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## PREFACE

The varied contents of *Midwestern Miscellany VIII* continue the tradition established with the first issue in 1974, but this issue adds two new dimensions: a reflection of the continued success of the annual symposium "The Cultural Heritage of the Midwest" and the record of a symposium exploring in depth an intriguing footnote in Midwestern literary history.

Consequently, the issue is truly a miscellany, containing essays that a less eclectic organization might consider more properly the province of historians or popular culturists as well as more conventional critical essays and the record of a personal discovery of the Upper Midwest through its literature.

The symposium, presented last Fall at Bowling Green State University, examines from three perspectives "The Chicago Renaissance and the Grotesques." We hope that similar symposia will become a regular feature of *Midwestern Miscellany*.

DAVID D. ANDERSON

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THE CHICAGO RENAISSANCE AND THE  
GROTESQUES: A SYMPOSIUM

Experimentation in the Chicago Little Theatre:  
Cloyd Head's *Grotesques*

MARILYN JUDITH ATLAS

The little theater movement began as a counterpoint to professional theater. Proponents of the movement hoped to replace artificial acting and stage techniques with simpler and more natural movements and materials. The movement began in the 1880's when a Parisian clerk and a group of amateurs produced a play each month. By 1912 there were amateur theaters in Berlin, Moscow, London, and Dublin. During the same year British Maurice Browne and American Ellen Van Volkenburg set up their theater in Chicago. Although cities such as Boston and New York had amateur theaters, by 1913 Chicago had more of them than any other American city. Chicago harbored such theaters as Hull-House Players, The Chicago Theater Society, the Drama Club of Evanston, The Playhouse, and Chicago Little Theatre.<sup>1</sup>

It is the theater of Browne and Van Volkenburg, the Chicago Little Theatre, that played the most significant role in the early development of non-professional theater. During its lifetime, 1912-1917, it produced forty-five plays, including those of John Millington Synge, William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg and Euripides. Seven of them were presented for the first time in America and eighteen for the first time anywhere.<sup>2</sup>

One of the reasons that the Chicago Little Theatre was so effective, and could rightfully claim to have been an influence in such major experimental theaters as The Washington Square Players and Provincetown Players,<sup>3</sup> was Maurice Browne's dynamic personality. Dale Kramer, in his book, *Chicago Renais-*

sance, states that Maurice Browne had the essential qualities of a prophet. Kramer calls him mercurial, untrammled, erudite, contentious, showy, dictatorial, vain and entrancing, adding that his desire to be exotic probably influenced his clothing: at home he wore oriental robes and a single earring.<sup>4</sup> Browne was the prophet who would bring poetic drama to the masses: he saw his theater in religious terms. In 1917 *The Christian Science Monitor* interviewed him, questioning his motive for persisting in what was obviously a financial failure. He explained his commitment in religious terms:

The real reason, the biggest reason is that my religion is art. It is to me that which makes it possible to look life in the face—and bear it. I don't mean art with a big A, but an art that is democratic; and there again I don't mean a democracy concerned with laws and governing, but having to do with all the people—popular as well as universal. I can't say 'uplift' for I dislike the word. An art that will lift man to recognize the godlike in himself and in his brother men.<sup>5</sup>

Another reason that the Chicago Little Theatre was so influential was that Browne's sense of theater was both innovative and excellent. He wanted to produce plays that had harmonious, synthesized movements; he wanted to use sound and color purposefully, suggesting sculpture and the rhythm of inner reality. Browne was tired of the uninspiring and glittering productions of commercial theaters. He wanted his theater to recapture the richness and simplicity of Greek drama and thought that this could be done most successfully by creating suggestive rather than realistic settings, using light to enhance emotional texture rather than to independently entertain the audience. In the same interview he explained his artistic ambitions and his focus on technique:

We started out to find technique and with our endeavor has come some understanding. We have found the technique. We know now what we want to do and how to do it. My work has all been for the future, preparing for the writing, the building rather, of plays. I have my best work to do.<sup>6</sup>

Browne had done well in choosing Chicago for his experimental theater. His artistic ambition naturally merged with the complexity of Chicago. In 1912, Chicago was growing and attracting all types of personalities. The population had risen nearly half a million between 1900 and 1910, making its current population two and one quarter million.<sup>7</sup> Chicago's diversity and expansion made it a rich place for new ideas and new creative voices: such intellectuals, artists, and editors as Sherwood Anderson, Susan Glaspell, George Gram Cook, Harriet Monroe, and Margaret Anderson all lived in the city at some time during this period.<sup>8</sup>

When Browne came to Chicago he recognized that it was in need of a meeting place. The Art Institute was bringing such visiting exhibitions as cubism and theater design,<sup>9</sup> but there was no adequate place for these events to be discussed. Browne and Van Volkenburg made the Chicago Little Theatre this much needed center by locating it in an accessible place downtown on South Michigan Avenue. Diverse characters such as Ben Reitman, anarchist, and Eunice Tietjan, associate editor of *Poetry*, were made welcome at the theater.<sup>10</sup> After rehearsals, they and others discussed new ideas and manuscripts. Sunday evenings were set aside for more ordered lectures and readings. These, too, were well attended by Chicago intellectuals. Many eminent people came to these Sunday evenings, including Granville Barker, Theodore Dreiser, and Emma Goldman.<sup>11</sup>

Chicago writers and critics were frequently supportive of the Chicago Little Theatre. Floyd Dell of the *Friday Literary Review* encouraged his readers to see the theater in terms of its innovative possibilities, explaining why it was sometimes less 'exciting' than commercial theater: "It is a natural result of the demand for the production of a more psychological, less objectively exciting sort of play than America has been accustomed to, and the demand, moreover for a more immediate relation between the plays and the audience. . . ."<sup>12</sup> Llewellen Jones, literary critic for the *Chicago Evening Post*, claimed that the theater's plays and lectures made Chicago the fully unique city that it was: "But now come the real things—the things that Chicago has done for herself and that are not to be had elsewhere. Already the announce-

ments are out for the Orchestra, for the University Extension Lectures, for the Little Theatre. . . ."<sup>13</sup> John Cowper Powys, himself a Chicago Little Theatre lecturer, went as far as to see the theater in just those terms that Browne most wanted: religious ones. He compared the theater to the armless goddess on the Seine, in front of whom one could rest and forget the voices of hate: "This is the place; the place where one can draw large even breaths; the place where one can cool one's fever; the place where one can drink, as Shelley says, 'of deep and liquid rest, forgetful of all ill'."<sup>14</sup>

A prophet of the theater needs an original playwright with whom to work. If Maurice Browne were to have the fulfillment of his dream, an American art theater, he would need a worthy playwright. In his essay, "The Temple of a Living Art," Browne makes his plea for such a theater, and ends his article waiting for talented individuals which his theater, and the other American experimental theaters, could nurture. Having developed his ideas about what an art theater should be like and to what ends it should aim, he concludes: "Yes, it's a pretty good training-school for a young man with a low stomach and a high heart; one of these days one of him will find he has a sense of humor as well, and then—then America will have its first Art Theatre."<sup>15</sup>

Cloyd Head, born in Oak Park, Illinois, was in many ways the playwright Browne had been awaiting. In his autobiography, *Too Late to Lament*, Browne calls Head a poker-faced poet, one with a brilliant sense of tragi-comedy.<sup>16</sup> In Head, Browne found his young man with a "low stomach and a high heart," one that had a sense of humor and a sense of innovative drama.

Cloyd Head's one act play, *Grotesques, A Decoration in Black and White*, was presented November 16, 1915, at the Chicago Little Theatre.<sup>17</sup> It combined the inspiration of the classics with the modern dilemma of self-consciousness, using irony as a tool toward honest exploration. Browne both directed *Grotesques* and served as its main character, using what he had learned in his first three seasons about lighting, scenery, and acting, producing a play that combined the flatness of the marionette with the power of mythic suggestion. He purposefully used the footlights to make the characters seem puppetlike and the proscenium to

obliterate shadow.<sup>18</sup> The auditorium lights were on dimmers to enhance the eery atmosphere and create the desired mood. The play explored the idea of continuous and broken movements and it forced the audience to participate by speaking to the viewers directly, demanding that they accept the role of the "gods" and take responsibility for the characters' fate as well as their own.

*Grotesque* was very much a Chicago Little Theatre production. Sheldon Cheney, in his 1916 critical review of the play, states that group production was one of Cloyd Head's ideas.<sup>19</sup> Group production was also the ideal of Browne. Browne even went so far as to say that writing a play was only a minor part of the work.

"While it may come from one man's pen, it is the product of a number of individuals—those who have helped develop the action. My thought is to take the idea and work it out on the stage before a word has been written. When the play is thus acted out in pantomime, the words follow freely."<sup>20</sup>

Cheney mentions individual contributions to *Grotesques*:

With Maurice Browne, director of the Chicago Little Theatre, and Raymond Johnson, one of the really important of the younger designers, he was enabled to clothe his poetic play in just the right visual beauty. The conventionalized background, with its slender whites against solid black, had just the delicacy, just the symbolic unreality, needed to reinforce the theme. And Maurice Browne brought to the production that understanding of decorative grouping, of balanced stage 'dressing' which has given a distinctive note to all the work at the Chicago playhouse.<sup>21</sup>

*Grotesques* was a multi-leveled experiment. It explored the possibilities of a group theater project as well as new staging and lighting techniques. Before the viewer was a framed decoration in black and white, a flat conventionalized design of tall white trees upon a black background. The framed background occupied more than one-half of the stage. On the background's left stood a white disc, representing the moon in a black sky. There were a number of trees. One opposite the moon held a faintly outlined

owl beneath which stood a zig-zag, the convention of a brook. A single lotus rose from the left side of this brook. Nearby stood the white representations of rocks. The characters were equally stylized. They drooped, inanimate, behind a frame of dark gauze about three feet forward from the background. They had white faces lined with black and their arms and hands were white. The designer of the decoration, Capelchard, was also stylized, developing the Grotesques by weaving his words with theirs, relying upon action more than sound. He developed them as curious groupings, relying on the relationship of their black and white nature as it interacted with the black and white background behind them.<sup>22</sup>

*Grotesques* attempted to be more than a novel experiment in group theater, staging, stylized acting, and lighting techniques: it attempted to be a poetic drama recreating the timeless human problem of control and exploring through action the effects of self-consciousness upon decision-making. The plot of *Grotesques* is episodic, focusing on how six characters react in different groupings.

Capelchard, a demi-urge, functions as the designer of the various patterns and the narrator of the play; the other five characters are Grotesques whom he attempts to control. When the play begins, they respond like marionettes, but as the play progresses their self-consciousness gives them a more fully-human appearance.

Although Capelchard's action in the play revolves around his ability to place the Grotesques into different gestalts, his major relationship is not with these characters but with the audience whose approval and complicity he desires. From the very first line of the play he is trying to tell the audience who we are and how we are to perceive and respond to the stage. He asks the audience to accept certain ideas; that all is illusory, that only the quintessence endures and that all actions are arranged to please us:

This is a forest—that is a Grotesque.  
You will find the forest somewhere in your thought.  
Its trees are graphic like an arabesque;  
The pale moon shines—I touch it with my hand.

I dip the water from the brook beneath,  
And fling it high among the leaves like dew.  
The effect is there, although the fact is not;  
So shall all things here seem—illusory.  
Who cares—who knows what brook is in his mind or in  
yours?  
It's the quintessence only that endures.  
The moon, that clear quintessence—see—is split  
To myriad moons by the brook, each moon like it!  
The moons are washed away—but there's the moon.  
Thus with design: I draw you these Grotesques,  
For your amusement spur them into—life?—  
Sign for thing signified, the hieroglyph.  
Give o'er philosophy to Beldame Owl:  
She thinks not; but you think the thoughts she should.  
How wise a counsellor!—if she does not hoot  
And break the illusion.<sup>23</sup>

During this monologue Capelchard asks the audience to accept his ideas, but in the very next line of the play he makes sure that our ability to trust him is undermined. He has the owl hoot, thus, in his terms, we are no longer able to use the owl as our counsellor. He gives the audience a system of receiving aid but immediately withdraws it. If the audience accepts Capelchard's power, we are correct in blaming him for breaking the illusion.

From the beginning of the play Capelchard is a confusing character. While according to his own statements he believes power is illusory, he centers all of his creative efforts on maintaining it. The more control he attempts to exercise over the five Grotesques, the less he seems to have. As the five characters are given certain roles and desires so that Capelchard can take away the source of their passion and create dramatic tension, they gain a degree of consciousness and work toward controlling their own patterns. Because he cannot fully control them, as they gain consciousness he warns them to control themselves: "Obey the decoration! be not like / The marionette who learned that there were strings and seeking independence severed them."<sup>24</sup>

Just as we know from the inception of the play that Capelchard offers little security, but demands our collusion with his world view, we also know that his perception of the Grotesques

is limited. They frequently surprise him as he sees them act out the qualities he has given them. As he watches, he gives them additional characteristics. For instance, when the Man-motive is placed in a design with the Sprite-motive the Man-motive recoils with fear, having been given no courage. Capelchard decides to rectify the situation since he is dissatisfied with the design. He tells the audience of his plans: "His movement outward draws discordant line; Courage would make the rhythm more compact. / Stand, therefore!"<sup>25</sup> The Man-motive gains courage and remains in the design which is composed not only of the Sprite-motive, but of the Girl-motive as well. To Capelchard's surprise as the Man-motive assumes his posture of courage and protects the Girl-motive from the Sprite-motive he begins to fall in love. Capelchard simply removes the Girl-motive from the design to form another pattern, but as he replaces the Girl-motive inanimate among the Grotesques, the Man-motive, by a great unconscious effort, tries to reach toward her. Capelchard is again surprised.

All five of Capelchard's Grotesques, the Man-motive, Woman-motive, Girl-motive, Spirit-motive, and Crone-motive, are capable of surprising him, but only the Man-motive and Woman-motive build enough independent character to question the usefulness of their obedience to him. Capelchard uses them in the most designs, continually thwarting their ability to consummate any established pattern of relationship. When Capelchard feels he is losing control over a design, he removes either the character who is causing him difficulty or the one who is eliciting undesired responses, moves him or her to the edge of the decoration, adjusts the rhythm and creates another design. But as the Man-motive and Woman-motive feel increasingly frustrated their desire to create their own pattern vies with their desire to worship existing powers.

Peter L. Berger, in *Invitation to Sociology*, wrote a social treatise almost forty years after *Grotesques* was created, exploring many of the same ideas as Cloyd Head, but in social, rather than artistic, terms. Like Head, Berger used the metaphor of a puppet theater to develop his theory about how the social stage functions in decision-making. Society, as both Berger and Head conclude, does not stop at the surface of our skins, but penetrates as well as envelopes us. Head portrays this in a number of designs. For

instance, the Man-motive has the courage to give up his love, the Woman-motive, rather than the courage to consummate his relationship with her. He is more willing to worship his oppressor than to break away from the power structure. Capelchard proves the Man-motive's preference for obedience, and, therefore, his complicity in his own slavery, by appearing before him as a spectre. Part of Capelchard's motivation for making this appearance is because he is afraid that the Man-motive may be feeling rebellious as he has recently lost two loves, the Woman-motive and Girl-motive. The Man-motive, rather than being rebellious, upon seeing the Spectre, accepts him as an emissary for the gods and sets up an altar to prove his acquiescence to whatever they have planned. The Man-motive has convinced himself that obedience is better than striving. The Woman-motive, although she is created as a more rebellious character, also accepts the value system of her oppressors. She has been manipulated into feeling that duty is important. Rather than rejecting this value she merely changes its focus and believes that duty to love is more important than duty to the power structure.

Head portrays a world where characters are partially entrapped by the value system they internalize. Berger explains what Head portrays:

Our bondage to society is not so much established by conquest as by collusion. Much more frequently we are entrapped by our own social nature. The walls of our imprisonment were there before we appeared on the scene, but they are ever rebuilt by ourselves. We are betrayed into captivity with our own cooperation.<sup>26</sup>

As the play progresses we see that absolute freedom is impossible. The greatest freedom the Grotesques achieve is to act in rebellion, a rebellion that Capelchard has planned. The audience, as the gods for whose pleasure Capelchard claims to be designing, leaves its power position to identify with the Woman-motive as she bitterly tries to convince the Man-motive to choose her over the demands of the gods, even though she realizes she is acting out a role that she has not chosen:

Our honor, nay, our love, they have made sport  
To thrill them. I am set to tempt, that they

May see you false, if yet our baffled love,  
 Again reincarnated, please unslain.  
 There is no duty greater than our love.  
 Yield: let them relish it.<sup>27</sup>

Although the five Grotesques are the victims of Capelchard, by the end of the play it is clear that the tragedy is also his. Capelchard's power is no less an illusion of surfaces than is the power of the other motives. He, too, is limited by his perceptions having convinced himself that he is doing what the audience, the gods, want him to do: "Is it you prefer / Tang always? Well, then chance shall wreck their love."<sup>28</sup> He is also limited by physical reality: "The end is not far distant either way; / To left, to right, the picture has an edge."<sup>29</sup>

Sheldon Cheney, in his review of the play, states that the fault is subtly placed on the audience, that it is our fault that the play must end in tragedy:

A second or third reading brings the meaning even closer: that we, the audience, who are the ultimate gods, do not exert our divine imagination to compose life as an artist would; that the human mind, the true director of the decoration we call life, too often confuses the lines and spaces, lets the motives run wild, or fails to lift existence from the void to any plane that can be called design.<sup>30</sup>

But it seems more likely that the audience is no more to blame than either the Grotesques or Capelchard. The tension of object and subject, the randomness of control is essential to the play's message: nothing is permanent except change. We are all victims of physical reality and are all creators of our complicity with the forces that break the comfort and meaning of each design.

*Grotesques* is an innovative play which attempts to unite form and content. But it is too abstract and its characters suffer from being overly stereotyped. Nevertheless, it should be recognized as an early and creative experimental play which studied the relationship of technique, style, and metaphysical exploration and paved the way for experimental playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill.

When the play was first produced it elicited mixed reviews. Some critics praised its movement toward symbolism and styliza-

tion. Harriet Monroe called it an experience of complete, unforgettable poetic beauty and published it in *Poetry* where it received the Helen Haire Levenson prize for poetry.<sup>31</sup> Other critics found it obscure and were satisfied when after three weeks the Chicago Little Theatre replaced it with a program of one-act comedies. Charles Collins, reporter for the *Chicago Post*, wrote that the change was "a welcome relief to the foggy symbolism and strained preciousness of *Grotesques*, which was enough to knit any forehead with intellectual effort."<sup>32</sup>

But regardless of mixed reviews, *Grotesques* was an exciting and rewarding experience for the individuals involved in the Chicago Little Theatre. The play was true to the theater's ideas: it was a poetic drama which used language to reinforce action, exploring the dance of light and shadow as it studied life's hidden meanings, and it was an American play pointing toward the beginning of an American art theater equal to those of Europe.

Years after *Grotesques* was produced, years after the Chicago Little Theatre had ceased to exist, Cloyd Head wrote to Maurice Browne asking him if he would consider returning to Chicago and opening the Goodman Theater: ". . . it would be like the fulfillment of an old dream if you and I could have another reincarnation in Chicago—grown up."<sup>33</sup> The theater was never purchased, but other reverberations of the relationship between Cloyd Head and Maurice Browne resound in the form of experimental theaters throughout America.

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#### NOTES

1. Maurice Browne, *The Temple of a Living Art: Being a Plea for An American Art Theatre* (Chicago: The Chicago Little Theatre, 1914), pp. 2-4, originally published in *Drama*, 1913; and Alice Gerstenberg to Eames MacVeagh, May 28, 1953, p. 14, Alice Gerstenberg Manuscripts, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.
2. Bernard F. Dukore, "Maurice Browne and the Chicago Little Theatre," *Theatre Survey*, III (1962), p. 66.
3. Bernard F. Dukore, p. 77: "The original members of the Provincetown Players included George Cram Cook and Floyd Dell, both of whom were not only familiar with the work of the Chicago Little Theatre, but knew Browne personally. Lawrence Langner, Edward Goodman, and Ralph Roeder, who founded the Washington Square Players, knew of and were influenced by him."

4. Dale Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance: The Literary Life in the Midwest, 1900-1930* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), p. 155.
5. "Maurice Browne Comments on His Work in Chicago," *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 9, 1917, located in the Maurice Browne/Ellen Van Volkenburg manuscript collection at the Rare Book Room of the University of Michigan Library.
6. "Maurice Browne Comments on His Work in Chicago," 1917.
7. Dale Kramer, p. 150.
8. Alice Gerstenberg to Nancy Cox-McCormack Cushman, June 13, 1950. This letter is over 50 pages. Gerstenberg discusses the Chicago she knew. See especially pp. 21-25, Alice Gerstenberg manuscripts, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.
9. Maurice Browne, *Too Late to Lament* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956), p. 127.
10. Dale Kramer, p. 194.
11. Maurice Browne, p. 134.
12. Floyd Dell, "Chicago's Experiment in the Production of Poetic Drama," *Harper's Weekly* (November 29, 1913), p. 22.
13. Llewellyn Jones, Literary Editor, *The Chicago Evening Post* (Friday, October 1, 1915), in the Maurice Browne/Ellen Van Volkenburg manuscript collection at the Rare Book Room of the University of Michigan Library.
14. John Cowper Powys, "Maurice Browne and The Little Theatre," *The Little Review*, II (March 1915), p. 5.
15. Maurice Browne, "The Temple of a Living Art," p. 19.
16. Maurice Browne, *Too Late to Lament*, p. 183.
17. Playbill, Maurice Browne/Ellen Van Volkenburg manuscript collection at the Rare Book Room of the University of Michigan.
18. Bernard F. Dukore, pp. 73-4.
19. Sheldon Cheney, "Cloyd Head's *Grotesques*," *Theatre Arts Magazine* (November 1916), p. 19.
20. "Chicago Little Theater Plans Show Activity," *Christian Science Monitor* (1915). Maurice Browne/Ellen Van Volkenburg manuscript collection at the Rare Book Room of the University of Michigan.
21. Sheldon Cheney, pp. 19-20.
22. Cloyd Head, *Grotesques: A Decoration in Black and White*, *Poetry* IX, i (October, 1916), stage directions, p. 2.
23. Cloyd Head, pp. 2-3.
24. Cloyd Head, p. 22.
25. Cloyd Head, p. 8.
26. Peter L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (New York, Doubleday & Co., 1973), p. 121.
27. Cloyd Head, pp. 25-6.
28. Cloyd Head, p. 11.
29. Cloyd Head, p. 9.
30. Sheldon Cheney, p. 14.
31. Bernard F. Dukore, p. 64.

32. Charles Collins, "Browne Revives 'Frivolous' Plays," *Post* (December 9, 1915), in the Maurice Browne/Ellen Van Volkenburg manuscript collection at the Rare Book Room of the University of Michigan Library.
33. Cloyd Head to Maurice Browne, March 1931, as found in the Maurice Browne/Ellen Van Volkenburg manuscript collection at the Rare Book Room of the University of Michigan Library.

