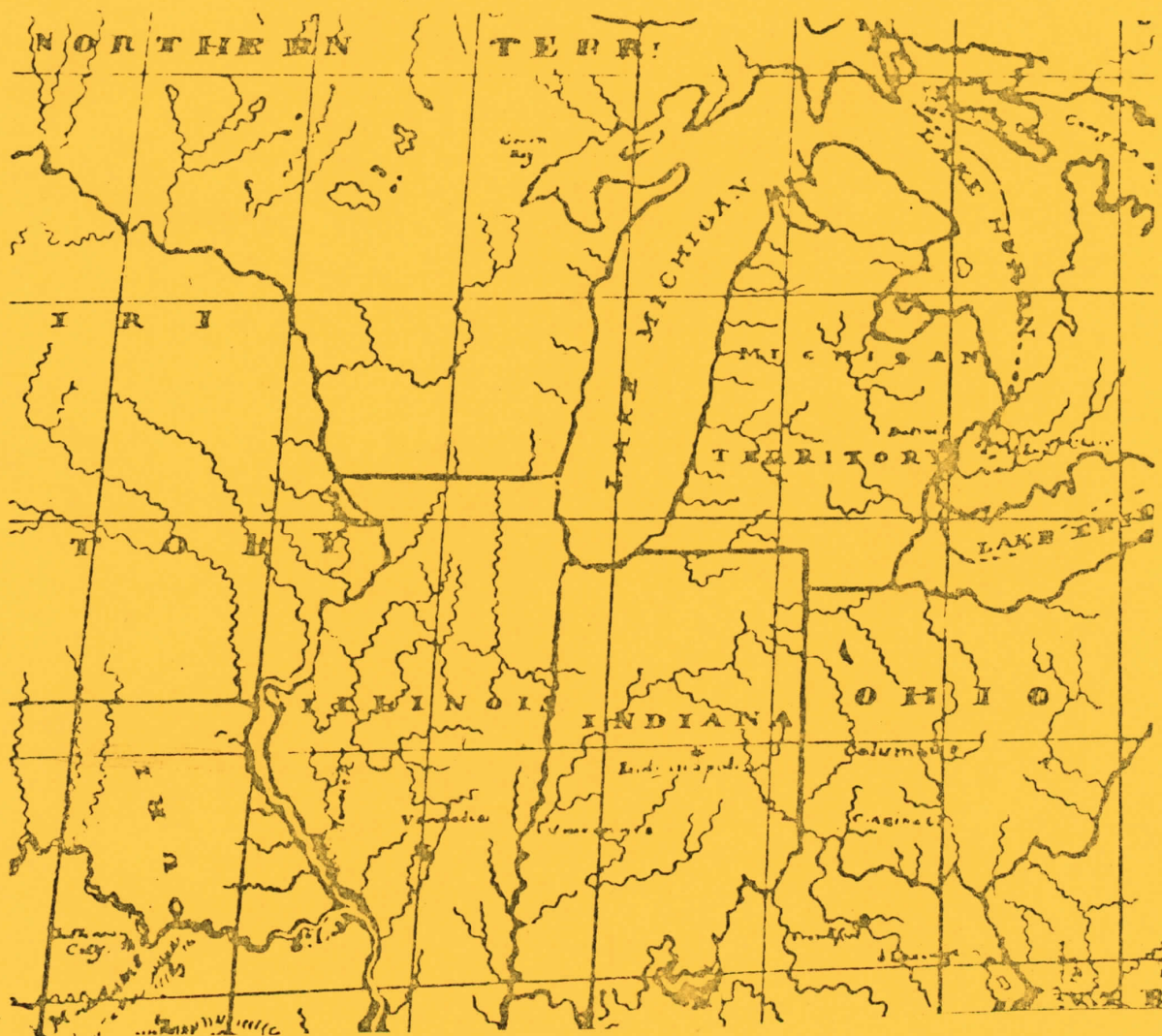


5-13-85

SML Newsletter



The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature

The Center for the Study of
Midwestern Literature and Culture

Founded 1971

Volume Fourteen,
Number Three
Fall, 1984

Society for the Study of
Midwestern Literature
Newsletter

Volume Fourteen, Number Three

Fall, 1984

Published at Michigan State University with the support of the Department of
American Thought and Language

Editorial Office:

Ernst Bessey Hall
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824

Editor:

David D. Anderson

Associate Editors:

Marilyn J. Atlas
Roger J. Bresnahan

Editorial Assistants:

Joan Brunette
Barbara Crutcher
Anita Kelly

Copyright 1984 by the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature.

Published in Spring, Summer, Fall.

