutions of a repressive human culture - the church and the mirthless wedding it sanctions. Yet even here, Niedecker focuses on the hard objects of evolution - the "algae, equisetum, willows" evolving to "diamond fronds" and "silver." Her notes to the poem, reprinted in the *Collected Poems*, reveal just how central evolutionary thinking was to her thinking here: "A long step from algae to the girl-slave, free to be a slave, a mind to support the silver kings. A long step from cell-division to the sweating of the male while the other takes her time acquiring silver and diamonds, donning and taking off satins" (414). Niedecker's integration of evolutionary concepts reflects a grounding of poetic knowledge in empirical observation and evolutionary theory, part of the larger demythologizing project initiated by Darwin. In absorbing Darwin's worldview into her vision of the river, then, Niedecker does not so much turn the river into a metaphor, but rather incorporates an evolutionary perspective into the poet's "objective" vision of the natural scene.

But to argue that Niedecker's use of figurative language drawn from the discourse of evolutionary biology does not represent a return to a poetics grounded in metaphor would seem open to the

charge of special pleading. And in fact, part of the pleasure of a poem like "I rose from marsh mud" stems from the way it permits the reader to engage in the familiar practice of decoding figural language. The figuration allows the poem to move beyond an "Objective" picture of a wedding and instead make a rhetorical argument about marriage and patriarchy. Similarly, in "Paean to Place," a late (1968) composition that is perhaps Niedecker's most famous and frequently anthologized poem, the poet telegraphs her bitter family history through a series of tropes involving the river that are borrowed from the discourse of evolutionary biology: "My life // in the leaves and on water / My mother and I / born in swale and swamp and sworn / to water" (261). This poem has long been among Niedecker's most popular and accessible poems, no doubt because it evokes the arresting family drama through a plethora of suggestive metaphors — "I was the solitary plover / a pencil / for a wing-bone" (265). In terms of the Objectivist program, however, this poem would seem to reflect a betrayal of the object itself, despite the title's affirmation of this particular "place."⁸ The river and its landscape function as sources of ingenious tropes whose proper subject is not, ultimately, the river itself but the family drama occurring on its shores.

In fact, Niedecker regularly transfigures the river landscape of Blackhawk Island to serve poems whose subject is her childhood and family history. In a poem from the early 1950s, Niedecker writes of her father that "he'd given her a source / to sustain her— / a weedy speech, / a marshy retainer" (170). The river landscape serves as source for the poet, but it cannot remain objectively separate from the poet. Instead, the natural world bleeds into the poetic subject, producing a hybrid "weedy speech." In an unpublished poem from the mid-1950s, Niedecker imitates the "weedy speech" of her mother: "'Hatch, patch and scratch, / that's all a woman's for / but I didn't sink, I sewed and saved / and now I'm on second floor'" (167). Niedecker's mother expresses her resentments through a vocabulary informed by her own "life by water," the hardscrabble struggle to escape the same floodwaters that expose the Darwinian drama of decapitated rabbits and muskrats grinding frogs and mice. The river landscape provides both the context for family conflicts and a way for Niedecker to make sense of them—as further casualties of the flood. "I've wasted my whole life in water. / My man's got nothing but leaky boats. / My daughter, writer, sits and floats" (107). As in "Paean to Place," these poems do not exactly abandon the Objectivist

vision of the river and the natural landscape, but they do expose a personal affect projected onto the river in ways that ultimately do transfigure the natural world into something vaguely malevolent and oppressive rather than something impersonal and "objective."

THE ROCK

Around the same time that Niedecker was writing her "Paeon to Place," she was also venturing forth in a new direction, both poetically and in life. In May 1963 she married Al Millen, a housepainter from Milwaukee, and together they embarked on a series of summer roadtrips from 1965 to 1967 to North Dakota; around Lake Superior; to Copper Harbor, Michigan; and to Door County, Wisconsin. In the poetic series that came out of one of these road trips, the "Lake Superior" poems, we find a renewed dedication to the antimetaphoric impetus of the Objectivist program. Both the poems and the copious notes Niedecker took on these expeditions show a new fascination with rock as a central force of nature. The rock becomes a solidly Objectivist object around which to construct poems because, unlike the ahistorical water, the rock can be situated into an evolutionary, geological, and historical chronology. We can see how the rock functions as a kind of historical/evolutionary fulcrum in her diary-essay on Lake Superior, where she collated some of the notes she took during her 1966 road trip around the lake. The essay's opening paragraphs bring together seemingly random observations about geology and history that are linked together in stone:

The agate was first found on the shores of a river in Sicily and named by the Greeks. In the Bible (Exodus) this semiprecious stone was seen on the priest's breastplate.

A rock is made of minerals constantly on the move and changing from heat, cold and pressure.

The journey of the rock is never ended. In every part of any living thing are materials that once were rock that turned to soil. These minerals are drawn out of the soil by plant roots and the plant used them to build leaves, stems, flowers, and fruits. Plants are eaten by animals. In our blood is iron from plants that draw it out of the soil. Your teeth and bones were once coral. The water you drink has been in clouds over the mountains of Asia and in waterfalls in Africa. The

air you breathe has swirled thru places of the earth that no one has even seen. Every bit of you is a bit of the earth and has been on many strange and wonderful journeys over countless millions of years.

So—here we go. Maybe as rocks and I pass each other I could say how-do-you-do to an agate. ("Lake Superior Country" 311)

This effusive celebration of minerals "constantly on the move and changing" identifies rocks and minerals as the central objects in an ongoing evolutionary trajectory that is both biological and cultural but decidedly not metaphysical or figurative. The "journey of the rock" moves from antiquity through time and space right into our very bodies, as the minerals that appear in our blood, teeth, and bones. The poet looks at the seemingly mute physical object and identifies the cultural history and evolutionary time contained therein. This observation brings the poet closer to the natural world, not through the willed assertion of a metaphor - "I was the solitary plover" - but through actual human physiology, an assertion that makes its way into the opening lines of the poem "Lake Superior":

In every part of every living thing
is stuff that once was rock

In blood the minerals
of the rock. (232)

Whereas in "Paeon to Place" the speaker declares herself as "sworn to water," here the observations are distanced from subjective affect and instead are framed in the language of objective science: we contain rock, our blood contains iron.

In both the diary-essay "Lake Superior Country" and the poem "Lake Superior," Niedecker seems to be reasserting a fierce commitment to the Objectivist principles that had captivated her decades earlier in her first encounter with Zukofsky. The "rock" as physical object brings together the natural and the cultural, the subject and the object, the present and the past, but it is no metaphor; rather, it literally contains the secrets of its history within its geological layers.

Iron the common element of earth
in rocks and freighters (232)

—
Through all this granite land

the sign of the cross

Beauty: impurities in the rock (233)

—

And at the blue ice superior spot
priest-robed Marquette grazed
azoic rock, hornblende granite
basalt the common dark
in all the Earth

And his bones of such is coral
raised up out of his grave
were sunned and birch bark-floated
to the straits (233)

—

Ruby of corundum
lapis lazuli
from changing limestone
glow-apricot red-brown
carnelian sard

Greek named
Exodus-antique
kicked up in America's
Northwest
you have been in my mind
between my toes
agate (234)

The pleasures of rocks and minerals are at once intellectual—"in my mind"—and sensual—"between my toes." Niedecker seems to relish not only the tactile quality of rocks and minerals, but also their rich names—agate, corundum, granite, basalt. The words, in true Objectivist fashion, become objects themselves whose particular tactile experience corresponds to the tactile quality of the objects they name. In addition, both words and rocks bear the marks of a particular history. "Priest-robed Marquette" references one history; "azoic rock, hornblende granite" references another. The poem moves from rocks to words and back again, appreciating the fine details of each specimen, aware of the historical pressures that have shaped the

object at hand. Together, words and rocks blend in this poem to create, as she writes in "Lake Superior Country," "one vast, massive, glorious corruption of rock and language" (313). This commingling of word and object produces a new kind of poetic beauty, one that results from the "impurities in the rock."

Thus, to feel a piece of agate "between my toes" is to be aware of a confluence of geological and historical forces, not lost in the ceaseless flow of the river, but anchored in language and culture at a particular point in time. By locating the confluence of these forces within the word and within the object, Niedecker reinvigorates, in these "rock" poems, the Objectivist model Zukofsky had advocated years earlier: "Impossible to communicate anything but particulars—historic and contemporary—things, human beings as things their instrumentalities of capillaries and veins binding up and bound up with events and contingencies" (*Prepositions* 16). In "Lake Superior," Niedecker reaffirms her commitment to this charge, even to the point of coming back to those "capillaries and veins," in the mineral-rich blood. "Lake Superior" shows Niedecker expanding her sense of what an Objectivist poetics of the natural world might encompass. Not bound by personal associations, these poems open out into a larger view, expanding into the "historic and contemporary" particulars of the geologic landscape. The result is an almost liberating rediscovery of the natural landscape through Objectivist eyes:

The smooth black stone
I picked up in true source park
the leaf beside it
once was stone

Why should we hurry
Home (236)

The placement of the final word "Home" (notably capitalized) suggests both the river landscape of Blackhawk Island and perhaps familiar modes of poetic expression. In "Lake Superior," the poet "born in swale and swamp and sworn / to water" steps solidly outside her place of origin and away from the affective figuration that the river encourages. While her father had "given her a source / to sustain her," a source drawn from the swampy waters surrounding Blackhawk Island, in "Lake Superior," Niedecker fixes on a different source for poetry. Far from her longtime home on Blackhawk Island,

in "true source park," Niedecker embraces the rock, exchanging the constraints of autobiography, personal affect, and trope for the expansive view that history and geology afford. The view there is exhilarating: "Why should we hurry / Home."

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NOTES

- ¹The literature of ecocriticism and ecopoetics has expanded tremendously in the past decade. For two recent examples, see Armbruster and Buell.
- ²For theoretical discussions of metaphor, see Franke and Sacks.
- ³See Harrison on the forest as a foundational trope in Western culture.
- ⁴Niedecker wrote these comments after having read papers in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison (today the Wisconsin Historical Society). Many of those documents can be found on the Historical Society web site. See <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org>. "Lincoln/Net," the "Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project", produced at Northern Illinois University, also has a substantial on-line archive of related to the Black Hawk War. See <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/>.
- ⁵For more on the relationship between Niedecker and Zukofsky see the introduction to Penberthy's *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky*.
- ⁶The extent to which Niedecker's poetry is indebted to Objectivist principles has been a subject of some debate among critics. While Zukofsky's writings certainly had a formative influence on Niedecker's sense of her own work, her style is very much her own and reflects also conscious affinities with surrealism and folk idiom. Moreover, in letters to various friends in the 1960s, Niedecker increasingly sought to distinguish her poetics from Objectivism. Nevertheless, I would argue that Niedecker's poems on nature invoke the Objectivist principles outlined in Zukofsky's essay and in Niedecker's 1955 essay on Zukofsky.
- ⁷For more on Niedecker's relationship to Zukofsky and to the Objectivists, see Heller. For larger overviews on Objectivist movement see DuPlessis and Quatrain.
- ⁸Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that this poem, written between 1966 and 1968, reflects a shift in Niedecker's thinking about her poetics, a self-conscious moving away from Objectivist principles toward something looser and more inclusive, something DuPlessis calls "fusion poetics." Douglas Crase speaks of Niedecker's "evolutional sublime" as a kind of compromise position that yokes together the empirical, Objectivist allegiances of Niedecker's poems with the metaphysical impetus associated with figural language.