## Arthur Davison Ficke's "Ten Grotesques"

KAY KINSELLA ROUT

When Mitchell Kennerley decided to provide a poetry competition and to publish the winners in 1912, one of the new writers who received his attention was Arthur Davison Ficke, a young man from Davenport, Iowa. He was in fairly distinguished company in the little anthology, *The Lyric Year*, which resulted, for among the one hundred poets represented were Vachel Lindsay, Sara Teasdale, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Some of the poetry being published by this time already looked to the future; it was, as the editor insisted modern poetry should be, democratic, optimistic, and humane, not to mention free of the limitations of our "classical heritage."

Kennerley was not the only one who thought poetry had a future outside the ladies' magazines in 1912. Harriet Monroe, a middle-aged Chicago poet, essayist, and journalist, made the decision to start a new publication with hardly a hint of what talent lay out there to be encouraged. The only poets she knew were decidedly mediocre.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in October of 1912 she launched *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, which survives today. One of the poets who submitted his work to her and to her co-editor, Ezra Pound, very early and very reliably thereafter, was Ficke.

For nearly two years *Poetry* enjoyed a monopoly on the work of Midwestern and even international writers, since there were few other places they could go for a publisher. In March of 1914, however, a competitor arose as the *Little Review*, a magazine of essays, personal comment, fiction, and incidentally, verse. Its publisher was another Chicagoan, Margaret Anderson, who intended to use her magazine as a vehicle for the praise of life with a capital L, Life as a "glorious performance" the wonder of which

is shown to us by "eager, panting Art as we rush along." Everything in the *Little Review* was intended to be "fresh and constructive and intelligent from the artist's point of view." Ezra Pound was not much impressed with the venture. He spoke of it as "a jolly place for people who aren't quite up to our level," as a nice spot where "the meritorious A<sub>2</sub> writers can go and console each other."<sup>2</sup> And at first that's what it was—most of the poems printed in the first year of the *Little Review's* operation were those which had originally been submitted to *Poetry* and rejected.

Gradually, however, some poets began to make original submissions to Margaret Anderson in order to get into print more quickly. Harriet Monroe had a drawerful of poems; Margaret Anderson needed some *now*. Among those willing to switch for the satisfaction of seeing himself in print was Ficke, who had developed no inordinate loyalty to the *Poetry* group. The ten short poems I am considering here were first printed in the *Little Review* in March of 1915, just one year after the publication was inaugurated. Ficke's "Ten Grotesques" have little in common with each other in tone, subject, or stanza form, but they focus upon ten examples of grotesque persons in the sense that Sherwood Anderson was to use the term—they are all people who are characterized by one truth which they embrace and live and use to define themselves. The poems look forward to the future in their use of occasionally unorthodox subject matter, such as a bit of refuse, in their attitudes, such as the praise of rebelliousness which characterizes at least three of them, and in their varied rhythms and rime schemes. They look backward in their occasionally self-conscious use of figurative language ("your Hebridean brow") and in the use of the iambic pentameter Shakespearean sonnet, which the Imagists found very restrictive but which Ficke always enjoyed. Out of the ten short poems here, four are sonnets, two are sonnets which lack only the final couplet, the first twelve lines falling neatly into the standard abab cdcd efef pattern prescribed three hundred years before, and two are composed purely of couplets. In only two poems, six, "To an Outrageous Person" and ten, "Song of a Very Small Devil," is there an attempt at innovation in the use of rime, and it is a modest attempt indeed, befitting the modestly outrageous ideas Ficke espouses in them. Similarly, the two poems which might

be called truncated sonnets vary from the iambic pentameter rhythm only in that iambic tetrameter predominates in "The Prudent Lover" and in "Portrait of the Incomparable John Cowper Powys, Esq." The two couplet poems, "Why Women Hate Artists" and "The Devil Among the Tailors," make use of the same iambic tetrameter. Again it is only in numbers six and ten that we see experimentation; each poem is written in iambic trimeter with a monosyllabic first foot or, alternately, trochaic trimeter with a stressed final foot. The effect is tetrameter, of course, since there are four stresses to the line, but the consistently stressed first syllables are refreshing in their reversal of our expectations amidst so much iambic rhythm.

Who were the ten grotesques Ficke wished to depict for his readers? As the above titles indicate, the grotesque may or may not be the speaker in the poem; sometimes he is the subject of the poet's contemplation or partisanship, or even, as in "Portrait of a Spiritually Disturbed Gentleman," of his ridicule.

Ficke's subjects include, besides the disturbed gentleman, the hated artist, the novelist Powys, the "devil" among the more unimaginative and plodding tailors, the little "devil" that seems to be the author himself, a woman who has listened to poetry all night, a new "believer" who has been shot in the head for his idealism, a prudent lover who has come to doubt the wisdom of his prudence, and of course the outrageous person, unnamed.

There is no substitute for an examination of the text, so let us look more carefully at several of these poems in order to evaluate Ficke's concerns and their treatment in his verse.

Poem number iv, "Portrait of a Spiritually Disturbed Gentleman," is one of the sonnets in this collection. The disturbed person is the *persona* of the work rather than the creature symbolically portrayed, and his imbalance is indicated by his bathetic concern for the stray piece of meat and probably for the human-kind which he imagines it to represent, inglorious though its end may be.

O piece of garbage rotting on a rug,—  
To what a final ending hast thou come?  
Art thou predestined fodder of a bug?  
Shalt thou no more behold thy Dresden home?

When green disintegration works its last  
Ruin, and all thy atoms writhe and start,  
Shall no frilled-paper memories from the past  
Drift spectral down the gravy of thy heart?  
Can the cold grease from off the dirty plate  
Make thee forget the ice-box of thy prime,  
And soon, among the refuse-cans, thy fate  
Blot out the gay fork-music of old time?  
Ah well, all music has its awkward flats  
And after all, there are the alley-cats!

The Shakespearean sonnet is traditional enough in its form, but rather unorthodox in its subject matter, not to mention its materialist assumptions about the ultimate fate, if that is indeed what it is, of the many pieces of garbage that were once acceptable examples of Homo Sapiens. The sentimentality of the *persona* and his relentless insistence upon the unfortunate metaphor combine to create a work that is certainly less than completely successful. Ficke's use of the food metaphor is inconsistent enough, moreover, to cause confusion; if the plate is "home" then how was the meat in its "prime" when it was in the refrigerator, unless we are to equate that frigid state with Heaven itself, to which the fragment is not, however, destined to return? If "green disintegration" will have brought the piece of meat to utter ruin even in its molecular structure, then how will memories of itself as a lamb chop with frilled pants still be able to drift down the "gravy of (its) heart?" Similarly, if such a state of radical change has been reached, one would imagine the "alley cats" (who symbolize the worms of the grave, perhaps) to get small satisfaction from a meal of "green disintegration" or its effects. In order for the poem to work as humor, there must be an internal consistency that is lacking here.

Another sonnet, number seven, is entitled, "In a Bar Room" and features a customer's meditations upon the nature and purpose of the saloon:

Across the polished board, wet and ashine,  
Appalling incantations late have passed—  
For some, the mercy of dull anodyne;  
For others, hope destined an hour to last.  
Here has been sold courage to lift the weak

That they embrace a great and noble doom.  
 Here some have bought a clue they did not seek  
 Into the wastes of an engulfing gloom.  
 And amorous tears, and high indignant hate,  
 Laughter, desires, passions, and hopes, and rest,—  
 The drunkard's sleep, the poet's shout to fate,—  
 All from these bottles filled a human breast!  
 Magician of the apron! Let us see—  
 What is that draught you are shaking now for me?

Most readers would probably find this sonnet less metrically satisfying than its predecessor, for the poet deliberately reversed several feet that we expect to be in iambic measure, although his reason for doing so is not always clear. The value of emphasizing the word *wet* in line 1, for example, or the phrasing of *hope destined* in line four, with its double stresses, is less evident than the use of the trochaic foot in line ten, "Laughter, desires . . ." or in line twelve, "All from these bottles . . ." The wrenched rhythm of *ann o dine* which is dictated by the meter in line three is too forced a rime with the unimaginative *ashine* in the first place, aside from the fact that it replaces the preferred pronunciation, *ann adin*.

The work's metrical awkwardness would be less objectionable, perhaps, if the grotesque in question were not such a cliché-filled creature, clearly possessed of a pre-Prohibition consciousness, who lists the weaknesses of humankind that alcohol is intended to alleviate or encourage, only to ask for a drink himself. The tone and the supposed reversal of expectations at the ending may be modern enough to provide a counterpoint to the traditionality of the sonnet form, but the self-conscious (not to mention incorrect) phrases like *appalling incantations* (for *decantations*?) in line two or *great and noble doom* and *high indignant hate* in lines six and nine, seem to be created more for the meter than for their truth. The epithet "magician of the apron" is excessively flowery for a twentieth-century poet to use in a work about human failings, although the couplet is more seriously affected by the extra syllable of *you are shaking* in the final line, which seems all the more cumbersome after the brevity of the three monosyllables *let us see*—.

The most charming of the pieces is certainly the last, "Song of a Very Small Devil." Here, there is none of the posturing, the ponderously serious tone or flowery diction of some of the earlier poems, but instead a lightly irreverent song in praise of a life of decadence and irresponsibility. Neither the author nor the *persona* takes the subject too seriously, which is the poem's saving grace. It is also one of the few examples, as mentioned above, of innovative riming, and is dependent upon trochaic rather than iambic meter, a refreshing change. Ficke never seems to have experimented much with non-traditional rhythms such as Gerard Manley Hopkins used, so his readers must be grateful for whatever breaks from the predictable iambic pattern they may be given to hear.

"Song of a Very Small Devil"

He who looks in golden state  
 Down from ramparts of high heaven,  
 Knows he any turn of fate,  
 It must be of evil given—  
 He perhaps shall wander late  
 Downward through the luminous gate.

He who makes himself a gay  
 Dear familiar of things evil,—  
 In some deepest tarn astray,  
 Close-companioned of the Devil,—  
 He can nowhere turn his way  
 Save up brighter slopes of day.

Plight it is, yet clear to see.  
 Hence take solace of your sinning.  
 As ye sink unfathomably,  
 Heaven grows ever easier winning.  
 Therefore ye who saved would be,  
 Come and shake a leg with me!

The final line gives one to suspect that the "evil" the speaker has in mind is closely akin to what the "magician of the apron" has to offer—Ficke seems not to have been a particularly decadent type, except perhaps by the standards of a fundamentalist farmer

from his home state of Iowa. For all its manifest naivete, though, the coy logic and the flip ending combine with the ababaa rime scheme to offer the reader some humor that does not seem at all grotesque.

Overall, Ficke's ten little poems are unevenly successful. Their exaltation of rebelliousness is puerile by our standards, although they might have been considered "modern" in contrast with the prevailing Victorian codes. The sympathy for the misunderstood that is the dominant tone in "The Newest Believer," in which the believer is shot in the head for wanting to end evil in the world, is as unsophisticated in its own way as is the attack on the work ethic implied in "To An Outrageous Person," in which the poet defends a friend who refuses to hold down a job, living in "glad carelessness" as he dances "up the rainbow," probably on a private income. The poems do, however, focus upon types that the poet considers to be more or less out of place in the workaday world of twentieth century urban America, where the Standard Citizen was already the dominant type, if we are to believe H. L. Mencken, and when Lewis's George Follansbee Babbitt was only five years from publication. Henry Davison Ficke's ten somewhat Bohemian types are, from that point of view, certainly modern without being mainstream, even though they find their lives in quite conventional poetic forms and meters.

Also undeniably modern, at least in contrast to the "classical heritage" Kennerley wished to escape, are the poet's romantic values. Poetry, he insisted in the preface to his *Selected Poems* in 1926, (which included, by way, only "Song of a Very Small Devil" from among those discussed here)—poetry contained revelations which were "indisputable because they do not pretend to be anything but the heart's emotions." "Nothing," he declared, "can refute the autonomy of a lyric cry," which fact renders all critical comment invalid from the start. Before these revelations of the "consciousness of life, which sweeps through (the poet) like a flame,"<sup>3</sup> the modern reader and critic can only smile and stand aside.

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## NOTES

1. Ellen Williams, *Harriet Monroe and The Poetry Renaissance: The First Ten Years of Poetry, 1912-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 4.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
3. Arthur Davison Ficke, *Selected Poems* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926), p. vi.

### *The Little Review* and Sherwood Anderson

DAVID D. ANDERSON

In March, 1914, *The Little Review*, under the editorship of twenty-four-year-old Margaret Anderson of Columbus, Indiana, published its first issue from room 917 in the Fine Arts Building at the corner of Michigan and Van Buren in Chicago. Miss Anderson had come from Columbus, Indiana, three years before to make her place in the art world that for her and the journal she dreamed of founding would extend to San Francisco, New York, Paris, and beyond.

The three years between Margaret's arrival in Chicago and the appearance of *The Little Review* marked the emergence and the apogee of the Chicago renaissance, the liberation, as many of its participants called it, and the "robin's egg" renaissance that Sherwood Anderson saw it to be in retrospect. Margaret Anderson was one of a remarkable group of young people who had come out of the towns and villages of the Midwest in the early years of this century, had gathered in Chicago to find themselves through art and liberation, and were by the end of the second decade of the new century, to exert a profound but indirect influence on the fiction, verse, and drama of our time.

Among these young people were Floyd Dell, who had come from a Davenport, Iowa, newspaper to the editorship of the *Friday Literary Review* of the *Chicago Evening Post*, where, at twenty-four, he had given the newly-arrived, three-year-younger Miss Anderson a book to review and instructed her on the spirit and substance of the Chicago liberation. "Here is a book about China," he told her. "Now don't send me an article about China but about yourself."

Through Dell and through her clerkship in the bookstore designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the Fine Arts Building she

met and worked with the staff of the *Dial*, the offices of which adjoined the bookshop, she became literary editor of a religious magazine called the *Continent*, and she began to move in a circle that included Theodore Drieser, whose *Sister Carrie* she praised in the *Continent*, neglecting to add that it was immoral and thus engendering abuse from her readers; George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell, who were to move from the Chicago Little Theatre to Provincetown and thence to introduce a young playwright named O'Neill to the world; Arthur Davison Ficke, who had come from Davenport, Iowa, by way of Harvard, to practice law in Chicago but found himself to be a poet; and an advertising man approaching forty who had recently left the presidency of a paint factory in Ohio to find himself and his art in Chicago. He was Sherwood Anderson, whose *Winesburg Ohio* in 1919 was to redirect the world of fiction. With him he brought a trunkful of unpublished manuscripts, from which he read on occasion. Miss Anderson described their meetings nearly twenty years later:

Floyd and I talked of Pater and of living like the hard gem-like flame. Sherwood Anderson used to listen to us in a certain amazement (resembling fear) and indicating clearly that nothing would induce him into such fancy realms. But I liked Sherwood—because he, too, was a talker and of a highly specialized type. He didn't talk ideas—he told stories. (It sounds bad but the stories were good. So was the telling.) He used to say to everyone: You don't mind if I use the story you've just told, do you? No one minded. Sherwood's story never bore any relationship to the original. He read us the manuscript of "Windy McPherson's Son." Floyd was passionate about it—I, a little less so. It was a new prose but I knew by Sherwood's look that he would do something even better.

As the idea for *The Little Review* germinated in her mind—the result, she later said, of hearing a lecture on Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater by John Cowper Powys, an English novelist, essayist, and poet, who had begun lecturing regularly in America—she determined that the magazine, tentatively called the *Seagull*, a name which she later rejected as too pretentious, would be filled with "the best conversation the world has to offer."

Sherwood Anderson was perhaps the best conversationalist she knew and she asked him for an article for the first issue.

Sherwood Anderson's contribution to the first issue of *The Little Review*—the name finally selected because of the success of the Little Theatre in Chicago—was an essay called "The New Note." His first literary publication—the second was to be a short story, "The Rabbit-Pen," in *Harper's* for July, 1914—"The New Note" was the attempt by both Andersons to define the purpose of the journal and the philosophy of the movement of which it was to be the voice. But the essay was not a note of liberation; it was a declaration of rejection, of affirmation, and of dedication, of rejection of commercialism and of conversation, however stimulating; of the affirmation of work, of craftsmanship, of art; and of dedication to work for its own sake. In the essay, Anderson wrote:

In the trade of writing the so-called new note is as old as the world. Simply stated, it is a cry for the reinjection of truth and honesty into the craft; it is an appeal from the standards set up by money-making magazine and book publishers in Europe and America to the older, sweeter standards of the craft itself; it is the voice of the new man, come into a new world, proclaiming his right to speak out of the body and soul of youth, rather than through the bodies and souls of the master craftsmen who are gone. . . .

Not only did Anderson point out the direction in which he knew the movement and the works to which *The Little Review* gave voice should go, but he pointed out the direction in which his own work would move: in a new literary language drawn out of the living language of the time; in a new technique that would penetrate appearance to lay bare psychological reality; and in a new subject matter composed of commonplace human lives:

It is the most delicate and the most unbelievably difficult task to catch, understand, and record your own mood. The thing must be done simply and without pretense or windiness, for the moment these creep in, your record is no longer a record, but a mere mass of words meaning nothing. The value of such a record is not in the facts caught and recorded but in the fact of your having been able truthfully to make

the record—something within yourself will tell you when you have done it truthfully. I myself believe that when a man can thus stand aside from himself, recording simply and truthfully the inner workings of his own mind, he will be prepared to record truthfully the workings of other minds. In every man or woman dwell dozens of other men and women, and the highly imaginative individual will lead fifty lives . . . a kind of partnership will in time spring up between the hand and the brain of the writer. He will find himself becoming in truth a cattle herder, a drug clerk, a murderer. . . .

Important in Anderson's concept of the new note as it was made clear in *The Little Review* and his own writing at the time were the substance and the form of the old craftsmanship and his new voice. The substance was that of dozens of human lives, each of them seen briefly but clearly in a penetrating moment that gave form to his work and revealed what he found in the language of love. Thus he discovered the form that was to lead to his best work; he discovered a subject matter which gave direction and dimension to that work; and he discovered a language—the language of those men and women whom he had made his own, the language of the easy rhythms of the American heartland. In his *Memoirs* he described in terms mythic rather than real what had happened to him at the time:

What dreams, hopes, ambitions. Somehow it had seemed to me, when as a young man I sat at the window of that room, that each person who passed along the street below, under the light, shouted his secret up to me.

I was myself and still I fled out of myself. It seemed to me that I went into the others.

What dreams. What egotism. I thought then, on such evenings, that I could tell all of the stories of all the people of America. I would get them all, understand them, get their stories told.

And then came the night that it happened.

But what happened? It is the thing so hard to explain. It is, however, the thing that every young man and woman in the world will understand.

I had been working so long, so long. Oh, how many thousand, hundreds of thousands of words put down.

Trying for something.

To escape out of old minds, old thoughts put into my head by others, into my own thoughts, my own feelings.

Out of the others, the many, many others, who had worked in words, to have got so much I wanted but to be freed from them.

To at last go out of myself, truly into others, the others I met constantly in the streets of the city, in the office where I then worked, and still others, remembered out of my childhood in an American small town.

To be myself, and yet at the same time the others.

And then, on a day, late in the afternoon of a day, I had come home to that room. I sat at a table in a corner of the room. I wrote.

There was a story of another human being, quite outside myself, truly told.

The story was one called "Hands." It was about a poor little man, beaten, pounded, frightened by the world in which he lived into something oddly beautiful.

The story was written that night in one sitting. No word of it ever changed. I wrote the story and got up. I walked up and down in that narrow little room. Tears flowed from my eyes.

"It is solid," I said to myself. "It is like a rock. It is there. It is put down."

Whether this account is factual or not is irrelevant; like his story of his departure from his office in Elyria to find himself as a writer, it is the substance of myth, of the attempt to explain the unexplainable, or in Northrop Frye's terms, to explain in imaginative terms that which cannot be explained through evidence and sense experience. Anderson had discovered the means by which he could best truthfully make the record of the new note, and he had discovered, too, those who sought like himself and the others of the liberation, to find freedom and fulfillment but found instead defeat and degradation. He had found people who, like the twisted apples left beyond in the orchards of his youth, had been deformed by circumstance, and he found, too, that like the apples they were sweeter in spite of, or perhaps because of, their deformities. In *Winesburg, Ohio* he was to call them grotesques.

The origin of Anderson's use of the term is clear, but his use of it in reference to his own work was unique in the context of the time and the place. The term "grotesques" had been used in two instances by members of the Liberation while Anderson was evolving the style, form, and subject matter that was to become the essence of *Winesburg, Ohio* and his other great series, two occasions that have already been discussed, the use of the word as the title of Cloyd Head's play and as the title of the verse sequence by Arthur Davison Ficke. Obviously Anderson was familiar with these uses of the term—a review of the play had appeared in the December, 1915, issue of *The Little Review*, the same issue in which his short story "Sister" appeared, and Ficke's verse had appeared in the journal in March, 1915. But Anderson's first published use of the term as a noun is in the prefatory sketch, "The Book of Grotesques" at the beginning of *Winesburg, Ohio*.

More significant, however, than his use of the term is the evolution of his use of the grotesque as a character-type in his fiction, a process that apparently began early in 1915 and was fully developed by March, 1916, when "The Philosopher," which was to appear in *Winesburg, Ohio* as "Paper Pills," appeared in *The Little Review* and "Hands" appeared in *Masses*.

The evolution of his concept of the grotesque is evident in his published fiction between July, 1914, when "The Rabbit-Pen" was published in *Harpers* and the appearance of "Hands," the first of what were to become the *Winesburg stories*, in *Masses* in March, 1916.

Anderson's first published story, *The Rabbit-Pen*, may or may not have been among the manuscripts which Anderson brought with him from Elyria; certainly in concept and execution the story seems much more closely related to *Windy McPherson's Son* and *Marching Men* than to the stories that began to appear in 1916. Although the publication of "The Rabbit-Pen" in such a prestigious magazine as *Harpers* contributed substantially to his reputation as a writer among the members of the Liberation group, it was in almost every conceivable way the antithesis of the concept of writing in "The New Note," published only a few months before. Certainly not the "realistic" story that Anderson saw it to be at the time, it nevertheless attempts to fuse a realistic

element, the struggle of a mother rabbit to save her new-born litter from the rampaging male, with the fantasies of a successful writer concerning marriage and the competition between a wealthy mother and a German housemaid for the love of the woman's children. Set in a wealthy suburban Chicago estate and an equally wealthy Chicago office, with overtones of the foreign and exotic, it depends on a twisted ending for its effect: the writer is shocked to learn that the housemaid, whose strong confidence and control of life he had admired and to whom he had fantasized marriage, had married the gardener and gone back to Germany. With her departure, the friend's children have become unmanageable.

Not only is the story dependent upon the gimmicky ending for whatever effect it has but the conversations are strained as they frequently are in *Windy McPherson's Son* and *Marching Men*, and the writer is naive beyond belief. Only the incident of the rabbit-pen itself resembles Anderson's later use of vivid, harsh incidents, as in "Death in the Woods," but it is only incidental to the story. The nursemaid has overtones of the idealized portrait of Anderson's mother that emerged in *A Story Teller's Story*, and there is some indication of Anderson's future concern with human love and the ironies of appearance. But the significance of the story is lost in its ineptness.