Society for the Study of
Midwestern Literature
Officers, 1984-85

President:	Ronald Primeau Central Michigan University
Vice President:	Mary Jean DeMarr Indiana State University
Executive Secretary/Treasurer:	David D. Anderson Michigan State University
Secretary:	Roger J. Bresnahan Michigan State University

Executive Council

Expires 1987:	Marilyn J. Atlas Ohio University
	Roger J. Bresnahan Michigan State University
Expires 1986:	Ellen S. Uffen Michigan State University
	Gene H. Dent Lakeland Community College
Expires 1985:	Pauline Adams Michigan State University
	Douglas Wixson University of Missouri/ROLLA
Bibliographers:	Donald Pady Iowa State University
	Robert Beasecker Grand Valley State Colleges

Society for the Study of
Midwestern Literature
Newsletter

Volume Fourteen, Number Three

Fall, 1984

Contents

A voice from the Thirties (V): An interview with Gilbert Wilson	Philip L. Gerber	1
A Voice from the Thirties (VI): An Interview with Gilbert Wilson	Philip L. Gerber	16
Sherwood Anderson, Letter-Writer	David D. Anderson	34
Harry Houdini in the Midwest	Thomas P. Linkfield	41

A Voice from the Thirties (V)
An Interview with Gilbert Wilson

Philip L. Gerber

This is the fifth of six interviews with Gilbert Wilson, painter and writer. In previous interviews he spoke of his experiences with Art Young and Diego Rivera, and reminisced about his boyhood in Terre Haute, Indiana. Other topics of concern have included: his early experiences as a painter; his connections with personalities such as Theodore Dreiser, Rockwell Kent, and Sherwood Anderson; his interest in adapting Melville's Moby Dick for the stage as a music-drama; and his tribulations as a mural painter during the 1930s. The present interview begins with Wilson's further remarks concerning the merits of Moby Dick.

Gerber: This morning we are going to talk about how you became interested in F.O. Matthiessen's work in connection with Moby Dick.

Wilson: Yes, well, everywhere I went I was searching for something on Moby Dick and Melville, and in American Renaissance, a very big book by F.O. Matthiessen, he has a chapter on Melville which intrigued me very much. Especially with my radicalization of viewpoint about art, I was glad to find this quote from Matthiessen: "Melville created in Ahab's tragedy a fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism that, carried to its furthest extreme, brings disaster both upon itself and upon the group of which it is a part." In other words, Ahab was really a symbol of that quality in America which is individualism; but I believe there is a point at which it becomes almost egocentric. One man can get into power, almost like Hitler did, and can really take the whole shebang down with him. Ahab is in that position, in a way, with his microcosm of the Pequod, which was not only a symbol of America, with its amalgamation of races, but a microcosm of the world, which is of all nations and nationalities. If one faction gets into

control of that, it can eventually destroy not only itself but the society of which it is a part. This essentially is what I was trying to say in Moby Dick as a music-drama, The White Whale.

The elemental energy in the atom or in the nucleus is really the secret of all sustaining life. It's getting energy almost direct from the sun. The power that is in the atom is equivalent to the nucleus of the sun in relation to our planets. It's just an approach to universal energy. And if we don't approach the atom with intelligence and with love, it will simply destroy us, because that's the nature of the whole idea. Nature will not tolerate stupidity. So far, I'm afraid that on our planet we're being very stupid about our survival. We may just ruin the planet to the point where life will not be able to go on. I'm sure it will go on elsewhere in the universe, but our planet, the earth, is really on probation. We, as the human beings of this planet, may have to face up to our own ignorance, which can destroy us.

I was so impressed with Mattheissen's evaluation of Moby Dick and its meaning that I wrote him a letter. He was at Harvard, teaching. I asked him if I could come and show him my drawings and talk to him about making a music-drama of Moby Dick. He admitted that he knew very little about music although he had an appreciation of it. He couldn't help me on the music side of the thing but he certainly was interested in Moby Dick and Melville, and any artist who approaches that combination he felt would interest him. I had very friendly letters from him for quite some time in relation to paying him a visit, but I never got around to it. I was always backward about meeting people face to face. I could easily write a letter and get on friendly terms with them, but

when the idea came of going in their presence and talking to them, I always felt insecure.

I even sent Matthissen a drawing; I cemented the friendship with this drawing of Ahab. He liked it very much and praised my work and said he was looking forward to seeing me. But after a few years of our correspondence, I was sorry one day to learn that he had committed suicide. Naturally, when you have a friendship with someone, you wonder. I was worried that maybe I had let him down in some way. I knew from what I had read that he had been anticipating this act of suicide for quite some time. He had willed his books and personal belongings and what money he had to various individuals and had really planned this. I attended a memorial ceremony in New York with George Braziller, the book publisher, and several other outstanding individuals.