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THE MATRIARCHAL MENTOR:
EDNA FERBER'S EMMA MCCHESENEY AS BOTH
"NEW" AND "WOMAN"

SCOTT D. EMMERT

In 1912 a fiction writer of ambition and talent, enjoying recent popular success but still working as a journalist to make ends meet, was buttonholed by an ex-President of the United States who was once again seeking the nation's highest office. This vibrant and exceedingly confident man wanted to discuss not himself or his political fortunes but a character the writer had created. While today such a scene seems implausible, the situation did occur between Theodore Roosevelt and Edna Ferber, and years later in her first autobiography, *A Peculiar Treasure*, Ferber recounted the experience this way:

At the Congress Hotel [in Chicago where she was covering the Republican National Convention] I met Theodore Roosevelt for the first time. Bill White introduced us. Roosevelt's first remark to me was characteristic. Here he was, in the midst of the fight of his fighting life.

"What are you going to do about Emma McChesney?"

Of course I was stunned and immensely flattered, as he had meant me to be. "Why—uh—I don't know, Mr. Roosevelt."

Briskly he took charge. "Well now, I'll tell you. I think she ought to marry again. What became of her first husband? Die? Or did she divorce him? You never said. Anyway, she's got to marry T. A. Buck. An immensely vital woman. She could manage business and marriage all right. Now, in that last story you had her . . ."

I knew this trick of his, but I was completely disarmed nevertheless. He hadn't just skimmed the stories; he had read them all. He knew the character as well as I did. (196)

Featured in a series of stories then running in the *American Magazine*, Emma McChesney is employed by the T. A. Buck Featherloom Petticoat Company covering the Midwest as its lone female traveling "salesman." Here her success has been forged by hard work, something made clear in an early story in which we learn that "[e]very Middle-Western town of five thousand inhabitants or over had received its share of Emma McChesney's attention and petticoats" (*Roast*, "Chickens" 51). Moreover, Emma understands the fashion needs of Midwestern women, as when she decries trendy New Yorkers' preferences for "'silk lace and sea-foam nighties'" because "'there are thousands and thousands of women up in Minnesota, and Wisconsin, and Michigan, and Oregon, and Alaska, and Nebraska, and Dakota who are thankful to retire every night protected by one long, thick, serviceable flannel nightie, and one practical hot-water bag'" (*Roast*, "In the Absence of the Agent" 292-93).

Like her character, Edna Ferber (1885-1968) also honed her work ethic in the Midwest. Born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Ferber spent her childhood in Chicago, Illinois, and Ottumwa, Iowa. Her family later moved to Appleton, Wisconsin, where she graduated from high school and got her first job in journalism working for the *Appleton Daily Crescent*, becoming that newspaper's first woman reporter (Rodgers xviii). Later a reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal*, Ferber eventually turned to writing fiction full time, and she became one of the most commercially successful American novelists of her day. Her novel *So Big* (1924) won the Pulitzer Prize and became the basis for two feature films. Indeed, in addition to being popular in their own right, a number of her novels, including *Showboat* (1926) and *Giant* (1952), were also made into hit films. Ferber's first wide success, however, followed her creation of Emma McChesney, and while in 1939 Ferber claims to have been "stunned" by Roosevelt's interest in Emma, in 1912 the young writer was savvy enough to capitalize on the great man's interest: words of praise written by Roosevelt in a follow-up letter to Ferber appeared in a magazine advertisement marketing future installments of Emma McChesney's story (Decker 28).

These stories were so popular that they would run for five years (1911-1915) in the *American Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan* and be collected in three books: *Roast Beef, Medium* (1913), *Personality Plus* (1914), and *Emma McChesney & Co.* (1915). In 1918, three years after this last collection was published, the author of *Wisconsin Authors and Their Works* would enthuse: "Emma McChesney is one

of the cheeriest, truest, and most helpful characters given to American readers in recent years" (Rounds). Although Ferber was offered a large sum to continue writing and publishing these stories, she declined, fearing creative stagnation (*Peculiar* 173-74). She did, however, write a play titled *Our Mrs. McChesney*, produced in 1915 and starring Ethel Barrymore, and she penned one later Emma McChesney story that appeared in the collection *Half Portions* (1920), a story that celebrated Emma's patriotic service during the First World War.

As Roosevelt's interest suggests, the McChesney stories were widely read and admired. Explanations for their popularity must account for their appeal to both male and female readers (Gilbert 408-09), for these stories were not merely "woman's fiction" or even "New Woman's fiction." Indeed, the stories were published in mass-circulation magazines¹ and not in ones aimed primarily at female readers. In fact, as we will see, the Emma McChesney stories were not like typical "New Woman" fiction though they certainly featured a character that might be so labeled. Nor were these stories typical of the kind of business fiction then being published, fiction that tended to take a skeptical view of commerce and trade, and of the people who plied such trade. The McChesney stories were popular not only for their novelty in presenting a female businesswoman who was, moreover, a traveling "salesman"—the first such character in American fiction (Shaughnessy 100)—but also for the implicit support they offered to men (and to women as well) who wished to succeed in business. Rather than posing a threat to male readers, Emma fit comfortably within a prevailing philosophy of success: not only was she self-assured, hard-working, and competitive, but she was also a mentor to others—particularly to her son, Jock, and to T. A. Buck Jr., the son of the company's founder and the man whom Emma, in fulfillment of Teddy Roosevelt's wishes, would eventually marry. In her capacity as mentor, Emma provided a reassuring fictional counterpart to advice provided by the how-to-succeed-in-business manuals of the time.

To understand how Ferber was offering fiction that was both novel and reassuring, one need only consider the kinds of stories then being published that focused on the New Woman and on the lives of businessmen. In the Introduction to *Breaking the Ties That Bind: Popular Stories of the New Woman, 1915-1930*, Maureen Honey discusses the characteristics of the New Woman story. Among these is

the depiction of ambitious and usually artistic women "committed to self-expression and creative work" who often "worked alone and claimed private space"(15), thus "position[ing] [themselves] for the leap from female culture to male" (16), male culture being represented by such activities as painting portraits, acting in serious dramas, and flying airplanes. One area of male culture eschewed by the characters in these stories, however, was business. In surveying the barriers to the characters' success, Honey concludes, "Commercialism is corrupting in the standard New Woman story" (25). Though a New Woman character often succeeds financially, she does not work for money; instead, she works for self-fulfillment, to fashion "a world of her own making," a world in which she "either finds a mate compatible with [this new world] or recommits herself to a woman's right to have a life apart from marriage" (8). As Honey notes, these stories are clearly more fantasy than reality in that they tend to portray women "able to have it all" (10).

Emma McChesney certainly fits some of these qualities of the New Woman character: She is creative, a kind of artist, who in addition to understanding the importance of charm in making sales can write effective advertising copy and even design new lines of women's undergarments. But Emma is also much different from this New Woman character in that she does not work alone, especially in the later stories when she leaves the road and becomes a manager. Nor does she have to position herself for a leap into male culture; as a "salesman" she is already a part of that culture when the series begins. And she of course does not find commercialism corrupting. Far from it; business is in her nature, as she says in the story "Blue Serge" to a woman thinking of quitting her job after marriage: "Some people are just bound to—to give, to build up things, to—well, to manufacture, because they just can't help it. It's in 'em and it's got to come out. . . . You're one—a great big one. I'm one" (*Emma* 134). Indeed, her identification with the business profession is so complete that she refers to herself unreservedly as "a traveling man" (*Roast*, "Her Mother's Son" 80). Finally, Emma is not a young woman in her twenties, a common age for a New Woman character: When the series opens, she is a mature thirty-six with a seventeen-year-old son (*Roast*, "Roast Beef Medium" 17).

The biggest difference, however, between Emma McChesney and the typical New Woman character is that Emma does not overtly challenge the ideology of separate spheres. Instead of inhabiting one

and not the other and instead of raising one over the other, Emma merges the female domestic and the male public/business spheres. Critic Jeffrey Louis Decker dubs the McChesney collections "a hybrid literary form: the domestic business novel" (25). Moreover, William Gleason argues that in a time when "Progressive Era women reformers" accepted separate spheres for men and women (44), Emma is "[c]learly working against gender role expectations" (70). She does so, however, without rejecting the perceived need for gender roles, for she is portrayed as both a self-made man and a mother, both a builder of self and a builder of others. As a character who integrates both traditional masculine and feminine roles, and who succeeds in both male and female spheres, Emma validates both public and private success.² Less a challenging figure than an ameliorating one, Emma represents a model of what might be called conservative progress, a forward-looking attitude founded solidly on tradition that was almost guaranteed to appeal to both male and female readers in the early twentieth century.³

The popularity of the Emma McChesney stories may also be traced to the positive attitude they exhibit toward business. In contrast to a body of fiction then casting a jaundiced eye on business and businessmen, the McChesney stories celebrate industry, morality, and individual achievement in business. The most notable, but by no means atypical, fictional businessman was Theodore Dreiser's Frank Algernon Cowperwood. Featured in two novels contemporaneous with Ferber's McChesney stories—*The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914)—Cowperwood portrays the American businessman as amoral and rapacious. Cowperwood's frequently spoken "I satisfy myself" flatly summarizes his attitude. Moreover, as Emily Stipes Watts notes, Cowperwood and other businessmen in fiction were shown to be decidedly antifamily: "Along with their lack of ethics and their amazing ease in making money, the fictional businessmen of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were also accused of neglecting or destroying their wives and children" (64). Emma McChesney is the opposite of the insatiable and socially irresponsible businessman: She is a chaste divorcée and a doting mother who insists that she will marry again only for love.⁴ Here, of course, Emma stays safely on the right side of the sexual double standard, and her obedience to a traditional sex/gender role furthers Ferber's fictional celebration of business as a wholesome pursuit. Furthermore, the McChesney stories appeared in the years when

"muckraking was [beginning to go] out of style" and magazines were less likely to print exposés of big business and "the evils of greed and corruption" (Tebbel and Zuckerman 119, 120). Like other successful popular writers, then and now, Ferber was riding a change in the Zeitgeist.

Part of this change affected attitudes toward the means of becoming successful in business, and here as well Ferber positions Emma McChesney as a model of the new. In particular, in the early twentieth century, the myth of the completely self-made man of business is challenged—surprisingly enough, within the world of business itself. That myth, as Irving G. Wyllie writes, had long roots in American culture that preceded its being named by Charles C. B. Seymour in the book *Self-Made Men* published in 1858 (19). As Wyllie puts it: "The legendary hero of America is the self-made man. He has been active in every field from politics to the arts, but nowhere has he been more active, or more acclaimed, than in business. To most Americans he is the office boy who has become the head of a great concern, making millions in the process. He represents our most cherished conceptions of success, and particularly our belief that any man can achieve fortune through the practice of industry, frugality, and sobriety" (6). Fundamental to the myth of the self-made man is the confidence that the exercise of personal virtues is more important than the effects of external circumstance in the economic and social success of young men of business. So strong was the belief that success can be attributed to internal character traits and not to outside influences that, after surveying various reasons for wide-spread business failure in the 1890s, Wyllie observes: "[But] only infrequently were failures charged against depressed business conditions or other causes beyond the control of the individual." More often these failures "were explained by such categories as incompetence, inexperience, extravagance, fraud and neglect" (32).

