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In honor of
Roger J. Bresnahan

PREFACE

"'Intertextuality,' then, was the linguistic Big Bang," proclaimed Mary Orr, "the deconstruction of 'Text' into texts and intertexts where these two terms ultimately become synonymous" (22). This Big Bang moment occurred in 1966 when Julia Kristeva published her essay "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," in which she asserted that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (37). However, several decades earlier, Virginia Woolf, prescient about this issue as about so many others, had written in *A Room of One's Own* that "books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately" (84), thus demonstrating that intertextuality has been a cultural fact of life for hundreds of years, however recently it may have come to the critical fore.

This issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* brings together four essays that explore the ways in which a number of Midwestern works have served as intertexts. David Radavich discusses the way a later play of Tennessee Williams revises *The Glass Menagerie* while Christian Knoeller explores the connections between performance in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*. Michael Merva shows how *Winesburg, Ohio* functions as an intertext of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter,* and Nancy Bunge looks at two pairs of poets who have created intertextual volumes of poetry.

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YOU *CAN* GO HOME AGAIN: TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S *A LOVELY SUNDAY FOR CREVE COEUR*

David Radavich

Virtually everyone who has read or seen *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) recognizes it as the playwright's farewell to Saint Louis. What many do not know is that Tom Williams had spent two decades living in the city, apart from occasional sojourns in the South, studying first at the University of Missouri, Columbia, and then at Washington University in Saint Louis before finally graduating from the University of Iowa in 1938 at the age of twenty-eight. At the end of that year, Tom changed his name to Tennessee, moved to New Orleans, and discovered his sexuality. *The Glass Menagerie* presents Williams's retrospective look at his Saint Louis years, through the distorted lens of memory, just prior to his departure.

Although *Menagerie* might seem to suggest that Williams's two decades in the Gateway City were an oppressive wasteland, young Tom in fact won a number of literary awards for poetry, fiction, and drama, beginning at Ben Blewett Junior High School, and continuing through University City High School and the University of Missouri. Williams also enjoyed three very successful play productions there: *Beauty Is the Word*, a one-act that won a prize sponsored by the Webster Groves Theatre Guild; and *Candles to the Sun* and *Fugitive Kind*, his first two full-length dramas produced by the Mummers, a vibrant, socially committed theatre troupe. In each case, press response was enviably positive, even enthusiastic.

By the time Williams left Saint Louis, he had not only written a number of plays, poems, and stories but had accumulated a lifetime store of memories and impressions for future literary mining. Nonetheless, Tom felt driven to leave what he regarded as an industrial Midwest that was frustrating and stifling. Part of that experience

was tied, without question, to the debilitating family dynamics at home. Even so, in over a dozen plays, Williams rendered Saint Louis as "a large midwestern American city" with striking cultural attractions but also stultifying industrial oppression (*The Long Goodbye* 203). In *The Glass Menagerie*, the most famous of the Saint Louis plays, he takes pains to describe the "turgid smoky red glow" of the fire escape, representing "the slow and implacable fires of human desperation" (413, 399).

Having articulated a deep ambivalence for the city he inhabited from the ages of seven to twenty-seven, Williams might have been expected never to look back after his official farewell to the region. However, he visited Saint Louis frequently in subsequent years, mainly to visit his parents, sister, and other relatives. Midwestern scenes and personages continued to appear in plays now set in New Orleans, the Deep South, and places beyond. In a particularly striking move, Williams returned to Saint Louis theatrically one last time in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*, which opened in 1978. The play is based on earlier memories and written material, but this work, completed only a few years before his death, revisits much of the terrain established in *The Glass Menagerie*. This time, however, the pivotal character chooses not to run away from family responsibilities but to stay home, enacting a striking reversal of position from the earlier play, an investigation into the "road not taken."

The "home" the narrating character Tom seeks to escape in *The Glass Menagerie* operates on a variety of levels, both physical and psychological. In the opening narration, the *persona* representing the playwright addresses the audience directly, situating the dramatic action in a time of upheaval. In addition to the Spanish Civil War, he mentions that in the Midwest "were disturbances of labor, sometimes pretty violent, in otherwise peaceful cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Saint Louis . . ." (400). On his own personal level, Tom resents the drudgery and monotony of his job with the Continental Shoemakers: "I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains—than go back mornings!" (400). When his mother tries to point out the virtues of employment at a warehouse during difficult economic times, Tom counters, "Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse!" (421).

The industrial side of life in Saint Louis, with its tenements and the "implacable fires of human desperation," plagues the spirits of

the young writer, yet other landmarks, particularly cultural ones, serve as vital oases for escape and renewal. Instead of attending classes at Rubicam's Business College, Laura absconds to nearby Forest Park, to "the art museum and bird-houses at the Zoo. I visited the penguins every day! . . . . Lately I've been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel-box, that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers" (408). For his part, Tom hides out at the movies, or at the Paradise Dance Hall. Jim, the gentleman caller, reminisces about a "moonlight boat trip up the river to Alton, on the *Majestic*" (459). The Gateway City is decidedly not devoid of charms.

However, these and other local attractions fail to convince Tom to stay put, largely because of family pressures and a debilitating atmosphere at home. He bristles at being controlled by Amanda: "I haven't enjoyed one bite of this dinner because of your constant directions on how to eat it," he says in the first scene (402). His mother criticizes his smoking, his mysterious nights out, his negative attitudes toward work—even the way he spends money. Instead of smoking, she argues, he could be taking "a night-school course in accounting at Washington U.!" (424). From another quarter, Jim O'Connor pressures Tom to develop himself professionally and to shape up his behavior at work.

Beyond all these pressures, however, undoubtedly the most haunting involves Tom's psychologically damaged sister. At the center of the play, in scene four, Amanda reminds him that "we have to be making some plans and provisions for her" (422). In the following scene, when Tom refers to Laura as a cripple, Amanda turns almost apoplectic in defense: "Don't say crippled! You know that I never allow that word to be used!" (430). From Amanda's point of view—at least, as rendered through Tom's memory—not verbalizing a troubling reality or viewing it through rose-tinted lenses can somehow keep disaster at bay. Tom Scanlan argues that the playwright does much the same thing in *The Glass Menagerie* overall: "Williams does not test the family attitudes which are his subject. He has evoked family fears and frustrations without probing them" (107).

Tom's sleight of hand is most evident in the final scene of the play, where, according to Thomas L. King, viewers are tricked: "the audience has been more faithful than it intended to be; they are left behind . . . while they must face their grief, their cruelty" (85-6). Yet Tom's guilt lingers beyond the final curtain of *The Glass Menagerie*: long after his departure from Saint Louis to cities that "swept about

me like dead leaves," the spectre of his abandoned sister "touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes . . . Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (465). Such haunting never left the playwright; in that sense, *The Glass Menagerie* offered, and offers, only a temporary exorcism of guilt.

This central dynamic of escape from Saint Louis and the Midwest animating *The Glass Menagerie* is well known. A fascinating, little-recognized counterpart—sequel, or perhaps bookend—can be found in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur,* which opened over thirty years later, a few years before the playwright's death. Again, the setting is Saint Louis and the Cental West End, in a similar apartment on limited means. But this time there is no narrating presence, no supertitles are projected, all the characters are female, and the dilemma over departing or remaining is answered in exactly the opposite way from *Menagerie*. In this late play, the pivotal character, Dorothea, chooses to stay home and take responsibility for her debilitated though biologically unrelated "sister." *Lovely Sunday* thus offers a provocative gloss on Williams's earlier classic, providing meaningful insights into both his mental attitude late in life and his earlier intentions.

For the average reader or theatergoer, the differences between *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* and *The Glass Menagerie* stand out far more than the similarities. Apart from the opening scene, the common elements operate largely underground, at the level of governing motive and dramatic structure. At the outset, Dorothea, a high school civics teacher sharing an apartment, does calisthenics to keep her figure in shape on a Sunday morning. She anxiously awaits telephone contact from a gentleman caller named T. Ralph Ellis, principal at Blewett High School where she teaches. Young Tom Williams and his sister Rose attended Blewett Junior High School and nearby Soldan High in the 1920s, both located north of Delmar Boulevard, which the author has conflated in this work into a school whose name evocatively suggests "blew it."