I learned that Mattheissen must have been a lonely man. To stand on a window ledge on a five-story building in a courtyard in the dark and to just let go, fall down into that, kill yourself! It left me with very uneasy feelings. I regretted that I hadn't pursued the friendship more vigorously. Not that I had anything to do with the suicide, but it was just that things might have been different if people had been more friendly. Especially when any person goes into the study of Melville and Moby Dick. Van Wyck Brooks pointed out to me that the book has a way of getting into your inner being and turning around in there and really disturbing you: it's dangerous.

Brooks pointed out that two of his friends--he didn't mention who they were--had come to bad ends from staying too long in the "honey head" of Moby Dick. We know that when the head is cut off the whale and hangs

on the side of the ship, they put what is called the sperm-bucket down into that cavity of the head, the brain, and there they get the finest oil, used particularly for the lubrication of watches and fine machinery. At one point in the story of Moby Dick, Tashtego slips in the greasy process of getting the oil out of the whale and falls head-first into this honey-well, as they call it. Just at that same time, with the added weight of his body, the head broke the tackle and the whole thing fell into the sea and started to sink. Queequeg with ever-ready prowess dove in and with his knife cut into the head down where Tashtego was. It's interesting how Melville describes him getting hold of a leg first. As everyone knows, if a child is born feet-first, it's a difficult birth, a breech birth, very bad for the child. So he pushes the foot back and turns the body around and gets a hold of Tashtego's head, and pulls him out. Gives him a second birth there beneath the water. I can't say that Mattheissen studied too long about Moby Dick, but he certainly was a scholar who went into things with full force, and his American Renaissance reveals that he had a very deep feeling for Melville and his story.

Gerber: I take it that your reading this quotation from American Renaissance regarding individualism means you would agree that in any conflict between the two, the group must take precedence over the individual; is that right?

Wilson: It's a very subtle kind of thing. There is a need for leadership, oftentimes and always, but that leadership has to have a purity of motive and must not dominate the group of which it is a part. In my study of Esoterics, the so-called masters of the wisdom remained

completely anonymous. They act through their subordinates. It's comparable to big business. If you get something wrong with your telephone, you can not call in to the president of AT & T and say, "Look, my telephone is in trouble." You have to go to someone beneath him, someone who has got the time to spend with you. It's the same way with leadership of nations; it has to be a beneficent relationship and never encroach upon the individualism of the people in the group.

Gerber: This question became quite important during the Thirties, a time when the emphasis upon the group came in strongly after--and maybe as a reaction to--the individualistic Twenties. I note that a number of the things you have worked on have to do with group action. Your murals always involve people working together. And your little film on the Hue-mans that you showed us last night has to do with groups. So I was interested that you would select this particular quotation from American Renaissance. It also has to do with the dangers of unbridled individualism.

Wilson: We have a perfect example of leadership gone wrong in the Guyana incident at Jonestown, where mass suicides came about through the influence of one individual, the leader. Hitler also is a perfect example. In Indiana, my home state, during the Thirties, Governor McNutt brought about martial law in my home town of Terre Haute. We had martial law for three days. It was illegal for three people to congregate together on the street. Two people could stand and talk, but if a third joined them they could be arrested. This was considered to be a crowd.

This was in 1934 and 1935, when I was doing murals at Terre Haute.

5

Investigating the problem of civil rights, they found that Sullivan County, about thirty miles away, had had martial law declared and never lifted for three years. In Terre Haute, when this professor friend of mine wanted to go down a certain street, a martial-law boy with his rifle said, "Sorry, sir, but you can't come down this street." And the professor said, "I'm going down this street. I've done it for the last fifteen years and I'm going down it again, to the school where I work." The fellow just put a bayonet to his stomach and called the rest of them and said, "Take this man to jail."

When I was doing the murals at Woodrow Wilson High School, the first I'd ever done, the city was being cruised by these great army trucks with men with machine guns. It was a general strike. Every industry and every store and every business in Terre Haute was closed. For three days we had really a very touchy situation. Earl Browder came to town and they arrested him as a vagrant because he didn't have very much money in his pocket. The socialist leader Norman Thomas came to town and tried to speak; they tried to prevent that. I believe there was a fellow named Powers Hapgood, who also was a socialist, came over from Indianapolis and spoke on the courthouse steps. He drew a little crowd, and so they arrested him. But Norman Thomas was too much of a national figure. They didn't dare jail him.

All the papers were writing about Terre Haute. I've seen my home town on the front magazine section of current periodicals three times. One of them was a big gambling thing that existed in Terre Haute, racehorse gambling. The next one was prostitution; it was called the Sin City of Terre Haute. And then the third time was a feature in Life magazine when the city had its general strike. I come out of a rather disturbed

background so far as a citizen is concerned. I stand with Debs and Dreiser, who were the two other outstanding individuals that came from Terre Haute.