"Sister," Anderson's second published story, appeared in *The Little Review* in December, 1915. A two-page sketch, impressionistic rather than realistic in nature, it marks Anderson's first published attempt to use the technique and the subject matter that were to fuse into the substance of *Winesburg, Ohio*. The prose is straight forward and natural, and no conversation appears in the story, perhaps because it is unnecessary, but more likely because Anderson had not yet learned to write conversation in the natural rhythms and language of the Midwest.

In technique and execution the story is a substantial advance over "The Rabbit-Pen." There is no plot—Anderson was later to insist rightly that there are no plots in human life—but a description of the relationship between a brother and sister, both of them exiles from their father's house, who meet periodically in the young man's room. The sister, we are told, has always been "strange"—a tomboy and a loner, who at fifteen had suffered

a severe beating from the father when she announced to him that she was about to take a lover.

In the telling, two incidents point to the future evolution of Anderson's subject matter. The father becomes ill after the beating, suggesting a dimension of the father that does not appear in the vicious portrayal in *Windy McPherson's Son* but begins to appear in Anderson's short stories and autobiographical writings of the early 1920's, when he began to view his father as displaced but sympathetic. Further, the narrative departs from realism to penetrate deeper dimensions of human relationships when the narrator comments that he had no idea how he learned of the beating, that he had neither witnessed it nor was told of it but knew that it had occurred.

In the final paragraphs Anderson moves from the incident to a search for its significance, not, however, in individual terms, as he was later to do, but in universal terms reminiscent of "Tandy," the poignant story that was to appear in *Winesburg, Ohio*:

I am the world and my sister is the young artist of the world. I am afraid the world will destroy her. So furious is my love for her that the touch of her hand makes me tremble. . . .

In the evening after my sister is gone I do not try to work any more. I pull my couch to the opening by the window and lie down. It is then a little that I begin to understand my sister. She is the artist right to adventure in the world, to be destroyed by the adventure, if that be necessary, and I, on my couch, am the worker in the world, blinking up at the stars that can be seen from my window when my couch is properly arranged.

The sister in the narrative is Anderson's first published attempt to define, perhaps without recognizing it, what was to become the grotesque: a human being twisted by circumstance and the lack of love and understanding, one who becomes worthy of love in the process but is doomed to misunderstanding by those who only see the surface of life. "Sister" is the forerunner of the memorable women in *Winesburg, Ohio*.

"Vibrant Life," published in *The Little Review* in March, 1916, at the same time that "Hands" was being published by

*Masses* in New York, is, like "Sister," a two-page sketch rather than a fully-realized story. But it is a sketch based on incidents rather than upon the grotesquery imposed upon people by circumstance and the lack of understanding. The ending is as gimmical and irrelevant, as grotesque rather than ironical, as that of "The Rabbit-Pen." In the story a young man had been shot and killed by a jealous husband, and two people are sitting up with his corpse: his older brother, who had, after a scandalous youth, become a successful lawyer, and a nurse who has apparently been in love with the dead man. They drink wine; they look at each other; and then the man notices a photo of a magnificent stallion in a farm magazine lying on the table. He remembers such a stallion from his youth, approaches the nurse, and tells her, "It was a wonderful sight. . . . The great animal was all life, vibrant, magnificent life. . . ." Then leaning over her he tells her, "We are like that. . . . The men of our family have that vibrant, conquering life in us." He seizes her, she protests, and as they struggle they bump the coffin; it falls to the floor and the dead body of brother and lover rolls out onto the floor.

As absurd as is the plot, more nearly related in its absurdity to "The Rabbit-Pen" than to "Sister," it reflects the confusion exhibited by many of the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*, those who mistake physical passion for love, those who see only the surface of life rather than the substance, the human truth, that lies beneath it. The forty-five-year-old successful lawyer is no nearer understanding than the young George Willard in *Winesburg*, who mistakes a lonely plea for love for an invitation to a sexual adventure. But in this story there is no suggestion that the lawyer will become other than the twisted, unfulfilled grotesque that he is. One can only speculate on what might have occurred had the coffin not been upset, and one wonders too if the lawyer continues his successful career and the pursuit of misguided, momentary satisfaction.

In a sense, however, "Sister" and "Vibrant Life" are prefatory to "Hands" which appeared in *Masses* in March, 1916, at the same time that "Vibrant Life" was published. But the difference between the two simultaneous publications is startling. "Vibrant Life" is mediocre and "Hands" is superb, a perfectly executed story that is almost immeasurably superior in structure, character

portrayal, and sheer writing to anything Anderson had yet published. Perhaps the difference can only be explained, symbolically if not literally, in his insistence that it was written under the influence of emotional excitement in that moment of insight into himself and the people who passed by on the street.

"Hands" is the story of Wing Biddlebaum, a fat, bent, frightened old man, whose hands are remarkably active and expressive, and of George Willard, a young reporter on the *Winesburg Democrat* (to become the *Winesburg Eagle* in *Winesburg, Ohio*). The old man is the target of abuse from many of the young people in the town, but his hands, remarkably adept at berry-picking, are a source of town pride and of George's fascination. Yet Wing is ashamed of them and he tries to conceal or control them. The old man and the young man become friends, seeking each other out to walk through the streets of the town and talk. The old man knows that there is much that he can tell George but he is reluctant to speak, and George knows intuitively that Wing's hands are the source of the old man's isolation and he wants to ask Wing about them, but he is reluctant to ask. In an encounter in the story George is prepared to do so, but Wing, becoming excited, tells George that he must reject the conformity demanded by the town. In his excitement his hands move wildly, and George becomes afraid; he no longer wants to know the man's secret. Wing, too, becomes frightened, and he walks away quickly.

Anderson as narrator tells us the man's secret. Twenty years before, Wing had been a schoolmaster in a Pennsylvania town, and often, when he became excited while talking to the boys, his hands would involuntarily touch them or tousle their hair. Men of the town misunderstood his actions as homosexual advances, and he was beaten and driven from the town in the night, the warning echoing that he is to keep his hands to himself.

The story concludes with Wing alone in his house, his hands quickly and involuntarily picking bits of bread off the table and carrying them to his mouth. Anderson concludes, "The nervous expressive fingers, flashing in and out of the light, might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary."

Biddlebaum's hands and his dream fuse in the story. His dream is of human love and fulfillment, and his hands are the means by which that dream, like all dreams so difficult to articulate, can be expressed. When Wing laid his hands on the boys he became more than a teacher: he became a parent and an artist and the dream neared reality. But the language of hands, like that of words or pictures or any other means of communication between people, can be easily misunderstood. For Wing, misunderstanding occurs, and the dream becomes a nightmare, driving him into himself and forever precluding understanding or love in his life.

The story, like "The Rabbit-Pen," "Sister," and "Vibrant Life," has a moment of horror as a crucial element in its structure, but unlike the irrelevancy of the horrible incidents in two of the others, here it is low-keyed and not exploited for its own sake. It provides an undertone that complements the action of the story as Wing, truly a grotesque—in fact in the story Anderson first uses the term, as an adjective rather than a noun—turns in upon himself, afraid to speak in the only language he knows, and permitting his hands to become instruments of pointless activity and focal points of idle curiosity.

With the publication of "Hands," Anderson, approaching forty, had completed his apprenticeship and the ideal defined in "The New Note" had become artistic reality. At the same time the Liberation moved toward its conclusion in Chicago. Floyd Dell had already departed for New York, and as Anderson found himself on the verge of success—*Windy McPherson's Son* was to be published that Fall and *The Seven Arts*, the first authentic voice of the artistic revolution then taking form in New York, discovered his fiction—Margaret Anderson determined to take *The Little Review* to New York and beyond, George Cram Cooke and Susan Glaspell went to Provincetown and thence to Greece, and others fled to the East and beyond. Anderson remained in Chicago, writing advertising copy and at the same time writing stories, each of them, like "Hands," revealing for a moment the essence of human truth. He was writing the stories that were to become *Winesburg, Ohio*.

## Masters's "Griffy the Cooper," Two Versions

ROBERT NARVESON

The Spoon River poems teem with passionate life struggling for expression against repressive cultural forms. In this respect, the *Spoon River Anthology* was part of a widely recognized phenomenon that Carl Van Doren misnamed the "revolt from the village." More recently, Anthony Channell Hilfer has further elucidated the theme in a book with that phrase as its title. In his study of the Chicago Renaissance, Bernard Duffey more accurately noted that the phenomenon was not restricted to the village, and identified the more general theme of "liberation."<sup>1</sup>

It must be emphasized, however, lest the point be lost in defining the theme of the *Anthology*, that this expression of the "buried life" is powerful because it is achieved not through abstract thematic statement but rather through concrete dramatization. Dramatization of any kind demands the creation of character, setting, and action. All these *Spoon River Anthology* has abundantly. Added insight into how Masters creates his effects may be gained by examining a poem apparently written to be independent of the *Anthology* in one form but part of it in another.

The independent version, titled "The Tub," exists as a typescript in the Harriet Monroe papers at the University of Chicago library.<sup>2</sup> It is not known whether Masters wrote it before or after the version that appeared as "Griffy the Cooper" in *Reedy's Mirror* (July 24, 1914), before being reprinted unchanged in the first book edition of *Spoon River* in 1915. The typescript of "The Tub" reads in its entirety:

## The Tub

You think you know life.  
You think your eye sweeps about a wide horizon.

In truth you are only looking around the interior of your tub.  
 You cannot lift yourself to its rim  
 And see the outer world of things,  
 And at the same time see yourself.  
 You are submerged in the tub of yourself:—  
 Taboos and rules and standards and falsehoods  
 Are the staves of your tub.  
 Break them and dispel the witchcraft  
 Of thinking your tub is life!  
 And that you know life!  
 Kick your tub over and take a walk around the city.

Spoken in this version by an unknown speaker and addressed to an unspecified audience in an unspecified setting, the poem becomes implicitly an address by the poet directly to the reader as audience. The language is formal and correct, the vocabulary that of an educated man (words such as "submerged" and "dispel" suggest this). The tone of address is aggressively didactic, as of someone with superior knowledge correcting an error he perceives in his listeners. At the same time, the speaker somewhat incongruously illustrates his contention about mistaken submission to "taboos and rules and standards and falsehoods" by the use of the extremely homely analogy of a tub in which the listener is figuratively submerged. The ideas are, distantly, Platonic (the myth of the cave), more proximately, Emersonian (reality hidden from the observer, whose false conceptions are shaped by received tradition). In the final line one detects the historical Edgar Lee Masters, product of a puritanical small town in rural Illinois, congratulating himself on his liberating escape (recalled as an act of violence, so traumatic it was) to the city of Chicago.

Readers familiar with Whitman, Thoreau, and others in the American transcendentalist tradition may be unwilling to grant the authority implicitly demanded by the speaker. Others have made his point better. The incongruity between concept and metaphor seems excessive. The final bit of advice seems a dubious solution to a problem of great difficulty. Surely no one would find life in a metaphorical tub so pleasant that he would stay there if a few metaphorical kicks would liberate him. There is, all in all, a lack of harmony between the diction and argument on the one hand and the metaphor and conclusion on the other.

What is objectionable in one context, however, may actually be attractive in another. By conceiving—or, it may be, reconceiving—this poem as part of the *Spoon River Anthology*, Masters was led to see his poem as the utterance of a specific character in a specific setting, and he accordingly wrote it differently:

*Griffy the Cooper*<sup>3</sup>

*The cooper should know about tubs.  
 But I learned about life as well,  
 And you who loiter around these graves  
 Think you know life.  
 You think your eye sweeps about a wide horizon, perhaps,  
 In truth you are only looking around the interior of your tub.  
 You cannot lift yourself to its rim  
 And see the outer world of things,  
 And at the same time see yourself.  
 You are submerged in the tub of yourself—  
 Taboos and rules and appearances,  
 Are the staves of your tub.  
 Break them and dispel the witchcraft  
 Of thinking your tub is life!  
 And that you know life!*

Master's first change was to name the speaker appropriately. The name "Griffy" characterizes by suggesting one who grasps onto things, in this case ideas. A *griffe* (from French for "claw," from the verb *griffer*, "to seize," out of the Old High German *grifan*, "to grasp"—cf. modern German *Griff*, "manner of grasping or handling; knack, trick, aptness," and modern English *grip*) in modern English is a clawlike ornament at the base of a column.<sup>4</sup> The name may also characterize by race, since a second meaning of *griffe* is "the child of a Negro and a mulatto; a mulatto; or a person of Negro and American Indian ancestry."

Like many names in *SRA*, "Griffy" carries overtones that reflect the extensive knowledge the self-educated Masters brings to bear in making *Spoon River* a microcosm of the world at large. It is an appropriate name for a small town artisan who employs concepts from the working world he knows to express his version of a philosophical theme of ancient lineage. The educated diction and traditional argument are a credit to such a character.

In identifying the speaker as "the Cooper" Masters joins him to a group of speakers in the *Anthology* whose modes of thought reflect their occupations. Masters had encountered this source of dramatic and thematic interest in the classical Greek Anthology, where references to occupation often supply the means of individuating the speakers. As in the Greek Anthology, some of the people in *Spoon River* have only a single name, and their identification is completed by the naming of their occupation. Others besides Griffy are Andy the Night Watch, Dippold the Optician, Schroeder the Fisherman, and (a variant) Plymouth Rock Joe who is obviously a chicken farmer. There seems to be an informal competition among these speakers to see who can most tellingly sum up his experience of human life in an "occupation analogy." The cooper's tub metaphor is a fitting contribution in this context.

In the new opening lines, the identity as a cooper is restressed, as is the circumstance that the voice of the speaker comes from the grave. The character speaks from the vantage point of a completed life and may therefore be supposed entitled to speak with some authority. One is at least inclined to give such a speaker the benefit of the doubt. While there remains the possible motive of apology (self-justification), one does not suspect such a speaker of the sort of possible designs on others that mar and complicate intercourse among the living. At the same time it is stressed that he speaks from a grave in the midst of familiar graves, part of his own community in death as in life. Whether or not there is life after death there is never ending conversation.

The salutary discipline of the epitaphic convention is noticeable in both versions of this poem. Caesar Pavese has observed that though frequently in Master's poetic practice his "resounding and ceaseless lyrical torrent comes down all veiled in vapor," in the *Spoon River* poems "the need of brevity, of emphasis, and of definition of the characters only rarely permits Lee Masters to blunder."<sup>5</sup> The need of definition of character noted by Pavese, the added requirement imposed upon the epitaphic convention by the *Spoon River* format, is in my estimation a chief course of the additional power in the *Anthology* version of this particular poem.

In the richly defined context of its graveyard setting, "Griffy the Cooper" lends support to the view of Masters as a writer in

revolt against the constraints of village morality. The final line of "The Tub" which gave the poem a city setting is inappropriate to *Spoon River*. It could be made appropriate simply enough by substituting the word "village" for "city." Instead, Masters deleted the line. This is the line that I think suggests a simplistic solution to the problem of vision that the poem poses. It is in my view a better poem without the final line.

By general consensus Masters in composing *Spoon River* rose to heights of poetic achievement he was never thereafter to equal. Whatever the discoverable motives, the artist deserves credit for his achievement. It pleases me to believe that Masters, inspired to create the complex structure of the *Anthology* out of the building blocks of the individual epitaphs, in turn conceived of the individual poems more richly than he could do outside of the structured whole. Though external evidence is lacking, it therefore pleases me to think that Masters first wrote "The Tub," then for inclusion in the *Anthology* altered it to produce the more satisfying poem we know as "Griffy the Cooper."

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#### NOTES

1. Carl Van Doren, *Contemporary American Novelists: 1900-1920* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922); Anthony Channell Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village, 1915-1930* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1969); Bernard Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters* (East Lansing: The Michigan State University Press, 1956).
2. In the Harriet Monroe papers at the University of Chicago library there are six typescripts of poems by Masters, versions of which appear in the *Spoon River Anthology*; but only the one in question is from the first edition. It was printed in the serialization of *Spoon River* in *Reedy's Mirror*, appearing there on July 24, 1914. As far as is known, this is before Masters met the editors of *Poetry*. He later promised Harriet Monroe some "anthologies," as he called them, for *Poetry* and could plausibly have given her the other five to print before they were added to the *Anthology* late in 1916. But why this one? Did he think the version different enough to be printed as a different poem? or did he wish an opinion from the editors about the ability of such a poem to stand on its merits apart from the *Anthology*?
3. *Spoon River Anthology* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922), p. 76. This standard hardcover edition replaced the illustrated edition of 1916 and has been frequently reprinted.
4. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, College Edition (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1956).
5. Cesare Pavese, *American Literature: Essays and Opinions*, Tr. Edwin Fussell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 50.

Literature from the Crucible of Experience:  
Jack Conroy in Ohio, 1927-30

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Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* was well received in Ohio when it first appeared in 1933. This fact is hardly surprising since *The Disinherited* was acclaimed everywhere as the first really successful novel fulfilling the promise of a new proletarian literature. Moreover, Conroy's literary career had really formally begun in Ohio several years earlier, indeed Toledo is the setting for the key section of the novel entitled "Hard Winter." A reviewer in the *Columbus State Journal* comments:

Of late there has been much talk of proletarian, and particularly of the novel as an organ of social protest. Perhaps the first satisfactory example to come out of America is *The Disinherited* by Jack Conroy. This is not a novel of wild-eyed rebellion. It is a realistic and powerful portrayal of the plight of the American worker written with humanity and first-hand knowledge. I recommend it as pertinent reading for the times.<sup>1</sup>

Howard Wolf, writing for the *Akron Beacon Journal*, called it "the best proletarian novel ever written by an American."<sup>2</sup> Elrick B. Davis, the *Cleveland Press* literary editor, warmly recommended it to his readers:

*The Disinherited*, though convincingly the story of Jack Conroy's own life as Louis Adamic's autobiography in the story of Adamic's, is in addition truly a novel. Materials as unquestionable as a slag heap are raised to creative literature.<sup>3</sup>

And when Louis Adamic came to Cleveland shortly after, Davis wrote another column on Conroy reporting Adamic's praise of

*The Disinherited*. The only fault Adamic could find, Davis remarked, is in its loose structure. "But," Davis added, "such structure is part of the character of the novel. It is after all a type of picaresque."<sup>4</sup> *The New Day*, a publication of the Ohio State Reformatory, surely a severe school of realistic criticism, reported:

If you want to read something live and human . . . Jack Conroy writes with a touch of mastery simply because he knows his subject. He is a worker himself, has lived through the things he writes about.<sup>5</sup>

But Hugh Montgomerie for the *Akron Times-Press* warned:

*The Disinherited* is not going to be a best seller. It is too raw and stark in its realism to an age that is sick of realism and ready to revel in 'Three Little Pigs'.<sup>6</sup>

And for Allen Saunders of the *Toledo News-Bee* *The Disinherited* had a familiarity and an honesty that would be particularly appealing to Toledoans who recognize in it "one public character and many a Toledo institution." "It is a story," Saunders wrote, "told with power and simplicity, in which you ache, starve and curse with the characters. You will have a fresh understanding of submerged humanity after you read it, a new, militant interest in the problems of the men who die to dig your coal, breathe rubber fumes to mold your heels, sacrifice fingers to assemble your car."<sup>7</sup>

Because Toledo was (and still is), like Ruth McKenney's Akron, a factory town, Conroy, like many a laborer in the 1920s, migrated there in search of work.<sup>8</sup> Despite the physical hardship and deprivation he suffered there, Toledo furnished Conroy his start as a major 1930s writer. It was there, and from there to other cities in Ohio, that Conroy made important contacts with Ohio writers and editors, and found the material and gained the experience he needed to write the foremost American novel of labor. It was through these contacts too that he would soon establish the leading little magazine of proletarian literature, *The Anvil*. What follows here is an account of how those contacts took place and what importance they would ultimately have for Conroy, indeed for American letters.

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Conroy came to Toledo in 1928, from a job in a rubber heel factory in Hannibal, Missouri, to join his nephew, Fred Harrison,

the "Ed" of *The Disinherited*. Harrison already had hired on at Willys-Overland in Toledo and wrote to Conroy that he too might find work there. Conroy got a job, worked at the Willys' plant for about a week, then hired on at Ford's in Detroit, but stayed only one day because the pay was too low in proportion to the work demanded. Harrison listed Conroy as sick for the one day of absence from Willys-Overland so that Conroy was able to return to his job in Toledo and thus begin a period lasting until 1930, of considerable moment for his literary development, both as writer and editor.

Living on Byrne Street in Toledo, Conroy made many contacts with Ohio writers and editors who became his close friends and in some cases submitted to mutual influences that would shape their subsequent careers. One of the Ohio little magazine editors Conroy had already known through correspondence before arriving in Toledo from Missouri. Conroy had contributed to Noah Whitaker's *Pegasus*, printed in Springfield, Ohio, almost from its beginning in 1924. *Pegasus* was one of many new little magazines in the 1920s and 30s, often undistinguished in themselves, that brought writers into print, most of whom have been forgotten or ignored in literary history, but some of whom would later become important writers and editors.

Whitaker's *Pegasus* was a queer mix of rebellion and reaction. His political orientation was socialist and anti-war. His editorial policy, however, was in full rebellion against modern verse, what he termed the "free-rhymers." Praising a contributor's verse, Whitaker editorializes: "a clear-cut specimen of rhythmic and properly accented blank verse which reveals that sedate, questioning intelligence, so seldom found in modern verse." Unfortunately the "simplicity and sincerity" that Whitaker preferred sometimes resulted in sentiment of the following sort from contributors:

Over the hilltops of happiness  
Down the valley of tears,  
Crossing the plains of achievement,  
Winds the Road of yesteryears  
etc.

But apart from the occasional bad verse, Whitaker's *Pegasus* attracted young leftist writers like Conroy whose "To Eugene

Victor Debs" poem heralded the political sentiments of a growing number of writers when Whitaker published it in 1927.<sup>10</sup>

Noah Whitaker was the very figure of the dedicated, self-sacrificing editor, a model that came to be imitated many times in the little magazines of the 1930s, and one that impressed Conroy himself who would soon reveal the same selflessness (but higher editorial standards) in his own work as editor of *The Rebel Poets* and *The Anvil*. Conroy has given us an unforgettable sketch of Whitaker:

Financially, *Pegasus* was a burden rather than an asset. Whitaker made a sort of living by twisting wire into household gadgets such as broom holders in a home-made machine in his basement—close by the ancient hand press on which he printed *Pegasus*. These handy household items he peddled from door to door, and when he found a sympathetic housewife who bought a broom holder he'd try to unload also a copy of *Pegasus* or a booklet of his own poems. He was a handsome old dog with a romantically-drooping mustache and he often effected a sale by reciting some of his verse with all the florid eloquence of an old-time elocutionist.<sup>11</sup>

One-man editors and publishers with ancient hand presses, whose little magazines served as stepping-stones for writers to better known publishers, have scarcely received their just due in literary history, owing in part to the anonymity in which they worked.

In Toledo, Conroy met David Webb from Chillicothe but living in Columbus. Together they put out a short-lived four-page little magazine called *The Spider*. An advertisement for *The Spider* in Whitaker's *Pegasus* describes it thus:

A monthly magazine of general culture, interpreting modern thought, yet maintaining a rigid standard of literary excellence.

The magazine called itself "The American College Radical" fighting in "the Vanguard of the Intellectual Revolution." But Conroy soon discovered that it was not among college students, at least in 1928, that he could hope for an "intellectual revolution." The magazine sold few issues. It was Conroy's first and last effort at

anything resembling pretension, since now in 1928, there were more pressing subjects at hand compelling his attention.