Dorothea, the central character based significantly though not entirely on the author, has had a recent rendezvous with Mr. Ellis in the back seat of his Reo Flying Cloud with adjustable seats that reclined "so gradually though that I didn't know till later, later . . . the earth was whirling beneath me and the sky was spinning above" (913). Yet she remains defiant about having lost her virginity on Art

Hill in the center of Forest Park: "I GAVE MYSELF . . . NOT JUST FREELY BUT WITH ABANDON, WITH JOY" (914). For the remainder of the play, Dorothea waits for her gentleman caller to rescue her from a desultory life of poverty and stifling daily routine, recalling Amanda Wingfield's approach to life in *The Glass Menagerie*.

Whereas in the earlier play the supposed gentleman caller arrives and turns out to be already committed, in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* he never even calls or pretends to care. All of the characters except Dorothea see T. Ralph Ellis as a selfish cad who employed "Valentino sheik tricks on a [sic] innocent teacher of civics just up from Memphis" (914). The speaker of those words is Bodey, her hard-of-hearing, German-American roommate, who staunchly defends Dorothea's space and person against all comers. When Bodey sees the announcement in the Sunday *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* of Ralph's formal engagement to a society girl, she tears out the page to wrap her fried chicken in, with hopes of postponing Dorothea's inevitable letdown. Thus Bodey serves as comic counterpart to *Menagerie*'s Amanda, helping Dorothea avoid unpleasant realities and continue living her dream of impossible rescue.

Another common element in the two plays is the crucial role played by the damaged sister. In *Lovely Sunday* that part is taken by Sophie Gluck, whose surname ironically means "luck" in German but inevitably sounds in English like a clucking hen. Sophie wanders in and out of the apartment like a spectre, speaking almost entirely in German. Her mother having died the previous Sunday, Sophie is beside herself with grief and cannot stay alone in her upstairs apartment. When the well-dressed and well-mannered Helena comes to visit Dorothea's apartment, Sophie is terrified that Helena is a *Spion* ("spy") to take her back to the *Irrenhaus* (literally, "crazy-house") (927). Early in the play, Dorothea—rather like Tom in his escape from Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*—simply cannot deal with Sophie: "The sight of that woman destroys me for the whole day" (922).

Having established these central dynamics—the impossible-to-believe contact from the gentleman caller, the broken sister desperate for care—Williams in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* then investigates a wide range of alternatives that never appear, or at least not significantly, in *The Glass Menagerie*. One striking difference is that the later work includes only females. There is no missing father.

and the gentleman caller never appears nor calls. Dorothea, the pivotal figure most resembling the earlier Tom, is not a writer and not a narrator. Like him she is nervous and desperately hoping for release, and she enjoys her sex unabashedly. She has a regular job—which she would willingly toss for the right man. Dorothea comes across as very much needing Bodey's motherly protection, though she noticeably strengthens and comes into her own at the end in Bodey's absence.

Bodey mentions that Dorothea has only recently arrived from Memphis, and Helena refers to her having "a lingering . . . Southern belle complex" (950). Nonetheless, Dorothea rarely speaks with a Southern inflection, apart from a striking "bawn" at one point as she suddenly Southernizes; in general, she speaks a mid-American dialect typical of Tom's Saint Louis. The Memphis allusion may have roots in Williams's visit to his grandparents during the summer of 1935 to recover from a nervous breakdown. He suffered that collapse as a result of working at the same International Shoe Company where Bodey, in *Lovely Sunday*, has worked for twenty years, somehow managing to survive as he did not.

While Dorothea is presented as a woman of some taste and aspiration beyond her means, Bodey embodies resolutely stolid, lower-middle-class German-American values. Unmarried, she functions as an older sister, calls herself that, though she also serves as Dorothea's surrogate mother on occasion. To counter Dotty's mooning about the rakishly glamorous Ralph Ellis, who will never come nor call, Bodey plugs her twin brother Buddy, a dependable, stocky man who has a good job and likes his liverwurst, beer, and cigars. Unlike Ellis, who signifies fleeting romance, Buddy represents steady reliability "in the long run" (911). When Dorothea asks what that means, Bodey answers her, "The long run is—*life*" (911).

Bodey's aspirations, in contrast to those of Dorothea, are practical and attainable. Every Sunday, she and her brother take Dorothea out to a pleasant lake and amusement park in the Saint Louis suburbs. To Bodey and Buddy, "it's nice and cool at Creve Coeur Lake and the ride on the open-air streetcar is lickety-split through green country and there's flowers you can pull off the bushes you pass. It's a fine excursion" (941). Moreover, such a reachable paradise has other concrete benefits: "Dotty will forget not gettin' that phone call" (941). Bodey works hard to achieve this Edenic result: she shops for three large hens, fries them on a hot Sunday in June, makes deviled eggs, and assembles the equipment for an outing to Creve Coeur. For a twenty-year employee of International Shoes, this jaunt serves as the highlight of her week.

In Bodey, the playwright has fashioned an astonishing character. For one thing, *Lovely Sunday* stands apart for its showcasing of German language and history in Saint Louis. Although Williams employed German elements in other plays, for instance in *Gnädiges Fräulein*, or the Lorelei singing in *Not About Nightingales, A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* is striking in its focus—and largely a positive focus, at that—on German-American experience. Part of such emphasis may originate in Rose's incarceration in the German St. Vincent home in the 1930s, where the family frequently visited. Bodey comes from south Saint Louis, a block from beautiful Victorian Tower Grove Park, with its imposing statue of Alexander von Humdboldt (among others), the famous German scientist and writer. The First Lutheran Church is located nearby on South Grand, as are other landmarks mentioned in the play.

In *Lovely Sunday*, Williams mentions more Saint Louis locations with greater specificity and affection than in any other play. But the locations also function tactically and dramatically. Bodey's allusions to particularized areas of the city anchor her in time, place, and history. She knows what every location signifies in terms of context, ethnicity, and social status. She also recognizes and accepts where she fits in the cultural hierarchy and where, by extension, Dorothea belongs given her fallen status and limited financial means. Bodey wants to rescue Dorothea and incorporate her into a supportive and secure world by arranging her marriage to Buddy. He's not exciting, but he's reliable and decent, and Dorothea could do much worse.

Chief antagonist to this scheme is Helena, who pursues greater dreams of glamour and romance. Helena is a colleague of Dotty's who teaches art at Blewett. She detests the cramped, garish apartment and wants Dorothea to move with her to a more spacious, elegantly appointed apartment on Westmoreland Place, one of the grandest old-money addresses in all of Saint Louis. Helena has never been out to Creve Coeur and scorns it as middle brow at best. Her vision for the future includes hosting tasteful dinner parties in the Central West End with "dainty little sandwiches, watercress, tomato, sherbets from Zeller's in the summer. And a nicely uniformed maid to serve." (949). Helena even arranges for a "foreign-made car, an Hispano-Suiza, no less, practically brand-new," through her wealthy

cousin Dee-Dee, who lives in La Due (949). Here the author separates the name of Ladue, a tony Saint Louis suburb, into two words, accentuating the pretentiousness.

Helena's cultivated options contrast directly and strategically with those offered by Bodey—not only the fried chicken and deviled eggs at Creve Coeur, but also Bodey's coffee and crullers, a German pastry taken at breakfast. Bodey and her twin brother ride the public streetcar and live on the "other side" of Blewett, where Helena has "never ventured . . . before" (917). The Blewett referred to in this instance is not the actual Blewett Street located in north Saint Louis near the cemetery but most likely Delmar Boulevard, on the far side of which Williams and his sister resided for some time and attended school. Bodey, of course, does her own cooking, without maid or catering. She also speaks broken, sometimes ungrammatical English, in contrast to Helena's finely turned language and manners.

Heightening the contrast even further is Helena's smattering of French phrases dropped casually yet carefully into judgments with rhetorical import—almost always as put-downs or demonstrations of superiority of taste or status. When assessing what she regards as Dorothea's current, woefully inadequate housing circumstances, she says witheringly, "*quel embarras de richesses* . . ." (922). Such carefully cultivated territory comes with a passionate dislike of all things German; Helena mocks the surroundings as "Schlogger Haven" for its lack of refined taste. She deliberately mispronounces Bodey's surname, Bodenheifer, meaning literally "earth-cow," emphasizing the she-cow portion instead of saying "hafer" as Bodey instructs her.

Thus, on the level of stylistics, *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* enacts a pitched battle between French and German sensibilities. Williams featured French extensively in his plays, particularly those situated in New Orleans, like *A Streetcar Named Desire, Suddenly Last Summer*, and *Vieux Carré*. He also incorporated Spanish in works like *Camino Real* and *The Night of the Iguana*, and both Spanish and Italian in *The Rose Tattoo*. But the social warfare of French and German values is unusual, less decorative and more confrontational, imbedded in the central conflict itself. Williams always seemed attuned to French language and culture, signaled in this play by the tragically beautiful, ironically named Creve Coeur, meaning literally "heart-break" or "death-heart." German values of earthy dependency may be scorned by Helena in this play, but they end up winning, a revolutionary development in the playwright's evolution.