Gerber: May we talk about Dreiser for a minute? I know you've gone over your connection with him many times, but I'm interested in having your analysis of what it is that drew you toward him.

Wilson: I'm sure that one day during the Thirties Time reviewed the book of Theodore Dreiser called Dawn, about his early life and his coming from Terre Haute. I was in my twenties, I guess, just out of high school, and I realized that here was a great man, born in my home town, whom I never knew anything about. Never in my study had anyone brought up the name of Theodore Dreiser. I felt resentful that here was an outstanding world figure, and my education had never touched him. So I went to the library to try to get a copy of Dawn, and all of Dreiser's books were "on reserve." That sounded funny; I thought maybe they were so valuable that they kept them on reserve, but I found out that they were considered dirty books, and they were not easily drawn out from the library. You had to sign for them.

I began reading about Dreiser's work. Eventually I had the chance to go to New York and to the Writers Congress. I'd had this trouble with my murals in Woodrow Wilson Junior High School and this had been written up in The New Republic.¹ Therefore I was asked to come to read a paper on my work at the Artists Congress, in 1936. I had made the point of looking up Theodore Dreiser, found he lived in New York City on East Tenth Street, right off Fifth Avenue, and so I wrote a letter asking if I could come and visit him and make some sketches for a portrait.

¹ "Art and Terre Haute," The New Republic, September 4, 1935, p. 91.

I wanted my "Mural Song of the Midwest" to include people like Debs and Art Young and Dreiser, anyone of great significance in the literary fields. I wanted to do a mural that would surround their heads with various expressions of their work. I asked Dreiser to give me a run-down of the characters in his books which he felt were most typical of his writing, and he did, about ten or twelve individuals, one being his brother Paul. Terre Haute would celebrate Paul, but they wouldn't celebrate Theodore. So I didn't get far with the "Mural Song of the Midwest." I still have that to do, somewhere, I suppose. But I did do my portrait of Dreiser.

Gerber: What kept you interested in Dreiser beyond the hope of getting his picture into a mural?

Wilson: I was finding murals more and more difficult to do--to get a chance to do. So I turned to writing, and I began writing about people in my home town who had influenced my life. I decided to call this group of stories High Earth, which is a translation of Terre Haute, French meaning high ground. I wanted to pattern this book after Dreiser's Twelve Men, which is a series of short character sketches about people he knew, and also Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, a series of short stories with one central character running through them; that character was a young newspaperman who was really Sherwood Anderson. I had about ten or twelve of these stories roughed out, and I asked Dreiser if he would let me send him this manuscript. He was more than gracious, saying, "Yes, I'll be glad to look at it; at least have it all typed up so that I won't have to struggle with someone's handwriting."

I was so lifted by this promise to look at my work that, again, I hesitated to take it to him because I wanted to continue polishing it, doing it better. He said, "I hope that you can write as well as paint, because I think that you would turn out an arresting volume." I'm sure that to me those words from Dreiser were pretty much like Emerson's praise of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: "I greet you on the threshold of a great career."

Gerber: Do you recall when you first met Dreiser?

Wilson: It was at the Artists Congress. When they learned that I was friendly with him and had some correspondence with him, they asked me if I would get Dreiser to come to the Artists Congress, which was held in one of the big meeting halls in New York City back in '36. So I called him on the phone and spoke to a secretary and she finally put Dreiser on the phone. I had that shaky feeling. This glass of water in front of me is always a symbol of my tight throat, which somehow just thickens up when I have an important word to say to someone. In talking to Dreiser I asked him if he would let us be honored with his presence there. He said, "I'll come to the meeting but I'll sit in the audience, not on the stage, if you don't mind." So we agreed to that, and he allowed me to announce his presence at the meeting, and when I read my paper I had him stand up and introduced him. Naturally, the applause was tremendous, because Dreiser had been very instrumental two years before in getting the Writers Congress established, which was a part of the League Against War and Fascism of that time.

Gerber: And you had other personal connections with Dreiser?

Wilson: Yes, a friend of mine was an assistant photographer for Time Magazine and naturally, now knowing Dreiser, I asked this photographer one day if he would like to take some pictures of Theodore Dreiser. Of course he jumped at the chance. Color photography was just coming in at that time; it was a very laborious process to get lighting set up, and I really stuck my neck out because when the photographer appeared he had three assistants and all of them had big cables and lights and cameras. Dreiser was almost overwhelmed. But I found him very agreeable. This was my first contact with him, in his presence, and I was amazed at how lighthearted he was. His smile, his friendly personality was so different from what I had imagined he would be like. An American Tragedy and Sister Carrie being such dark, dark books gave me the feeling that he would be an old grouch, someone who might "look the part" of being the author of grim books.