Conroy's interest in the possibilities of the little magazine likely grew out of his early familiarity with the E. Haldeman-Julius Little Blue Books which reprinted popular classics, provided a home course in all subjects, and were distributed widely throughout small towns in the Midwest when Conroy was growing up in Moberly, Missouri. Emmanuel Haldeman-Julius was a kind of Midwestern populist and "free-thinker" whose publications, printed in Girard, Kansas, were reading matter for many rural and lower middle class homes during the 1920s and 30s. To get his start as a publisher, Haldeman-Julius had bought the *Appeal to Reason*, an independent Socialist weekly, in 1919. Haldeman-Julius began to publish pocket-sized books called the Appeal Pocket Series, later changed to Little Blue Books, in an effort to bring good literature into low income homes. The price dropped to a nickel as the number of titles, which included Shakespeare, Kipling, Shelley, and Wilde, exceeded 1000 and the total circulation 100 million by 1928. In 1922, Haldeman-Julius replaced the *Appeal to Reason* with the *Haldeman-Julius Weekly*, later to become the *American Freeman*. These newspapers reached a large audience throughout the Midwest, and indeed Noah Whitaker's "discovery" of H. H. Lewis, the "gumbo" poet from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, was a result of having read the *Weekly*.<sup>12</sup>

The little magazines with which Conroy became associated, both as contributor and editor, reveal populist sentiments that can be traced to publications such as Haldeman-Julius' *Weekly* and the Little Blue Books. They are frequently anti-establishment, suspicious of big business and often hostile to "modernity" in contemporary writers such as Eliot, Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and others. Sympathy was directed toward marginal elements in society, marginal literature, regionalism, and the "little man."<sup>13</sup> Writing recently in the leftist *Daily World*, Conrad Komorowski describes the "rebellion and humanity" which inspired the contributions to *The Anvil* under Conroy's editorship in the 1930s. He explains:

*The Anvil* was intended for workers, and reached some, but most of its writers had what might be called a rebellious

populist and humanist approach, tempered by the radicalism prevalent in the years of the great economic crisis but not steeled in the fires of the biggest working class struggles, such as the establishment and building of the CIO and other major labor battles.<sup>14</sup>

The mood of rebelliousness, together with a humanitarian sympathy for those who were perceived to be without privilege in society, was a kind of grassroots expression emerging throughout the Midwest in the 1920s, but especially in Ohio when Conroy arrived there.

In the little magazines appearing in the 1920s a new radical critical temper was undergoing formulation. The rebellion was in part against the aesthetic individualism that appeared to characterize *Broom*, *transition*, *Secession*, *The Little Review*, *The Fugitive*, and other little magazines which had fought the battles against the establishment on a cultural front that excluded writers like Conroy who identified himself in spirit with the activist tradition of Whitman, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair. The move was toward identification with a group and a leftist orientation with its penchant for social realism and reportage.<sup>15</sup> Beginning with a revolt against the "free versers," for instance, Whitaker's *Pegasus* later took up the part of the new radical aesthetic which stressed the activist function of the literary work of art and the social responsibilities of its writer. The new radical aesthetic was articulated in its most famous instance by Mike Gold in his "Go Left, Young Writers!" piece appearing in the January 1929 issue of *New Masses*, a magazine where Conroy's early sketches of a worker's life first were published.<sup>16</sup> Conroy's little magazines, however, avoided—or tried to avoid—the exclusive Communist perspective of *New Masses* and *The Modern Quarterly*. Instead, as I have suggested, the grassroots motivation, born of Midwest regionalism and independence, had greater sway over Conroy's aims in providing a forum than did party line. To maintain this aim Conroy would need dedicated self-sacrificing helpers who were willing to work without remuneration and on their own, like Noah Whitaker of Springfield, who knew how to skirt financial failure and would be satisfied with possible literary oblivion.<sup>17</sup>

Before moving to Toledo, Conroy had contributed to Whitaker's *Pegasus* and administered a poetry contest for which S. Fowler Wright, editor of *Poetry and the Play*, an English little magazine, was judge.<sup>18</sup> *Pegasus* exchanged notices with several English little magazines, the importance of which for Conroy I shall mention presently. Conroy had also written a prose piece for Whitaker, entitled "The Great Spectra Hoax," relating with obvious delight how Witter Bynner and Arthur Davidson Ficke (both of whom later became Rebel Poets) using pseudonyms founded, in 1916, the Spectric School of Poetry to parody the Imagists and Vorticists. *Spectra*, their publication, was taken quite seriously by critics and reviewed by William Marion Reedy, John Gould Fletcher, Alfred Kreymbourg, and others—Kreymbourg devoted an entire issue of *Others* to the new "school"—in an acclamatory manner.<sup>19</sup> The hoax was revealed in a remark Bynner made while lecturing, a revelation that caused no small embarrassment among the critics. Whether Conroy's enjoyment of the hoax is an indication of the native Missourian's anti-humbog attitude, shared with Twain, or a reflection simply of Midwestern writer's fundamental scepticism toward Eastern literary circles is conjecture. There is the possibility, of course that both might be true.<sup>20</sup>

*Pegasus* served as a kind of communication center for isolated writers. It was through its pages, for instance, that Conroy met Emerson Price who, in 1928, was living in Columbus, Ohio. In the Carleton Symposium on 1930s writers, many years later, Conroy indicated the importance of "committees of correspondence" to little magazine contributors, and ultimately to American literature. Conroy wrote:

The isolated writers soon put into effect equivalents of the Committees of Correspondence. Some who became good friends by mail did not meet for years; some, indeed never did encounter one another face to face. But they were bound together by a camaraderie, a fraternity of mutual concern, that no longer exists.<sup>21</sup>

It was through such a device that Conroy "met" Price, a meeting that would have a great deal of importance for both writers, while Conroy was still in Hannibal (in 1927). Their correspondence

began through "Contacts for the Intellectually Marooned," a club advertised in little magazines. Merlin Wand originated it for this reason.

Two writers met shortly after Conroy came to Toledo, and soon they were driving down to Springfield together in Conroy's car to visit Noah Whitaker. Whitaker, as I have suggested, was something of an eccentric, somewhat older than Price and Conroy, and one whose idealism and sacrifices would not withstand the economic downturn long. By 1931, *Pegasus* was defunct despite the magazine's politicization and Whitaker's personal appeals for financial support from his contributors and subscribers.<sup>22</sup> Whitaker was no longer moving fast enough with the times. Co-operation was now the order of the day, and organization among writers, no matter how different their convictions and backgrounds.

One such organization was "The Rebel Poets, an Internationale of Song," founded in 1928, shortly before Conroy's installation in Toledo, by Lucia Trent and Ralph Cheyney. The common ground of The Rebel Poets, whose members were soon about 250 in number and from Europe and North America, was protest, "rebellion." Otherwise they had little in common, neither politically nor culturally. (Harry Crosby, for example, was an early member.) The Rebel Poets had its origins in the anthology *America Arraigned*, a collection of poetry protesting the Sacco-Vanzetti execution, and edited by Ralph Cheyney and his wife Lucia Trent. It was through the little magazine "grapevine," once again, that Conroy became acquainted with Cheyney. Cheyney, a philosophical anarchist who had been imprisoned in World War I as a conscientious objector, came from a background of education and privilege. His father was Edward Potts Cheyney, the well-known historian from Philadelphia. Cheyney had been editor successively of *Contemporary Verse* and *Contemporary Vision*. His sympathy with the "lowly" was more academic and vicarious than actually experienced.

The headquarters of The Rebel Poets were wherever Conroy and Cheyney happened to meet by letter since Cheyney lived in New York. Emerson Price was its first secretary-treasurer. In a recent article written for the *Triquarterly* issue on little magazines, Conroy describes Price's role:

The first official organ of the Rebel Poets was a bulletin turned out on a hectograph by its secretary, Hugh Hanley (pseudonym of Emerson Price), in Columbus, Ohio, where Price was a bank clerk soon to have a story, "Ohio Town," published in the *American Mercury*.<sup>23</sup>

Together Conroy and Price, though living in separate Ohio cities, participated in the rise of a new proletarian literature which literally took form in the pages of the little magazines and the anthologies of The Rebel Poets, beginning in 1929.<sup>24</sup>

While working days in the Willys-Overland automobile factory, Conroy proved himself extraordinarily productive at night, writing poems and stories which were placed in *New Masses*, *The Left*, and in the annual anthologies entitled *Unrest* that appeared under Conroy and Cheyney's editorship until 1931, when the anthologies were replaced by a magazine called *The Rebel Poet* with Conroy as editor. In order to avoid being fired by the bank Price took the name Hugh Hanley, aware that *The Rebel Poets* would probably be considered subversive. Conroy tells the story how a shipment of *Unrest* 1930 arrived in the U.S. from its English publisher, E. M. Channing-Renton, by way of Canada:

A shipment of copies of *Unrest* 1930, which Channing-Renton published, arrived by boat to Canada and was duly transhipped to Columbia by rail. Here a pipsqueak customs official halted them and asked Price if he didn't think they were a trifle too "socialistic." He assumed a stern and injured demeanor and said "No!" so vigorously the copies were released.<sup>25</sup>

Price was, as Conroy wrote elsewhere, "the workhorse of Rebel Poets, serving as secretary and sweating over its monthly bulletin—the ancestor of my first magazine, *The Rebel Poet*."<sup>26</sup>

Operating from his home in Columbus Price as business manager published notices in *Pegasus* of each forthcoming anthology. Whitaker in turn gave a generous notice of *Unrest*:

*Unrest* is the name of an anthology compiled by Jack Conroy and Ralph Cheyney. This is the only anthology in America whose aim is social reform and the betterment of the human race. . . .<sup>27</sup>

Appearing in the first *Unrest* anthology in 1929 were poems by several Ohio poets (Sherwood Anderson wrote "Machine Song: Automobile" for the 1931 *Unrest*), including "Unknown Soldiers" by Whitaker, two poems about factory work by Jim Waters of Cleveland, which had already found a publisher in *New Masses*, and Conroy's "Journey's End," obviously drawn upon his own experiences riding freight cars in search of work. A few lines will suffice to indicate Conroy's early vigorous, graphic style, tempered in the crucible of experience and soon characteristic (better than most) of the new radical aesthetic of the worker-writer:

When the bull stamped on your ice-cold fingers,  
And the bellowing darkness sprang between you and the  
grab irons,  
Death leaped like a hound from the ground and clutched  
you,  
The whining wheels ground you, and rolled on, and forgot  
you.<sup>28</sup>

The volume also included poems by Rebel Poets Harry Crosby, Mike Gold, Norman Macleod, Benjamin Musser, James Rorty, Lucia Trent, Cheyney, and others, gathered for the most part from little magazines.

Another collaboration that came about through Whitaker's *Pegasus* was that between The Rebel Poets and E. M. Channing-Renton, the English editor of *Home and Abroad*, published in France for expatriate English, generally holidayers on the Continent, "The Only English Literary Illustrated Magazine Published abroad for English People," according to a notice in *Pegasus*. Channing-Renton was also the publisher of "Studies" Publications which issued short biographies of literary figures. Hearing that Conroy had worked in Hannibal he assigned the Missouri author to write a biography of Twain, notice of which was given on the dustcover of Patrick Braybrooke's *Oscar Wilde, A Study*. Conroy's "study," however, never materialized, probably because he had too much of his own material ready for publication and was anxious to see that into print since the demand for proletarian writing was great. Emerson Price became the American editor for Channing-Renton's "Studies" Publications where *Unrest* 1930 commemorating Harry Crosby's suicide was published.

Early during his stay in Toledo, Conroy drove over to visit Jo Labadie near Detroit. Labadie, whom Conroy had written about in Ben Hagglund's *Northern Light*, and obviously admired, printed booklets of his own poems on an ancient hand press at little cost.<sup>29</sup> "I realized then that good poets need good printers" writes Conroy in his *Triquarterly* memoir,

and that rebellious poets (and publishers) need self-sacrificing printers who will print for whatever sums you rustle up for them. If *The Anvil*, in its period of greatest circulation, had been conducted on that principle. . . .<sup>30</sup>

The kind of self-sacrificing printer required for "rebellious poets" was patiently turning out *Northern Light* in tiny Holt, Minnesota, like Whitaker, supported by odd day-jobs. *Northern Light's* publisher and printer, Ben Hagglund, advertised his magazine in *Pegasus*. At one point a brief feud took place between "the black bug" (Whitaker) and "the Northern Light" (Hagglund) in the pages of *Pegasus*. Whitaker was not amused when Hagglund wrote saying that the feud might help increase circulation. He advised Hagglund to read Conroy's article on the Spectra Hoax!<sup>31</sup>

The story of Hagglund's contribution to proletarian writing as the publisher of Conroy's *The Rebel Poet* magazine (January 1931 to October 1932), and subsequently *The Anvil* (May 1933 to October/November 1935) is not my subject here.<sup>32</sup> Dale Kramer, founder and first editor of *Hinterland*, a magazine published in Iowa and drawing on Midwestern life, summed up Hagglund's role, writing in 1938:

Hagglund played an important role in the literature of the early 1930s. He was, in a manner of speaking, Printer to the Proletariat. From his little press rolled the first songs of the "rebel poets," a group which held a prominent place in the vanguard of the "proletarian movement" later to sweep America's literary centers.<sup>33</sup>

A fragile, tenuous connection that so often bound publishers, editors, and contributors of little magazines together, was once again made through the choice circumstances of Conroy's move to Toledo in search of work and his involvement in the Ohio little magazine activity taking place there.

By 1930, layoffs were frequent at Overland. "In the stricken cities," Conroy reminisces, "there was actual fear of starvation. I felt it, as did most of the men I had worked with at the Overland automobile plant, then working with a skeleton crew one or two days a week."<sup>34</sup> During an extremely difficult time when Conroy was unemployed and forced to pick carrots to survive, the genesis of much of his most important work took place. His poem, "Dusky Answer," in *Unrest 1930*, prefigures his interest in Black migrant workers whom he observed in Toledo factories, an interest that would one day manifest itself in the important study of Black migration to the cities of the North, *They Seek a City* (1945), written in collaboration with the Black novelist, Arna Bontemps.<sup>35</sup> The poem begins:

"Black boy," I said to him, "why do you niggers  
Come all the way from Georgia, take us white men's jobs,  
Work for less pay and stand the gaff they give you?"

It was cold standing in the line that morning;  
Stamping feet rang on the iron ground, and the jobless  
Shivered like hairless hounds, waiting for the gates to  
open.<sup>36</sup>

In the coal mines of northern Missouri, where Conroy had grown up, Blacks worked alongside whites, usually immigrants. And Blacks were UMW officials as was Conroy's father. His introduction to racial contention therefore was among migrant workers, Black and white, from the South at Willys-Overland in Toledo. Before long, Conroy, like Agee, would travel to the South to witness the condition of the rural worker, demonstrate for his rights, and gather matter for his own subsequent work.<sup>37</sup>

Conroy's friendships with Ohio writers and editors were helpful connections resulting in a publication that became the seed for *The Disinherited*. Emerson Price was the English section editor of *The Earth-Pamantul*, a bilingual Rumanian and English little magazine sympathetic with workers. Published in East Chicago, Indiana, its editor was Theodor Sitea. Conroy's contribution, "Jackson Street; Toledo," appearing in the December 1929 issue, described a contemporary scene of radical agitation with actual figures such as "Hambone, the mad negro evangelist"

and "the militant atheist, who challenges one and all to inform him where Cain got his wife." The account begins:

Jackson Street is the Hyde Park of Toledo. Here the "harsh and relentless cries of bad news" congregate. Words batter the thick walls of workers' double reinforced concrete brains, fall back ineffectually, but now and then a tiny seed finds a crevice and takes root. The idle crowds surge restlessly while an impassioned speaker, mounted on the traditional soapbox, appeals for funds for the defense of Tom Mooney, rotting in jail these thirteen years.<sup>38</sup>

Conroy's hometown newspaper in Moberly, Missouri, took notice of his progress:

Jack Conroy is perhaps Moberly's principal contribution to the ranks of those who hold radical views on government and social conditions in the United States. He has taken an active part in radical agitation, especially about Toledo.<sup>39</sup>

Such was the temper of the times that a small-town newspaper, traditionally conservative, would praise a former resident for his radical views! Mentioned in the article were Conroy's plans: "At present the author and poet is working on a book of sketches and short stories." The book referred to was to become *The Disinherited*, the basis for which was Conroy's article, "Hard Winter," published in the winter 1931 issue of *American Mercury* by H. L. Mencken. The article incorporated "Jackson Street" and turned Conroy's Toledo experience into a justly celebrated portrayal of working-class life in the Depression. The story of Mencken's discovery of Conroy's talent is told elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> There is no need to repeat it here since it took place shortly after Conroy's return to Moberly—my account is of Conroy's seed-time in Toledo.

Conroy left Toledo in the spring of 1930 after a winter of unemployment, flophouses, breadlines, and temporary work in a beet factory. He migrated back to Moberly where he began his most important period as editor and writer, now able to sustain himself and his family from articles for Mencken's *American Mercury*. He had made many friends and contacts in Ohio, whom he was able to repay in some cases, and who would remember him well when *The Disinherited* appeared in 1933. Conroy en-

couraged Emerson Price, who later became literary editor of the *Cleveland Press* for twenty-two years, to submit his piece, "Ohio Town," to Mencken. Mencken liked it and published it in the fall 1931 issue. It is a story of difficult circumstances, obviously influenced by Conroy's earlier contribution to Mencken's magazine, "Boyhood in a Coal Town."<sup>41</sup> Like Conroy's articles in the *American Mercury*, it would grow into a novel, published in 1939, by Caxton Printers in Caldwell, Idaho (and reprinted by Southern Illinois University Press in 1977).

It is instructive in terms of what has been said here to compare Price's novel with Conroy's *The Disinherited* and may serve as a summary. In keeping with the ideals of the little magazine contributors of the late 1920s and early 30s, but not always observed by them, Conroy in his typically generous fashion, arranged for Price's book to be published, suggested the title, and wrote a forceful introduction to it, praising its "simple strength, its artless wisdom," qualities that perhaps describe the best of the early proletarian writings.<sup>42</sup> Both novels are fictionalized autobiographies. Both recreate a child's education in penury and hardship. But Price's novel, appearing near the end of the decade, ends before his protagonist reaches maturity, as if the author were unsure of a commitment for his youth. Conroy's protagonist-narrator, on the other hand, is a politically committed young man, his adolescence outgrown by the conclusion of the novel. Since Conroy's novel is told through a first-person narrator, a technique common to the proletarian novel, with antecedents in the picaresque novel and Gorki's *Childhood*, the result is an objectivity utterly lacking in Price's story where the reader must depend upon an older man's bitter memories. Furthermore, Conroy relieves the dreariness of his story about suffering, hardship, and pain through irony, humor, and human warmth. Neither is a pretty story. But Price's for being true to feeling, is almost unbearably bleak in its effect. Scatterfield is a wretched place whose inhabitants struggle with poverty and drabness. "Since most of them have deserted the living," writes the author in an Afterword to the reprint some 38 years later, "one must wonder what purpose they served in the annals of the human race."<sup>43</sup> Not so with Conroy's characters. Perhaps Price, who lived experiences similar to those of Conroy—early penury, formal education

under great personal sacrifice, factory work, later professional writing—wrote his novel too late to share in the idealism, the desire to live *despite* all he has seen and known, expressed by Conroy's Larry Donovan when he finally leaves with Hans to join in organizing workers, free of his youthful poetry, now ready to take part in the "living poetry" of revolution.<sup>44</sup>

For the proletarian novel experience was a criterion for writing an "authentic" novel. Price had plenty of that. But Conroy's *The Disinherited* relates detail to social and economic circumstances beyond the confines of its characters' lives. Price, on the other hand, dwells entirely within the dismal, restricted possibilities of his characters' circumstances and makeup, as if he believed that nothing could be done about these. The Rebel Poets had long split up over political differences (Price had continued to serve as their treasurer even after Conroy moved back to Moberly).<sup>45</sup> Conroy carried on the ark of proletarian literature long after many of its followers became disillusioned or changed sides.<sup>46</sup> A conclusion of commitment and hope such as Conroy's novel offers was perhaps no longer available to Price in 1939. In any case his novel seems to say so.

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#### REFERENCES

1. (Jan. 17, 1934). I wish to thank Jack Conroy here for permitting me to examine his private papers.
2. (Nov. 1933). Howard Wolf was also a published novelist and poet.
3. (Nov. 27, 1933). Adamic's *Dynamite, the Story of Class Violence in America* had appeared in 1931.
4. *Cleveland Press* (1934).
5. (April 14, 1934).
6. Date missing.
7. (Nov. 28, 1933).
8. Ruth McKenny's *Industrial Valley* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939) is a study of rubber workers in the 1930s and one of the best documentary-journalistic descriptions of labor conditions from that period. Malcolm Cowley called it a proletarian novel. See Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), p. 382.
9. *Pegasus* 11 (August 1926), 16. Whitaker's *Pegasus* is not to be confused with *Pegasus; a Magazine of Verse* published from 1923-24 by W. H. Lench in San Diego.
10. 14 (May 1927), 10-11.

11. "The Literary Underworld of the Thirties," *New Letters*, 40 (March 1974), 56-57.
12. *Pegasus*, 22 (May 1929), 41. Lewis was one of the more eccentric poets and little magazine printers about whom a longer study needs to be written. He was so-named the "gumbo poet" for his article in Mencken's *American Mercury*, "School Days in the Gumbo," 22 (January 1931), 50-58. See Harold L. Dellinger's "H. H. Lewis—Plowboy Poet of the Gumbo," *Foolkiller*, 3 (Fall 1976), 6-7.
13. And hence to be distinguished from Mike Gold's ideological criticism (in *New Masses*) of modernist writers. A division between Conroy's populism would grow to an open break within The Rebel Poets, precipitated by Philip Rahv of the New York faction.
14. (Sept. 13, 1974), 8-9.
15. See Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine, a History and a Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), Chapter 9.
16. See David Peck, "Salvaging the Art and Literature of the 1930's: A Bibliographical Essay," *The Centennial Review*, 20 (Spring 1976), 128-41; also, David Peck, "The Tradition of American Revolutionary Literature: The Monthly *New Masses*, 1926-1933," *Science & Society*, 42 (Winter 1978-79), 390-1; and Hoffman, pp. 151-2.
17. Sherwood Anderson wrote in *New Masses* that a little privation was probably a good thing for literature: "My own feeling now is that if it be necessary, in order to bring about the end of a money civilization and set up something new, healthy and strong, we of the so-called artist class have to be submerged. Down with us. A little poverty and shaking down won't hurt us. . . . I believe in our ability to survive." Quoted by Conroy in his article "What If You Don't Want to Write for Money," *Writer's Review* (1932), 11. His words became, of course, a self-fulfilling prophecy.
18. Wright later became well known as the author of *Deluge*, a Book-of-the-Month Club selection.
19. See Conroy's account in *Pegasus*, 16 (November 1927), 9-11. Also, see John Fluwdas' recent review of Bynner's *Prose Pieces* in *Sat. Rev.* (Feb. 17, 1979), 55.
20. Such scepticism proved to be well founded later when *The Anvil* was taken over by the *Partisan Review* in a coup engineered by Philip Rahv and Wallace Phelps (later William Phillips) of the New York John Reed Club. See James Burkhart Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: John Wiley, 1968).
21. ". . . the contemporary fact . . ." *Carleton Miscellany*, 6 (Winter 1965), 36-39.
22. Whitaker wrote in the August 1931 issue: "The financial breakdown of our capitalistic system of government—the complete collapse of America's vaunted prosperity—has served to retard the progress of poetry until we can no longer promise you the magazine on time. We are not going to quit—for we are not a quitter. . . ." But publication ceased with the next issue.
23. 43 (Fall 1978), 115.
24. A corresponding development was taking place simultaneously in *New Masses* under Gold's editorship, who turned the magazine into "A Magazine of Workers' Art and Literature."