Accentuating this battle of two cultures is Dorothea's central role as an emotional pivot. Like Helena, she knows French and drops brief phrases into her speech. She also does not understand German and, at least at the beginning, strongly resists Bodey's pressures to go out to Creve Coeur for a leisurely picnic. But it's not that she rejects such attractions, since she has gone with them before; she merely hopes for more—to be swept away by Ralph Ellis. Such romance, however, requires financial means, which she can hope for through marriage but not accomplish on her own. Unlike Helena, too, Dorothea feels genuine empathy with Sophie, understanding her debilitating brokenness. In fact, she identifies so strongly that she cannot be around Sophie very easily until her own brokenness erupts at the end. Dorothea certainly longs for romance, reaches for its salvation, but unlike Helena, she admires Bodey's dogged insistence on creating beauty in a concrete, limited way in daily life.

The battle between French and German sensibilities turns out to be one also of identity. Whereas Helena fights in her chi-chi fashion to redeem Dorothea into a world of glamour and garden parties removed from all evidence of middle-class struggle or tawdriness, Dotty comes to recognize and accept her own restricted means. Witnessing Helena's selfish and heartless snobbery, she learns to detest "the little card parties and teas you'd had in mind for us on Westmoreland Place" (958). In choosing to ally herself with Bodey, Buddy, and the afflicted Sophie, Dorothea throws her lot in with the disadvantaged, wounded people who, with genuine loyalty and concern, look out for each other and try to find aesthetic sustenance and renewal where they can.

Such renewal must come in a physical context marked by clutter, chaos, and noise. The opening stage directions describe "attempts to give the apartment brightness and cheer [that] have gone brilliantly and disastrously wrong" (905). There's a "fiercely yellow glare" with "vistas that suggest the paintings of Ben Shahn: the dried-blood horror of lower-middle-class American urban neighborhoods" (905). Dorothea comments on the "fierce purple carpet," while Helena notices both "the glare, the glare" of the neighborhood and the apartment's "combination of colors! Such a *vivid* contrast!" (912, 918, 919). Helena discovers "*a large painted china frog*"—"you'd almost expect it to croak . . ." (920). Bodey also has a stuffed canary, named Little Hilda, whom she preserved after a record-breaking long life. Overall, this efficiency apartment is cramped, garish, and in Helena's

view "full of hazards," apt figuration of lower-middle-class existence (921).

Unlike the depressing tenement of *The Glass Menagerie* with its smoky fire escape and expressionistically lit photograph of the missing father, the apartment in *Lovely Sunday* lacks all decorum and pretensions to gentility. From the outset we are ushered not into a nostalgic, largely serious world of individual frustration and protest but instead into a setting of Pinteresque comedy, where menace is enacted in ridiculously distorted ways and where grotesquerie is foregrounded. In the opening scene, Dorothea conducts her exercises with "fearful effort" and "a great gasp of deliverance," almost like an animal in heat. Helena enters for the first time *"with the eyes of a predatory bird"* (917); Bodey, taking an almost instant dislike, calls her "You *Schwein*, you bitch!" and refers to her as a snake in scene two. While frying the chickens for their picnic in Creve Coeur, Bodey spatters grease on herself and subsequently spills both the baking soda and coffee on the carpet.

Dorothea's later collapse behind the sofa while performing calisthenics is ostensibly the result of "a nervous heart condition," which she remedies, gasping throughout, with too many tablets of Mebaral chased down with sherry. Bodey, for her part, suffers from calcification in the ears. Helena calmly advises against having "a hole bored in her skull to correct it. The operation is called fenestration—it involves a good deal of danger and whether or not it was successful could not be determined since she never recovered consciousness" (920). This is, of course, an oblique reference to the playwright's sister's disastrous lobotomy, which Helena describes here matter-of-factly for comic effect. At the very same moment of this interchange, the disembodied voice of Buddy calls out from the phone Bodey neglected to replace on the hook back in the kitchenette. Thus the world of *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* abounds in grotesque intrusions both comic and weirdly disturbing.

Most grotesque of all is Sophie Gluck, the German-speaking, tragicomic wraith who wanders in and out uttering refrains like "*Das Schlafzimmer ist gespukt!*" ("The bedroom is haunted!") (945). She creates chaos as she drinks coffee with her cruller and develops diarrhea, which she always gets, and is ushered promptly into the bathroom. But then she lets the faucet run over, causing flooding and requiring Bodey's intervention with a mop. For all the body-focused interventions, however (accentuated by Bodey's very name), both

Sophie and Bodey remain preternaturally clear about the real danger in their midst: near the climax, when Helena rails to Dorothea against "a future of descent into the Gluck abyss of surrender to the bottom level of squalor," Sophie emerges suddenly from the kitchenette and *"throws a glass of water in Helena's face"* (950).

Beneath the Pinteresque comedy, real battles are waged that go to the heart of both identity and survival. Dorothea, having witnessed Helena's ongoing insults not only to Bodey and Sophie but also to herself, opts finally for honest "squalor" rather than the pretended, heartless sophistication of Westmoreland Place, with its implicit reliance on the degradation of others. This is a stance toward truth-telling strongly accented in Midwestern literature; it represents a turning away from Williams's earlier attraction to the seductive power and anesthetizing comfort of illusion. Although she fears that "Bodey wants to absorb my life like a blotter," Dorothea cannot help but be impressed by her roommate's dignified departure for Creve Coeur, allowing Dorothea to make up her own mind regarding her future (953). Once news of Ralph Ellis's betrothal comes out, Dorothea snaps into a different psychological dimension; Helena's threats of impending squalor are no longer "dismaying to me" (958).

Dorothea's resonant departure at the end offers a fascinating, radical re-envisioning of the final scene in *The Glass Menagerie*: she "*shuts her eyes very tight and raises a clenched hand in the air, nodding her head several times as if affirming an unhappy suspicion regarding the way of the world. This gesture suffices to discharge her sense of defeat*" (958). This dramatic action takes us back to the defiant activism of the early Saint Louis plays. After calling and leaving a message for Bodey at the streetcar station, Dorothea begins sobbing. Sophie, in her naíve, haunting empathy, sobs even louder. Dorothea then hugs her wounded sister and provides coffee and a cruller. This final act of caring prefaces her leaving—not to flee from Saint Louis or its family responsibilities as in *The Glass Menagerie*, but to join Bodey and Buddy in their Sunday picnic outing to Creve Coeur for healing and renewal. Life in the garish, crowded apartment will go on as before, but punctuated by quiet pastoral adventures and supported by genuine interpersonal commitment.

So ends a remarkable late play in which Tennessee Williams appears to reverse time and rewrite personal history, or at least to consider the road not taken. Dorothea's final decision is one of dignified acceptance—tinged with loss to be sure, but ultimately affirming per-

sonal relationship over the alluring but traitorous pretensions of money and status. Unlike the earlier dozen or so Saint Louis plays, written largely in the 1930s and early 1940s when the playwright sought to rebel against his family background, the city is portrayed in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* not as confining or oppressive but as offering genuine possibilities for sustenance and restoration. Both the glitter of Westmoreland Place and the pastoral idyll of Creve Coeur provide their comforts; Bodey's south side is a neighborhood of history and connectedness. Debilitated souls like Sophie Gluck will be taken in and cared for. And ironically, such broken figures may even bring their caretakers a bit of emotional "luck" as her name implies.

A number of questions arise from the alternatives enacted in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* compared to the Saint Louis plays written over three decades earlier. What does this work tell us about the author's seemingly altered state of mind or attitude, both toward Saint Louis and the Midwest and toward personal responsibility? What changes in Williams's art or aesthetic does *Lovely Sunday* betoken? Such speculations can never be conclusively settled, but a variety of evidence suggests that the aging, award-winning playwright was changing direction, or at least re-evaluating. *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* began as a screenplay written in the 1950s entitled *All Gaul Is Divided* (Foster 158). Roughly two decades later it was rewritten as a two-woman one-act play called *Creve Coeur.* The final two-scene version obviously expands on old themes in a new historical and personal context.