My desire to do Dreiser's portrait was frustrated by my finding him a very different personality in this first meeting, different from what I had imagined from reading his books. I'll agree with his niece;² she says, "Your portrait of Dreiser that I saw at Terre Haute that time offended me. I never saw that kind of quality in my uncle." I tried to explain about an artist when he does a portrait. I don't know who the author was, but a quotation says, "As when a painter poring on a face divinely through all hindrance finds the man behind it, and so paints that the form and color of a mind and life lives for those after him, ever at its best." You go beyond the surface of the face. You try to express some of the inner quality of the man. This is what I have tried to do with my mural portrait of Dreiser, to get that grim,

²Dr. Vera Dreiser, niece of the novelist and author of the biography My Uncle Theodore (1976).

powerful determination of his, to get at the facts and bring them out regardless of how devastating they are, to face up to the inner qualities of our whole society.

Gerber: What happened to those photographs?

Wilson: I tried to reach that man later, his name was Leigh Irwin. I wrote to a contact I had in New York, and he looked in the phone book, but there was no indication that Irwin was still in New York. I have no way of knowing. I never saw any of the photographs published. I told Dreiser when I was getting them made, "This is a photographer for Time magazine, and these may be used on the cover of Time." He said, "Oh Yeah?" as if he was very dubious about getting on that cover.

Gerber: Were you with him at Woods Hole and places like that?

Wilson: No. A letter of mine was forwarded to him there, and he wrote me from there. I immediately wrote and asked if I could come to Woods Hole. He had praised it so highly as a little commune where they worked on vegetables in the early morning and then in the afternoon worked on their own things. They were very advanced and celebrated scientists who were trying to bring their work forward individually and not have to turn it over to big industry. I understand that many an important scientific experiment will be brought forth, for instance, shoes which will not wear out, or tires or razor blades, and these will be brought up and put under the table and not sold. Because there is no profit in them. What manufacturer wants a pair of shoes that will last forever? They're not going to sell anything like that; they want you to wear it out so they can sell you a new one. These men at Woods Hole were

working on various things that did not have to be financed through big industry or government. Dreiser spoke of this nucleus of marvelous integrity that mankind can have. The scientist can have as rough a time as the artist, as when Pasteur went up against the College of Surgeons with his ideas about germs, and they said, "You're just a chemist, get out of here." So Pasteurization was put off for a number of years.

Gerber: When were you acquainted with Marguerite Tjader Harris?

Wilson: I met her through my friendship with Art Young. She was Dreiser's secretary for many years and was working with him on The Bulwark, I believe, and also his Notes on Life. She was a wealthy woman who had a little magazine called Direction. She published it personally; it had no advertising. She came to see Art Young about using some of his drawings. I was there with Art. That was in Danbury, Connecticut. Art said, "Gilbert here is helping me on my autobiography and typing up things. Why not let him write something about the drawings and pick out the ones you want and pay him for his services?"

I had to go down to Bethel, Connecticut, which was five or so miles on the bus and another mile at the end of the bus line out to his farm. There I'd go over his drawings and find out what I wanted. So we published about four or five different articles during the course of several months. I would get paid thirty or forty dollars for these. It was helpful to me at that time because, like all artists, I was broke much of the time. It was a matter of hand-to-mouth existence. I met Marguerite subsequently several times, and again at the Dreiser Centennial, which was held in Terre Haute several years ago. She was

very friendly to me. We went to lunch and she introduced me to this Dr. Zassoursky, the head of the journalism department at Moscow University. He spoke fluent English. Here was my chance, I hoped, to establish a contact with Shostakovitch, whom I was always pursuing, trying to get him to do something about the score for The White Whale.

Gerber: Marguerite seems always to have been faithful to Dreiser and his work and helping him.

Wilson: Very much. I wanted to send her that story of Ruth which we were laughing about the other day. I wondered if Marguerite Harris had ever been one of Dreiser's many women. He used her as a secretary, I know, and she was very devoted to him and his work. I understand she was chiefly responsible for the manuscript of The Bulwark finally getting published, because it laid for years in Dreiser's desk without his coming to grips with it. If it hadn't been for her, we might not have the book. Certainly we wouldn't have the Notes On Life, which she published herself.

Gerber: What is it about the Notes on Life that attracts you?