For the most part, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, self-made men are portrayed as individuals naturally in possession of the virtues necessary for success or as individuals assiduous in helping themselves to attain these virtues. One major shaping force allowed for in this myth, however, is a young man's mother. However, a mother shapes individual character; she is not a purveyor of business knowledge or acumen (Wyllie 29). By the early twentieth century, in contrast, external training in business begins to be emphasized, and the so-called self-made man of the earlier model of success is increas-

ingly looked upon as artificial.⁵ While "self-help handbooks" in the nineteenth century "offer little practical advice on advertising methods, accounting systems, investment procedures, production techniques, and other such mundane matters," instead stressing "private character and morality" (Wyllie 34), by the time of the Emma McChesney stories, higher education for men bent on a career in business was less likely to be discouraged, as it had been for much of the nineteenth century (Wyllie 101-115). In this instance, Emma proves herself to be a remarkably modern woman: She encourages Jock, her son, to go to college before entering business. Indeed, she works hard to earn money to make sure he stays in college.

Emma also embodies newly developed ideologies in business management theory. One further challenge to the myth of the self-made man was the rising number of women entering business—mostly in clerical and retail sales positions—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶ Compounding the crisis in masculinity that resulted from this rapid change (How could a man be a man if a woman could do his job?) was the development of "scientific management theory" that privileged "the work process rather than personal relations" (Kwolek-Folland 73). This theory threatened the notion of the self-made man who rose to prominence through his own efforts. As one historian writes, "To the extent that the work process could be measured, and to the extent that it was governed by technological developments and increasing job specialization, it was less possible to imagine a place for the self-made man of character, for social mobility through work, for the opportunity to prove one's manhood by grappling with the vicissitudes of business life, or for physical skill and stamina" (Kwolek-Folland 73).

Although changes in the work force and in work itself threatened established ways of defining masculinity, a different management theory emerged in the early twentieth century that provided men with the reassurance that business was still "manly." This theory, "impressionistic management," differed from scientific management theories by emphasizing "sensibility" and interpersonal skill. Furthermore, impressionistic management allowed "women [to] argue for a female role in business management and insurance sales," even though men still dominated sales and indeed were trained for sales jobs in ways that sought to "balance aggression and empathy, competitiveness and teamwork" (Kwolek-Folland 77), i.e. balance male and female char-

acteristics. Thus, "By World War I, managerial theory created an ideological niche for both male and female managers that incorporated rather than challenged nineteenth-century gender divisions" (Kwolek-Folland 76). While continuing nineteenth-century notions that successful salesmen were, in the words of one educator, "'progressive, enthusiastic, ambitious, and manly,'" impressionistic management also relied on "assumptions about women's nature—their empathetic qualities, sensitivity to other's needs, and ability to persuade others." These qualities were also deemed to "fit perfectly with sales work" (Kwolek-Folland 76).

In short, management theory evolved not so much to include women in greater numbers but to include definitions of management that incorporated certain "female" attributes while maintaining that sales was still a "manly" profession.⁷ An inspirational poem, "A Man Who Wins," from a 1907 business publication summarizes the attributes a "man" needs to be a successful manager and salesman: :

The man who wins is the man who does
The man who makes things hum and buzz,
The man who works and the man who acts,
Who builds on a basis of solid facts,
Who doesn't sit down to mope and dream.
But humps ahead with the force of steam,
Who hasn't the time to fuss and fret,
But gets there every time - you bet! (qtd. in Kwolek-Folland 87)

A newsletter published by the Heinz company in 1905 referred to its preferred brand of in-house salesman this way: "'He is polished, intelligent, energetic; a man of affairs; a student of human nature; an observer of conditions; alert, affable, dignified, enthusiastic. He is trained for his work'" (qtd. in Friedman 91). Except for the male pronoun, this description fits Emma McChesney. No wonder one critic calls Emma "the woman who had mastered the man's world" (Wilson 78), though of course she does so not by being a man with certain feminine qualities useful in business, but by being a woman perfectly in line with male definitions of success.

Though representing a masculine model of success, Emma nonetheless adheres to the traditional roles of mother and wife. Specifically, she mentors Jock and T. A. Buck, Jr., acting as a kind of living advice manual to make them better men of business. Jock certainly needs his mother's guidance as he works to build the kind of

character deemed necessary to business success. The reader's first view of him occurs when Emma notices a "weasel" flirting with a young shop girl, dubbed a "chicken." Emma is shocked to discover that Jock is the weasel, what today's younger generation might call a "player" (*Roast*, "Chickens" 65-66). Seeing her son's slide into dissolution, Emma—in typical fashion—takes decisive action. First, she lectures him about having to work hard:

"You'll have to [work], Jock. That's the only thing that will make a man of you. I've started you wrong, but it isn't too late yet. It's all very well for boys with rich fathers to run to clothes, and city jaunts, and 'chickens,' and cabs and flowers. Your mother is working tooth and nail to earn her six thousand, and when you realize just what it means for a woman to battle against men in a man's game, you'll stop being a spender, and become an earner - because you'll want to" (*Roast*, "Chickens" 74-75).

Then Emma insists that Jock go on the road with her to learn firsthand about hard work. The lesson takes time to sink in, for in later stories Jock approaches the advertising business with a desire for easy success, only to learn that charm is not a substitute for effort and to be sobered as well as inspired by his mother's serious approach to business: "So it was with something of his mother's splendid courage in his heart, but with none of her canny knowledge in his head, Jock McChesney fared forth to do battle with the merciless god Business" (*Personality*, "Personality Plus" 42). By the last collection of stories, Emma is able to congratulate herself for having "trained [Jock] into manhood and placed his foot on the first rung of business success" (*Emma*, "Blue Serge" 113). In the end, Jock has become a successful executive, but his greatest achievement in Emma's eyes is marrying the beautiful and intelligent Grace Gault, who sacrifices her own business success to be a wife and mother (*Emma*, "An Etude for Emma" 210-211).

Emma also mentors her future husband, helping him to progress from potential stagnation as an aging playboy to a mature man of business smart enough not only to marry Emma but also to let her help him run the company he inherited from his father. Here again, Emma instructs through example. For instance, in the story "Hoops, My Dear!" Emma and Buck react to the failure of one of their salesmen, who returns from the road defeated. As Ferber puts it: "The Middle West would have none of him" (*Emma* 158). Leaping into

action, Emma decides to exhibit the company's new, fuller skirt at Madison Square Garden and convince department store buyers from places like "Manistee and Oshkosh and Terre Haute" (159) that an American-designed garment is just as good as a French-designed one. The skirt is, of course, a huge success, as once again Emma's business sense and creativity win the day. But more than simply succeeding in a competitive male-dominated business, Emma in this instance also strikes a blow for women's freedom. When the model who will wear the skirt dissatisfies Emma by walking too stiffly, Emma chides her: "'Myrtle, listen: That Australian crawl was necessary when our skirts were so narrow we had to negotiate a curbing before we could take it. But the skirt you're going to demonstrate is wide. Like that! You're practically a free woman in it. Step out! Stride! Swing! Walk!'" (168).

It is certainly possible, therefore, to read the Emma McChesney stories in feminist terms⁸ and Ferber/McChesney's credentials as a feminist ring clearly in Emma's assertion that "'[a]ny work is woman's work that a woman can do well'" (*Roast*, "Knee-Deep in Knickers" 258). Arguably, however, as a character Emma may have been popular because she did not overtly challenge traditional masculine and feminine roles. Instead, she successfully reconciles those roles within the business world. Like many heroes in popular culture, she is an ideal of successful negotiation of opposites without loss of self. She builds an individual reputation, becoming a celebrity in a man's world, while not losing the opportunity to be a wife and mother. She is, in short, the woman who has it all—which remains a contemporary fantasy for women at a time when more women work outside of the home than ever before. She would very likely appeal to readers of popular fiction today, something that would please her creator, the crowd-pleasing Edna Ferber, to no end.⁹

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NOTES

¹The *American Magazine* was owned by the same company that published *Collier's* and that enjoyed 12 percent of the overall magazine advertising revenue in 1912; *Cosmopolitan* was unlike the current magazine with that title (i.e., a magazine targeted almost exclusively toward women readers), and by 1918 it had over 1 million subscribers (Tebbel and Zuckerman 79). Furthermore, according to Frank Luther Mott *American Magazine*, founded by some of the country's best-known magazine "contributors" (3: 512), sought to appeal to the "average man and woman" (3: 514) by publishing work by both established and new writers. (In this latter category was Edna Ferber.) Mott also details the his-

tory of *Cosmopolitan* in the years when the Emma McChesney stories were appearing (4: 496-98). These years saw *Cosmopolitan* emerge as the "the best-selling magazine in the world" (4: 496) by focusing on the publication of fiction aimed at "the general magazine audience" (4: 498). That the McChesney stories had both male and female "fans" is accepted by Lawrence R. Rodgers, though he also notes that women who worked in sales tended to write Ferber letters urging her not to let Emma marry (xiii-xiv). Although the readership for the McChesney stories may very well not have been equally divided between men and women - there may be no way of knowing for sure - as a genre "business fiction was in great demand" in America in the early twentieth century (Di Renzo xiv-xv). Midwestern writer Sinclair Lewis, for one, was cashing in on this wide popular interest, publishing stories "written for and about 'the tired business man' [that] appeared in such popular slicks as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *American Magazine*, the periodicals we find in George and Myra Babbitt's living room" (Di Renzo xiv). The author is grateful to questioners at the 36th Annual Conference of The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature for encouraging the discovery of further details about the readership of the Emma McChesney stories.

²Mary Rose Shaughnessy also points out this dual success: "Her roles as mother and wife sometimes conflict with her role as businesswoman, but she manages to succeed in both simultaneously" (112).

³Christopher P. Wilson identifies the "adroit combination of masculine and feminine attributes in what contemporaries dubbed Ferber's 'Bull Moose heroine'" as a significant reason for Emma's popularity with readers (81).

⁴Michael Oriard detects a clear gender split in this regard, noting that most of the business fiction by women in the early twentieth century "reveal[s] no interest at all in the mighty titan," a "demigod" figure of considerable power and often inconsiderable scruple (208).

⁵According to Wyllie, in the Progressive Era, as critics of business—tax reformers, Populists, and "muckrakers" among them—grew more vocal, the realism of self-help books and the myth of the self-made man were questioned. These books offered characters too perfect to believe, and "they glossed over the hard realities of business practice" (149).

⁶See Stuart Bruchey for statistics charting the increase in women office and sales workers between 1870 and 1910 (354). Angel Kwolek-Folland also demonstrates this rise in women office workers (4) while noting that these increases were not nearly as sharp in the areas of management and non-retail (e.g., insurance) sales (78).

⁷Traveling sales was seen as especially masculine. Walter A. Friedman writes, "Commercial traveling was an occupation that defined itself as being 'manly' and, indeed, was almost entirely filled by men. This was true in 1890 (when 99 percent of those in the profession were male) and continued to be so in the decades afterward" (60).

⁸Emma is seen as a feminist role model by Julie Goldsmith Gilbert (408) and by Mary Rose Shaughnessy (343-44).

⁹The Emma McChesney stories represent Ferber's least critical presentation of business as a pursuit in which women can be happy and successful. Two subsequent works by Ferber are skeptical of a woman's opportunity to be happy in business; see Adam Sol on the 1917 novel *Fanny Herself* and Christopher P. Wilson on the 1921 novel *The Girls* (89).