The striking style of this late play, garish lower-middle-class comedy, is not typical of the younger Williams, though several short works like *A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot* and especially *The Dark Room*, both Saint Louis plays, provide an early glimpse into this mindset. *The Dark Room* is especially apt, given its grimly funny mockery of a well-meaning but misguided social worker attempting to redeem a hopelessly dysfunctional family. Williams always adapted to new social developments, most markedly perhaps in his shift from engaged political activism in the 1930s and early 1940s to explorations of personal desire in the 1950s. *Lovely Sunday*, Verna Foster argues, fits in stylistically with the plays of the 1970s, blending "the psychological realism of the earlier plays with the grotesque style Williams developed later in his career" (155). Elements of Beckett, Ionesco, and Artaud appear in an "absurdist view of life" that becomes "more overt as his dramaturgy evolves from its basis in realism" (Foster 158).

The comic stance in *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*, tinged as it is by irony and loss, signals a more tolerant perspective. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* headline marking Williams's return to his former city in August 1978 reinforced this shift: "'Mellowed Tennessee Williams Revisits St. Louis'" (qtd. in D. Williams & Mead 325). In this article, Williams claimed "he liked St. Louis . . . he was mellow and full of smiles and said the city he had called 'the city of St. Pollution' had its own charms" (qtd. in D. Williams & Mead 325). Citing a different interview in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* several years earlier in 1974, Allean Hale reports that "when asked why he left St. Louis, he said: 'I never left'" (623).

This viewpoint differs markedly from the one presented at the end of *The Glass Menagerie* and common in all the early plays set in Saint Louis. In the 1940s classic, Williams made the rhetorical argument for departure and abandonment with an attitude of detachment (King 84). Yet the turnaround in attitude toward Saint Louis evident in the 1970s was more gradual than the previous quotations suggest. Already in 1953, in the introduction to *27 Wagons Full of Cotton,* Williams waxed nostalgic about the dynamism of The Mummers, the theatre troupe with whom he associated and who performed his first plays: "roughly from about 1935 to 1940 . . . . Yes, there was about them that kind of excessive romanticism which is youth and which is the best and purest part of life" (ix). He even expressed "a tremendous wave of longing for something that I had not been conscious of wanting, until that moment. The open sky of my youth!" (viii). Clearly, absence from Saint Louis made Tennessee Williams's heart grow fonder after the initial desperation to escape wore off.

Ultimately, more important than the playwright's attitude about the city of his youth, however, is the philosophy toward life revealed in a work like *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur.* The early plays set in Saint Louis were all marked by desperation—either deep, debilitating imprisonment that leads to collapse in plays like *Hello from Bertha* and *Not About Nightingales*, or wild passion to escape that drives works like *The Long Goodbye* and *The Glass Menagerie*. In *Stairs to the Roof,* a carnivalesque, expressionistic comedy written in the early 1940s, the central couple even absconds to outer space. *Lovely Sunday* represents a radical change of perspective. Replacing the pulsating, often irrational desperation of the early plays is a newly

acquired practicality: "making an adjustment to a realistic acceptance of life on the terms offered," as the playwright phrased it (qtd. in D. Williams & Mead 324).

Such "realistic acceptance" also signals a return to Midwestern values that had remained largely hidden during the playwright's Southern period and *Wanderjahren* far from Saint Louis. From the regionalist perspective, both *The Glass Menagerie* and *Lovely Sunday* enact a debate between remote glamour and Midwestern practicality. In *Menagerie*, the Southern elegance of Amanda is exaggerated and ridiculous out of context but retains an undercurrent of tragic dignity. The Midwestern competence and optimism of Jim O'Connor are unattainable for the Wingfield family, who seem destined to fail in the arena of work and everyday survival. At the end, all Tom can do is spin away from two options he can no longer abide.

In *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*, Helena is not Southern, and her offer of glamour is less faded and tragic but also more treacherous than Amanda's. Her pretensions are used as social weapons against the unfortunate and for social exclusion rather than for survival. The Midwestern options presented by Bodey and Buddy are as daunting as the energetic boosterism of Jim O'Connor, but they also offer interpersonal commitment and reliability. Whatever the deficiencies of this understanding of reality, Dorothea, in her woundedness, like the playwright himself late in life, embraces its practical charms.

In its way, *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* paved the way for the playwright to return home, both literally and figuratively. Of course, he had visited his family and spent time in the area frequently in the intervening years, even spending an extended period in the late 1960s for drug rehabilitation. But the ending of the play suggests an ideological and emotional readiness to accept the sometimes comforting limits of daily life. Williams's burial at Calvary Cemetery on the north side of Saint Louis, next to his Ohio-born mother and beloved sister, represents a coming home psychologically anticipated in this late play. *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* serves not only as a dramatic bookend to *The Glass Menagerie*, a comic investigation into alternative choices, but also as a coming home to a past Williams could no longer escape and, apparently, no longer wished to.

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"A PROFESSION OLDER THAN WRITING": ECHOES OF *HUCKLEBERRY FINN* IN STEINBECK'S *TRAVELS WITH CHARLEY: IN SEARCH OF AMERICA*

CHRISTIAN KNOELLER

> There is, for the traveler at least, the sense that learning about home and learning about a foreign world can be one and the same thing.
>
> —Pico Iyer, "Why We Travel"

Recently, while traveling in the Rocky Mountain West, I became reacquainted by chance with John Steinbeck's literary travelogue, *Travels With Charley: In Search of America*, a loosely woven set of reflections penned while motoring around the US in a camper during the 1960s. Journeying through the American West is both a literary trope and a historical one: an ongoing narrative of national identity. Indeed, the tension between settling down and "lighting out for the territories," as David Radavich contends, has historically been central to Midwestern experience, identity, and literature: "the recurring western theme of desire for escape battling with the need to settle down and put down roots" (*Western* 2). Yet Steinbeck's stated purpose, as his title suggests, is to take stock of a nation—as well as of himself—at something of a defining moment. When published in 1962—the year he became the sixth American to be awarded a Nobel Prize in literature—the book was an overnight popular success. Only belatedly, as Jay Parini notes, has it received serious critical attention; curiously, this is also true for much of Mark Twain's work, which only gradually became canonized long after its initial popularity. It has inspired many imitators in the decades since, only some of whom acknowledge their textual debt. In a similar vein, the ongoing bicentennial celebration of the Lewis and Clark Corps of

Discovery expedition to the Pacific at the dawn of the nineteenth century, has spawned a raft of books by authors purporting to retrace their steps—or, in some cases, to paddle in their wake. Scott Weidensaul's *Return to Wild America* likewise revisits the itinerary famously described by ornithologist Roger Tory Peterson on his 30,000-mile trek fifty years before, while Alexis de Tocqueville's account of traveling around America is recapitulated in Bernard-Henri Levy's *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*. Others have set out in search of the "original" Robinson Crusoe. Indeed, *National Geographic* has developed a sort of rhetorical formula along just such lines: a correspondent exploring the hinterlands where someone noteworthy had once tread, mixing present-day descriptions with historical narrative, drawing apt parallels and contrasts along the way.

While it might well be an interesting project to chart the trajectory of literary journeys derived from Steinbeck's, my intention here is to consider it's literary *antecedent* in Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). It seems a truism to point out that Twain's novel is central to American literature—and thereby a seminal work—quickly hailed upon publication as "*the* great American novel" by prominent critics in Britain, and, thirty years later, anointed as "one of the greatest masterpieces in the world" by none other than H.L. Mencken (Graff 314). Moreover, to the extent that canonicity relies on the proverbial "test of time," *Huckleberry Finn* continues to compel interest—and spark controversies—better than a century later. Twain's work has indeed proven to be a rich source of intertextual references for subsequent authors—sometimes in subtle ways—as I will trace in the case of Steinbeck in this essay.

Specifically, taking Steinbeck as my primary text, I will examine a single chapter of the travelogue that addresses several themes related to regional identity in literature: a writer's relationship to place; textual representation of place; and, finally, places imagined and romanticized. More particularly, I focus on how both Steinbeck and Twain depict itinerant actors purporting to deliver Shakespeare to the American Midwest. The dramaturgical theories of social interaction advanced by Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* are instructive here, a framework for viewing such theatrical characters—both onstage and off.

To begin, consider Steinbeck's overall agenda in embarking on such a journey and writing the travelogue: "When I go to Europe,

when I am asked what America is like, what will I say . . . I came with the wish to learn what America was like" (107-8). Twain's aim in *Huckleberry Finn* is arguably parallel: an entertaining yet unvarnished portrait—and critique—of regional and national character, notwithstanding Twain's famously tongue-in-cheek "NOTICE" to readers, a disclaimer prefacing the novel, seemingly leveled at future academic critics: "PERSONS attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished" (np). Needless to say, this playful admonition only calls attention to the book's serious aims.