Wilson: I was absolutely amazed at Dreiser's command of scientific interest and his knowledge of science, since it never seems to appear in his books. But in his Notes on Life he is dealing with tremendous and complicated problems, like Einstein almost. Dreiser speaks time and time again of the island universes. He was interested in the energy of the universes. He was interested in the energy of the universe and the power of nature and all kinds of development. I'm sure that when he was at Woods Hole

he was able to talk with these men on a very high level of knowledge. For a man as uneducated as I believe Dreiser was, he had a certain background of reading, surely, and study that was never used in his books. I was flabbergasted with entries in his journalism--the Notes on Life--how far-reaching they were in their appreciation of the way divine forces are operating. Dreiser had a very deeply religious, though unorthodox, belief which was quite astounding. People have thought of him as being an old radical Socialist or Communist, a person who would not believe in divinity. But I believe Dreiser had a great grasp and a broad expanse of veneration for--not necessarily an anthropomorphic god, a religious kind of god, but certainly a respect for the forces of the elements.

Gerber: After Dreiser died, Helen wrote that she had located manuscripts for the Notes that, if stacked atop one another, would reach to the ceiling of her living room. The printed volume which Marguerite did was very much a cut version.

Wilson: I refer again to my study of Esoterics. I suppose you could call that my religion--it's a kind of theosophy. I understand there are these several masters of the wisdom, there must be about twenty of them all told, and they're in all phases of life. They at one time had a one-to-one relationship with their disciples but now they only operate through groups. I happened to belong to an international group--group ten, which is cultural creativity, the group for the artists. We correspond through a single leader who merely takes portions of letters from the various members and puts them into a paper and sends them back out to the group as a whole. They're located all over the world. I suppose

there's twenty or thirty individuals. I've never met any of them, but I've corresponded with the woman who is head of our group. This seems to be the thing you stress now, more than anything, the group. The individual is fading out. It's a very difficult thing to balance the two inclinations, belonging to a group and going your own separate way.

Gerber: You're pretty unorthodox in suggesting that you admire Dreiser for the quality of his ideas, because he's often scorned as a thinker. In fact, he didn't have much respect for himself in that regard, at least publicly. The Notes didn't appear in his lifetime, of course.

Wilson: I think he underestimated himself, if that is true. I believe these Notes are authentic, I don't think that Dreiser copied them from anyone. They're difficult to read, many times, and the whole scope of the book is pretty much the same; I mean he doesn't seem to run into variety of interest as a keeper of a journal. Yet, time and time again I read in awe of his use of the language of science. I've done quite a bit of study on my own of scientific things, especially psychiatry and psychology, but I couldn't begin to write some of these Notes. They are surprising in their brilliance. I don't know what a scientist would think about them; he might pull them to pieces. But Dreiser had a mind. I don't think he was lacking there, and anyone who claims he is is rather short-sighted.

A Voice from the Thirties (VI)
An Interview with Gilbert Wilson
Philip L. Gerber

This is the last of six interviews with Gilbert Wilson, painter and writer. In previous interviews he spoke of his experiences with Art Young and Deigo Rivera, and reminisced about his boyhood in Terre Haute, Indiana. Other topics of concern have included: his early experiences as a painter; his connections with personalities such as Theodore Dreiser, Rockwell Kent, Sherwood Anderson, and F. O. Matthiessen; his interest in adapting Melville's Moby Dick for the stage as a music-drama; and his tribulations as a mural painter during the 1930s. The present interview begins with Wilson's further remarks concerning his friendship with Sherwood Anderson.

Gerber: Shouldn't we speak further of your connection with Sherwood Anderson? How did you manage to become acquainted with him?

Wilson: It took two approaches. I had written him when I visited California one time; I learned from friends out there that Sherwood Anderson had been on the coast just a few weeks before; it was a little theater group, and he had talked to them. I had read a story of his in a

magazine. It was about a milling town, girls falling in love with their machines. Of all things, they would lean up against these machines and get their kicks out of the machines and then the boys couldn't have anything to do with them. It was an interesting story from the standpoint of how man's machine and his machine world possessed him. I can't recall the title, but the story intrigued me.

Anderson had been in California just two weeks before, so I wrote to him in care of this group; I thought they would forward the letter. Evidently they didn't, because I never heard from him. This must be in 1930 or '31, and it was not until 1934 or '35 that I finally wrote him again, and this time I seemed to contact him, because he answered. I was again approaching him on writing. I wanted him to look at some of my "Stories of High Earth." He responded and said, "Sure, I'll look at them, and I may steal from them." That was flattering as the dickens to me--the thought that I could give Sherwood Anderson an idea. So when I had this friendly response, I began corresponding with him and found him readily willing to answer.

I learned that he used his correspondence as a kind of warming up for his day's writing. He really welcomed having someone to write to. Many times his letters were much like his narration in his stories. I had long letters from him. He would take this foolscap paper, which is yellow and lined, and put it in his typewriter; it's very cheap paper, and he would hit the damn keys so hard that they cut right into the paper. The pages were cut in patterns almost like a lace valentine. He'd type clear out to the edge of the margins and from the top of the page clear to the bottom. He said he typed with one finger or two

fingers, something like that. You could certainly tell his letters because of the way they were cut out of the stationery.