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WISCONSIN: LAND OF STRANGE BEINGS AND ANCIENT GODS

SARA KOSIBA

Wisconsin is not the first place many people think of when considering the fantastic and supernatural, particularly in literature. While strange qualities are often attributed to other states and regions of the country, such as the supernatural New England tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne or the mythic history and superstition of William Faulkner's Deep South, Wisconsin is marginalized in terms of its potential oddity for many reasons. One main contributing factor is that the Midwest as a whole is not often portrayed or realized in literature or in American culture as a region of mysterious possibility. While localized areas of the Midwest recognize their distinctiveness and their individual claims to creepiness, when perceived by the majority of the American population the region becomes "America's heartland" or "flyover country," either wholesome and patriotic or bland and homogenous. Wisconsin itself, through its image as "America's Dairyland" or the land of "Cheeseheads" and the Green Bay Packers, seems far from out of the ordinary. In various regions of the state, however, myths, stories, and traditions survive that give the perceived normalcy of Wisconsin a reason for reassessment.

Two writers in particular stretch the boundaries of possibility in Wisconsin with their portrayal of strange gods or beings and spectral places, particularly in the northern forests. One, a Wisconsin native, August Derleth, began this process in the early half of the twentieth century. Derleth's commitment to his home state is amply revealed in the many regional stories and novels he composed over his career. While he wrote in many genres, Derleth enjoyed supernatural or macabre tales, in many cases building on the ideas and influences of H.P. Lovecraft, and transferred those images and ideas to the Wisconsin landscape, imagining it as a place of mystery and strange

spirituality. Derleth also drew on existing characteristics of the region that already leaned toward the supernatural in his compositions. Thirty years after Derleth's death, a British writer transplanted to the northern Midwest found similar potential for the supernatural and strange in Wisconsin. Neil Gaiman, in his award-winning¹ fantasy/horror novel *American Gods* (2001), addressed larger issues of American culture and identity and used many Midwestern locations to convey those ideas to his readers. In particular, a great deal of the novel is set in various Wisconsin locations, some of which contain aspects of the fantastic or extraordinary. Gaiman, a student of similar writers and traditions as Derleth, also found the state to have potential as a setting for his tale of how the ordinary can, at times, become quite strange. By looking at these writers and their use of regional landscape comparatively, Wisconsin emerges as a place of extraordinary mystery and supernatural possibility and a state that should be reassessed for the multiple literary landscapes it can represent.

Derleth, while writing a book of advice for aspiring writers, addressed the techniques necessary for a good "imaginative story." An imaginative story, by his definition, included tales of horror, ghost stories, fantasy tales, and science fiction. His advice was that "the imaginative tale rising out of a familiar background carries the most drama for the average reader" (*Writing Fiction* 98). By making common surroundings transcend their typical characteristics, the author of an imaginative story subverts the reader's expectations. This strategy often contributes to making the subsequent plot twists and developments eerier and more surprising when they occur. Derleth explained, "The conclusion is overwhelming, after a study of the fiction in the field, that the sense of reality has first to be carefully instilled, and then with equal care to be insidiously undermined, so preparing the reader for the shock of discovery of the incredible" (*Writing Fiction* 98). Derleth's supernatural stories set in Wisconsin are the strongest in his writing of the genre. When in such familiar territory, Derleth is able to portray the ordinary with such accuracy that the extraordinary elements of his writing are all the more disturbing for the often startling juxtapositions they create.

An example of the ordinary being a location for the strange and fantastic can be found in Derleth's short story, "The Drifting Snow," originally published in *Weird Tales* magazine in 1939. While staying at a house in northern Wisconsin, members of a family wonder at

their aunt's superstition in keeping the curtains on the west-facing windows closed every night. Eventually, their persistent curiosity gets the better of them, and in peering through the window they see figures wandering in the growing blizzard. When they express concern, the aunt reveals that years ago her father cast a servant girl out into a snowstorm in anger and that the girl died due to exposure. The aunt further explains that,

Years later—she came back. She came in a snowstorm, as she went; but she had become vampiric. We all saw her. We were at supper table, and Father saw her first. The boys had already gone upstairs, and Father and the two of us girls, my sister and I, did not recognize her. She was just a dim shape floundering about in the snow beyond the French windows. Father ran out to her, calling to us to send the boys after him. We never saw him alive again. In the morning, we found him in the same spot where years before the girl had been found. He, too, died of exposure.

Then, a few years after—she returned with the snow, and she brought him along; he, too, had become vampiric. They stayed until the last snow, always trying to lure someone out there. (47)

Her nephew Henry does not believe the story and leaves the house, determined to rescue the two figures he sees out in the snow. Two men from the house venture into the snow to rescue Henry and while they succeed in returning him to the house they are too late. Henry has been influenced by the figures outside and he rushes back, only to be found dead in the morning with marks of the girl's hands on him. The idea of a "snow vampire" stretches ordinary reality (and even ordinary definitions of "vampire") and yet, because Derleth couches this idea within the ordinariness of a family visit to an aunt's house and the solitariness of the northern Wisconsin location, the story takes on an uncertain believability. Through Derleth's description, a reader can picture this house, can picture the snow blowing outside, and can imagine being in this house surrounded by these people, particularly sharing their skepticism. The darkness, the blowing snow, and the distance to the nearest neighbor all contribute an air of uncertainty to such ordinary surroundings and make the idea that something like a snow vampire can exist outside the walls of a secure, comfortable house all the more believable.

Derleth also builds on elements specific to Wisconsin and its history and culture that further infuse the ordinary aspects of the state

with greater possibilities. Drawing on Native American references and locating his stories vaguely but with authentic reference points, he begins to tell supernatural stories that have a more inherent Wisconsin feel. One story where these traditions and locations are featured most prominently is in "The Dweller in Darkness" (1944). The story begins with an epigraph by H.P. Lovecraft, describing the type of location that most appeals to a fan of horror: "But the true epicure in the terrible, to whom a new thrill of unutterable ghastliness is the chief end and justification of existence, esteems most of all the ancient, lonely farmhouses of backwoods regions; for there the dark elements of strength, solitude, grotesqueness and ignorance combine to form the perfection of the hideous" (275). Northern Wisconsin provides this type of background for Derleth. He begins his story by establishing the setting, explaining a drive north through what

is not desolate country, but an area thick with growth, and over all its expanse there persists an intangible aura of the sinister, a kind of ominous oppression of the spirit quickly manifest to even the most casual traveler, for the road he has taken becomes ever more and more difficult to travel, and is eventually lost just short of a deserted lodge built on the edge of a clear blue lake around which century-old trees brood eternally, a country where the only sounds are the cries of the owls, the whippoorwills, and the eerie loons at night, and the wind's voice in the trees. (275)

Through this description, particularly through its cadence, Derleth infuses the ordinariness of trees, forests, and animal sounds with a sense of loneliness and solitude, much like Lovecraft recommends.

A tale in the style of H.P. Lovecraft, "The Dweller in Darkness" is the story of two men who head to northern Wisconsin in search of a lost professor. Professor Upton Gardner, of the University of Wisconsin, had been up north seeking the source of strange sounds and circumstances that had been reported in an area around Rick's Lake. Derleth weaves aspects of Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos² into the story, as the characters find the area around the lake a point of power for strange elemental beings. These beings are part of the land, air, fire, and water and are often referred to as being quite old and even ageless. Again, the characteristics attributed to these strange beings take advantage of the understandable in average elements of nature and yet, by encouraging their timelessness, expand the sense

of uncertainty by placing them outside the realm of ordinary time or scientific understanding.

Besides simply describing the creepy visual and auditory characteristics of the area, Derleth incorporates elements of folklore and myth that are prevalent in the region, commenting on how earlier missionaries to the area had recorded strange happenings in their journals, drawing on the area's historical evolution, and making reference to local legends. Derleth makes reference to Professor Gardner's work in regional folklore and legends, mentioning at various points Paul Bunyan, Whiskey Jack³, the Hodag⁴, and the legend of the Wendigo⁵. That these myths and legends actually exist in or around northern Wisconsin and the places where Professor Gardner is purportedly researching gives Derleth's story a greater sense of legitimacy, as well as deepens the mystery that inhabits the rather common surroundings at the lake. Paul Bunyan's larger-than-life persona in the dense woods of the northern Midwest, the strange and ferocious image of the Hodag lurking in the Wisconsin forests, and the other historical and native references provide a tangible connection for tales of the unknown. Derleth's narrator even comments in the story that "legends abound in out-of-the-way places" and that because of that commonality, they are often not seen as having any greater significance until strange situations or reports multiply and expand as they do in the case of Rick's Lake.

After arriving at the lodge up north, the men are at a loss to explain what they are seeing and hearing. They travel south to Wausau to visit another retired professor who studied in the same areas as Gardner. The professor describes to the men "a mythology of pre-human life not only on the earth, but on the stars of all the universe. 'We know nothing,' he repeated from time to time. 'We know nothing at all. But there are certain signs, certain shunned places. Rick's Lake is one of them.' He spoke of beings whose very names were awesome—of the Elder Gods who live on Betelgeuse, remote in time and space, who had cast out into space the Great Old Ones" who include figures like the "amphibious Cthulhu" and the figure that is haunting the woods around Rick's Lake (290). The professor further explains that

Long before human beings walked the earth, the conflict between the Elder Gods and the Great Old Ones had taken place; and from time to time the Old Ones had made a resurgence toward power,

sometimes to be stopped by direct interference by the Elder Gods, but more often by the agency of human or non-human beings serving to bring about a conflict among the beings of the elementals, for, as Gardner's notes indicated, the evil Old Ones were elemental forces. (290-91)

While these gods are taken almost verbatim from Lovecraft's mythology, the story that Derleth chooses to tell with them draws more upon the elements of the Wisconsin landscape, creating a tale that gives the area greater supernatural significance.

As the story evolves, the men discover that Professor Gardner not only has been kidnapped, but his spirit has been taken over by the very elemental being he was trying to find. They find a stone slab in the forest around the lodge that appears to have ties to this strange being and believe that it is connected to the professor's disappearance. In danger for making this discovery, the men try to save themselves the only way they know how, by invoking a second elemental being to try and counter the first being, "The Dweller in Darkness." The tale ends as they flee for their lives. The forest around them erupts into an elemental battle of fire and light, but in the closing images of the story there is again a return to the ordinary turned extraordinary as the men take one last look back and see

the line of footprints that led away from the lodge in the direction of that hellish slab deep in the black forest, the footprints that began in the soft soil beyond the verandah in the shape of a man's footprints, and changed with each step into a hideously suggestive imprint made by a creature of incredible shape and weight, with variations of outline and size so grotesque as to have been incomprehensible to anyone who had not seen the thing on the slab—and beside them, torn and rent as if by an expanding force, the clothing that once belonged to Professor Gardner, left piece by piece along the trail back into the woods. (305-6)

The uncertainty of the forest and what lurks within provide the ultimate backdrop for this story of the weird and strange. Derleth, by drawing on various mythologies and legends, creates a supernatural Wisconsin that lives both in fiction and in the deceptive simplicity of the state's landscape.

Neil Gaiman also found extraordinary aspects in Wisconsin's perceived ordinariness. Regarding his use of the Midwest, and particularly Wisconsin, in much of *American Gods*, Gaiman responded in a

Minneapolis Star-Tribune article that "Friends on the east and west coasts have said, 'So why did you set it in flyover country?' When I first came here, everything was new and magical and strange. And I tried to get as much of that into 'American Gods' as I could" (Smith 13F). Shadow, the main character of the novel, travels throughout America in the aid of Mr. Wednesday, never entirely clear on what business he is assisting him with but content to not ask a lot of questions. The plot eventually evolves to reveal that at the center of the characters and the novel itself is a battle between the old gods of America, the gods that people brought over from their original countries or prayed to in the days of the early pioneers, and the new gods of the contemporary world, like media and television, that people appear to worship and pray to in current American culture. Gaiman's focus on gods, while applicable to American beliefs and traditions as a whole, also addresses a preoccupation of Midwestern writers. O.E. Rølvaag, in *Their Father's God* (1931), also questions the role of gods in emigrating from Norway to the Midwest, wondering what impact that move has on the spiritual beliefs of a people⁶. Gaiman moves concerns like Rølvaag's to the present day, when American society has found a more homogeneous identity and, while still influenced by gods of the past, is also shaped by modern "gods" and concerns.