Steinbeck's untitled chapter (127-42 in the Penguin edition) opens as he approaches the city of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, birthplace of author Sinclair Lewis—the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature—whose novel *Main Street: The Story of Carol Kennicott* was published in 1920 and made into a movie just three years later. Steinbeck remembers the book for "the violent hatred it aroused in the countryside of his nativity" (103). Midwesterners have often supposed their own communities inferior to the urban cultural centers of the East Coast (Radavich "Performing" 6). Steinbeck contrasts such self-effacing attitudes with the historic Work Projects Administration (WPA) guides to the states, conceived during the Great Depression, that he characterizes as "the most comprehensive account of the United States ever . . . . by the best writers in America" (103). While admittedly a massive undertaking, the project "employed approximately ten thousand writers, the vast majority off the breadlines and varying greatly in their skills, documenting their *own* communities in state, regional, city, and local guides [. . .] brokering [. . .] individual, community and national identities" as Christine Bold (1999) observes (xiv, emphasis mine). In examining these guides as cultural artifacts, however, it becomes clear that they offer images that were in fact fabricated in response to a variety of constituencies. Nonetheless, "their documentary status allowed project publicizers to speak of them as 'discovering'—rather than 'creating'—American culture" (Bold xv). Consequently, while Steinbeck delights in their ambitious scope and exhaustive detail, his allusion to the WPA guides also signals interest in textual representation of place that he himself is engaged in: how we imagine unfamiliar places in terms of the romanticized ways they are sometimes portrayed.

Crossing the border into North Dakota, for example, upon arriving in Fargo, he recounts how it is fabled to be alternately the coldest, hottest, wettest, and driest—in short the most extreme climate on the continent. The Midwest is commonly regarded in the popular imagination as subject to notoriously intense weather—consider the *Wizard of Oz* (Radavich "Performing" 2). While Steinbeck acknowledges that such myths about a place are prone to be exaggerated and romanticized—and therefore suspect—he pinpoints Fargo as the nation's very center: "If you take a map of the United States and fold it in the middle, eastern edge against western, and crease it sharply, right in the crease will be Fargo. On double-page maps sometimes Fargo gets lost in the binding. That may not be a very scientific method for finding the east-west middle of the country, but it will do" (104). Indeed, this area is typically assigned to the Midwest, as David Radavich notes, "the Eastern portions of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas, to the west of which begin the Great Plains" are generally perceived to part of the region geographically ("Performing" 1). Steinbeck, for his part, identifies the dead center—equidistant from the sophistication associated with both coasts— and at a great remove from even the region's own urban cultural centers such as Chicago: in effect, a "margin" in the middle.

Several sorts of "margins" are operating in both texts. Geographically, the Mississippi River is conventionally seen as a dividing line between eastern and western portions of the country. Historically it served as a major conduit for exploration, settlement, transportation, and trade. Accordingly, in the 1840s world in which Twain's work is set, the Mississippi is in a sense the very heart and lifeblood of the young—and not yet fully formed—nation. Moreover, social stratification is also commonly viewed in terms of marginalization. Marginalization along racial lines was in effect institutionalized by the whole system of slavery, of course—ensuring its perpetuation across generations. Jim's illegal status as a runaway slave subject to capture, detention, and return greatly compounds the risks of their journey. Consider the obstacles Huck and Jim constantly face: their vulnerability while floating the river—running by night, hiding by day. The simple pleasures and ceaseless adventures afforded by life on the raft do not disguise their fundamental predicament. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more marginalized existence—in stark contrast to the centrality of the river they travel. While Huck and Jim eke out an existence essentially outside of the

law, Steinbeck, for his part, also travels incognito. I would suggest that this purposeful anonymity is essentially a strategy that positions the author as he wanders, allowing him to inhabit the margins socially—arguably a sort of Everyman—able to pass as a person having affinity with even the lowliest of folks he encounters.

Place: Steinbeck himself was born in 1902 at Salinas, California, the state where several of his most celebrated novels are set, yet he expressed a lifelong desire to travel. Indeed, he recalls rather poetically in the first line of the preface to *Travels* his earliest yearnings "when I was young and the urge to be someplace else was on me" (3). As Parini recounts, Steinbeck spent the "last half of his life with New York City as his primary residence, traveling abroad frequently. Mexico, France, and England were favorite destinations" (ix). In fact, in 1960 he embarked on his sprawling tour of America after spending the better part of a decade abroad, to take stock firsthand of the nation, its regions, and its people. His novels, of course, have long been admired for their "intimate sense of landscape" (x), their "specific highly concrete environment[s]," and characters "ultimately bound to the rhythms of nature" (Parini, xiii). This affinity matches the iconic Midwestern temperament that was arguably forged of nineteenth-century sensibilities derived from the agrarian lifestyle of family farms, by necessity attuned to the natural cycles that impact crops and livestock. As Radavich reminds us, "In the Midwest, the fertility of the soil and its crucial role in sustaining human economies has forced farmers and townspeople *to live in closer relation to the land*" (Western 14; emphasis mine).

When writing travelogue, Steinbeck naturally employs the familiar techniques of a novelist, such as creating characters through sustained dialogue. In terms of technique, as Parini notes, in *Travels* "discreet scene gives way to discreet scene in a mode of picaresque fiction invented by Cervantes" (xvi). Steinbeck's allusion to Cervantes is explicit: in fact, he christens his camper Rocinante after Don Quixote's steed—though, tellingly, no one along the entire route apparently recognized the allusion. It is interesting to note that this connection to Cervantes signals one level of intertextuality: In Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Tom Sawyer's misguided exploits were inspired—like Don Quixote's—by his (mis)reading of lavishly written accounts of chivalry and Romance. Such (intertextual) connections to *Don Quixote of the Mancha* have long been noted (e.g. Gullason). Richard Hill, for example, suggests that Tom Sawyer is "in a sense, an updated Don Quixote: exasperating, yet sympathetic" (327) who, like Don Quixote, sometimes turns to "authorities" from his reading of the Romances to devise and justify his own most outlandish schemes. As Arnold Weinstein notes, "Huck ran into the same obstacles and one has to say that Don Quixote's entire life is about the conflict, even confusion, between these two realms" (32): the amusing, yet potentially treacherous, conflation of the actual with the imagined. Accordingly, Steinbeck writes with reference to a tradition where almost anything goes, seemingly as wide-eyed—if not so naíve—as Twain's narrator in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Yet, as Weinstein observes, "Behind the stories of adventure and picaresque forays, the narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries testify to an imperative of recuperation. From the most ambitious and self-regarding of the bunch—Cervante's *Don Quixote* [. . .] the project at hand seems to be one of retrieval" (27). What then might Steinbeck hope to recover? Consider that Twain's account is historical retrospection, depicting another time and place: that of his youth. After all, Twain sets *Huckleberry Finn* in the 1840s: that is, forty to fifty years prior to its publication in 1884. On one level, then, what *Huckleberry Finn* "recovers" is a past—or rather an account, sometimes laced with nostalgia. Steinbeck's project differs in that he purports to capture real-time impressions of a nation that thrives on progress. Indeed, the 1960s are notorious for dramatic change: both social and political upheaval. Could it be that Steinbeck, not unlike Twain, yearns for an earlier time: an America in which authentic regional differences still existed—in which the relationship to landscape and place held sway in everyday life—before media laid claim to the popular imagination. Indeed, Steinbeck fears that what he terms "the sterile wonders of movies, television, and radio" (116) will serve as purveyors of a national cultural hegemony that ironically, in decades since, has only continued to expand globally. He repeatedly frames the project as a kind of reconnaissance: ultimately to tell a European audience about the character of America. In fact, the overarching mission of Steinbeck's journey—as well as the book itself—is ostensibly to profile an America with which he has become somewhat disenchanted in the manner of an expatriate. If there is an element of nostalgia in his account, it is possibly the hope that some of what has been lost to change can still be recovered—if only one looks in the right places and, perhaps, knows how to look. Yet one's perceptions of place—

as well as how they are expressed in written text—are inevitably colored by desire: expectations conditioned by a lifetime of reading both literary and popular texts. As Pico Iyer would have it, "We invent the places we see as much as we do the books that we read" (np).