25. Letter to me from Conroy, April 24, 1979.
26. "Home to Moberly," *MLA Quarterly*, 29 (March 1968), 44.
27. *Pegasus*, 25 (February 1930), 60.
28. Jack Conroy and Ralph Cheyney, eds., *Unrest 1929* (London: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1929), p. 25.
29. "Joe Labadie, Craftsman and Poet," *Northern Light*, (Nov.-Dec. 1927). Whitaker called him "the working man's friend."
30. "On Anvil," *Triquarterly*, 43 (Fall 1978), 116-7.
31. *Pegasus*, 16 (November 1927).
32. See Michel Fabre, "Jack Conroy as Editor," *New Letters*, 39 (Winter 1972), 115-117, for an excellent description of Hagglund's role in *The Anvil*.
33. Source unknown, c. 1938. Conroy has the original.
34. "Home to Moberly," 44.
35. Revised completely, it was published again in 1965 as *Anyplace But Here*.
36. Ralph Cheyney and Jack Conroy, *Unrest 1930* (London: "Studies" Publications, 1930), p. 25.
37. My article, "'Black Writers and Whitel': Jack Conroy in the Thirties," is to be published shortly.
38. p. 17.
39. *Moberly Monitor-Index* (1931).
40. Jack Salzman, "Conroy, Mencken and the *American Mercury*," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 7 (Winter 1973), 524-528.
41. 23 (May 1931), 83-92.
42. Jim Gibson, the owner of Caxton Printers, was a friend of Howard Wolf, feature writer on the *Akron Beacon Journal*. Wolf introduced Conroy to Gibson who in turn introduced Gibson to Price. Gibson had already published a play and some poems of Wolf's who had also published a memorable account of Akron in the early Depression, "The Rubber Barons Fight to the Death," *American Mercury*, 23 (June 1931), 129-143; and a chilling story entitled "Suicide Notes," in the November 1931 issue.
43. Emerson Price, *Inn of That Journey* (Carbondale: Southern-Illinois Univ. Press, p. 268.
44. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), p. 289. *The Disinherited* is now in its tenth printing and will soon be re-issued in a hardbound edition by Robert Bentley Publisher.
45. See Fabre.
46. In the same year, 1939, Conroy and Hagglund edited and published *The New Anvil* which ran six issues until "the main business of those who might have written for *The Anvil* or supported it financially had become the squelching of Hitler." Conroy, "The Literary Underworld of the Thirties," 72.

## From Your Place and Beyond

SYLVIA WHEELER

Planning in 1977 to teach in Vermillion, South Dakota, I was as vague about where South Dakota was as most seem to be. Was it West, or Midwest? Wasn't Rushmore around there, or was that Wyoming? And I came from Kansas City, not seven hours away.

Upon arriving, I would look from the balcony of my South Dakota apartment at the mobile homes behind me, and the flat land squared off behind them. With no sense of place, I felt disoriented, and therefore distracted. Unable to identify where I was, I couldn't seem to identify myself. And, as a writer, I had little to say, though I hadn't thought of myself as taking off from place. Back in Kansas City I had known where I was, in part through the voices of writers. There the words were: "camshaft," "telephone pole," "Winsteads," "swag tail," "static," "Macy's," "whiskey."

And though I hadn't planned a long reminiscence, I did find out, that first year in South Dakota where I'd been. As a reader my sense of place, where I'd not been as well as where I'd visited, had come through books. In South Dakota I turned to Rolvaag, Cather; but along with past I wanted present. I thought of contemporary writers living in Midwestern small towns such as I lived in now, writers like Dave Etter in Illinois who had poems reading 'I love to sit here on the screened porch / and go over the names of prairie towns: / Morning Sun, Carbon Cliff, What Cheer; / and the Indian names of rivers: Wapsipinicon, Kishwaukee, Pecatonica. . . .'<sup>1</sup> I thought of Mark Vinz, Minnesota, whose poem, "In The Heartland," began: "Who can say / why the birds in this country / crash so hopelessly against / the win-

dows of passing cars?"<sup>2</sup> I read Freya Manfred, Craig Volk, and native American writers, all of whose land I was now in.

A year and a half later, I am beginning to see the land, to understand the past, and to sense the present of my place, South Dakota. Of the poets I read, three had written books directly relating place to theme. Each had "lived, and traveled, long enough to know the plants, birds, and yearly weather"<sup>3</sup> of their place. Each had taken a stand regarding place that gave them a clear point of view. Each had used the particulars of place as craftsmen working within the literary tradition, in various poetic modes. In so doing, their poems reflect the greater community of us all as they go from their place and beyond.

The first writer, Dan Jaffe, now living in Kansas City, had written *Dan Freeman*<sup>4</sup> some years after having come in the 1950's from New Jersey to Nebraska, a state bordering South Dakota. Jaffe recalls in the introduction to his "micro-epic"<sup>5</sup> the t.v. influenced picture he had of the Midwest before seeing it—that of a tundra of "dull, dusty, plains." It was Jaffe's thought that during the short time he would spend in the Midwest he would "speculate on the unusual and suffer the intolerable bravely."

His suffering began early as he neared Lincoln on an almost empty gas tank; all the while hoping to see a station "around the next curve or over the next hill," but finding, instead, that he could look in "four directions and see no signs of human habitation, no signs of man except for the roadside fences and the cement highway." When he reached Lincoln, Jaffe began to feel "a new kinship for all men, especially for those who had looked squarely out across an unpeopled horizon, who had faced an uncharted landscape alone. I had come west," he continues, "to test the compass of myself and to weather a new geography."

Later, Daniel Freeman Jaffe discovered that two parts of his name matched that of Daniel Freeman, the first U.S. homesteader, 1862, from Beatrice, Nebraska. Though one-hundred years apart in their pioneering, both had come east to west, both needed to contend with a new land, and both valued the American ideals of freedom and equality. The two Daniels are suggested in *Dan Freeman* where the protagonist's journey is given in prose facts and verse forms similar, in that, to W. C. William's *Paterson*.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the "geography" weathered by the two men differed by a century. Dan Freeman's landscape must have been akin to that described at the book's beginning by a Lynch County, Nebraska, pioneer who saw his place in the late 1800's in this way: But, you work with what is given you.

I was born eight miles from a railroad, five miles from a schoolhouse, nine miles from a church, 885 miles from New York, 220 yards from a swimming hole, and 15 feet from a cornfield.

Dan Freeman is a rounded character whose contentiousness, especially when feeling his individual rights threatened, brings him to life. As John Knoepfle says in "Crossing The Midwest": "A failure to accept our own past leads to the creation of cultural and regional stereotypes which blot out longstanding conflicts that have formed both the region and its literature"; Knoepfle emphasizes that "the determination to see the Midwest as the phlegmatic homeland of Middle-American normalcy is to deny an active spirit of dissent . . . abroad in the regions from its settlement to the present day."<sup>7</sup>

Such spirit of dissent was typical of Freeman's personality. Feeling that the reading of the Bible in public schoolrooms was an encroachment on freedom of religion, he brought before the courts a suit called "The Bible Case." Freeman's protest alienated him from his neighbors to whom he responded by saying:

Well, we're still here and cussin'. We filed  
Our teeth on trouble. We know what it's about.  
Right out back we fired bricks for a school,  
Me and Tom. I guess we would again.  
But now some goddamn politicking fool  
Says Dan Freeman ain't American.  
Did we chew locusts, drink dust from a sieve,  
So a preacher's daughter could teach us how to live.  
(Jaffe, 37)

All men, Freeman said, had the guaranteed right to "be unreasonable in religious matters" (Jaffe, 35).

In the Jaffe poem, as has always been true in literary tradition, characters are set in a particular place and reflect a particu-

lar culture. Odysseus traveled from a place called Ithaca, he stopped at an Island called Sicily, he traveled by ship. Dante's protagonist says that his parents bear the "Lombard name," that "Mantua" is their country and their race. Dan Freeman settled in a town called "Beatrice, Nebraska," he was stationed near a river called "The Little Blue," he traveled by Conestoga, or horse, across the plains. Place names all. From the man to the community to the world. Furthering the tradition of epic journey, Jaffe's book alludes to Dante's in the significance of the name, Beatrice," and most pointedly in the passage describing Freeman's crossing by wagon "an unnamed river" and meeting there a "swarthy boatman" who asks him:

. . . . . 'Friend,  
Before you reached this crossing, what was your name?  
I list all the sad souls that the fates send.'

Because Dan Freeman is believable, is a character not made larger than life, and because the language uses dialect, though not coyly, appropriate to the twin protagonists and their times, Jaffe lifts the mythic element to "look both forward and backward in order to create and communicate a vision where we [can] be responsible citizens. . . ." as Leonard Bird says of turning to myths for metaphysical direction.<sup>7</sup> More, it seems to me, is it characteristic of *Dan Freeman* to further the sense of community among us all. Certainly it was with such intention that Dan Jaffe identified with the character, Dan Freeman, seeing the two Daniels coming from different cultures, but sharing the larger community of the Western World as is stated in this passage:

. . . . . How did Dan'l  
Cussing his neighbors, 'Bible-reading fools,'  
Sluicing tobacco juice from off his porch,  
Change me, the orthodox Jersey Jew whose name,  
By chance alone, was his? What Babylonian  
Magic had charmed me 'cross a continent  
To find myself, then hid our secret bond  
Behind the years, beyond deciphering?  
Daniel Freeman, whatever man you were  
I share now, as I share the myths you made

With all our countrymen. And you as far  
From me as the tamer of lions who named us both!  
(Jaffe, p. 5)

Character and setting make sense here; the mix of rhymed and free verse, with prose facts, the suggestion of the longer history of mankind in its Judeo-Christian contending with the land and other forms of oppression make *Dan Freeman* more than just another pioneer myth. But, in that old seeming-contradiction of making universal the particular, the writer must pin down particular facts as absolutely as can be done. Dan Jaffe prefaces *Dan Freeman* with these remarks: "It is because the Midwest *is* that I have tried to capture who Dan Freeman *was*. I have tried to be as scrupulous as possible. . . . Merely to learn about Freeman is not the same as to share his life and thereby a portion of his time and his land" (Jaffe, p. xi).

The second Midwestern writer I speak of, Cary Waterman, writes in a lyric voice of rural life in Le Seur County, Minnesota, important to me as a symbol of the shared rurality of Minnesota and South Dakota which it borders. Waterman uses her farm setting to reflect themes of community, and of displacement in *First Thaw*.<sup>10</sup> Historically, women writers have been limited in choosing their homes, having been placed by father, or husband. Those whose work has been recognized have had to make their "limited circumstances work for them."<sup>11</sup> Presumably, more choices are open to them today.

Waterman's poem, "The Family," p. 12, tells of claiming a new place, and more. Here, of a Christmas visit back to her childhood home in Connecticut, she says: "I have stopped calling this home / and dove into myself for a place to live / . . . I will remember what I don't remember anymore. / I will touch here and leave / the luminous trail of a small shelled animal. / I will pick up anything I have forgotten to take."

Having taken, she finds herself at home with pigs, heifers, and ducks on a farm in Minnesota, and in a rural setting where props such as white birches, aspens, and rivers could well provide the sort of pastoral setting which, like the pioneer myth, can lead to idealization of subject. But as is true with Dan Jaffe, Cary Water-

man holds close to object, situation, and analogy in the context of what's given her.

That a responsive person speaks responsibly is seen in Waterman's pulling back from easy summary, in her following through her emotions, and ideas, to the contradictions implicit in them. Watching domesticated ducks follow upon their instincts in "Husbandry," p. 10, the persona notes they are "obedient, / and every night anticipate like wives / going to bed in their wooden box / ..... docile / and printed with the image that feeds them. / They will get fat because they're confined / and lay eggs and keep them soft and warm. / And when the flock is hatched / they will mark off the days until the first thanksgiving." A fitting analogy.

In reference to the look of death, Waterman denies that the dead Holstein frozen solid between house and barn resembles, as someone had loftily said, something fluid wearing "long garments like the wind"; instead, we're told, "Death is a pile" (Waterman, p. 8).

Speaking of love, Waterman shows a husband telling a wife that she hasn't "done a thing all day," and the anger felt by the wife causes her to "develop an ulcer and . . . stomach cramps on the spot" (Waterman, p. 6). And yet, in a later poem, "The Vespers," p. 21, the pair is seen awaking from a hot summer afternoon's nap to pull "the shades . . . stiffly over the south of windows, / over the flies caught there / vertical against the light"; they move to the kitchen where "water hysterically laughs itself / into the sink." Finally, they "reach out for water, / set the table, / and invade each other like diamonds." The synesthetic effect of this quiet image suggests the rhythms of a close relationship, just as does the anger felt earlier, and both illustrate Cary Waterman's ability to capture, through place, displacement as well as harmony.

These are poems written in the tradition of free verse, old as the Psalms, coming through Wordsworth's interest in the "common people," down through Whitman, Williams, to what is now perhaps the most prevalent verse form used. If, as Stanley Plumly says, good "free verse consists of assonance, dissonance, and surprise,"<sup>12</sup> then Waterman's verse applies. Through her clear

point of view, which in turn complicates the action between protagonist and object, through the tension between persona and place, the poetry, though seemingly personal, avoids being propaganda or confession. What is valued here, I sense, by the author is that which she praises in a neighbor, Axel Benson, whom she passes on the road. Of Benson she says: "I see what he has done with his life. He has found the center. He sees hills for what they are. They are there . . . and there. . . . He is not looking for anything. So he finds everything, right in its place. . . ." (Waterman, p. 19).

The assumption that poetry is falsely reflecting reality if no mention of city is given seems based on the premise that poets act as prophets. Both city and country exist; nor do we ask those whose place is urban to verbally concede to the rural—there can be rustics in both settings. Transcendence from place to what is common to us all comes from a cosmopolitan awareness, not necessarily a cosmopolitan setting, if there is such setting. All prophets do not sit in Times Square.

As is true with the poets I've discussed, John Milton, author of *The Blue Belly of the World*,<sup>13</sup> works out of a long established literary tradition in his mystic search for a harmony of flesh and spirit. Here the quest is shown through the persona's interaction with coyote and daisy. Milton, living in Vermillion, South Dakota, brings me home in his use of place, and its particulars.

On this grassy peninsula between West and Midwest, the great plains rise to granite hills. The outdoors is ever present but locked out by double storm windows eight months of the year. Spring passes quickly, and then it's summer when again the outdoors is locked out, drapes pulled against the sun. Pheasants spin dust across gravel roads, the sunset sky gives the only gaudy color, all else is a subtle mix of ochre to brown with touches of pig pink. For the most part rural, small towns and Indian reservations spot the road. Above all, it is sparsely populated and land and people seem subdued.

To know this place you need to know the Dakota Indian culture as well as that of the later Scandinavian pioneers because both cultures still dominate. In "The Promise of Place" (Milton, p. 22) this mixed culture is acknowledged:

## THE PROMISE OF A PLACE

The flatness need not prove  
that the world is not round.  
Stand at the junction of  
wire fences and see the spokes  
of an unseen wheel; it  
is there; it circles in  
the mind and it is real.

The emptiness does not  
make us barren. Indian  
bones have floated in old  
trees reaching beyond the  
shield of sky; farmers rest  
beneath boulders they could  
not move; with coyotes and  
hawks relics are everywhere.

The land is bright and the  
land is dark; unshaded  
suns expose new poets  
and old plows; trees drink at  
rivers, Indian women  
string their traders beads, and  
once each year the promise  
of snow is unbroken.

John Milton

from *The Blue Belly of The World* (South Dakota:  
Spirit Mound Press, 1974), p. 22.

It is the coyote, present in this poem, and the chief totem throughout the book, whose arched back against the sky, the "blue belly of the world," gives the protagonist his vantage point. Held to the earth, and looking to the sky, the poet wonders at the tension between flesh and spirit, sometimes speaking as coyote, sometimes as man. Like man, the coyote has "conditions / . . . placed upon him from without. / Frustrate, he loves at noon / and whines his anger in the dark" (Milton, 21). He is a "shape" "within its first form, / free in confinement" (Milton, 32).

Both man and coyote lie beneath "an indiscriminating sun," both feel lust; but surely only man can be conscious of the yearning to locate the love which would make life more than mere survival, as is expressed in "Seeking," p. 27: "I have lost / the light of my soul / . . . I cannot sleep / until I find her."

Though *Blue Belly* can be read as a searching for love, that healing emotion, it is the tension between coyote and daisy, assertion and surrender, that interests me most. Throughout the book, coyote and daisy skirt each other. Only once do they come together when the poet, having waited thirteen days in a sacrificial fasting on the hills for the coyote to appear, hopes that perhaps "a meadowed daisy / could lean [his] way / in the wind / and prettify / [his] bones." Upon descending on the fourteenth day, he looks behind him to see "the real vision" as coyote trots down the hill, "a wilted daisy drooping from his meatless mouth" (*The Sacrifice*, p. 21). But this momentary purification is just that—a vision. It is, instead, "Permanent pain" that the furies want. "He gives it to them / and writes no poems" (Milton, p. 59).

The conflict and its possible appeasement is given us, but little lasting reconciliation between the demands of flesh and the yearning for transcendence is found here, nor is there a meeting between the primitive respect for land and animal, and contemporary usurpation of both. "Coyote In The New World," p. 32, shows the coyote standing "like a grey ghost" on a "brown hill" ". . . sniffing the wind" "for the salty smell / of a man." Seeing "the new landscape / as new gods / walk the grass and dust," the coyote's eyes are confused with "musky fright." Still, "Unless the coyote cries," "The Zunie will forget / their fetishes / . . . And man will live only / in buried books, deep in / the sun burned sand" (Milton, p. 60).

Again, as do Jaffe and Waterman, Milton locates his poems very specifically in his region's setting, attending to the culture that informs region, and in doing so with artistry, adds his images to Western literature. Much of the pleasure in *Blue Belly* comes from the many meanings suggested by the tension between flesh and spirit, personal, cultural, and religious. The spare look of verse on the page, the language that just rides above conversation, even the punctuation, occasional, except for semicolons pointing

to relationships, the frequency of the simple, direct word, all add to the poignancy of theme.

Dan Jaffe, Cary Waterman and John Milton helped me establish where I live in the upper Midwest. What the three have in common is only that they have lived here, and that they are crafty writers. They know their place, and in knowing it, go beyond it, again making the particular universal, much as M. L. Rosenthal noted in *Poetry and The Common Life*:<sup>14</sup>

I have thought, seeing the intricately satisfying designs woven into Tourez tent walls, how these designs made an infinitely expanding world out of what would otherwise have been the narrow, stifling confines of the primitive tents of desert nomads. Every art does the same.

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#### NOTES

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2. Mark Vinz, "In The Heartland," *A Geography of Poets*, ed. Edward Field (New York: Bantam, 1979), p. 245.
3. Karl and Jane Kopp, quoted from Gary Snyder, *Southwest* (Albuquerque: Red Earth Press, 1977), p. 10.
4. Dan Jaffe, *Dan Freeman* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967).
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8. Kopp, *Southwest*, intro. x.
9. Cary Waterman, *First Thaw* (Minnesota: Minn. Writers' Publishing, 1975).
10. Ellen Douglas, "Provincialism in Literature," *New Republic*, 5 July 1975, p. 23.
11. Stanley Plumly, "Breadloaf Writer's Conference Workshop," 1978.
12. John R. Milton, *The Blue Belly of the World* (Vermillion: Spirit Mound Press, 1974).
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### *Ordinary People*: Extraordinary Novel

JOHN STARK

Viking Press's acceptance of Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* even though she sent it to them unsolicited made that novel newsworthy and deserving of a footnote in the history of American book publishing.<sup>1</sup> Most reviews of it have been tepid and perfunctory, grudgingly offering a modicum of praise and then condemning technical infelicities. Lore Dickstein, for example, acknowledges strengths but also charges that it has "jarring shifts of tone, and confusion about who is speaking" and that "the devices for presenting characters are crude and unimaginative."<sup>2</sup> Avoiding these two responses that trivialize *Ordinary People* makes it possible to recognize the power of this novel, its insights into human motivations and its tentative solutions of perplexing everyday problems. This novel's themes, that is, lie at its center. By pushing on from the point where a pragmatic reading for helpful insights ends, a critic can further clarify this novel and perhaps partly rebut the accusation that all serious contemporary novels are too esoteric to justify the bother needed to read them.

The major themes of *Ordinary People* appear succinctly but obliquely in a list of questions that Conrad Jarrett, the main character, answers for a final examination in his high school English class:

1. Discuss Hardy's view of Man's control over his inner/outer environment, using *Jude the Obscure* as an example.
2. Are the characters in *Of Human Bondage* people of great strength or great weakness? Support your theory.
3. What is Conrad's viewpoint, as illustrated in *Lord Jim*; concerning action and consequence?

These three topics—control, evaluation of oneself and others and the nexus between actions and their consequences—dominate the thinking of the major characters and thereby strongly influence their perceptions. This novel's first sentence states the importance of principles such as those that one can establish by taking a position on these topics: "to have a reason to get up in the morning it is necessary to possess a guiding principle." Inappropriate guiding principles, however, can distort perceptions so much that reality bewilders, even to the point of madness. Conrad Jarrett, for example, baffled by his guiding principles, especially by his beliefs about these three topics, has surrealistic memories and has been driven to an unsuccessful suicide attempt and to madness that required months of treatment in an institution. After he modifies his principles, however, he sees things "in focus" (p. 131). Conrad finally learns to disregard these three topics and to remember the advice that his English teacher writes on the blackboard just before the exam: "RELAX. NO BIG DEAL."

The problem of attaining control, particularly self-control, vexes Conrad through most of this novel. He wishes for more control so that he can tolerate Stillman, an immature friend, and persons like him. Much later he punches Stillman and expects, according to "one of life's unwritten laws," to be punished for losing control (p. 183). At another point he increases the number of facets of his personality that he wants to regulate and he makes a list of self-help projects that he intends to pursue. The most extreme example of his rage for order occurs when, traumatized by one of the most formidable threats to his self-control, a friend's suicide, he decides that "control is all" (p. 222). He and his psychiatrist illustrate their values when Conrad tells him that he wants more control and Berger asks if control is related to absence of feeling. For a long time Berger cannot dissuade Conrad about the benefits of control.