Like Derleth, Gaiman also draws on Wisconsin traditions and mythology, as well as specific references to location and place, to give his story greater authenticity while stretching the bounds of ordinary reality. Early in the novel, Wednesday and Shadow travel to the House on the Rock, in Spring Green, a location that in the novel represents a place of spiritual and magical power. For many, the House on the Rock would simply be a roadside attraction, a place for tourists to explore imaginative architecture and an eclectic collection of objects. Wednesday explains that in the old days they would deem the energy at sites like this holy and build churches or temples there, but

in the USA people still get the call, or some of them, and they feel themselves being called to from the transcendent void, and they respond to it by building a model out of beer bottles of somewhere they've never visited, or by erecting a gigantic bat house in some part of the country that bats have traditionally declined to visit. Roadside attractions: people feel themselves pulled to places where, in other parts of the world, they would recognize that part of themselves that is truly transcendent, and buy a hot dog and walk around,

feeling satisfied on a level they cannot truly describe, and profoundly dissatisfied on a level beneath that. (118)

According to Wednesday, the House on the Rock fulfills this ambiguous sense by providing a location for people to visit that seems to represent something more significant and yet fails to exactly articulate or fulfill that longing.

Wednesday and Shadow tour the house and the grounds, noting highlights like the House's Infinity Room and the various music boxes and displays that are found throughout the rest of the complex. Gaiman incorporates some of the House's history:

Forty years ago Alex Jordan [. . .] began to build a house on a high jut of rock in a field he did not own, and even he could not have told you why. And people came to see him build it—the curious, the puzzled, and those who were neither and who could not honestly have told you why they came. So he did what any sensible American male of his generation would do: he began to charge them money—nothing much. A nickel each, perhaps. Or a quarter. And he continued building, and the people kept coming. (120)

The House on the Rock, through Wednesday's description, serves as a place for the lost and curious to converge. It has a power that draws people together. And as Shadow explores the fortune-telling machines and is encouraged by Czernobog to view a moving nineteenth-century diorama because it is "the world as it is," Gaiman repeatedly emphasizes through the images and associations the worldly connections and subtle power of the House.

The ultimate locus of power at the House on the Rock, and one of its claims to fame as a roadside attraction, is the World's Largest Carousel. This is the location Wednesday has been leading Shadow and the others to in a roundabout fashion. Shadow is in awe at the visual impact of the carousel:

A sign proclaimed it was the largest in the world, said how much it weighed, how many thousand lightbulbs were to be found in the chandeliers that hung from it in Gothic profusion, and forbade anyone from climbing on it or from riding on the animals.

And such animals! Shadow stared, impressed in spite of himself, at the hundreds of full-sized creatures who circled on the platform of the carousel. Real creatures, imaginary creatures, and transformations of the two: each creature was different. He saw mermaid and merman, centaur and unicorn, elephants (one huge, one tiny),

bulldog, frog and phoenix, zebra, tiger, manticore and basilisk, swans pulling a carriage, a white ox, a fox, twin walruses, even a sea serpent, all of them brightly colored and more than real: each rode the platform as the waltz came to an end and a new waltz began. The carousel did not even slow down. (127)

Gaiman's description incorporates the characteristics of the actual carousel, which most would likely perceive as being nothing more than a curiosity or an awe-inducing but fundamentally common carousel. In *American Gods*, however, the location and the carousel itself contain much greater meaning. The carousel is described by a companion of Wednesday's and Shadow's as being "Like a prayer wheel goin' around and round. Accumulating power" (128). Defying the rules, the men mount carousel animals and use them to journey through this holy place and access the world of the gods. The House on the Rock, besides being a famous Wisconsin landmark, begins to take on alternate, otherworldly possibilities. The eccentricities or fantastical elements of its creation or greater collections are not to be dismissed lightly in Gaiman's estimation, for with some imagination and an open mind, the most ordinary locations might also serve some other purpose.

Shadow spends his most stable moments in the novel hiding out in the fictional northern Wisconsin town of Lakeside, where local experiences also contrast the ordinary with the extraordinary. Gaiman notes in his "Caveat, and Warning for Travelers" at the beginning of the novel that he has obscured the origin of Lakeside, suggesting that for all its reality it would be difficult to pinpoint to one particular place. The qualities of Lakeside indeed seem common to many northern Wisconsin towns. Shadow's first day in town is made notable by the fact that the temperature is minus thirty and he is caught walking to town without proper clothing. When saved from the cold by the local friendly sheriff, he is taken to Mabel's, the local restaurant famous for its pasties. Mabel explains that the food is a "yoopie thing. Mostly you need to be at least up Ironwood way to get one. The Cornish men who came over to work the iron mines brought them over" and clarifies that "yoopie" means the "U.P." or Upper Peninsula of Michigan (267). This conversation is yet another way Gaiman works in local characteristics and language to add authenticity to Shadow's experiences. One of the local town traditions is to park a junked car out on the ice during winter and sell

chances to see who can pick the day the ice will melt and the car will fall through, with the money going to charity. All these qualities seem common or believable for a northern Wisconsin town.

By the end of the novel, Shadow becomes suspicious about the town's normalcy, particularly when browsing through an old book of town records and seeing that the name Hinzelmann appears again and again. The only Hinzelmann that Shadow knows is a friendly old local man who is well thought of and accepted around town. Shadow thinks that the references are merely to Hinzelmann's ancestors but also notes in the town records the mysterious disappearance every year of a child from the town. After pondering these circumstances for a while, Shadow begins to suspect that the old man might not be as simple as he appears and believes that he is connected to the children's disappearances. Shadow returns to Lakeside and investigates the trunk of the old car positioned on the ice, having been tipped off during the battle of the gods that something is in there. The ice is thin and thawing and yet Shadow crawls out anyway:

He walked toward the klunker, painfully aware that the ice was too rotten for this, and that the water beneath the ice was as cold as water could be without freezing. He kept walking, and he slipped and slid. Several times he fell.

He passed empty beer bottles and cans left to litter the ice, and he passed round holes cut into the ice, for fishing, holes that had not frozen again, each hole filled with black water. (553-54)

Gaiman's description highlights rather ordinary aspects of a thawing lake and yet what Shadow discovers upon the lake, the dead body of that year's missing child in the trunk of the junked car, is anything but ordinary. Shadow starts to suspect that below the ice is a graveyard of sorts, of cars and children, extending back as long as the town had existed.

Shadow discovers that the explanation for the missing children lies in the fact that Hinzelmann⁷ is really a god who, in exchange for prosperity and a good life for the town, accepts the sacrifice to him of a child every winter. These sacrifices are placed in the trunk of the car on the ice every year. When confronted, the old man confesses "I made the lake. They were calling it a lake when I got here, but it weren't nothing more than a spring and a mill pond and a creek." He paused. 'I figured that this country is hell on my kind of folk. It eats us. I didn't want to be eaten. So I made a deal. I gave them a lake

and I gave them prosperity...'" (564). In exchange for this child sacrifice and Hinzelmänn's continued life, Lakeside enjoys a stability and prosperity that are unusual when compared to the shifting economic and social conditions of surrounding towns. Upon learning this, "Shadow wondered which of the people who had come to northern Wisconsin 150 years ago, a woodcutter perhaps, or a mapmaker, had crossed the Atlantic with Hinzelmänn living in his head" (568). Lakeside is in many ways a typical Wisconsin town that, according to the novel, was created in a strange fashion and contains a very atypical past. Through the circumstances of Gaiman's novel, the identity of this typical Wisconsin town changes, showing the fine line between the ordinary and extraordinary.

American literature is filled with authors such as Edgar Allen Poe, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, or H.P. Lovecraft who take common aspects of region and place and render them fantastic by invoking their supernatural tendencies and potential. While Wisconsin is not the first location one often thinks of when thinking of the haunted or supernatural, through the writing of August Derleth and Neil Gaiman the state is redefined and opened to new perspectives and possibilities that defy the ordinary. While many characteristics of the state may seem average, some of those qualities, when perceived through another set of eyes or through various circumstances like the ones in these stories, take on more magical or mystical possibilities. Through the myths and legends which inhabit the region, in addition to the physical creepiness inherent in many of the forests and areas themselves, Wisconsin becomes a place where extraordinary or unexplainable things can and do happen.

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NOTES

¹*American Gods* won the Hugo Award for best Science Fiction/Fantasy novel, the Bram Stoker Award for best Horror novel, the Locus Award for best Fantasy novel, and the Nebula Award for best novel.

²H.P. Lovecraft invented the Cthulhu and other elemental beings through many of his supernatural and fantastic stories. These beings were merged with land, air, fire, and water and defy any time period or age. In Lovecraft's fiction, they often appeared in various New England locales, often through strange subterranean passages and other connections to their alternate world. Various other fantasy and horror writers have occasionally borrowed or expanded on these characters and dabbled in this world, a type of authorial fan fiction that gave birth to the term the "Cthulhu mythos" which encompasses the genre as a whole.

³Whiskey Jack, also known as Wisakedjak or Wisa'ka. Found in Cree, Ojibwa, Fox, Shawnee, and Algonquin stories in various names or images. Known as a creator (cred-

ited with having created the earth and everything on it) as well as a trickster. (definition compiled from two sources: Leach, Maria, ed. *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of American Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*. Vol 2. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1950 and Leach, Marjorie. *Guide to the Gods*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1992)

⁴A mythical horned creature fabled to inhabit the forests of northern Wisconsin (particularly in the area of Rhinelander, which has adopted the Hodag as its mascot)

⁵Also known as Windigo. Giant cannibalistic monster of Ojibway legend. Noted for bringing ice and cold with his presence. (Bastian, Dawn E. and Judy K. Mitchell. *Handbook of Native American Mythology*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004)

⁶Rölvaag comments on this in various ways. In *Peder Victorious* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929), Peder reflects on the differences of talking to God in English versus Norwegian (he has this battle regularly with Beret). He reflects at one point, "If God lived here, He must be an American. There you have it! . . . What would they want of a Norwegian God in this country? Most likely that's just what these Norwegians didn't understand and so things went wrong with them" (17). In *Their Father's God*, Peder gives a speech at the beginning in response to the rainmaker the town agrees to hire, talking about needing to cast off old Norwegian superstitions in order to become more American and make way for progress. Later, in the same novel, he has a discussion with Nikoline, a recent immigrant from Norway, where they discuss the differences between seeing mirages (what Norwegians call *hilder*). Nikoline tells him "We know when we see *hilder*; we can tell it and make allowance. You Americans believe all you see until you run your heads against a stone wall; then you don't believe anything anymore" (235). Through this conversation, Peder's conviction that American ways or gods are better is deeply questioned.

⁷Hinzelmänn was the most famous of the German kobolds (mischievous spirits who often dwelled in mines and were small and hairy). They especially loved children, often took the form of a child to play with them, and were kind to those who respected them. Often gave them gifts. (American Gods gods website: <http://frowl.org/gods/gods.html>).