Writing at the dawn of the 1960s, Steinbeck laments the impact of national media on remote, rural regions. He finds the same sorts of comic books and paperbacks available everywhere, while "big city papers cast their shadows over large areas [. . . .] the *Chicago Tribune* all the way here to Dakota" (109), and local radio can be characterized as generalized, packaged, and undistinguished. Bland food is a constant reminder: "tasteless, colorless, and of a complete sameness" (108). Consider that this lament about American monoculture was written before the advent of color television—let alone satellite networks or the Internet! Yet he speculates that ultimately theater is likely to prevail in the face of such virtual competitors:

> So it went on—a profession older than writing and one that will probably survive when the written word has disappeared. And all the wonders of movies and television and radio will fail to wipe it out—a living man in communication with a living audience. But how did he live? Who were his companions? What was his hidden life? (116, emphasis mine)

It is fitting, then, that Steinbeck's account would depict an encounter with an itinerant actor for whom theater had run in the family for fully three generations, who had sold an inherited home on the elite resort island of Nantucket, originally part of an artist's colony there, to bankroll an extended performing tour. Is this not tradition writ large? Such an inheritance—both monetary and theatrical—might be likened to the credentials that the King and the Duke concoct in *Huckleberry Finn*, not to mention their preposterous claims of royal status. Curiously, Twain's own heritage involved shirttail relations to European gentry on both sides; they were, as Gerald Graff recounts, "genteel Virginia families who were proud of their British ancestors. The Clemens clan could find a branch on the family tree identifying one of the judges who sentenced Charles I to death; the Lamptons [Twain's mother] could trace their connection to the earls of Dunham" (20). It is tempting to speculate that this personal experience may have contributed to Twain's later irreverence for pretensions of inherited privilege.

In *Huckleberry Finn*, the first of Twain's vagrants announces with considerable pomp:

> "Gentleman," says the young man, very solemn, "I will reveal it to you for I feel I may have confidence in you. By right I am a duke [. . . .] yes. My great-grandfather, eldest son of the Duke of Bridgewater fled to this country about the end of the last century [. . . .] I am the rightful Duke of Bridgewater; and here am I, forlorn, torn from my high estate." (163)

Not to be outdone by this declaration of noble European heritage, his accomplice—though whimsically unsuccessful at elevating his own diction above colloquial dialect—claims "your eyes is lookin' at this very moment on pore disappeared Dauphin, Looy the Seventeen, son of Looy the Sixteen and Marry Antonette" (164). Such garbled historical reckoning seems almost a parody of Shakespearean tragedies, such as *King Lear*: "Yes, gentlemen, you see before you in blue jeans and misery, the wanderin,' exiled, trampled-on, and sufferin' rightful King of France" (165). As Erving Goffman would have it, there is often a disparity between such affectation and its reception—and therein lies the potential for humor and irony: consider the chasm between how a character like Don Quixote perceives himself and how he is seen by others.

Even lowly Huck soon sees through these shenanigans, of course, yet pretends to be taken in—if only not to rock the proverbial boat. As Richard Hill observes, Huck had "always been amiably inclined to let strong-minded associates have their own way as long as doing so promotes general harmony" (321), a coping strategy he acquired early on, given the abuse he faced as a child at the hand of Pap Finn. Huck himself says as much, with characteristic goodwill:

> It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes, at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds. But I never said nothing, never let on; kept to myself; it's the best way; then you don't have no quarrels, and don't get into no trouble. If they wanted us to call them kings and dukes, I hadn't no objections,' long as it would keep peace in the family [. . .] If I never learnt nothing else out of pap, I learnt that the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way. (166)

Goffman characterizes this sort of situation as a temporary consensus:

> Together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored. Real agreement will also exist concerning the desirability of *avoiding an open conflict* of definitions of the situation. (115; emphasis mine)

Huck's pretending, then, is a sort of performance in itself: an act of pragmatism as much as acquiescence.

Affectation is essential to such pretense, of course, no matter how fallacious, no matter how flagrantly the King and Duke miss the mark linguistically when it comes to the "Queen's English." Such contradictory indicators of identity and status—the "King's" pronouncements of royal heritage versus his crass manner of speech, for example—are what Goffman terms "fundamental asymmetry [. . .] demonstrated in the communication process": when the speaker's intended impression is belied and thereby inadvertently undermined in the eyes of the audience (113). Goffman suggests that as a rule people are well practiced, and therefore adept, at spotting impostors.

Twain had an exceptional ear for dialect—approaching perfect-pitch—that adds great charm and nuance to his characters. Indeed, he was keenly conscious of dialect, as reflected by an explanatory note preceding the novel:

> In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods South-Western dialect; the ordinary "Pike-County" dialect; and four modified varieties of the last. The shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guess-work; but pains-takingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity of these several forms of speech. (np)

Taken at face value, Twain clearly prided himself on rendering such dialects with considerable precision.

Steinbeck's actor, on the other hand, self-consciously alters his speech in ways that sociolinguists have documented as markers of social class. As Steinbeck begins to render this "character" through dialogue, both his vocabulary and speech patterns give him away:

> "I see you are of the profession."
> I guess my mouth fell open. It's years since I have heard the term.
> "Well, no. No, I'm not."

> Now it was his turn to be puzzled. "Not? But—my dear chap, if you're not, how do you know the expression?"
>
> "I guess I've been on the fringes."
>
> "Ah! Fringes. Of course. Backstage no doubt—direction, stage manager." (112)

It is telling that Steinbeck is mistaken for an actor—though the reasoning proves ludicrous—based merely on his grooming (a beard), his apparel (a naval cap with British royal coat of arms), and his pet (a poodle). This is commonplace enough: jumping to conclusions by sizing up strangers based only on appearance. Consider the significance of the ways we choose to dress, for example. Goffman describes the process by which we infer identity by making assumptions: "to apply untested stereotypes [. . . and] assume from past experience that only individuals of a particular kind are likely to be found in a given social setting," such as the theater, for example (2002, 110). The exchange is ultimately self-serving for the actor in the sense that he calls attention to his own vocation, a way of situating himself socially and seeking recognition—what Goffman refers to as simply expressing one's self.

This initial exchange also serves as a sort of secret handshake signaling membership in the fraternity of the theater: insider jargon such as the phrase "of the profession," a longstanding, if apparently antiquated, term. "Old chap" seems equally strained. Moreover, Steinbeck also comments on his changing pronunciation: broadening certain vowels in an attempt to sound impressive—whether highbrow, theatrical, Bostonian, British, or Shakespearean. Such social hierarchies are clearly at odds with the more egalitarian ideals and social structures typically associated with the Midwest (Radavich, "Performing" 3). Moreover, there is a moral underpinning to self-representation—akin to language philosopher Paul Grice's conversational implicature, specifically truthfulness as represented by the maxim of "quality"—that Goffman posits this way: "an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is" (116). Yet should we ever take an actor—practiced in the art of deception—at face value?

There is also a tongue-in-cheek sort of deception going on in the presentation of self, as Steinbeck describes his own accomplishments as being "flops" —only "on the fringes" of respectable theater.

Asked directly "Would I know your name," Steinbeck claims "I doubt it. Nobody else did" (113). Here, Steinbeck engages in what Goffman describes as "a kind of information game—a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery" (114). This deception is in keeping with the anonymity on his journey as a whole—a far cry from the self-conscious, theatrical posturing of literary *persona* by the likes of Twain—or even more so his contemporary, Walt Whitman. Warned in advance by friends that an author of his stature would undoubtedly be recognized anywhere he went, Steinbeck reports that in truth he never was. The trip, Steinbeck tells us, "demanded that I leave my name and my identity at home" since his name "had become reasonably well known" (5). While this may reflect merely the desire for privacy (or even genuine humility), it raises interesting issues. Steinbeck presumably wishes to avoid what might be termed observer's paradox: the likelihood that his reputation would cause people to behave in uncharacteristic ways. Moreover, anonymity creates a space for Steinbeck to perform a self that is responsive to context and, frankly, one most likely to elicit material in the form of character sketches and anecdotes rich in dialogue—real or invented.