Whereas Conrad at first desires self-control, his mother, Beth, desires to control other persons and events. After hearing Carole Lazenby praise Beth's organizational ability, Cal, her husband, remembers her tenacious battle to keep their apartment clean and orderly, despite their two young sons. Although he recognizes her occasional compulsiveness, Cal "like[s] the order she brought into his life" (p. 90). Her sister-in-law, too, understands that Beth

cannot tolerate deviation from her plans. At first her punctiliousness seems useful, but late in this novel it appears in a different light when she comments on Conrad's attempted suicide: "he made it as vicious, as sickening as he could! . . . Oh, I will never forgive him for it! He wanted it to kill me, too!" (p. 237). The bloody mess, she thinks, was the most important part of her son's desperate act. Her reaction supports Berger's oblique contention that demand for control can obliterate feeling. Cal finally changes his conception of her orderliness: "he seems something else here: that her outer life is deceiving; that she gives the appearance of orderliness, of a cash-register practicality about herself; but inside, what he has glimpsed is not order, but chaos; not practicality at all, but stubborn, incredible impulse" (p. 254).

She intends most resolutely to control her son, which exacerbates his troubles. During her first appearance in *Ordinary People*, for instance, she asks Cal to nag Conrad about seeing the Lazenbys. Conrad often reacts to her attempted control of him by avoidance, as he does shortly after her conversation with his father, when he leaves for school. Then, although he has forgotten his sweater, he will not return to the house for it because he does not want to risk meeting her, and he hopes that his ride arrives before she comes outside. But he cannot always avoid her. After the Christmas tree is decorated she ruins a potentially cheery occasion by complaining that he has not told them he has quit the swimming team. Her attempted domination of him is one reason why he wants self-control: she has persuaded him that he must be controlled in one way or another.

Like Beth, Cal at first wants to control other persons and events, but unlike her he later recognizes the futility of this wish. Cal's thought that "fault equals responsibility equals control equals eventual understanding" illustrates his first position and, by the way, brings together the three topics mentioned in the English examination (p. 34). He translates this theory into action; Beth accuses him of expecting others to act as he wants. An analogue, although less repugnant, of Beth's reaction to Conrad's attempted suicide, Cal's anger that Buck's (their other son, who drowned) broken leg will cause them to miss a football game, shows her accusation's validity. In general, he wants "safety and order. Definitely the priorities of his life" (p. 173). Nevertheless,

his desire for control and his faith that he can attain it sometimes falter, as he shows by commenting that "all life is accident" (p. 146). Cal persists in his belief that order and comprehension depend on each other, so when he loses his faith that he can achieve order he sees all around him meaninglessness. Thus, Cal, like Conrad and, although she does not recognize it, like Beth, reaps trouble from his demand for control, because the objects of that desire remain obdurate. Later, however, although Beth frustrates him, Cal thinks "you cannot change her anyway, you are not God, you do not know and you are not in control, so let go" (p. 241). Furthermore, he abandons his illusions "that he has existed in order to understand, to control, to predict. This idea that he was necessary. To organizations, to his family, to his wife. To life. All these things, including himself—they exist all right, but not because of anything" (p. 242).

The trouble caused by the characters' search for order validates Berger's preference for fluidity rather than for order. One needs to make a careful distinction at this point, however. A sentence in this novel, its importance underscored by its statement of the title, is relevant here. The narrative voice announces that "truth is in a certain feeling of permanence that presses around the moment. They are ordinary people, after all. For a time they had entered the world of the newspaper statistic; a world where any measure you took to feel better was temporary, at best, but that is over. This is permanent. It must be" (p. 94). Lore Dickstein convincingly states that in this novel it is sometimes difficult to identify the speaker. This quotation, that is, may not express Guest's opinion. The action of this novel, however, lends authority to these beliefs. Most convincingly, the drowning, which thrust them into the world of the newspaper statistic, has shown them that if the choice is between permanence and fluidity they had better choose permanence. One must distinguish, in other words, between soothing permanence, which is better for them than fluidity, and confounding order, which is worse.

The second question, about the relation between events and their consequences, has a vital part in *Ordinary People*, the plot of which is essentially a playing out of two events: Buck's drowning and Conrad's suicide attempt. To emphasize further the relationships between events and consequences the protagonist is

named Conrad and the English examination's question about consequences refers to Conrad's *Lord Jim*. Moreover, Conrad Jarrett thinks that his swimming coach, "Salan[,] is a Man of his Word, actions have consequences, *Lord Jim* and all that" (pp. 177-178). In addition to causing many actions and thoughts, the drowning and attempted suicide increase the main characters' fascination with control and with evaluations of strength and weakness. The drowning casts doubt on persons' ability to control their destiny, and Conrad slashed his wrist in order to control his destiny totally by ending it. Those two events clearly raise questions of moral, physical and psychological strength. That is, many of the ramifications of this question of causality, despite its importance to *Ordinary People*, fall into the categories formed by the other two questions on the examination.

Conrad thinks more usefully about causality soon after the most optimistic event in the novel, an event that also indicates his healing's impressive progress. That is, the euphoria of his sexual experience with Jeannine is subtly but unmistakably connected to his healing and his new attitude toward causality. After their experience Jeannine asks him, "do you believe people are punished for the things they do?" and she adds that she means punished by God (p. 251). He evades her question by saying that he does not believe in God, and then he digresses by listing some things in which he does believe, including her. He has learned, in other words, that contemplating his actions' consequences causes trouble and that he can avoid doing so.

One literary technique used in this novel reinforces the point that the consequences of events should not be, perhaps cannot be, traced very exactly. Often sparse information about a person or event appears early, more information appears later, and a full explanation appears still later. References to the drowning are a suitable example. The novel opens with a description of Conrad awakening that does not mention another, dead son. After a few pages one learns that Beth's "stomach is flat, almost as if she never had the babies," not "the baby" (p. 6). Later it is revealed that the missing son has drowned, but not until page 217 is the drowning narrated. Conrad's suicide attempt, too, is explained only gradually. At first his behavior, like Nick Adams's in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," hints that he is trying to recover from

mental difficulties. Both characters' obsession with details and attempts at ritual show that they require more order. Brief psychological diagnoses are given sporadically later, sometimes in narrative comment, sometimes in reports of Conrad's memories. While the drowning and suicide attempt become more clear very slowly, their consequences multiply, the conjunction of these two developments making it difficult to see the relations between events and consequences.

The drowning influences the ways in which the characters, especially Conrad, try to decide who is weak and who is strong, a question like the third one on the examination. Relative strength of body and will were decisive in the drowning episode, because the two boys clung to an overturned boat in a storm, Conrad until help arrived, Buck, although he was a much better swimmer, for not so long. The outcome is ironic in the same way as the outcome in Crane's "The Open Boat"—the strong perishes and the weak survives—and this irony makes more problematical the evaluation of strength. Because of the drowning Conrad becomes emotionally involved with swimming, primarily in ways that show his need to compare himself to Buck. He measures his performances against Buck's exemplary record, and he probably tries to figure out how a strong swimmer can drown. Some of the other swimmers implicitly remind him of Buck, and although Conrad needs friendship he suffers so much from those reminders that his swimming deteriorates, his pleasure vanishes, and finally he quits. Quitting does not solve his problem of emulating Buck, because swimming is only a paradigm for that larger problem. Like the other important information in *Ordinary People*, information about the intensity of his desire to measure up to Buck is presented in bits and pieces. First a psychiatrist at the institution warns him that high achievers set impossible standards, inevitably fall short, and then feel guilty. It becomes evident that Conrad needs this warning and that, specifically, his standard is Buck. Near the end of *Ordinary People* this psychological mechanism is further clarified in a parable that Berger tells Conrad about "this perfect kid who had a younger brother. A not-so-perfect kid. And all the time they were growing up, this not-so-perfect kid tried to model himself after his brother" (p. 224). "Then, along came this sailing accident," Berger continues, and "'where is the justice?'"

He adds that "the justice, obviously, is for the not-so-perfect kid to become that other, perfect kid" and that this burden is too heavy so the younger brother tries to destroy it.

Cal's sessions with Berger indicate another reason why Conrad is obsessed with self-evaluation. Cal claims that he is "maybe a lousy husband and father" (p. 147).

"Ah," Berger nods. "Well, maybe rotten sons deserve lousy fathers. Yours tells me Tuesdays and Fridays what a rotten kid he is."

"He shouldn't. It isn't true."

"He comes by it honestly, though."

Cal, although probably the most admirable character, worries about Conrad, grieves for Buck, and is bedeviled by his wife, so that he is inflicted with guilt about his relationship with his family. Little, if any, specific evidence suggests that Conrad has learned self-depreciation from his father, but their memories of the suicide attempt constantly remind them that something is wrong with the family, and Beth's dogged refusals to admit error and her frequent charges that Cal and Conrad are conspiring against her induce them to shoulder the blame.

Conrad finds antidotes for self-loathing outside his family. After a woman he meets in a library tells him he is good-looking, he thinks well of himself, and then sadly expects punishment for this re-evaluation. Lacking self-regard, he had never noticed that he is attractive, and he had worried about skin blemishes. Partly because of his failure to notice his attractiveness, he had avoided girls. His self-regard grows even more rapidly as his relationship with Jeannine develops. Then, rather than trying to raise his self-esteem, he stops evaluating himself, thus implicitly admitting that he should ignore the issue in the third examination question.

Like the theme of tracing consequences, the theme of evaluation is reinforced by skillfully used literary techniques. The release of information about some of the characters is controlled so that their moral status appears to change, and the difficulty of evaluation is thereby suggested. Beth, for example, at first appears beautiful and attractive because she is seen through Cal's eyes. Her first discussion with him about Conrad seems to demonstrate only a mother's normal concern for her son. Later,

however, her obsessive need to control others and her egocentricity become obvious and she appears negative. Jeannine is glimpsed objectively early in the novel: "a small neat-looking redhead in a blue skirt and tan jacket is hurrying along the street, her books in her arms" (p. 17). Then, however, she is seen differently through the eyes of the vulgar Stillman. A few pages later, after another girl introduces Conrad to Jeannine, she seems unremarkable. As Conrad's relation to her develops, Jeannine's attractiveness becomes apparent. Toward the end of the novel, however, she describes some of her previous problems, so her status changes again.

Thus, in many ways this novel supports skepticism about the benefits of control, of tracing consequences, and of evaluation. A skeptic about those three things could conclude that amorality is justified, but *Ordinary People* rebuts this conclusion. Conrad's desire to protect Jeannine appears to be admirable, and her confession makes more credible her need for him. Her need also hastens his psychological recovery by helping him to divert his efforts from self-evaluation to concern for her. His feeling that "he is her protector against the world," which he implicitly communicates to her, elicits her confession (p. 248). The meticulous and credible establishment of the warm relation between Cal and Conrad, which becomes most evident after Beth leaves, indicates that persons are responsible for others. In contrast, Beth reprehensibly lacks concern for others. Her reaction to the attempted suicide and her refusal to see Conrad in the mental hospital dramatically illustrate her attitude; many small instances illustrate it less dramatically. In short, some of the sources of Conrad's trouble are evident, but certainly it does not follow from them that hedonism or amorality is defensible.

Instead, this novel suggests some other guiding principles. One, humor, is crucial because it dictates that the other principles not be held with such seriousness that, like the three that derive from the examination, they become debilitating. On the second page Conrad repeats to himself some precepts he had learned from a psychiatrist at the hospital: "*Lay off. Quit riding yourself. Less pressure more humor go with the stuff that makes you laugh.*" These things he does—when he can follow his teacher's admonition to relax—to some extent with his father, somewhat more

with Jeannine (occasionally to her mild annoyance) and most of all with Berger. Immediately after meeting Berger "he sees the way to handle this guy. Keep it light. A joker" (p. 41). Berger's eccentricity and wit justify Conrad's decision, and these two characters have some witty exchanges. In this novel, that is, Guest demonstrates humor as well as advocating it.

Some of the other values developed in *Ordinary People* contradict the discredited values. As an antidote to tenacious evaluation of oneself and others this novel presents forgiveness. Conrad, strongly aided by Berger, gradually replaces his self-loathing with self-acceptance and then overcomes his need to evaluate himself. At first Conrad attends to his mother's failure to forgive him, but in an important scene Berger works him into a position in which he realizes that he needs to forgive her. Quickly Berger nudges him one step further:

"Give yourself a break, why don't you? Let yourself off the hook."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean, there's somebody else you gotta forgive."

"You mean me? What for? For the other night, you mean? For trying to off myself?" (p. 120)

Berger states the premise from which he derives the necessity for forgiveness: "people don't change on command from other people. You oughta know that, having given her the ultimate command a year ago [his suicide attempt]" (p. 121).

The final scene of *Ordinary People*, although at first glance not very meaningful, actually shows the extent to which Conrad's forgiveness of others and himself has progressed. In that scene he goes to the Lazenbys' house and asks Joe to play golf, thereby symbolically expressing his forgiveness of his mother, even though, by leaving Conrad and his father, she has increased the amount of forgiveness she needs. Conrad, that is, indicates his reconciliation with her, even in her absence, by doing the action that very early in this book she asked his father to get him to do. The narrative thus comes full circle. Moreover, he shows his forgiveness of himself. He had been holding Lazenby at arm's length and then had avoided him completely because Conrad associates Lazenby, a former close friend of both Conrad and Buck, with

his painful memories of Buck. This golf game will therefore show that Conrad can endure Buck's death and has stopped blaming himself for failing to emulate, and thus replace, Buck. After Conrad learns to resolve all these moral issues that impede him, he begins to see that life is matter-of-fact, that it just "is." This notion, which occasionally is stated earlier in *Ordinary People*, is the meaning of the apparently meaningless final lines: "He follows the sound of Lasenby's voice: 'Hey, anybody seen my golf hat? Katy, you seen my golf hat, damn it?' He picks up the nine-iron, swinging it lightly through the grass as he walks toward the house" (p. 263).

An alternative to control, Berger suggests, is feeling. He asks Conrad, "'you see any connection here, between control and this—what'll we call it—lack of feeling?'" (p. 99). Conrad is not yet ready to consider this proposition, so he evades the question. After Conrad has great difficulty handling the news that a friend has committed suicide, Berger is more direct; he eschews his usual Socratic method and clearly advocates feeling without relating it to control: "'the thing that hurts you . . . is sitting on yourself. Not letting yourself connect with your own feelings. It is screwing you up, leading you on chases that don't go anywhere'" (p. 225). Conrad progresses slowly in the direction that Berger suggests. His affection for Jeannine grows, for example, and he more overtly demonstrates his love for his father and even, although it is not reciprocated, for his mother.

Conrad more easily follows a related piece of advice that Berger gives him at the end of one of their sessions: "'the body doesn't lie. . . . You remember that. So all you gotta do is keep in touch'" (p. 121). Illustrating a minor meaning of this admonition, Berger and Jeannine, the two instruments of Conrad's healing, have the same kind of eyes. That is, this part of their body identifies them as truth-seers. Conrad soon notices Berger's "eyes, a compelling and vivid blue[; they] beam into whatever they touch" (p. 38). Those eyes make Conrad uneasy at the beginning of his first session with Berger, and they have the same effect on Cal at the beginning of his first session. During Conrad's first significant conversation with Jeannine, "she looks up at him. Clear, blue eyes. Like someone else's. With a start he recognizes them. Berger's eyes. Weird" (p. 102). Conrad later learns from

her about a more important way in which the body communicates. After their first kiss and the rush of feeling it causes, he thinks, "marvelous accident. Did he discover her in her blue skirt that day last September, in Lazenby's car? If so, Berger is right: the body doesn't lie" (p. 171). After their first sexual experience he has a similar but understandably heightened response and the same thought: "and he squeezes her tightly, feeling the sense of calm, of peace slowly gathering, spreading itself within him. He is in touch for good, with hope, with himself, no matter what. Berger is right, the body never lies" (p. 251). Again, the point is not an amoral, hedonistic one: if it feels good do it. Rather, one should conclude that it is possible by attending to the way the body is feeling to short-circuit the difficulties that the mind causes. To release feeling is itself a positive step, Berger argues. Moreover, some of the messages that Conrad receives from his body help him achieve peace and self-awareness. Believing the body, then, is a means, not merely an end.

This novel's conclusion appropriately focuses on the everyday world. One strength of *Ordinary People* derives from its attention to the world, to lost golf hats as well as to psychological crises. Guest, that is, keeps her eye on the world, not on esoteric literary techniques. This does not mean that she lacks literary craftsmanship or knowledge about her predecessors; one can easily find evidence of both qualities. Rather, she chooses to communicate with readers and to describe obvious realities. Her clarity catches one's attention, and her insights about the way we live hold that attention. Her book, therefore, deserves better than to slip into oblivion.

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#### NOTES

1. New York: Viking Press, 1975. Later references will be parenthetical.
2. *New York Times Book Review*, 18 July 1976, p. 18.

## Edna Ferber and the "Theatricalization" of American Mythology

ELLEN SERLEN UFFEN

The enormous popularity of Edna Ferber's novels lay in her ability to create a consistent fictional universe based in popularly known and accepted American mythology: plucky, self-reliant boys and girls gain success and fame in colorful settings ranging from the old Wild West to the new wilds of Alaska. All aspects of Ferber's work—plot, character, setting, style—partake of the myth. Other writers, of course, have also used myth, but more narrowly, as allusion, as metaphor, as extended literary motif and, often, as thematic contrast to the reality of the events being depicted. Fitzgerald, for one, mourned its loss in *The Great Gatsby*; Faulkner satirized it in *Old Man*; and "popular" authors have often played on its surefire ability to strike chords of longing in the reader. All of these writers, however, no matter what the relative merits of their work, implicitly view myth as just that—unreal, a product of literature, of historic tradition, as stories inextricably interwoven into the fabric of American culture. Edna Ferber, in the guise of implied author, differs in that she believes in mythology as reality, or more precisely, as paradigmatic real possibility. This belief almost naturally shapes the fiction. Moreover, since she accepts so unquestioningly her own reification of the fantastic, the audience can as well. Her quite childlike belief in a showboat universe still attracts us today by its charm, its naivete, and it attracted her contemporary audience as well by its wide divergence from the reality of the Wars and the Depression during which she wrote. Like children listening to fairy tales, we believe. In this response of her audience lies Ferber's basic appeal.

Ferber's use of mythology, perhaps the necessity for its use, may be explained in great part by the fact that she was raised as a Jew in the Midwest. Born in 1887, in Kalamazoo, Michigan, she moved with her family to the small town of Ottumwa, Iowa, in 1890. There she would spend the seven years which, she realized later, were "more enriching, more valuable than all the fun and luxury of the New York years" of her success.<sup>1</sup> This "value" derived from a negative source, anti-Semitism. Continually subjected to the cruel bigotry of the townspeople, while still a child Ferber learned to fight back; she learned to dramatize, perhaps "melodramatize" herself as the persecuted one surrounded by inferior enemies, and she learned to make her own escapist world through reading and through "playing show," staging little theatricals for her family.<sup>2</sup>

From Ottumwa, the Ferbers moved to Appleton, Wisconsin, where Edna was to live the next thirteen years of her life. The prosperous, lively, friendly town taught the Ferbers another side of America. It was here, it may be safely assumed, that Edna developed the love for America which would be so evident in her future work. Appleton, that is, created what may be thought of as the mood, or tonal aspect of her work—the enthusiasm and joy in America—and Ottumwa created the framework for its articulation—the dramatic structure. The actual content of the books developed later, through Ferber's many years of travel all over the United States.

Ferber, in all her travels, took great pleasure in the various types of people she encountered. This, too, becomes evident in her novels. Her fictional world focuses on its inhabitants. For this reason, her books tell simple, often similar stories, and contain little plot. Critics whose expectations have been formed on novelistic techniques quite different from Ferber's see this narrative simplicity as a fault. Witness the following overall summary from James Gray: Ferber's fiction, he tells us, "habitually takes a firm, possessive hold upon a heroine and leads her resolutely through a series of highly contrived incidents in a standardized siege against the citadel of success."<sup>3</sup> The sense of Gray's summary is not entirely wrong, since it does describe one aspect of *So Big*, *Show Boat*, *Cimarron*, *Saratoga Trunk*, for just a few. What is wrong is the implied negative evaluation caused by his

failure to take into account that Ferber's method concentrates not on plot, as he implicitly assumes, but on character portrayal. Since nothing may be allowed to overshadow character, the plot is intended as only one of a number of revelatory containers, so to speak. Moreover, since Ferber's aim is the revelation specifically of mythic character, traditional expectations will not hold here, either. She is not concerned with subtleties of feeling, nor does she intend the reader to investigate her people too deeply. Hers is characterization by tic, by literary leit-motif. Her heroes—and I use that word in its most traditional and popular sense—are indeed those of mythology, flat figures in any real sense, because known only from the outside. Her people do not think. Their world is one of action. They are rooted not to history, but to wherever they happen to be in the fictional present. They are larger-than-life in exploits, and even physique.

Although Ferber's authorial sympathies, as Gray suggests, seem to lean toward her women, her interest in mythic character nevertheless results in a strong concentration on the male character. Her men are spectacular, magnificent, expansive, attractive and, most important perhaps, self-consciously theatrical, all these traits befitting their mythic heritage. The gambler, the sonorously named Gaylord Ravenal, of *Show Boat* (1926), for instance, has both "a gift for painting about himself the scenery of romance," and a "sense of the dramatic" which "did not confine itself to the stage. He was the juvenile lead, on and off" (p. 138).<sup>4</sup> About Clint Maroon of *Saratoga Trunk* (1941), we are told, in a style as expansive as the sense of its language, that "He was magnificent, he was vast, he was beautiful, he was crude, he was rough, he was untamed, he was Texas" (p. 47). He was also, according to his wife, Clio, "melodrama come to life" (p. 112). Another Texan, Jordan ("Bick") Benedict of *Giant* (1952), is "benign and arrogant. Benevolent and ruthless" (p. 28), "a figure of steel and iron and muscle" (p. 200). Vaughan Melendy, of the lesser-known *Great Son* (1945), is of "heroic stature," a "benevolent giant" (p. 7). But perhaps the most outstanding example of the quintessential Ferber hero is Yancey Cravat of *Cimarron* (1930). Ferber gives us the following description of Yancey's qualities, which include

great sweetness and charm of manner, an hypnotic eye . . . Something of the charlatan was in him, much of the actor, a dash of the fanatic . . . Yancey . . . was a bizarre, glamorous, and slightly mythical figure. No room seemed big enough for his gigantic frame; no chair but dwindled beneath the breadth of his shoulders. He seemed actually to loom more than his six feet two. His black locks he wore overlong, so that they curled a little about his neck in the manner of Booth . . . (p. 12)

Ferber's women, in contrast, are vastly different from her men and inhabit a plane much closer to reality. In context of the novels, they provide steadiness and security; they are the keepers of traditional American values; they are the workers, the depiction of whom Ferber was so proud.<sup>5</sup> They help their men with great, but quiet strength. Selina De Jong, for one, of *So Big* (1924), married to an unsuccessful truck farmer,

literally tore a living out of the earth with her two bare hands. Yet there was nothing pitiable about this small energetic woman. . . . Rather there was something splendid about her; something rich, prophetic. It was the splendor and richness that achievement imparts. (p. 218)

Ferber's books are replete with courageous, dependable women like Selina: Sabra, wife of the fabulous Yancey; Pansy, of *Great Son*, in love with the married Vaughan Melendy, the father of her son; Leslie, of *Giant*. These women are sympathetic, even admirable. We see the events mostly through their eyes and it is a perspective whose validity we do not question.