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THE DIVIDED WORLDS AND CONFLICTED SELF
REVEALED IN STEWART EDWARD WHITE'S
THE BLAZED TRAIL AND
THE UNOBSTRUCTED UNIVERSE

PAUL W. MILLER

"It is only the vividness of memory that keeps the dead alive forever."
John Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 119

The American writer Stewart Edward White (1873-1946), who was reared in Michigan but spent much of his adult life in California, is mainly known today, if at all, for his friendship with Teddy Roosevelt, and for his early influence on Ernest Hemingway, who in 1915 wrote in his high school notebook that O. Henry, Kipling, and Stewart Edward White were his three favorite authors (Reynolds 39, 50-51). White wrote adventure tales resembling those written by Owen Wister, Jack London, and James Oliver Curwood, stories set in the undeveloped or developing American West and in the Far North. Later White found another new frontier in Africa, where he hunted, shot and reportedly killed some seventy lions. Though many of White's more than sixty published fiction and nonfiction works were hurriedly written potboilers, at least two, *The Blazed Trail* (1901, 1902) and *The Unobstructed Universe* (1940), merit attention. These are sharply contrasting works, not only in the different genres they illustrate but in the values they espouse: rugged realism tinged with romance in *The Blazed Trail* vs. a highly romantic, inevitably subjective, but scrupulously reported and reasoned argument for spiritual survival after death, based on spirit messages received by and from White's wife Betty before and after her death in *The Unobstructed Universe*. The tug of war between realism and romance, science and imagination, that goes on between these works as well as within them, is important as it points to a lifelong conflict

in White himself, a conflict scarcely noted by his critics and, to date, his two biographers.

The first of these works, a novel about the decline of lumbering in the 1880s in Michigan's Lower Peninsula and its beginnings in the Upper, "is the classic novel of the logging industry, just as Owen Wister's *The Virginian* is the classic cowboy novel . . . Readers follow the logs from standing timber to delivery at the end of the drive. The job of each man, the dangers, and the hardship are described in detail" (Alter 16, 18). *The Blazed Trail* was a huge popular success in its day. Even today it stands as a readable, realistic, sometimes violent narrative of an important bygone era.

The second work is an inward-looking autobiographical account of White's paranormal experience as a mature adult, apparently far removed from the machismo of most of his early action-packed books, including *The Blazed Trail*. But like *The Blazed Trail*, *The Unobstructed Universe* was "as successful in its field as *The Blazed Trail* had been forty years earlier. Within the first three and a half months after its first publication in 1940, it went into its twelfth printing; in July of 1942 it was in its seventeenth. Month after month it appeared as a national best seller" (Butte 352). In this work White, on the authority of his dead wife Betty, communicates the wisdom of "the Invisibles" (defined by White as "discarnate earth-entities") through a trusted friend and medium he pseudonymously called Joan. After her death in 1955, Joan was revealed to be Ruth Ebright Finley, a New York journalist originally from Akron, Ohio, who, with her husband Emmet, co-authored in 1921 a psychic work about a World War I soldier-revenant entitled *Our Unseen Guest*. White's *The Unobstructed Universe* describes life after death as a generally pleasant, fully conscious state unobstructed by the daily obstacles to immediate satisfaction that characterize our lives on earth (*Universe* 16). White's glorification in his early novels of his protagonists' abilities to deal with the hazards of lumbering, with violent enemies, or with ferocious wild animals appears in context of his psychic works to be nothing more than a dramatic—or melodramatic—but ultimately insignificant record of mankind's attempts to overcome the obstacles to happiness in our daily lives. Furthermore, it seems as though in his later works White abandoned his hard-won niche as a much admired independent thinker and writer to become an editor engaged in the comparatively humble task of revising, as necessary, the million-plus words he recorded in shorthand from the wisdom of

"the Invisibles" (*Universe* 16). By this eccentric approach to composition, not alleged to be revised "dictation" until 1937 or 1938, he produced four books arguing for the continuance of individual lives after death: *Credo* (1925), *Why Be a Mud Turtle* (1928), *The Betty Book* (1937), and *Across the Unknown* (1938? 1943). In addition, he wrote five more psychic books besides *The Unobstructed Universe: The Road I Know* (1942), *anchors to Windward* (1943), *The Stars Are Still There* (1946), *With Folded Wings* (1947), and *The Job of Living* (1948), for a total of ten psychic works in all. (The last two works were published posthumously.) In his psychic works he portrayed bodies not as facilitators of life but as "barriers of encasement" that impede or "muffle" the friendly and loving relationships for which human beings all grope, barriers overcome only by death, the great liberator (*Universe* 18).

The gulf between White's character revealed in his earlier and later work as epitomized by *The Blazed Trail* and *The Unobstructed Universe* is so great at first glance as to make their author appear almost schizophrenic. Alternately, this gulf might be viewed as the product of a conversion experience coming relatively late in life to a perfectly sane person possessing what William James called the Divided Self — a common, but by no means universal, attribute of mankind. According to James, the conversion experience, occurring most frequently in adolescence, typically follows a time of crisis often approaching despair, following which one side of the Divided Self comes to dominate the other and to produce marked changes in one's life, usually, but not always, in the form of spiritual development (166, 199). What sets off White's transformation from the typical conversion experience is not only its coming relatively late in his life, when he was about forty-five years of age, but its being unaccompanied, so far as we know, by a period of crisis and despair. That some spiritual transformation took place in White at about this age and that it led to a form of spiritual development one could scarcely have prophesied earlier is evident.

Although the evidence of what William James has called the Divided Self is most marked in White as one compares his later works with his early works, one can also find evidence of the Divided Self within *The Blazed Trail* (as I argue later), in spite of its author's determination to focus attention on the violent, realistic elements of commercial fiction White knew he had to write in order to make a living from his writing.

Both of White's biographers to date, Edna Butte and Judy Alter, must have been well aware of the gulf in subject matter and focus between White's earlier and later published works, both fiction and nonfiction. Nevertheless, in an effort to find some consistency in the man and his work, both of them treat his psychic works as just one more frontier, the last in a series of frontiers the Whites elected to explore. To be sure, both Butte and Alter hint at a certain discontinuity between this new frontier and the merely "planetary frontiers" of northern Michigan, the Hudson Bay region, Africa, and Alaska when they describe this last frontier as "the greatest adventure of their [the Whites'] lives" (Butte 334, Alter 42). But what makes this so-called last frontier radically different from the others is that it substitutes investigation of mankind's inner life for the Whites' earlier exploration of some of the last remaining frontiers on planet earth.

A further radical difference is White's abandonment, on this last voyage of extraterrestrial exploration, of the role of male superiority laced with machismo he had assumed on logging, camping, fishing, and hunting trips around the world with his wife Betty, a society girl from Newport, Rhode Island. While he made clear in several of his nonfiction adventure stories that he loved her deeply and regarded her as a willing, valuable participant in his adventures, he nevertheless usually managed to convey the idea that he, not she, was the Big Chief of these expeditions. Getting things started on the right foot (at least from his point of view), their honeymoon in 1904 took the form of an extended camping trip in the High Sierras of California, where Betty, like her husband, slept on the ground with no tent, ate camp food, and got along "by way of wardrobe— for four months— on what she could stuff into one small duffle bag" (qtd. in Butte 187). Later White summed up as follows his married life as a writer and "planetary" traveler in the years before his psychic travels began: "My family . . . consists of one wife who goes wherever I go, even into Africa, and two dogs who would like to go wherever I do, but I sternly command them back at times . . . My way of life is to come home . . . work awhile, and then depart for almost anywhere" (qtd. in Alter 8). In his years devoted to psychic writing, Stewart's and Betty's roles were reversed, with Betty reporting on life after death through a medium and her husband playing the role of amanuensis and editor. At least that is how in *The Unobstructed Universe* he described his new method of composition, a method he was slow and

apparently reluctant to reveal to his public, for reasons on which we can only speculate.

Contrary to both Butte's and Alter's interpretation, White's exploration of the inner life and the extraterrestrial universe in his late writings was not a new frontier at all, but a return to the first frontier of his life as a writer. As White himself pointed out, his first long unpublished work of fiction, *Aliris: A Romance of All Time*, was different from his early published writing, those shaped by his Columbia University English professor's realistic theory of writing, by commercial considerations, and by contemporaneous writers of realistic fiction:

[In *Aliris*] I selected a symbolical theme that covered eight million years and had to do with angels, and star evolution, and time relations and such things: together with a search through reincarnations and other handy devices for a meaning to the universe. The point at which this tale touched earth was Arabia, mainly because I knew nothing about it. I named this 'Aliris: A Romance of All Time.'

Fortunately when I had finished it I got caught up in a little series of excursions to such places as the Black Hills gold rush and Hudson's Bay. By the time my literary periscope again emerged I had made the acquaintance of Mr. Brander Matthews who gave me a shove in the direction of something a little more realistic. I still have 'Aliris'; but I have never dared read it. (Butte 84)

This work was composed over a period of six years, from about 1890 to 1896. To judge from his comments on it, one must conclude that any realism *Aliris* might have had was incidental if not accidental. Even so, it is clear from many references to it in his diary that White considered it a major work, at least up to the time he abandoned it under the combined influence of his father and his writing teacher and mentor Professor Brander Matthews, a well-known devotee of realistic American literature at Columbia University. Thereafter White made fun of and ultimately dismissed the work on which on which he had lavished so much time and energy.

While a student at the University of Michigan, White had promised his father that unless he could achieve reasonable success as a published author by the time of his graduation, he would prepare himself for a career other than writing, his first love. Since he could boast of little success as a published author by 1895, the year of his graduation, he kept his promise to his father by enrolling in

Columbia's law school the following year. There, in the last semester of his law program, he came under the influence of Matthews in a creative writing course. Matthews saw promise in one of White's stories, "A Man and His Dog," encouraging the young author to revise and market it and advising him always "to write about what he knew." The story sold for \$15.00. From that time forward White gave Matthews full credit for starting his successful career in writing at this turning point in his life, when he turned from writing fanciful works of imagination like *Aliris* to writing realistic — and salable — fiction and nonfiction. He typically based these works on his travel to unfamiliar places and on his experiences as a miner, logger, camper, fisherman or hunter, often in the undeveloped Western or Far North wilderness — areas uninhabited or sparsely populated by Indians, half-breeds and other exotic characters. Among the standard elements of realism employed by White in these works are his apparently objective narration, his selective use of detail, and his skillful arousal of suspense by hints of future narrative developments. These elements of realistic fiction are, of course, still employed by many successful popular writers today.

In hindsight it becomes clear that the imaginative world that White mocked is very similar to the one in the ten psychic works listed above. The difference, of course, is that in light of his growing belief in spiritualism, perhaps from as early as 1912 on, he maintained that the primary source of these works was not his imagination but "the Invisibles," communicating first through Betty, himself, and their friend Joan, initially with the help of an ouija board. Some months after Betty's death he began communicating with her spirit through Joan, who was serving as the medium (*Universe* 15, Alter 42, Butte 333).

To find evidence of the Divided Self even in his realistic writings, one need turn only to *The Blazed Trail*, where romance and fantasy play an important part in the novel's development, especially toward the end. Indeed, I would argue that even in this novel, with its trappings of realism that include a good deal of violence, the work as a whole moves toward the triumph of spiritual over this-worldly values, as is much more obviously the case with his psychic works like *The Unobstructed Universe*. Yet even in these later works elements of realism are present, reassuring the reader that although White's head may be in the heavens, his feet are still on the ground.

The tension between realism and the romantic imagination in *The Blazed Trail*, set in the 1880s, is perhaps most evident in varying attitudes toward the forest revealed by three key characters: its hero, his principal antagonist, and its heroine. For while both the hero and his principal antagonist see the forest as a plum ripe for exploitation, the former is determined to pursue forest wealth honestly, while the latter, totally unscrupulous, will use any means, legal or illegal, to enlarge his holdings of forest lands in his unending pursuit of wealth. The heroine, on the other hand, sees the forest initially as a beautiful but limited resource, full of spiritual significance, and in great danger of being swallowed up by insensitive, greedy men like the hero and his antagonist.