Gerber: He put a lot into them, physically as well as mentally!

Wilson: But some of his letters were handwritten. I often find that I have to use my own handwriting in writing a letter, and I hate to do it, because I know people can't read it; it's not legible at all, it's lettering instead of writing, and the letters are all strung together. Sherwood Anderson's writing was like that. In a few cases he would write in his own handwriting, and I would have to take each line of his letter separately and write my own interpretation of what the words were in order to get the sense of the letter. Sometimes I was absolutely lost as to what to make out of a word. The people at Chicago who have Sherwood Anderson's letters and papers, at some library--

Gerber: The Newberry?

Wilson: Yes, Newberry Library. They asked to have his letters one time. I had about ten or fifteen I suppose, and they put them on microfilm. I know they must have been buffaloed by the letters which had both his handwriting and mine on them. But that's the only way I could interpret his handwriting, was by carefully putting my own writing underneath to decipher it. Finally, when I was at Antioch, doing the murals there for the class of 1938, during 1939 and '40--I was living on the campus at Antioch College in Yellow Spring^S, Ohio--I told the people there that I knew Sherwood Anderson and that, since he was an Ohio man, it might be a nice thing for them to invite him

for a lecture period, to spend two or three days on the campus. They had a lecture service which allowed them to go up to one thousand dollars to have an important man come. So Sherwood Anderson got a thousand dollars for coming for three days. He was somewhat taken with my murals. I had one panel done and part of another. There were to be three panels, but the war had come along and I was disturbed, because I knew I was eligible for the draft, and I didn't want to go. I wouldn't have anything to do with the war. My feelings about the mural were such that I couldn't do the third panel in my upset state of mind.

Anderson was driving an old car back to New York. He'd been to Olivet, Michigan, and had spent some time there. So he spent these three days at Antioch, talking to the students and looking at my work, and so when the time came for him to do, I asked him if I could ride back to New York with him. It would be a chance to see Art Young again and get the mural out of my mind so that I could come to grips with it. He was tickled to death to have me go along with him in the car, because he was driving alone. He talked all the time he was driving; he really enjoyed unloading himself. I was asking all kinds of questions about Winesburg, Ohio; I had become intrigued by the fact that almost every story in Winesburg mentions the rain. It rains in almost every story. I had underlined all those passages. He was surprised, himself, to find that rain was such a symbol in his work. In the little portrait that I had made of him, a sketch, I had it raining in the background. I thought of Winesburg in terms of rain. I would read him a passage about the rain, and he would guess which story it came from. Only once or twice did he miss.

We got back to New York and he took me to dinner with his wife and a whole bunch of friends down in the Jewish section. I'd never had Jewish food before, Kosher food, and I was scared because I didn't have any money in my pocket, and I didn't know whether I was being taken along as a guest or whether everyone would pay their own way, like artists generally do, go dutch. But he was very good about taking my check and telling me to eat up, because I was ordering very lightly. I was very hungry, but I didn't want to get in too deep and not have any--

Gerber: You didn't want to wash dishes?

Wilson: That's right. Then I asked Anderson to let me make some sketches, so he invited me to come to Washington Mews, which I thought was Washington News. I had never heard of a Mews, so I was asking people where was Washington News. I thought it was a journal or newspaper. So finally they said, "Are you sure that isn't Washington Mews? That's up the street to your left." So I went in this little alleyway and here's this old stablehouse made into the most beautiful apartment you ever saw. He was visiting there with some wealthy woman and a maid let me in. I sat down, and my feet were all slushy and muddy and my coat was really wet from the snow. The snowflakes must have been two inches in diameter, the kind that hit your face and stick there. In came Anderson, right through the room, didn't even see me. I stood up, but I was in a dark place, and he walked right past me. He had to make a few phone calls, and he had this long scarf around his neck; I'll bet it hung to his knees, both sides of it. I got to sit with him there, and talk, and later, that evening we went to eat Italian food. That seemed to be a favorite of his; he liked foods that were un-American.