In the novels of another author, perhaps these women would be heroines. Here, however, they are overwhelmed by the sheer magnificence of the men, and this is because Ferber is a bit in love with her own heroes. She wants them to hold center stage. Sometimes a woman tries to take over the stage, but the author sternly forbids it. When Chris Storm, for instance, of *Ice Palace* (1958), granddaughter of the two heroic, male figures of that novel, threatens to burst out of her role, she is told by an older, wiser woman, who interestingly uses the language of fiction for the purpose, that she is in danger of becoming "A rounded character," when "Everybody ought to have anyway one slab side" (p. 94). And Ferber also makes sure that Clio Maroon is put

into her place when necessary. She, perhaps more than any other of Ferber's women, possesses the extravagance and flamboyance of the men. But despite the vitality with which Ferber endows her, we are told by an intrusive authorial voice possessed of highly suspect psychological acumen, that "Like all domineering women she wanted, more than anything in the world, to be dominated by someone stronger than she" (p. 173). That single statement takes the fire from Clio and returns it to Clint where we are meant to understand it belongs.

Ferber herself seems, at times, to be somewhat embarrassed by her own attitude toward her women. As if to compensate for her odd authorial anti-feminism, she makes an attempt to bring her men down a peg by assigning them certain flaws—stubbornness, power madness, irresponsibility. But Ferber is so much taken by heroism that she (consciously or not) overcompensates. That is, she gives her men as well a certain childlike amorality, the charming innocence of the American Adam and this works, conversely, to mitigate—in fact, excuse—whatever else is imperfect about them. So Purvis De Jong's pride and stubbornness may be destroying both himself and his family, but how can we think too badly of a man who has "about him the loveableness and splendor of the stricken giant"? (p. 73). Nor are we free to follow our own feminist instincts and hate Yancey Cravat for leaving Sabra and their children for months and years at a time: it is, after all, in character for adventurous men to follow adventure. Even his relatively conservative townspeople—the novel's chorus—agree. They are shocked by the casualness of his departures and returns, yet they cannot stay away when he does return:

Perhaps he represented, for them, the thing they fain would be or have. When Yancey, flouting responsibility and convention, rode away to be gone for mysterious years, a hundred men, bound by ties of work and wife and child, escaped in spirit with him; a hundred women, faithful wives and dutiful mothers, thought of Yancey as the elusive, the romantic, the desirable male. (p. 168)

The reader, part of the chorus, greets Yancey as wholeheartedly as everyone else upon his return. Our fictional universe had indeed become dull without him.

In *Giant*, a similar situation exists: Yancey's irresponsibility is here Bick Benedict's power madness. It is diagnosed by his physician father-in-law, a sympathetic and, therefore, trustworthy character, as "dedication." Even Jett Rink, also of *Giant*, as close to a villain as Edna Ferber ever created, will not be allowed the role of bad guy. He is coarse, brutal, savage, sadistic, yet he, as much as Bick Benedict, is a "living legend" (p. 390), and along with Bick, another symbol of Texas. It also does not hurt Ferber's purpose that he is in love with Bick's wife, Leslie. If women readers are meant to identify with Leslie, to hate Jett would be tantamount to undermining our own attractiveness. Ferber counts on her readers' vanity. Her novels, for all their old-time melodrama and theatrically, are plays without villains. The myth remains pristine.

The theatricality of the novels is, in fact, precisely what works to sustain our belief in the myth and in the men who live it. The characters, that is, function in an undeniably fictive universe. But paradoxically, in the reading, the very consistency and, thus, self-containment of the fiction makes it "real" for the moment. We can enter Ferber's books completely; our own reality never threatens, nor does it even beckon. Her enticements are not of our world and that is exactly why they are enticing. Interestingly, within the books, when a version of reality which is similar to ours does begin to beckon—usually in the form of those "traditional" women—Ferber does not allow it even then to defeat the fiction. The audience roots for the men, for romance and for myth, and the author responds. The women may retain our intellectual sympathy, but our emotional and, for the space of the reading, more substantial sympathies, lie with the larger-than-life men leading extraordinary lives.

We, Ferber's readers, are as much a part of her theater as her characters. She writes for an audience she recreates in every book, for a giant show-boat audience, composed of "naive people. That which they saw they believed. They hissed the villain, applauded the heroine, wept over the plight of the wronged" (p. 113). Interestingly, in one incident, the show-boat audience becomes so much a part of what they are viewing that when a potential villain begins to unleash his villainy on a stage beauty in distress, a member of the audience takes aim with a gun. The

onstage villain, seeing the offstage gun aimed in his direction, "released his struggling victim. Gentleness and love overspread his features, dispelling their villainy" (p. 112). Just as the fictional actor responds here to the wishes, albeit crudely expressed, of the fictional audience, so Ferber in her work responds to her larger, real audience's wishes. We want no villains. The scene in *Show Boat*, like the earlier advice given to Chris Storm, is an odd example of technical explanation, Ferber's brand of self-literary criticism.

The theatrical milieu, then, can be understood overall not only as a metaphor modifying her characters' fictional mode of existence, but also as a distancing device, functioning to separate us as much as possible from our own reality, while, at the same time, enabling us, as much as possible, to enter into the fictional reality. The novels in themselves illustrate and mirror this function. The characters consciously play-act, as if to remove themselves even from their (too-real) fictional reality. Clint Maroon's acting is constantly referred to, as is Yancey Cravat's. In *Show Boat* there is even a "real" love scene acted out on stage between Gaylord and Magnolia, as if to imply that the theatrical milieu is somehow a more appropriate and, perhaps, safer one in which to function. This moves us a step further into the fiction.

But Ferber's dramas are well-made ones, and so, within her large system, she also employs various smaller distancing devices. If we are to believe in the myth which she presents through her characters, the stage must be more populated in order for it to appear as complete and as self-contained as our world. Accordingly, there are many minor actors, character types, or literary walk-ons. Some of these people are as fantastic as the leads, albeit writ much smaller and much more rapidly.<sup>8</sup> *Show Boat*, as might be expected, contains an entire cast of minor characters, among whom are Andy, Magnolia's hearty, slightly comic father (played in the 1951 movie, with a fine eye for casting, by Joe E. Brown); Parthy, her shrewish, yet slightly comic mother; and Windy, the tobacco-chewing, eccentric, "best pilot on the rivers" (p. 88). In *Cimarron* there is Dr. Don Valliant, "the most picturesque man of medicine in the whole Southwest" (p. 120), with a name to match. *American Beauty* contains its own side show: Jot Oakes, "one of those jolly little dwarfs you see in

German gardens—a gnome, stepped out of Rip Van Winkle's long sleep" (p. 49); and Big Bella, "a heathen Buddha . . . with the body of a giantess, the bones of a behemoth" (p. 54). *Saratoga Trunk*, for one last example, has the elegant, black servant woman, Kakaracou, and the bizarre dwarf coachman, Cupidon.

Ferber's other distancing devices are more subtle and, much like her earlier blanket aim in creating a larger-than-life world, distinctly different from ours and, therefore, posing it no threat, so her other techniques are also aimed at "saving" her audience fear and anxiety. Although we are meant to "identify," the identification must never threaten discomfort. This is why Ferber presents many of her stories in flashback form, a more sophisticated, novelistic version of "Once upon a time. . ." When a character in a flashback is presented on page one, we can be sure, whatever will befall, that the character has survived. Subsequent threats to life, limb and livelihood become much less threatening than they might be in another narrative and this comforts us. We can relax, for instance, when the eighty-nine-year-old Clint Maroon appears with his seventy-nine-year-old wife, Clio, at the outset of *Saratoga Trunk*, or when we are told by the narrator of *So Big*, with unquestionable omniscience, that Selina's son would become "in later years . . . the Dirk De Jong whose name you saw (engraved) at the top of heavy cream linen paper" (p. 4). Things, rest assured, could not have been awful if these people appear both alive and prosperous at the end. We can comfortably read on.

Ferber makes sure that our comfort lasts from chapter to chapter. Accordingly, she allows little unpleasantness and even less suspense, both potential anxiety-causers. She must allow some unpleasantness—such is part of life—but unlike when it occurs in our own lives, here we can prepare for it. If we are to be treated to any serious unpleasantness, we are told at the beginning of a chapter how the present incident will end. If a character, for example, is to die, we know it immediately and, even then, Ferber's actual presentation of the event saves us even further. When Captain Andy of *Show Boat* meets a violent death during a river fog, we see it through the confused and bewildered eyes of a child, his granddaughter. The event thus loses its sharpness and terror for us as well as for the child. Or death can sometimes,

as in *Cimarron*, be presented as a romantic result of heroism. The death of Yancey lends the final, melodramatic flourish to his life. He catches a can of nitroglycerine, thus saving many lives, and dies in the arms of his wife, Sabra, whom he has not seen for many years, reciting the words of "Peer Gynt, humbled before Solveig" (p. 255). We are hardly saddened by this. More likely, the reader's response fits the mode of being of Yancey: "What better way to go?" we ask in chorus, playing *our* role in the novel.

Like the unpleasant incidents in her books, Ferber's variety of suspense is hardly calculated to make us lose sleep. Quite the contrary, her suspense is fun and, at times, even open-ended. If, after Yancey Cravat's spectacular introduction, we are told that his past is "clouded with myths and surmises" and that "Rumor, romantic, unsavory, fantastic, shifting, and changing" (p. 13) floated about him, who cares? Not to know, in this case, is more fitting—and titillating. It would be a disappointment to know for sure that someone who has been compared to Ulysses and Jason was born in the same, mundane manner as the rest of us. And, in a similar vein, since we know that Dirk De Jong will succeed (and why isn't his mother happy about it?) and that Magnolia will eventually marry Gay Ravenal, we can freely indulge our maternal and romantic fantasies, respectively, and wonder how these events will come about. But not *why*. Motivations are clear in Ferber's mostly black-and-white universe. If not, the narrator's omniscience can be relied upon to provide them. No need to trouble ourselves. "Nuances," Edna Ferber's narrator tells us early in her canon, are "not for show-boat audiences" (p. 112)—nor, then, are they for us, her extended show-boat audience.

Ferber's final distancing device and the one which serves also as the ultimate backdrop for the playing-out of the myth, is physical setting. Traditionally, the American myth has been associated with the specific setting of the land. That is why our heroes—and Ferber's—are pioneers of a sort. They are conquerors of the "wild" West and Southwest and, in more modern history and in Ferber's later books, tamers of Alaska as well. Many of the settings are natural spectacles, but even the relatively "quiet" locales have a part in the myth. Selina De Jong makes her small Illinois farm yield vegetables for which she would become famous; the tobacco farm land of the Connecticut Valley in

*American Beauty* (1931) is conquered by its workers.<sup>7</sup> Even Saratoga, perhaps the least naturally flamboyant of Ferber's locales, is presented, through the eyes of Clio Maroon, as a place in which "were gathered the worst and best of America" (p. 157), in effect, a microcosm of the land and its inhabitants.

Ferber, in her presentation of setting, is confronted with a tactical problem. For practical novelistic purposes, the settings must be allowed neither to overwhelm nor even to compete with the characters, but since they are so much a part of Ferber's myth, nor can they act simply as dead scenery. What Ferber does, finally, is not only to present her settings in *as* spectacular a manner as her characters, but to make them indistinguishable in importance one from the other. The scenery functions as a backdrop that is as well an extension of the people it contains—all American and all, in their various ways, magnificent. The entire first chapter of *Great Son*, for instance, is taken up by a description of Seattle and, in counterpoint, of Vaughan Melendy. "Himself of heroic stature," we are told of Melendy,

he fitted well into the gorgeous and spectacular setting that was the city of Seattle. Towering and snow-capped like the mountains that ringed the city, he seemed a part of it—as indeed he was. Born into this gargantuan northwest region of towering forests, limitless waters, vast mountains, fertile valleys, he himself blended into the lavish picture and was one with it. (p. 7)

Seattle and Melendy, however, are no less spectacular and dramatic than Yancey Cravat and his world, the wild and exciting Oklahoma Territory of *Cimarron*. Or the immense vitality of Alaska and its inhabitants in *Ice Palace*. Nor are any of these locales to be outdone by the Texas of *Giant*. The land and its people—Bick Benedict, Jett Rink, and many, more minor figures—are huge, violent, beautiful, mythic. Even Leslie Benedict, new to Texas and overwhelmed and a bit frightened by its extraordinary size and strength, as she is by her new husband's, is lured by it. She finally realizes, while witnessing Bick take part in a cattle-branding episode, the primitive (and almost Laurentian) essence of the land, the real meaning of Texas:

To Leslie it was a legendary scene, incredibly remote from the world she had always known. A welter of noise, confusion; the stench of singeing hair and burned flesh . . . she began slowly to comprehend that in this gigantic melee of rounding-up, separating, branding, castrating there was order; and in that order exquisite timing and actually a kind of art. Here, working with what seemed to her unbelievable courage and expertness, were men riding running leaping; wrestling with huge animals ten times their size; men slim heavy tall short young old bronze copper tan lemon black white. Here was a craft that had in it comedy and tragedy; that had endured for centuries and changed but little in those centuries.

A ballet, she said to herself. A violent beautiful ballet of America. (p. 201)

Ferber plays even further on her spectacle by greatly emphasizing its visual qualities. She is as much in love with her settings as with her heroes and provides us with exciting scenes galore: the flood in *Show Boat*, the great train fight in *Saratoga Trunk*, the gunfights in *Cimarron*. But this graphic use of locale and equally vivid presentation of action has led Ferber to be disparaged by reviewers and critics for writing what appear to them to be movie scripts rather than novels.<sup>8</sup> This means, in effect, that her writing tends to be theatrically mannered, broad in gesture, sweeping in scene, magnified life, so not really life. Myths, however, are precisely this. So whether Ferber wrote with movies in mind, or whether her stories lent themselves quite naturally to film, is of no real account. Nor does it matter that her settings may differ to some degree from the reality, which they do. Ferber's knowledge of them, in fact, was often garnered through library research. But her books, by her own admission, were meant as "escapes," from reality for both herself and her readers.<sup>9</sup> Her larger-than-life people in their larger-than-life worlds, provide just that. They fulfill their promise.

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#### NOTES

1. *A Peculiar Treasure* (Ferber's Autobiography; 1939; rpt. New York: Lancer, 1961), p. 41.

2. This aspect of Ferber's experience throws an interesting sidelight on her later work. She believed that the oppression of Jews has, historically, led to their great creativity by forcing them to seek relief in various kinds of self-expression. Hence her own fictional "escape." Moreover, Ferber has stated that America seems to her "the Jew among the nations," and has explained her own success by the fact that she was born a Jew. In an important sense, then, although she never makes the connection this directly, since all of Ferber's works are about America, they are all about Jews. See *A Peculiar Treasure*, pp. 56-57, 13, 169, respectively.
3. *On Second Thought* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1946), p. 158.
4. All references to Ferber's works are from the following editions: *So Big* (1924; rpt. New York: Grosset & Dunlop, n.d.); *Show Boat* (1926; rpt. New York: Fawcett, 1971); *Cimarron* (1930; rpt. New York: Fawcett, 1971); *American Beauty* (1931); rpt. New York: Fawcett, 1974); *Saratoga Trunk* (1941; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1960); *Great Son* (1945; rpt. New York: Fawcett, 1974); *Giant* (New York: Doubleday, 1952); *Ice Palace* (New York: Doubleday, 1958).
5. See *A Peculiar Treasure*, p. 325; and Rogers Dickenson's "Afterword" to *So Big*, in which he quotes William Allen White, who calls Ferber "the goddess of the worker."
6. Ferber tells us that she learned the ability to "sketch in human beings with a few rapid words," during the eighteen months she worked for her local newspaper, *The Appleton Crescent*, when she was seventeen. See *A Peculiar Treasure*, p. 94.
7. The title of this novel is, in fact, a reference to the particular kind of beauty English settlers found in their new American scene, one which, in comparison to a character's native Kent, is "grander, bolder, vaster, more sweeping (p. 129).
8. And there have been many films made of Ferber's novels, among which are two versions each of *Cimarron* and *So Big*, three versions of *Show Boat*, and single versions of *Giant*, *Ice Palace*, and *Saratoga Trunk*.
9. Here is Ferber on the composition of her novels:  
 . . . I wrote them, I suppose, as an escape from the war. Unless the writer went back to another day he found himself confronted with the blood and hate and horror of the years between 1914 and 1918. I had never deliberately thought this out; I seemed automatically to turn away from this mad and meaningless hate and slaughter to a lovelier decenter day. In doing that I quite unconsciously followed the inclination of the reading world (*A Peculiar Treasure*, p. 270).

The Fiction of Ray Bradbury:  
Universal Themes in Midwestern Settings

THOMAS P. LINKFIELD

Although most people associate Ray Bradbury's name with science fiction, due to the success of *The Martian Chronicles* and other stories dealing with space, a large proportion of his work has nothing whatsoever to do with either space or science fiction. In some of his nonscience fiction stories, Bradbury has created the mood of pure terror in the best tradition of Edgar Allan Poe. In others, Bradbury has drawn upon his Midwestern background and written stories that celebrate and romanticize his boyhood experiences in Waukegan, Illinois, where he lived for twelve years. Pure nostalgia, however, is not what makes his stories in this last category memorable. For in addition to containing a romantic, nostalgic image of the Midwest, novels such as *Dandelion Wine* and short stories like "The Strawberry Window" also contain broader ideas that transcend the purely regional setting. Ray Bradbury is an extremely gifted story teller who has blended in a number of his works images of the Midwest with universal themes concerning ordinary people and their adjustment to life.

Bradbury has incorporated in a number of his stories and novels a basic nostalgia for the Midwest he was forced to leave during the Great Depression. His short story "The Strawberry Window" is an excellent example of this nostalgia, even though the story's setting is the planet Mars. A family from Ohio is homesteading in a colony called New Toledo. The wife is homesick for Earth and especially for her precious Ohio. She misses not only the seasons and colors of Ohio, but also her house and every material object it contained. She misses the comfort, security, and routine of the Ohio she abandoned for a new life in

the Martian colony. Her husband attempts to alleviate her discomfort by spending the family's entire savings to have the old house in Ohio transported to Mars. In this case Bradbury has simply used the wife to express a nostalgia for the Midwest that he himself felt after moving to Los Angeles, California.

This same fond remembrance for the Midwest of his youth is found in three of Bradbury's novels. In *The Halloween Tree*, which is a juvenile history in novel form of that special night, Bradbury recreates the atmosphere and mood of All Hallows' Eve in a small Illinois town. Even though Bradbury's purpose is to instruct readers on the history and meaning of Halloween, he successfully integrates into his story images recalling the sights, sounds, and smells of autumn in the Midwest. In part, the novel is an exercise in nostalgia for the fun and excitement Bradbury associates with Halloween in Illinois.

The novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is set in Green Town, Illinois, in the month of October. This novel, which is even more nostalgic than *The Halloween Tree*, captures the special qualities of smalltown Illinois in the early 1930's. The rural setting of Green Town, surrounded by prairie country, is described vividly and lovingly. Once again Bradbury chooses October, with all its special images and sounds, to narrate a story about people struggling to cope with themselves and reality. But before a reader must dig for meanings and symbols, he can luxuriate in the cosy images that recreate a small Midwestern town at a very special time—autumn.

*Dandelion Wine*, the most nostalgic of the three novels, is by Bradbury's own admission a conscious recreation of his hometown of Waukegan, Illinois. It is a collection of memories, deliberate nostalgia for the images of the past. *Dandelion Wine* is a "celebration" of the past summers Bradbury as an adult writer remembers from Waukegan, which becomes Green Town in the novel. Bradbury even lends his middle name, Douglas, to the novel's main character, Douglas Spaulding. The most persistent metaphor in the novel is that of dandelion wine, which represents the images and memories of the summer of 1928 bottled and preserved for future enjoyment. Though not an escapist, Bradbury definitely enjoys reliving the images and memories of his Midwestern origins.

In addition to his obvious fondness for remembering the past, however, Bradbury is also quick to demonstrate in his writing that certain dangers, or at least dangerous tendencies, can accompany simple nostalgia for the past. In "The Strawberry Window" the wife's nostalgia for the planet Earth and Ohio becomes a brooding melancholy for the past. She magnifies every minute detail about her former life and home in Ohio. She simply cannot accept the strange environment on Mars, despite the fact that the colony is named after Toledo, Ohio. Her problem is that she is unwilling, or afraid, to confront the present and accept it. Consequently she is afraid to relinquish the past and dotes constantly upon memories for every object she left behind.

Bradbury's answer to this type of misdirected nostalgia is clear and direct. The husband attempts to instruct his wife by asking:

Is the Old worth all our money? . . . No! It's only the things we did with the Old that have any worth.

No one, neither the colonist on Mars nor the migrant in Los Angeles, must absolutely abandon his past or the memories associated with it. Instead the transplanted wife, or anyone else, must learn to accept a new environment when asked to do so and make the proper adjustments. Furthermore, the New can and probably should contain part of the Old in it, just as authentic sourdough bread contains a small portion of the previous day's mixture. The wife, therefore, must accept the present as containing something of the past in it, but she must not attempt to preserve or glorify the past through nostalgic melancholy.

In one of the stories from *The Martian Chronicles*, entitled "The Third Expedition," Bradbury demonstrates how nostalgia leads to the deaths of sixteen humans.<sup>6</sup> When Earth's third expedition to Mars reaches the planet's surface in the year 2000, it discovers it has landed in a very authentic looking Midwestern town. In fact the sixteen American astronauts have landed in Green Bluff, Illinois, circa 1926, complete with records of Harry Lauder and paintings by Maxfield Parrish. This typical Midwestern town is perfect in every detail, and it is even populated with close relatives, wives, and lovers of all sixteen crew members. The only problem is that it is on the wrong planet. One by one, the expedition's members abandon their rocket ship, their present

world and reality, and surrender themselves to people and conditions that logically and physically cannot exist, at least not on Mars.

The expedition's commander, Captain John Black, who himself was born in Illinois in 1920 (the same year as Bradbury), finally discovers the horrifying truth. Using telepathy and hypnosis, the Martians have created an ingenious illusion based upon the humans' wants and desires. First the Martians probed the humans' minds for images and details, and then they created a masterful illusion to trap the Earth men. But the discovery of what is happening comes too late to save Captain Black; he and his crew are cruelly murdered by the same relatives and friends they assumed were real. The human need for familiar surroundings and the crew's desire to believe what was physically impossible resulted in the deaths of sixteen trained astronauts.

Nowhere does Bradbury better dramatize the danger associated with nostalgia than in his novel *Dandelion Wine*, his personal celebration of his boyhood in Illinois. Mrs. Helen Bently, aged seventy-two, is one of Green Town's oldest residents. She is also obsessed with preserving objects from her past. Her house is literally a museum filled with junk from the past, everything from old clothing to ticket stubs to photographs of herself as a child. Helen Bently surrounds herself with the past in order to escape the present. For her, memories represent much more than fleeting images of the past; for Helen Bently, they represent her inability to accept the present as reality. She allows the past to hypnotize her, to freeze her in time, and this tendency is always dangerous. Before her husband died he had warned her, "Be what you are, bury what you are not." Although Helen Bently has ignored this wisdom for years, she finally realizes her mistake and destroys her precious artifacts from the past.