Another interesting echo of Twain in Steinbeck concerns audience in the Midwest for live performance, whether serious drama or farce. The King and the Duke go to great lengths to attract an audience, printing playbills trumpeting their appearances. Similarly, Steinbeck's acquaintance describes his target as "[w]herever I can trap an audience. Schools, churches, service clubs [. . .] wherever two or three are gathered together. Sometimes I even rent a hall and advertise" (113-4). Such modest aims contrast with the raucous crowds that the King and the Duke managed to draw, of course, but even more pronounced are their respective attitudes toward those audiences. While Steinbeck's itinerant friend seeks in his own words to "bring culture" to a region presumably lacking it, he expresses emphatically his own respect for such audiences: "When show people come into what they call the sticks, they have contempt for the yokels" (114). This is clearly the stance assumed by the King and the Duke, who seem to believe that their charade will pass for theater. Consider how the Duke reassures the King that the audience will readily accept him—a bald and bearded amateur—cast as Juliet:

> "But if Juliet's such a young gal, Duke, my peeled head and white whiskers is goin' to look oncommon odd on her maybe."
>
> "No, don't you worry—*these country jakes won't ever think of that*. Besides, you know, you'll be in costume, and that makes all the difference in the world." (171; emphasis mine)

Of course, not all audiences are so easily cowed—with sometimes dire consequences for impostors. As Goffman describes, "events may occur within the interaction which contradict, discredit, or otherwise throw doubt upon this projection. When these disruptive events occur, the interaction itself may come to a confused and embarrassing halt [. . .] At such moments the individual whose presentation has been discredited may feel ashamed while the others present may feel hostile" (116). Ready the tar and feathers.

By contrast, Steinbeck's thespian recognizes that, as he puts it, "there aren't any yokels." Still, Steinbeck prods him, asking the actor "But aren't people scared of gypsies, vagabonds, and actors?" (114). This conflation of actors with transients harkens back to the King, the Duke, and their ilk being continually on the lam. There is also a recursive turn in that both Huck, as Twain's narrator, and Steinbeck himself share in the protean identity that travel allows—replete with stereotypes about hobos and never-do-wells. As Pico Iyer observes, "travel is notoriously a cradle for false identities" (n.p). Consider the startling range of *personae* that the Duke is prepared to perform for profit:

> One bill said "The celebrated Dr. Armand de Montalban of Paris," would "lecture on the Science of Phrenology" at such and such a place, on the blank day of blank, at ten cents admission and "furnish charts of character at twenty-five cents apiece." The Duke said that was *him*. In another bill he was the "world renowned Shaksperan tragedian, Garrick the Younger, of Drury Lane, London." In other bills he had a lot of other names and done other wonderful things, like finding water and gold with a "divining rod," "dissipating witch-spells," and so on. (170; emphasis in original)

The issue of "respect" for audience intersects in interesting ways with the "material" being performed. Steinbeck's itinerant—who seeks to deliver a glimpse of high culture in the hinterlands—recites monologues from Shakespeare. Yet while the King and the Duke claim to do likewise, their sorry performances become inadvertent parody. Steinbeck's man, to the contrary, couples the authority lent

by the traditional literary canon with his imitation of an illustrious, recorded performance by a Britisher who had been knighted no less, one Sir John Gielgud which, he confides, likewise "gives authority to the performance" (115). The actor actually carries Gielgud's signature in his wallet at all times, and showing it to Steinbeck, handles it like a holy relic. Viewed by some as the greatest Shakespearean actor of his time, Gielgud appeared in no fewer than 122 movies and directed his own film version of *Hamlet.* These are precisely the kinds of credentials that an aspiring actor traversing the Dakotas in a camper might wish to appropriate—a lofty pedigree indeed—and his appropriation is nearly as far-fetched as the King and the Duke's claims to nobility. Implicit in such posturing, of course, is a double dose of postcolonial, pseudo-high culture: both the Shakespearean play itself and, by imitating Gielgud, the very manner of performing it are of conspicuously European origin. In *An American Colony: Regionalism and the Roots of Midwestern Culture*, Edward Watts argues for just such an analogy: "Midwesterners view the East as the East views Europe, its erstwhile colonial parent" (qtd. in Radavich, "Performing" 7). And while the King and the Duke purported to "do" Shakespeare—performing *Romeo and Juliet, Richard III,* and *Hamlet*—regardless of how badly the original scripts have been butchered, their claim to the profession is no less based on the pedigree and canonicity of Shakespeare's plays.

What Steinbeck would recover in the end is performance itself—in authorship as much as in theater. He finds a kind of salvation in drama, the living performer "in communication with a living audience": the shape-shifting mystery that theater allows—like travel and writing itself—the power to reinvent ourselves while bearing witness to the world. As we have seen, his process of composing *Travels* involves his own performance of a *persona*: that of the sometimes cantankerous traveler—rather than the literary light we might have imagined. He sees the success of his project—to get the goods on America—as contingent on his own role while interacting with the people he depicts, whose words and actions are meant to represent the social fabric of a nation. Some of them—like the itinerant actor or even Steinbeck himself—have for the moment made the road their home. Travel itself has become an intrinsic part of their enterprise and, for the time being, their identities. Like Huck and Jim—no less than the King and the Duke—they live by their wits, forever sensi-

tive to context and place. We survive, these two books suggest, by performing.

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

MICHAEL MERVA

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

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

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

MAKINGS OF A LISTENER

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

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

mean when I talk to you" (164). At other times characters realize it, but as in the case of Wing Biddlebaum, still "hunger for the presence of the boy, who was the medium through which he expressed his love of man" (33). But most often readers get no indication either way, only the last words of the "teller" who must plead with Willard for understanding. This pleading indicates that although Willard "must live and die in uncertainty" (234) and may not understand the tellers, Anderson wants to remind readers that it is not the understanding that is important, but the listening and telling itself which brings relief.

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

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

Opening Up

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

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

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

But even more than these physical manifestations of a willingness to be around the tellers, every character refers to Singer's eyes

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

EVERYONE NEEDS MORE THAN HELLO & GOODBYE

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

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

In *Winesburg* it is these friendless characters that are encountered most often, but also reaching out to Willard are people who arouse distaste in the town simply because of their personalities, often because they are so outspoken about their lives. Doctor Parcival, for instance, is described as wanting to "make everyone seem despicable," (55) and believes that after ignoring a request to see a dead child, that there would be "talk of hanging" him (56). Joe Welling, who envies Willard, is described as "a man who is subject to fits . . . who walks among his fellow men inspiring fear . . . Men watched him with eyes in which lurked amusement tempered by alarm" (104). McCullers picks up most on these types of characters when she needs "tellers" for Mr. Singer to listen to in *Hunter*.

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

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

Objectivity Lives and Grows

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

New Beginnings, Old Endings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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INFLUENCING EACH OTHER THROUGH THE MAIL: WILLIAM STAFFORD'S AND MARVIN BELL'S *SEGUES* AND JIM HARRISON'S AND TED KOOSER'S *BRAIDED CREEK*

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The most common negative stereotype, or perhaps truism, about the Midwest is that it collects people for whom the lights of Des Moines are quite bright enough, thank you; they're people singularly devoid of the desire to head for New York and realize large dreams. This negative rendition of Midwestern placidity has a positive version: the people of the Midwest have a finely honed ability to enjoy ordinary events. That affirmative portrayal radiates from *Braided Creek* and *Segues*, both of which collect poems Midwestern poets sent back and forth to each other through the mail.

In 1983, Marvin Bell and William Stafford published *Segues: A Correspondence in Poetry*, poems Bell and Stafford wrote in response to each other's work, a process Stafford describes in the preface as "playing annie-over with poems" (ix). Stafford recommends this practice to others, explaining that "the stray feelings and thoughts, the strange little bonuses when you push words toward each other, the easy to neglect but inwardly significant events of your life—keeping in touch is a way to welcome those happenings, to link and confirm them, there on the page, between friends" (x). In the case of *Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry*, Ted Kooser and Jim Harrison did not decide to send each other poems; rather, their letters to each other morphed into "a correspondence comprised entirely of brief poems because that was the essence of what we wanted to say to each other" (jacket of *Braided Creek*). But these poems clearly also allow Harrison and Kooser to relish subtle every-

day joys. In sum, both *Braided Creek* and *Segues* commemorate the richness of ordinary life.