Early in the novel the young hero, Harry Thorpe, gets a job as a logger with the great firm of Morrison and Daly in the Saginaw River Valley of the Lower Peninsula, where the company's once vast pine holdings have almost all been cut. Recalling many Horatio Alger heroes before him, he works his way up from chore boy to become boss of a valuable but highly leveraged logging operation in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where large-scale logging operations are just beginning. In the first three parts of this five-part novel, before he meets his "dream girl," he is portrayed as a rising, hard-driving woodsman completely devoted to success, but always on honorable terms. Soon his logging crews recognize him as a tough but fair leader — he is as hard on himself as on the rough-and-tumble crews he commands. Quick to act and to judge in a crisis, he will dismiss a crew member for the slightest dereliction of duty. He is a stern administrator of justice, serving as prosecutor, judge and jury.

His powerful antagonist is Mr. Daly, woods partner of the large but criminally corrupt logging firm of Morrison and Daly, Thorpe's first employer. Thorpe discovers in the course of "land looking" on the Upper Peninsula that Morrison and Daly have been stealing millions of board feet of lumber from government lands adjoining their Upper Peninsula property. He uses this knowledge to persuade Daly to settle a disputed wage claim on behalf of Thorpe's good-hearted but naive logging boss, who was persuaded to sign a contract (illegal in Michigan law) requiring him to forfeit his whole salary if he failed to deliver all of the 5,000,000 feet of lumber contracted for. Later, adding insult to injury, Thorpe, backed by his wealthy friend Wallace Carpenter to the tune of more than \$30,000, beats Daly's firm out of buying a valuable logging property adjoining Morrison and Daly's

holdings, a property which both companies desperately want. Fired with a villainous desire to destroy his upstart rival by any means at his disposal, Daly has the same drive to success as Thorpe, but unlike Thorpe, has no compunction about manipulating or breaking the law in order to achieve his goals.

The heroine of White's novel, Hilda Ferrand, although she is not seen or even mentioned before the last two parts of the novel, also plays an important role. She is an eligible young society girl from Chicago and heiress to a large fortune. Somewhat improbably, she first appears to Thorpe as a wood sprite one beautiful moonlit night in a pine grove on his Upper Peninsula property, located somewhere in the wilderness near Marquette. As Thorpe watches her, she listens entranced, as he is by her, to the repeated song of a white-throated sparrow. Then she disappears. Only some days later, when she reappears in the forest by fading daylight as a girl rather than a moonlit creature "wholly divine," does he learn that she is on a camping trip with his financial backer's sister, Elizabeth Carpenter, and their entourage. Wallace Carpenter, Thorpe's partner and Elizabeth's brother, invited the campers to pitch their tents in Thorpe's section of the forest, half of which is Carpenter's, and all of which is in the process of being cut by Thorpe and his loggers.

I have described Thorpe initially as a character passionately devoted to success defined as the honest achievement of great wealth in the exploitative Michigan logging industry. So fierce is he in this competitive pursuit of wealth that he even comes to resemble his hateful antagonist Daly. Yet there is more to Thorpe than acquisitiveness guided to some degree by conscience. Even in the first three parts of the novel he is paradoxically portrayed as a lover of the mysterious beauty and spiritual significance of the forest he is destroying wholesale with his logging operations. Not until we come to the last two parts of the novel, when he meets the "wood sprite" Hilda, does the deep conflict in Thorpe both surface and demand resolution.

One of the clearest passages bringing out the conflict between Thorpe's dominant, down-to-earth materialistic nature and his repressed imagination, sometimes revealed in spiritual or even ecclesiastical imagery, is found when White's hero comes upon a magnificent section of virgin forest:

At first the grandeur, the remoteness, the solemnity of the virgin forest fell on his spirit with a kind of awe. The tall, straight trunks lifted

directly upwards to the vaulted screen through which the sky seemed as remote as the ceiling of a Roman church . . . Then the spirit of the pioneer stirred within his soul . . . These feathered trees, standing close-ranked and yet each isolate in the dignity and gravity of a sphinx of stone, set to dancing his blood of the frontiersman. He spread out his map to make sure that so valuable a clump of timber remained still unclaimed. A few sections lying near the headwaters were all he found marked as sold. He resumed his tramp light-heartedly. (120)

Thorpe finds his single-minded pursuit of success perfectly satisfying for a time, but eventually comes to realize that something important is missing in his life. He becomes restless and unable to concentrate on his work. White describes Thorpe's new problem this way:

Out of the present his mind was always escaping to a mystic fourth dimension which he did not understand. But a week before, he had felt himself absorbed in the component parts of his enterprise, the totality of which arched far over his head, shutting out the sky. (265).

In a passage that recalls Thorpe's own initially awed response to the beauty of the virgin forest he had discovered while land looking, White describes Thorpe's second, late afternoon encounter with his "wood sprite," now transformed into a flesh-and-blood girl standing "on a knoll in the middle of a grove of monster pines" with "the awe of the forest . . . in her wide, clear eyes":

There was something of the cathedral in the spot. A hush dwelt in the dusk, the long columns lifted grandly to the Roman arches of the frond, faint murmurings stole here and there like whispering acolytes. The girl stood tall and straight among the tall, straight pines like a figure on an ancient tapestry . . .

The great sweet feeling clutched the young man's throat again. But while the other, — the vision of the frost-work glade and the spirit-like figure of silence — had been unreal and phantasmagoric, this was of the earth. (278)

In this high-flown passage, as in several earlier passages, White clearly associates Thorpe's long repressed need for a spiritual dimension to his life with the soul-stirring, transcendental beauty of the forest, a need now at least temporarily transformed into need for a much idealized woman to share his love and life. A bit later in the novel she is seen through Thorpe's eyes as the priestess of love and "the high-

est symbol of God's splendor" (282). Earlier, however, on a less idealistic note, White compared Thorpe blindly searching in the forest for his vanished "wood sprite" to a bull moose in rut, "plunging through the trackless wilderness to his mate" (277). Thorpe, like White his creator, gradually emerges as a more interesting and complex character than is suggested by his early one-sided characterization as a man obsessed with material success.

After Thorpe's romance with Hilda flourishes for a few days, a conflict between him and her and within Thorpe himself develops over his lumbering operation. The immediate cause of this conflict is his poorly explained refusal for business reasons — "I want the money this will bring" — to grant Hilda's romantic request that he leave the beautiful grove where they first met uncut "until the very, very last." She compares his decimation of the forest to the awful devastation soldiers see after a battle:

But the battlefields, Harry; to me they are dreadful. I went walking yesterday morning . . . and after a while I found myself in the most awful place. The stumps of trees, the dead branches, the trunks lying all about, and the glaring hot sun over everything! Harry, there was not a single bird in all that waste, a single green thing. You don't know how it affected me so early in the morning. I saw just one lonesome pine tree . . . standing there like a sentinel. I could shut my eyes and see all the others standing, and almost hear the birds singing and the wind in the branches, just as it is here. (311)

No radical twentieth-century conservationist, she concedes that their "sacred grove" will have to be cut eventually, but cannot bear to see it once its desecration has been accomplished, hence her request. When he refuses it, citing the needs of his logging firm, she asks him,

"Do you need the money more than you do me? More than you do love? . . . There can be nothing better than love," she said.

"Yes, one thing," said Thorpe, "— the duty of success." (318)

She leaves him then, separated from him, apparently forever, by his masculine pride, their independent spirits, and their misunderstanding of one another, whereupon he returns to his single-minded pursuit of success. Not until his logging business fails is he sufficiently humbled to visit Hilda at her home in Chicago and make the following awkward confession: "You told me there could be nothing better than love. In the pride of my strength I told you this was not

so. I was wrong" (395). Welcoming him into her home and reaffirming her love for him as he turns to leave, Hilda concedes that God meant a strong man, such as Harry, to succeed, but then adds, "But, Harry, *are you sure that God meant him to succeed alone?*" (405). Buoyed by her declaration of love, he swallows enough of his pride to make it possible for him to accept the blank check she offers him. With her help he regains his lost confidence, averts the bankruptcy that had seemed inevitable, and achieves the success that had eluded him for the seven years he struggled alone. Perhaps he is coming to realize at the novel's end that success may be achieved by cooperation as well as independent struggle, and that success as well as failure in life without love may prove as hollow and empty as sounding brass or tinkling cymbal. In retrospect we see that in order to achieve this ending, White relied heavily on the coincidence of his hero's falling in love with an heiress who, when told he needs a hundred thousand dollars to bail him out of his financial difficulties, replies, "Why, it's nothing" (404). What the story gains by this happy ending, it loses in probability. Perhaps even more damaging to the story as a whole, this ending minimizes the significance of the conflict developed in the novel between Thorpe's interpretations of the forest as a potential source of wealth honestly achieved and as a symbol of mysterious transcendental values ultimately narrowed to represent the idealized love between a man and a woman. In the process, what was initially portrayed as a powerful and significant conflict in Thorpe's character is watered down to the point where the simultaneous pursuit of success and spirituality is seen to be compatible, provided the hero happens to fall in love with a generous heiress who returns his love. In effect the novel's ending suggests that with a little negotiation and compromise between hero and heroine, they can have it both ways, simultaneously achieving great material success and cultivating the spiritual values the heroine once thought were being trampled on by the hero's obsessive pursuit of money as the measure of success.

Whether or not White the author in pursuit of popular success in this and his other early novels compromised his own spiritual values as his heroine Hilda may have compromised hers remains a question. I suspect myself that he did. If so, it is probable that he did not fully regain his self-respect until, having gained the popular success he once coveted, he finally felt free to develop his long repressed imaginative and spiritual interests as a writer. Strangely enough, the

method of writing he hit upon, as noted above, gradually came to depend on his revision of spirit messages transmitted from beyond the grave. Many writers—but apparently not White—would regard such a method as the relatively unimaginative work of an editorial hack rather than a writer—unless in fact these transmissions were the combined product of White's as well as Betty's cultivated, disciplined imagination, mysteriously projected into the ether and then returned to earth in the form of messages from beyond the grave. Surprisingly, White himself seems to have considered such a possibility, as he hints in a final chapter added to *Across the Unknown* soon after his wife's death in 1943:

When I sat down at my [writing] desk, at 8 A. M., was I not doing my ritual of invocation no different in *essence*—though vastly in outward seeming—from the sacraments, mysticisms or plain abracadabra I had [once] thought so alien? And might not the whole be ordered into something approaching conscious control?

It began to look that way. For one thing Betty's teaching seemed to imply that all these various manifestations were actually the functioning of a specific faculty—something quite as definite as our physical senses. Heretofore it had not been to us as palpable as these, simply because it dealt with things which ordinarily we do not recognize, and of which therefore we are unaware. (290)

Earlier in the same volume it appears that the "Invisibles," like White himself, may identify Betty's "specific faculty" with imagination not too far removed from that of the writer or artist. Betty's spirit, though, is uneasy about the notion that imagination may be mankind's best if not his only guide to spiritual reality:

"I don't think," Betty interjected, "that's a very good word—imagination. It's too cobwebby with unrealities."