Bradbury also demonstrates the possible dangers of nostalgia for the past through the curious relationship of Helen Loomis and Bill Forrester. Helen is a ninety-five year old spinster, while Bill is a young reporter for the town's newspaper. Bill makes the mistake of thinking he can share Helen's memories of her long life and of all the exciting places she has ever visited. In fact, Bill identifies with Helen's nostalgic reminiscences to such an

extent that he is dangerously close to falling in love with a romanticized image of Miss Loomis. He loses sight of the ninety-five year old reality and sees only a young, beautiful, and vivacious image. Helen warns him that "mummies are hardly fit companions." Bill must learn painfully that the young cannot share the private past lives of the old. The young must instead pursue their own existences in the present. This is the reality that they and Bill Forrester must accept.

Bradbury uses three novels to illustrate another of his favorite themes, and that is the very human tendency to fear death and the night. In *The Halloween Tree*, All Hallows' Eve itself is the symbol for this fear. In the novel a creature named Carapace Clavicle Moundshroud, who possesses all the characteristics of a gloomy church sepulcher, instructs several boys on the origins and meaning of that special night of fun they celebrate at the end of October. A basic fear of death and the night has always been with mankind, and this fear led directly to the creation of one night each year when the living would remember the dead. The boys from their small town in Illinois are duly impressed with Moundshroud's lesson and learn to confront their fear of death and night. Bradbury uses the same theme, fear of death and the night, in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, which describes how a traveling carnival run by sinister Autumn People attempts to ensnare discontented souls in Green Town, Illinois, and imprison them in its evil freak exhibits. The main characters must experience real agonizing fear of both death and night before they discover the secret of defeating the wicked carnival and its Autumn People. In *Dandelion Wine* the wooded ravine which splits Green Town, Illinois, represents the unknown, especially at night. According to local legend, the Lonely One, who is a brutal slayer of single women and a symbol for death itself, lurks in the ravine. Lavinia Nebbs foolishly challenges the town's legend at midnight and learns that she too is very susceptible to a human fear which she had previously ridiculed. The novel's main character, Doug Spaulding, also learns to confront his fear of death and to accept the prospect of dying as an important part of the process of maturity. Many of Ray Bradbury's characters must confront their fear of death and night. It is an integral part of being human.

A very important theme that Bradbury emphasizes in his non-science fiction writing is the absolute necessity that each individual accept reality, which naturally will differ with each person. In *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, this is especially true of Charles Halloway and his son Will. The evil carnival, named Cooger & Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show, feeds upon hate, fear, pain, guilt, and in particular upon discontent. People who are discontented with their present life for whatever reason, or people who believe they can grab something for nothing out of life, become willing victims of the carnival's tempting powers. At fifty-four Charles Halloway is discontented with the reality of middle-age; Will Halloway and his friend Jim Nightshade are discontented with being young. The carnival can offer each person a tempting alternative to reality, but only if each one rejects the present with its mixture of joys and sorrows. The three defeat temptation and in the process gain insight into the nature of their real worlds. Mr. Halloway accepts the fact that he will never be young again and that he must now progress from year fifty-four. His son, in turn, discovers that his father possesses both exceptional courage and practical wisdom. Both accept the wide gulf in their ages. All three learn that wallowing in discontent is not a viable alternative to a confrontation with and an acceptance of reality.

Bradbury utilizes the same theme in his short stories set in the Midwest as well as in his novels. In "The Strawberry Window" the family from Ohio must accept the fact that Mars is a new reality for them, and this necessitates a process of adjustment on their part. In a touching work entitled "A Story of Love," Bob Spaulding, age thirteen, falls in love with his school teacher, Ann Taylor, who is twenty-four, in Green Town, Illinois. Such a romantic love is impossible because of their age difference, but Bob must learn the hard way that time will not freeze Miss Taylor while he matures eleven years. He must accept his life in its time frame. In the story "The Time of Going Away," Bradbury describes a man who has avoided the tedium of reality by pursuing romantic quests and high adventure throughout his adult life.<sup>9</sup> With *National Geographic Magazine* as his inspiration, this dreamer has wasted his time looking for secret elephant graveyards or prehistoric fossils. Any wild idea or vision that permits

an avoidance of the real world of work and routine he favors. His zanniest adventure involves walking the shore of Lake Michigan in imitation of exotic Polynesian natives who, he discovers, paddle their canoes out to sea when they sense their deaths are imminent. He eventually learns that he must confront and accept his reality, humdrum though it may be at times, and not adopt the exotic or adventurous elements in other men's lives as his own.

The same basic theme, acceptance of reality, figures prominently in Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*. Helen Bently's obsession to relive the past, and thus escape the present by preserving hundreds of objects from her past life, has already been noted. Another character in the novel, Leo Auffman, entertains and alarms many residents of Green Town, Illinois when he builds a Happiness Machine. Leo's machine allows a person to experience a series of pleasurable sensations, which collectively produce complete happiness. Only three people ever use Leo's machine, but all three discover that by extending the mood of happiness indefinitely they are merely escaping from reality. Instead of searching for happiness through a mechanical device, Leo must find happiness in the reality he has been ignoring. He makes the startling discovery that his wife and six children and their daily routine constitute the authentic happiness machine. Facing and accepting reality with all its ramifications becomes the major test for Doug Spaulding, the novel's main character.

A final theme Bradbury utilizes in his fiction with Midwestern settings is that of stasis versus change. It constitutes the heart of *Dandelion Wine*, the most nostalgic of his works. For Doug Spaulding, summer is a season composed of safe, predictable, and reassuring rituals. Rituals like drinking lemonade, listening to adults gossip on the front porch, or cleaning carpets outdoors are all minor events which when added together represent a predictable, static mood he wants preserved. As Doug begins the summer of 1928, his twelfth, he is confident he can repeat the same rituals that he has always associated with summer. He can climb the same trees, play the same games, and visit the same ice house that he did the previous summer. As the summer of 1928 begins, Doug assumes that his static world of reassuring rituals is safe; nothing could possibly interfere with his status quo.

But as the summer melts from one month to the next, Douglas Spaulding discovers that not even his allegedly static world in Green Town, Illinois is safe from change. Doug senses that the summer is turning bad, like sour wine, when unexpected events interfere with his rituals and threaten his status quo. Great-grandmother, whom he thought indestructible, dies suddenly. The town's electric trolley is discontinued, a victim of progress. Even his tennis shoes lose their magical speed. But the worst shock of all, the biggest threat to Doug's status quo, is the alarming news that his best friend John Huff must leave town forever. Doug had constructed the summer's rituals specifically with John Huff in mind. These events and more conspire to undermine the security and stasis Doug craves.

The lesson Doug must learn is painfully difficult for him, but it is one which is basic for his continued existence. He must accept the fact that he is maturing from boyhood to early adolescence. The world of Green Town, Illinois will not remain static for him. He cannot freeze himself in time and space. Unexpected and uninvited events like the trolley's demise are happenings which he must adjust to, whether he likes it or not. Change will intrude itself into everyone's life, and it cannot be forestalled by magical spells or comfortable rituals. Once Doug has accepted change as something inevitable and even necessary in his life, he will have made considerable progress toward coping with maturity, since it is a key aspect of reality.

Although Ray Bradbury encourages a certain degree of nostalgia in his fiction set in the Midwest, he does not encourage pointless sentimentalism. He realizes that each person is a product of his past experiences and that the present should contain some of the past in it. But anyone who tries to escape into the past by whatever method is merely attempting something that is both impossible and dangerous. Memories from the past, like dandelion wine, can be remembered and enjoyed, but to immerse oneself in the past itself is foolhardy nonsense. Each person must first accept his present condition as having resulted from his past, and then he can proceed into his future. Each individual must live his own life as a progression of steps toward maturity.

## The Old Northwest and Gilded Age Politics: An Analysis

LAWRENCE ZIEWACZ

Interpreters of late 19th century politics traditionally have argued that the political life of the two decades preceding the McKinley-Bryan contest lacked both meaning and substance. In fact, most historians assign less significance to the political activity of these years than to those of any other period in our national experience. Not only do they summarily dismiss the relevance of the political issues in that period for contemporary students and historians, but they contend that those issues lacked real relevance for the post-Civil War electorate. Despite differences in approach, these detractors return to the same verdict—that is—the parties differed little on the political questions of the day and the issues discussed held little meaning for the body politic. Indeed, voters were distracted from what should have been the real concerns of the era by bombastic rhetoric and endless debate of political issues that evoked emotional rather than rational responses.

A similar political perspective was advanced by contemporary political commentators, both foreign and domestic. The most prominent and perceptive of European analysts, James Bryce, author of *The American Commonwealth*, deplored the weakness of Congress and the paucity of legitimate political concerns. Complaining of a lack of "genuine political issues," Bryce described American elections as "mere scrambles for office" in which voters are asked to vote on the merits of men rather than measures and political philosophies.<sup>1</sup> Such an appraisal could have been similarly rendered by Moisei Ostrogorski, a Russian observer, or by such American spokesmen as Henry Adams, Henry Jones Ford, or Woodrow Wilson. So deficient was the American party system

in the eyes of Wilson, that he called for the introduction of party practices and discipline that were the essence of the British parliamentary system so that Congress could consider, and effectively legislate on viable and legitimate issues. Therefore these students of the American political scene basically agreed that American party politics and practices were deficient in both meaning and substance.<sup>2</sup>

In large measure, these 19th century critics of the period developed the essential framework upon which many 20th century historical analyses of the period would be based. Matthew Josephson, author of *The Politicos*, which was considered a standard work on the period for several decades, discerned little difference in the parties and their supporters after the Reconstruction era. He maintained that the politicians of either stripe were little more than spokesmen for the major economic interests of the day. Instead of raising vital issues, Josephson found both parties "circumspect and wary to the point of boredom."<sup>3</sup> As a result, false issues were deceptively thrust upon the public. Unwilling to deal with legitimate issues, he maintained, party managers found it necessary "to engender artificial differences, to invent enthusiasm, passion, and frenzy" in order to win elections.<sup>4</sup> In *The New Commonwealth, 1877-1890*, a volume now considered the new standard work on the period, John A. Garraty takes ground not dissimilar to that occupied by Josephson. He found political debate "murky and unenlightening" and was unable to describe a "consistent Republican or Democratic position on most of the issues."<sup>5</sup> Voting behavior, according to Garraty, "aside from the obvious sectional division," was influenced "by family, tradition, religion, and local issues of the moment more than by the policies or pronouncements of statement and their organizations."<sup>6</sup> Though suggesting the importance of these factors, Garraty made little effort to pursue this argument. Elsewhere, he contended that the tariff could have been a "real issue if politicians had debated the merits of scientific rate making."<sup>7</sup>

In another recent investigation, Robert H. Wiebe argued that even though the parties differed on states rights and protection, these issues were largely irrelevant to the voter. Yet, the politicians, "conscious actors in a democracy," exerted enormous energy in order to keep the myth alive that theirs was a viable

democratic political system.<sup>8</sup> Another recent investigator, John M. Dobson, noted that "no single leader attracted followers on a national basis and . . . after a time no single issue aligned the parties either." In his view, "the deliberately obscure Democratic and Republican titles could stand for anything or nothing."<sup>9</sup> In his 1973 work, *The Shaping of Modern America: 1877-1916*, Vincent P. De Santis discussed politics in a chapter entitled "The Politics of Dead Center." De Santis accepts the judgment that the major parties did not address themselves to the major problems of the day and notes that "political activity in the last quarter of the nineteenth century seemed to lack the vitality and productivity of earlier periods in American history."<sup>10</sup> Keith Ian Polakoff in *The Politics of Inertia: The Election of 1876*, argues that the decentralized structure of the major parties in the immediate post Civil War period created a "tremendous inertia" by sticking to discussion of safe but not crucial issues (such as the tariff) and as a consequence, "the resulting irrelevance of much of the political process was actually one of its principal sources of strength." On the other hand, Tom E. Terrill in *The Tariff, Politics, and American Foreign Policy, 1874-1901*, contends that although the major parties avoided volatile issues, they utilized the tariff as an issue of meaningful differentiation and an issue which affected both parties' attitudes toward foreign policy. Thus, for both parties, the tariff issue "was presented as a conservative panacea for the nation's recurrent economic woes."<sup>11</sup>

Despite this impressive array of evidence to the contrary, I would suggest strongly that both politics in the Gilded Age and particularly in the Midwest states of the Old Northwest, was significantly more exciting and in need of further examination than traditional interpreters would have one believe. First of all, one must of course define what one means by the term Midwest. At its broadest extension, one might well consider "all the territory between the Alleghanies and the Rockies and Canada and the Ohio and the southern boundaries of Missouri and Kansas, or one may include Kentucky or exclude the Dakotas."<sup>12</sup> However, for a number of reasons, the states of the Old Northwest will be the Midwest referred to in the paper.

First of all, as one analyst has described it, the

Midwest is an amphitheater in which more political contests and tugs-of-war seem to go on than in any other part of America. Its political thought, action, and methods are highly colored by that original difference from the East and South . . . namely the growth of political life from the bottom upward instead of from the top down. Its approach to politics is therefore necessarily local and sectional.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, as Professor Russel B. Nye has noted in his *Midwestern Progressive Politics*, that in the late 19th century, Midwesterners, for better or for worse, proclaimed a new role for the national government. Instead of viewing the federal government as possessing only policeman's powers, Midwesterners called upon the government for aid. This was not an unlikely solution for the

Midwesterner had been given his land by the government, the United States Army had protected him while he settled it, his railroads had been subsidized by the government, and Washington had governed him until his state entered the Union.

What resulted was "socialized politics"—that is—"politics which attempted to give the state some positive and systematic control over the economic and social life of the people."<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, the Midwest has been characterized by some scholars, and rightly so, as the "political weathercock of the country. It told whence and wither the wind was blowing." This was especially true in the Midwest during Gilded Age where after 1875, political contests, particularly in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois were fiercely fought battles in which "neither party was regularly able to command the allegiance of the voters." In addition, almost a "quarter of the national electorate lived there." . . . From 1860 through 1912, the GOP only twice failed to select its presidential candidate from Ohio, Illinois, or Indiana, while in nine of these 14 elections the Democratic nominee for vice-president came from one of the same three states:

It was to an Indiana, Illinois, or Ohio that candidates sent their battalions of stump speakers, knowing that the pos-

session of these key swing states often meant the difference between victory and defeat.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, the seriousness of the Midwestern political effort and its eventual impact upon the American national scene testifies to its importance. For example, the majority of social reform passed in the 20th century such as social security, the eight-hour day, and farm price supports to name just a few, found their inception in the Midwest political arena.<sup>16</sup>

Fourthly, the Midwesterners of the Gilded Age were active political participants, often massing in the thousands for campaign speeches and rallies—and voter turnout generally was 60 percent of the total electorate, sometimes soaring as high as 95 percent—a truly phenomenal figure.<sup>17</sup>

And finally, the states of the Old Northwest are similar from a standpoint of geography, economics, and culture. They are Great Lakes states who were “settled, gained statehood, and reached political maturity between the Revolution and Civil War. They thus escaped the angry memories of both the Federalist era and Reconstruction.” They all had heavy influxes of immigrants, particularly Germans, who greatly influenced the political situation and they generally (all except for Indiana) had rapidly growing metropolises, i.e., Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, which lent a rural-urban dichotomy to the political scene.<sup>18</sup>

Recent Gilded Age political studies of the Midwest have radically altered and revised previous scholarship and have re-established the significance of Midwestern Gilded Age politics. These investigations maintain that the political divisions were important because of the social and cultural conflicts they reflected. To varying degrees, these studies have deemphasized national political issues and have underscored the importance of value-laden local questions such as temperance or legislation affecting parochial schools. These recent studies have drawn upon the literature of sociology of religion and political sociology and have been influenced by the results of investigations of political behavior conducted by political scientists since the 1940's. Historian Samuel P. Hays of the University of Pittsburgh, a pioneer in interdisciplinary studies, has exerted a powerful influence upon these scholars. Hays has been critical of historical analyses that

have attempted to discern the nature of political movements by concentrating upon the characteristics of leaders at the top levels.<sup>19</sup> In his words:

Ethnocultural issues were far more important to voters than were tariffs, trusts, and railroads. They touched lives directly and moved people deeply.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars responding to Hays' suggestions have centered their investigations upon ethnocultural groups whose conflicting values and interactions have, they contend, given structure and life to the Midwestern politics of the late 19th century. Following procedures borrowed from sister disciplines, these behavioral historians have examined election behavior over considerable time periods in order to determine what represents change and normal political behavior. They statistically explore census data and data drawn from a variety of local sources in order to assess the nature of political behavior at the lower level.

According to the most recent interpreters of the period, party allegiances were not based upon economic issues; rather they were rooted in the basic cultural identities of voters and groups of voters. Locked in continual conflict were two cultures and the value systems upon which they were based. This cultural conflict came to the surface in American political life in debates over naturalization laws, Sunday blue laws, temperance, and legislation affecting parochial schools. These questions touched basic identities and had a profound influence upon voting behavior.

Among the most thorough examinations of ethnocultural conflicts are two impressive studies of Midwestern politics in the late 19th century. They are Richard J. Jensen's *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896*, and Paul Klappner's *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900*. Klappner's work centers upon the states of the Old Northwest with special emphasis upon Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin, while Jensen focuses upon Iowa and the Old Northwest. Both Jensen and Klappner perceive value conflicts growing out of religious divisions. As Klappner states it:

The more ritualistic the religious doctrine of the group, the more likely it was to support the Democracy; conversely,

the more pietistic the group's outlook, the more intensely Republican its partisan affiliation.

Jensen agreed that "religion was the fundamental source of political conflict in the Midwest" and he identified pietists with the Republican party and liturgicals with the Democracy. Thus ethnic influences often reinforced religious identities as in the case of Irish or Italian Catholics, but in the last analysis, religion proved more important than ethnic influence.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, according to these two scholars then, religion providing a reference for Midwesterners to understand the world around them, and that the broad perspectives encompassed in the liturgical and pietistic outlook transcended denominational lines.

Several conventional studies of politics in these years also suggest the importance of ethnic and religious voting in the Midwest prior to the election of 1896 and the great importance of economic questions as a result of the depression of 1893. David P. Thelen in *The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885-1900* and Stanley L. Jones in his study *The Presidential Election of 1896* both note that economic issues generated by the depression of 1893 played an important role in the campaign of 1896 and helped to shatter previous ethno-cultural alignments. Melvin G. Holli, in his study of Hazen Pingree's successful campaign for governor of Michigan in that year, notes the importance of both ethno-cultural and economic factors also. Perhaps his most intriguing finding is that many Catholic voters, despite the advice of their hierarchy and press, supported progressive Republican Pingree for governor while voting for Bryan on the national ticket. Pingree's success at outpolling McKinley was based upon his ability to attract many ethnic votes through hard-hitting economic appeals.<sup>22</sup>

Along similar lines, Thomas Flynn, a political scientist, in an article published in *The Journal of Politics*, discovered that party affiliation in late 19th century Ohio politics was influenced by both economic status and ethnic loyalties. In summarizing his finding for the Gilded Age in Ohio, he noted that:

. . . there was at all times an issue oriented politics with class implications on one level while on another level there was electoral response in terms of group loyalties and an-

tipathies which had little direct connection with issue politics.<sup>23</sup>

Although there is room to debate the relative importance of ethno-cultural factors and economic issues in the years of realignment, it appears from the above studies that both behavioralists and conventional historians agree in assigning considerable importance to economic issues in influencing Midwestern voter behavior in these critical years. However, the behavioral historians are less inclined to assign much more importance to traditional political questions in the years prior to 1892. Indeed, many of these scholars assign no more importance to conventional national issues in these years than Matthew Josephson or John A. Garraty.

Until more studies of this nature—hopefully utilizing quantitative methods—have been completed, the question of the relative weight of economic issues and ethno-cultural factors in Midwest politics in these years will remain unresolved. Yet these recent inquiries, many of them innovative in nature, distinctively dramatize the fact that new options and opportunities exist for the examination of Midwestern politics in the late 19th century. Some other approaches that might yield promising results include the following items. First, a better and more concentrated effort might be made to examine voting patterns in each Midwest state at the local level. This would enable scholars to scan the results for the Northwest and to more quickly determine whether or not the peculiarities of the voting pattern in a particular election were of a local phenomenon or were of a much more general nature.

Essentially what is being suggested is that a topical approach to examine questions that were common to the states of the Old Northwest, might provide better regional understanding of the politics of the Midwest. For example, Professor I. R. Davis published in 1960 an article entitled, "A Century of Voting in Three Ohio Counties," in which he found in Ohio, a supposedly two party state, that two of three presumed "swing counties" were actually one party counties. Similar studies in other states of the Midwest might result in the development of a model which might well be used to fairly accurately predict the general voting pattern of a typical county in the Midwest during the Gilded Age. Or similarly a concentration on a particular event to determine why

it occurred in one area of the Midwest and not another might be useful. James M. Morris' article, "No Haymarket for Cincinnati," *Ohio History* (1974), is such an example of a study of urban labor violence with regional implications. Or perhaps a regional examination of the relationship between educational and politics should be explored. The impact of the Bennett law in Wisconsin and Ronald M. Johnson's article "Politics and Pedagogy—The 1892 Cleveland School Reform" in *Ohio History* (1975), indicate that Wisconsin was not the only state to have education and politics intermingled at the same time. Again, a comparative regional approach to racial discrimination and its impact upon politics in the Midwest state might prove fruitful. Robert A. Rockaway has published an interesting examination of anti-Semitism in Detroit from 1850-1914 reflecting the changes that political parties manifested toward Jews in Detroit for those years. Was Detroit an exception? A comparison with Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, would undoubtedly be interesting and revealing. In addition, a recent study by Melvyn Hammarberg of Indiana farmers in late 19th century indicates that remoteness of location made Indiana farmers more independent politically and more susceptible to third party movements. This concept of remoteness needs further testing not only in other rural areas of the Midwest but might have implications for urban areas also.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, even more radical and innovative approaches than those already mentioned might be necessary in order to thoroughly explore the core of the Midwest political structure. For example, Robert W. Bastian in an article published in the *Geographical Review*, entitled, "Architecture and Class Segregation in Late 19th Century Terre Haute, Indiana," indicates that one can determine the occupational class of residents by their preference for distinctive types of domestic architecture. He holds that this pattern probably held true for the entire Midwest. If one could definitely link class to political affiliation, one could theoretically determine, it would seem, the politics of a Midwest neighborhood by a picture of the type of dwellings in the neighborhood.<sup>25</sup>

Such a relationship is certainly hypothetical and somewhat facetiously presented but along with the other approaches discussed in the paper, graphically indicates that Gilded Age politics in the Midwest is not a dead subject and that the last word has

not been written on the subject. Also it seems apparent that these new investigative techniques call for more than just a knowledge of politics and strongly indicate that a scholar of Midwestern politics will need multi-disciplinary skills if he is to keep abreast of his field. Therefore it seems only fair to conclude that the scholar of Midwest politics need not apologize for his labors since recent investigation by both traditional and non-traditional academicians have helped give new life to Midwestern political historiography and have clearly revealed that in the Gilded Age, Midwestern political life was rich in complexity and holds a significance for our own age.

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