Indeed, *Braided Creek* seems almost entirely celebrations of mundane grace. Poem after poem notes simple delights, like this one:

> What pleasure: a new straw hat
> with a green brim to look through. (6)

The collection suggests that this ability to savor the everyday increases with age. The first poem alludes to the fact that the creators of this collection are no longer young:

> How one old tire leans up against
> another, the breath gone out of both. (1)

And a number of poems regretting the passage of time appear at the beginning, like this one:

> All those years
> I had in my pocket.
> I spent them,
> nickel-and-dime. (2)

But more persistently, *Braided Creek* suggests both explicitly and implicitly that aging gives one permission to relish life:

> I'm sixty-two and can drop dead
> At any moment. Thinking this in August
> I kissed the river's cool moving lips. (67)

Kooser and Harrison can look intently outward because the inner turmoil that often afflicts the young seems to have entirely ceased, making some questions no longer seem relevant, like the notion of an identity crisis:

> Come to think of it,
> there's no reason to decide
> who you are. (67)

Instead, Kooser and Harrison assert that their characters were given them at birth and that their long lives have changed them little:

> I was born a baby.
> What has been
> added? (85)

Their genes, not their wills, have shaped their experiences:

In each of my cells Dad and Mom
Are still doing their jobs. As always,
Dad says *yes*, Mom *no*. I split the difference
And feel deep sympathy for my children. (26)

Although both have spent their lives producing art, now, as they look back, they have little confidence in its immortality:

Oh, to write just one poem
that would last as long as that rose
tattooed on her butt! (59)

But they have enormous faith that the process of making art offers one of life's great pleasures:

The imagination's kisses
are a cloud of butterflies. (59)

And they link the making of art to the nature that seems the central source of their enjoyment:

Imagine a gallery
where all the paintings
opened and closed their wings! (68)

Poems that frame moments of observing and enjoying nature far outnumber those about art in *Braided Creek*. Here are three out of over a hundred possible examples:

To prevent leakage,
immerse yourself in clouds and birds,
a jubilant drift downward. (32)

All I want to be
is a thousand blackbirds
bursting from a tree,
seeding the sky. (4)

Peach sky
at sunset,
then (for god's sake)
one leaf across
the big October moon. (66)

Even more important than nature is the redemptive power of a perspective that accepts and enjoys all, including emptiness:

There are mornings
when everything brims with promise,
even my empty cup. (6)

And on those mornings, small events, natural and otherwise, become great pleasures:

A book on the arm of my chair
and the morning before me. (5)

These mornings of quiet contentment come more frequently with age:

Lost: Ambition.
Found: A good book,
an old sweater,
loose shoes. (8)

Death naturally concerns these men, but they see it as simply another part of life:

An uncommon number of us die
on our birthdays. You turn a bend
and abruptly you're back home. (71)

After all, they note, we die all our lives:

Every time I've had a sea change
I thought I was dying.
I probably was. (60)

And, finally, we are just another variety of animal:

The old hen scratches
then looks, scratches then looks.
My life. (60)

Indeed, in some ways, animals surpass us in wisdom:

The rabbit is born
prepared for listening,
the poet just for talk. (9)

So, death restores us to the solidity and wholeness of the natural world:

It's nice to think that when
We're fossils we'll all be in the same

Thin layer of rock. (59)

Finally, for Kooser and Harrison, living well means cultivating openness to whatever each day presents. This means letting go of theories:

> Let go of the mind, the thousand blue
> story fragments we tell ourselves
> each day to keep the world underfoot. (18)

And if we succeed, we achieve daily riches:

> Each time I go outside the world
> is different. This has happened
> all my life. (12)

Thus, *Braided Creek* suggests that when one asks for more than daily graces, one confesses ingratitude and blindness.

In *Segues*, William Stafford and Marvin Bell embrace many concepts similar to those that emerge in *Braided Creek*, especially the wisdom of resting open to what life presents. Marvin Bell most explicitly states this idea in his poem "THE IOWA RIVER" in which he praises the attempt "to be as much of oneself as possible" and the aspiration to own all parts of oneself: "To accept (& complete), rather than revise" (30).

William Stafford responds with the poem "Accepting what Comes," which concludes with these lines:

> Those turns, those dark little trees at the end
> of the road, and the twang when the river appears,
> a sudden long curve braced against
> a horizon too grand for the eye to believe.
>
> Friends, I tell you it's gold, it is better
> than gold, if you learn to accept what you find. (31)

But as Marvin Bell notes in the preface, he and William Stafford have distinct outlooks: "He and I are from different generations, from very different backgrounds, and he moved from the Midwest to the Northwest while I moved from the East to the Midwest. We make our differences in our poems" (xi). And this is true. While Harrison and Kooser consider their poems so thoroughly a product of joint effort that it makes no sense to identify the author of each, Bell and Stafford leave their names off the individual poems in the collection, but a reader can figure out who wrote what, and their perspectives

and poems do differ. Rather than collapsing into a shared point of view, Bell and Stafford react to each other. Marvin Bell makes the process explicit at the start of his poem, "It's." Here, Bell responds to a Stafford poem that begins, "You learn from losers" and then continues to assert Stafford's pacifist stance where "yielding becomes an art" (16). Bell answers:

> Taken me a month to reply to your letter.
> Couldn't figure out why.
> I liked the word "lake" right away.
> I had ideas about "Yes," and
> Fortune-telling. It even appeared to me
> That "No" would not be an answer,
> But what occurs while you
> Are waiting for an answer, maybe
> Even fearing an answer.
>
> But then "losers," "Losers!"
> "Losers" and "Yes" and the "lake."
> I know drowned people...
> That's not it either. (17)

Then Bell talks about seeing a picture of the concentration camps, "Those piled bodies of the losers" and asserts that the sight "taught me nothing" (17). Bell does not react to the sight of his "losers" with "yielding" the way Stafford does, but, instead reports: "Oh, I was more than /just moved; I'd have killed" (17).

Bell's replies to Stafford's poems often present a correction or complication like this. When a Stafford poem talks about how everything he encounters moves him, Bell returns with a poem about running cross country and the difference his physical state makes in what he sees. Persistently, Stafford asserts a more optimistic view of the world than Bell, perhaps, Kooser and Harrison might suggest, because he's a generation older. For instance, after Bell sends a poem about a fire burning everything down, Stafford answers with a poem about the land's earlier beauty entitled "Before It Burned Over" (41).

Although sometimes Bell and Stafford disagree, more often their poems ricochet off each other. Marvin Bell happens to mention the days school closed because of snow in a poem that acknowledges his attraction to odd people and Stafford responds with a poem about snow and school in which he apologizes for not being kinder to those teachers he sensed were unloved.

But Bell and Stafford join Harrison and Kooser in agreeing that the process of poetry matters more than any subsequent rewards. As Bell puts it in the preface to *Segues*, "There are ideas and stories here, but it is the idea and story of the ongoing series that wanted for examples, and welcomes more. We ourselves have written past the covers of this book: the signal of a willingness which lies at the heart of any writing, and which must be cherished or all fall down" (xii).

They also affirm that one does not live well by striving heroically to conquer the environment. William Stafford admits that aging has led him away from this perspective:

> It's not the little trumpeter—
> Secretly myself—trudging miles
> Through the snow and dying after he saves
> The emperor on his big black horse.
>
> It's another story...
> I am a tree and can't move....
> Everything is telling one big story. (3)

Marvin Bell agrees in his responding poem that life has hidden unity, that his past continues to shape his present, that "a ghost will push us." (4).

Presumably because of this shared faith in the past's impact, Stafford and Bell both frequently write about their childhoods, returning to them and leaving the reader and perhaps themselves there, implying that, like Harrison and Kooser, they see little change in themselves even though both men believe that writing —and reading—poetry helps them realize dimensions of themselves, as Stafford puts it in "For an OK Writer," a poem praising the impact of Bell's work on him:

> Other selves crowd forward—they lift
> the old neighborhood call, "We are here
> waiting for you to come out to play."
> These walls become nothing. Only
> artificial glass ever held us inside
> a room. We shatter into that palace
> called outdoors. You open it. You make it happen. (51)

And like Harrison and Kooser, Stafford and Bell validate for each other the centrality of simply paying attention. Bell first asserts it in "Wherever You Are":

> I've heard a few things before
> they were said. It's nothing like the giraffe,
> who says nothing, or the dolphin, who hears
> it all: it's an open ear
> ready for the slightest squeeze of air:
> a cough of vocal muscles tensing,
> a rubbing in the throat, the muscular.
> It's the mutt in me, that's all.
>
> To be "man's best friend" might be
> to listen so well that it needn't be said. (26-27)

William Stafford responds enthusiastically with "Dear Marvin":

> I merge with your message "Wherever
> You Are." I learn what it is like to
> have soft ears that compose whatever comes
> into a symphony to hear as a silver
> sound the whole imminent world.
> You wake up my instinct for puppyhood
> and bring that summer bubble around me:
> forgiveness everywhere, a yearning, a grace
> coming out of awkwardness to capture
> us, a touch from the beginning of things. (28)

He concludes his response with these lines:

> For awhile, reading your lines, I ran
> on your trail so well I could never be lost.
> And sometimes when you turned I was already
> there, your very best friend.
> —Bill. (28)

These books seem examples of Midwestern modesty at its best: four distinguished poets who love making art so much that they write poems to each other until they have enough for two books that, in different ways, demonstrate and articulate the pleasures of sharing the news, or lack of it, with a friend.

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