"Imagination?" [the "Invisibles"] cried, astonished. "Why, that is the very gateway to reality. Imagination is the Power of Transportation—that overrides space and time! Imagination enables you to put yourself *anywhere*. . . . It's the power to see the Pattern." (38)

Such was the power, the power of imagination, with which White strove more or less successfully through his long career to shape both his fictional and nonfictional works into artistic wholes, using the warring elements of the world around him and his inner self as raw

material. *The Blazed Trail* and *The Unobstructed Universe*, his two most successful works, composed some forty years apart, are clear illustrations of the warring worlds from which he shaped his many fictional and nonfictional works. As such, the outer and inner conflicts with which he grappled in both these works may well constitute an important but long ignored continuity in White's perception of the world and in the author himself — a distinctive signature without which both the man and the body of his work might appear to be hopelessly conflicted if not actually schizoid in their nature.

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RELIGION AND LITERATURE IN SINCLAIR LEWIS AND WILLA CATHER¹

JAMES SEATON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Willa Cather and Sinclair Lewis were contemporaries and both were authors from the Midwest who often wrote about the region, but that seems to be about all they had in common. Certainly they did not agree either about the Midwest or about religion. In *O Pioneers!* Cather celebrates the way of life created by farmers like Alexandra Bergson whose farm has "the order and fine arrangement" of a painting; Alexandra is a true artist, but her farm is her canvas, for "it is in the soil that she expresses herself best" (63). Carl Linstrum left Nebraska to become an artist, but when he sees her farm he realizes his mistake; he tells her "I've been away engraving other men's pictures, and you've stayed at home and made your own" (87). In Sinclair Lewis's portraits of the Middle West only a generation or two after Alexandra Bergson's time, however, neither farming, nor art, and certainly not religion, is able to give any true significance to life. Rev. Philip McGarry, one of the few thoughtful ministers in *Elmer Gantry*, marks the difference between the Middle Wests of Cather and Lewis when Lewis generously allows the reverend to become a literary critic and score a point against Lewis himself:

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

Elmer Gantry itself is dedicated to H. L. Mencken "with profound admiration," so the Rev. McGarry is quite right in linking Lewis to Mencken as exemplars of a philosophy that he implores his fellow minister, Frank Shallard, to avoid if he wishes to remain a minister of even the most liberal sort. Rev. Phil McGarry knows that his friend could be a successful minister if only "you could lose your intellectual pride, if you could forget that you have to make a new world, better'n the Creator's, right away tonight—you and Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells and H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis . . ." (357). In the world of *Elmer Gantry* religion—in particular American Protestantism—not only fails to give meaning and order to life, it fails so completely that an observer of that world—a reader—would have to agree with H. L. Mencken that only boobs and morons could possibly fall for it. The movie *Elmer Gantry* gives the impression that the real issue is the personal morality, especially the sexual escapades, of Elmer Gantry himself. And in the book as well as the movie, Rev. Gantry is continually on the lookout for available

women—in the passage that concludes the novel, Elmer's professional ability allows him to continue leading his congregation in prayer even as he notices in the church choir "a new singer, a girl with charming ankles and lively eyes, with whom he would certainly have to become well acquainted" (416). Lewis's target, however, is not merely Elmer Gantry himself, nor is it even the hypocrisy of those who denounce sin even as they practice it. Lewis intends to challenge Christianity itself, even when it is led by ministers who have the "longing . . . for decency and kindness and reason" (34) that Elmer conspicuously lacks.

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

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

Just as it seems clear that Professor St. Peter speaks for Willa Cather in asserting the identity of art and religion, so there is little doubt that Frank Shallard speaks for Sinclair Lewis in his denunciation of Christianity and religion in general. When ideas are advanced in a novel, the first step in analysis should be to consider whether the ideas are supported by the dramatic evidence supplied by the novel as a whole rather than examining the ideas in themselves, as though they were presented in an independent essay. Professor St. Peter's ideas are borne out by what Tom Outland and Father Duchene have to say about the ruins of Cliff City. In contrast, Frank Shallard's indictment of Christianity, particularly his "chief objection," is not

borne out by *Elmer Gantry*. In itself making "dullness" the "chief objection" to American Christianity has intellectual validity. Although this "chief objection" may seem trivial next to the other charges Frank Shallard makes, it is indeed key for the sort of truly radical critique Lewis intends. If it is impossible for anything interesting to be said using the concepts and vocabulary of Christianity, then it must be the case that Christianity is simply irrelevant to human life. We are bored by what does not concern us, with what has nothing to do with our lives. If the churches were simply being exploited by bad ministers, then the issue would be not religion itself but rather its false friends. If, on the other hand, religion itself simply has nothing relevant to say about human life, then no change of personnel could make any difference.

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

Why is it that a sermon focusing on "good old-fashioned Hell" is more likely to hold one's attention than a nonjudgmental, inclusive discourse affirming that all will be saved in the end? Surely more is involved than the accidental fact that Frank Shallard is a poor speaker and Elmer Gantry a good one. Since this is a literary question, perhaps George Santayana, who shares with Professor St. Peter the view that religion and poetry are in essence the same, may have something to offer. Santayana, a philosophical materialist and an atheist, argued

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

If *Elmer Gantry* today seems more a sociological study than a novel, if its value seems to lie more in its evocation of the habits and attitudes of a particular place and time than in any dramatization of perennial human dilemmas, perhaps that is because Lewis's indictment is so relentlessly one-sided. As Sheldon Grebstein points out, the reader of *Elmer Gantry* is allowed to see religion only as Lewis saw it: either "a kind of carnival, a show, a hoax, a monstrous but profitable fraud" or "a creeping, snuffling, dingy, paralyzing affair" (104). If religion were simply the con-game it seems to be in *Elmer Gantry*, it would have disappeared long ago. The novel ends with Elmer Gantry more successful than ever, ready to move from Zenith to a big church in New York City and to become executive secretary of the National Association for the Purification of Art and the Press. A reader of the novel sees through Elmer from the beginning, yet the members of his various congregations and the public at large never do. The inescapable conclusion is that the world of the novel is made up of people who are not nearly as intelligent or perceptive as the reader or the author. The world of the novel is, as Mark Schorer puts it, "a fantastic world dominated by monstrous parodies of human nature" (116). It is difficult to care much about people who allow

themselves to be ruled by such "monstrous parodies" as Elmer Gantry. We may feel sorry for them, but we cannot consider them our equals.

In attempting to understand why *Elmer Gantry* now seems dated while *The Professor's House* or *O Pioneers!* is as fresh as ever, we might return to the second thesis of Professor St. Peter. In asserting the virtual identity of art and religion, Godfrey St. Peter claimed as well that it was through art and religion that man has achieved "the only happiness he has ever had" (69). This happiness, Professor St. Peter makes clear, is not the happiness derived from pleasant fantasies of wish fulfillment, nor the kind of relaxation to be enjoyed when one realizes that nothing one can do makes any difference. Instead, St. Peter argues, art and religion both make happiness possible by bringing home the importance of every human life and the responsibility this belief imposes on each individual. "I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no importance—you impoverish them," argues St. Peter. Thus people could be as happy in the medieval world as they are today, despite all our technological advances:

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

The important literary contrast between the works of Sinclair Lewis and Willa Cather in regard to the treatment of religion is not grasped by noting that Lewis was hostile to religion and Cather was sympathetic. Joan Acocella has pointed out that Cather's literary reputation has been injured by well-meaning critics who have been so happy to find a writer friendly to religion that they have unintentionally slighted Cather's accomplishment as a writer in order to put the emphasis "not on her style but on her content, her values, which they judged to be transcendent, spiritual, and good" (33). The relevant point is not, however, that Cather's own ideas about religion differ from Lewis's but that Cather's characters possess the same sort of moral freedom and responsibility that Godfrey St. Peter finds affirmed in medieval Christianity. The characters of *Elmer Gantry*, on the other hand, do not seem to possess the ability to make respon-

sible decisions for themselves. Unlike the reader or the author, they are controlled by social forces bigger than themselves, especially the force of religion. In contrast, novels like *The Professor's House* and *O Pioneers!* convey a sense of what Godfrey St. Peter calls the irreducible "mystery and importance" of every human life, an awareness always in danger of being lost and always in need of renewal.

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NOTE

¹Editor's note: We published the wrong draft of this essay in *MidAmerica* 2005. This version is the revised version that Professor Seaton intended to publish. We apologize for the error.

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TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD: THE METAPHOR OF FAIRY TALE IN THE POETRY OF LISEL MUELLER¹

LINDA NEMEC FOSTER

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

Mueller's own love of fairy tales and myth has been a significant source for metaphor in her poetry. Judith Kitchen argues that "[Mueller's] sense of history gives her poems a rare philosophical intensity." I would add that her sense of the universality of the fairy tale to explore the human psyche gives her poems a metaphoric brilliance. And in the center of this brilliance is the power of the fairy tale—and, indeed, of the poem—to transform.²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

tales (e.g. Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, and Cinderella).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why do I read you tales
in which birds speak the truth
and pity cures the blind,
and beauty reaches deep

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. A Voice from Out of the Night

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

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

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

I was accused of devouring children
and mutilating men;
they said I smelled of old age
and strong home remedies.

They cast me into the forest
but come to me secretly, in the dark,
in their times of trouble.

What could I have done to convince them
I was not guilty?
Loss of beauty was all
the proof they needed.

Young wives in love with your men,

kissing your babies: this
could be a warning, but what is the use?
Husbands will flee you,
sons will turn on you,
daughters will throw up their hands
and cry, "Not me! Not me!" (*Alive Together* 135)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and because before we had lungs
we knew how far it was to the bottom
as we floated open-eyed
like painted scarves through the scenery
of dreams, and because we awakened
and learned to speak
2. We sat by the fire in our caves,
and because we were poor, we made up a tale
about a treasure mountain
that would open only for us

and because we were always defeated,
we invented impossible riddles
only we could solve,
monsters only we could kill,
women who could love no one else

and because we had survived

sisters and brothers, daughters and sons,
we discovered bones that rose
from the dark earth and sang
as white birds in the trees

3. Because the story of our life
becomes our life

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

and none of us tells it
the same way twice

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

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

Grand Rapids, Michigan

NOTES

¹Editor's Note: Because of problems with computer interface, some errors in spacing and line indentation crept into this essay when it was originally published in *MidAmerica* 2005. We are reprinting it here to correct those errors. We apologize to Linda Nemec Foster and Lisel Mueller and thank them for their help in resolving this problem.

²This essay is a slightly revised version of a presentation I gave in March of 2004 at the Associated Writing Programs' annual conference in Chicago. The presentation was part of a panel discussion I moderated that was titled "A Celebration of the Poetry of Lisel Mueller." Four panelists (including myself) presented papers that discussed several aspects of Mueller's poetry: the importance of history and language (both English and German); the theme of family, specifically that of the mother/daughter relationship; the narrative and lyric styles of her work; and the metaphoric use of fairy tales and myth. This latter topic was the subject of my presentation and, subsequently, this essay. Throughout the essay, I use six of Mueller's poems to highlight my analysis. After conferring with Ms. Mueller and her publisher, Louisiana State University Press, I decided to quote the poems in their entirety in order to highlight Mueller's unique rhythm and pacing: two characteristics that reflect the essence of fairy tale as significantly as the power of metaphoric language. All poems are reprinted by permission of Louisiana State University Press from *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems* by Lisel Mueller. Copyright 1996 by Lisel Mueller.

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Abbreviations used denoting genre and publication types:

A	Anthology	lang	Language
bibl	Bibliography	linguistics	
biog	Biography	M	Memoir
corr	Correspondence	N	Novel
crit	Criticism	P	Poetry
D	Drama	pub	Publishing
I	Interview(s)	printing	

jrnl	Journalism	rev	Review essay
juv	Juvenile fiction	S	Short fiction

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