This woman who lived at Washington Mews must have been very wealthy. She was going to give a cocktail party, with the money from the proceeds to go to Spain; this was when the Franco War was on. She was trying out her drinks on us to see how weak she could make them and still keep us satisfied. We were guinea pigs for her martinis! She set a big pitcher of them in front of us. So there I was, making Anderson's sketch, and him sitting there, both of us talking. I told him not to worry about posing because I liked animation in the face, and just to go ahead talking. I was drinking away; I'm sure it was not the drinks that were getting me, because he was laughing at them. He said, "This is undoubtedly the wettest martini I have ever had." I was telling him that I liked the portrait which Alfred Steiglitz had made of him. The hair was down over his forehead; he looked something like a chubby grocer, not like a literary man at all. It seems I hurt his feelings by telling him that I felt there was this something in the picture that Steiglitz had made and which I didn't find in him today. His head sank down and he didn't talk, kept drinking away at his martini, twisting the glass around. I knew that he had something on his mind. I stopped drawing. I couldn't go on. His face was in shadow. I was silent too, and you know how those silences can get to the point where you don't know what to do. So I said, "Have I said something wrong, or hurt your feelings?" He said, "You know, you're the second man inside of the last few weeks that has come up to me and fired point-blank in my face. The other fellow I have to respect--I don't know you, because you're a stranger to me, practically--but the other fellow was Thomas Wolfe. Wolfe told me that I was washed up, that I was woman-crazy and that I'd better get myself straightened out if I'm going to be a writer any more."

Here you come along and say that Steiglitz' portrait has more in its face--a photograph which was taken twenty years ago--than I have today." It nearly broke his heart. I saw that I had hurt his feelings. And the silence still extended itself after he had said that. I said, "Do you want me to go?" I had already taken the portrait and torn it up, which in itself was a kind of insult.. What I meant by it was that I wasn't getting what I wanted in the sketch. So I asked if I should go. He said, "If you want to," and so I got up and left.

Can you imagine having a friendship start off with such a blank blow like that? I wrote him a letter then, and put a great effort into apologizing about the situation. He wrote back, saying, "I really feel that when I first met you, you were a young, arrogant kid who wants to take pot shots at a man who has made his mark. Now I see that you are honest and not that way at all." It really made me feel good to get off the hook, because I felt I had ruined the friendship. From then on we exchanged letters for six or seven years. He was always prompt about answering, and he seemed to thoroughly respect my friendship. I was pleased to find at least three or four of his letters to me in his published book of letters.¹ When he told me that he would read my "High Earth" stories, I sent that letter to Dreiser and apologized for putting him second in line, as I had already offered the stories to Anderson.

Both men seemed to feel that I should try to put the stories into book form and become a writer, although Anderson discouraged me from being both a writer and a painter. He said, "I tried to paint when I was young,

¹See Letters of Sherwood Anderson, Howard Mumford Jones and Walter B. Rideout, eds. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953, pp. 249, 250.

and I finally had to give up painting. My brother² paints and has made a career of it, but I took to writing and cut off the painting. That's the best advice I can give you." I've never taken it. I may still not be a writer; I don't know.

Gerber: What was it you so admired about Anderson?

Wilson: He was from the Middle West, having been born and raised in Clyde, Ohio, and that made him eligible for my Mural Song of the Midwest. I suppose that as much as anything was my reason for writing him, just as it was for Dreiser and William Allen White and others.

Gerber: Why a Mural Song of the Midwest? Why select that area?

Wilson: Does that seem provincial?

Gerber: No. I was only curious about your aim.

Wilson: There were a group of artists in New York, also in the West, who were well known. I was circumscribing my community. No one had really come out of the Middle West, to celebrate it. I was saying, "Let the Eastern artists have their group and let the Western have theirs, and we'll have one in the Middle West. I suppose, in a way, it was cliqueish. I found that there were more people of Middle-West origin; I was surprised to find that Robert Penn Warren was born in Kentucky. We had a great many celebrities from that area. No one thinks of Dreiser as being from Terre Haute, Indiana; you have to be a scholar to know that. I think the Middle West is neglected by not being very cognizant of its creative people. I suppose that's what I was trying to do, bring that fact into focus.

²Karl Anderson, painter and illustrator.

Gerber: What about a painter such as Grant Wood? Would you consider him as belonging within your circumference?

Wilson: I admired him very much. He was a jurymen at the Hoosier Salon, which gave a prize to my work. In fact, it was the Eug enics picture, which we were looking at up in the studio. It was supposed to have been the outstanding work in the exhibition, according to Grant Wood; he put it first. It finally went to about third place, because the rest of the jurymen felt that they could not give first prize to the Eugenics picture, which is the seamy side of life, when the Hoosier Salon was noted for its landscapes and its zinnia paintings and its still lifes. To have this fellow come in and take the prize with this ugly picture of the slime and grime of a society--the sponsors might cut off their prize money.

So my picture, which Grant Wood had praised very highly, didn't win. He wrote to me after the show, saying he was sorry it didn't get first prize, but that he would like for me to come out to his home in Iowa and help him with his students to do a mural. He knew I was a mural painter, and this Eugenics picture was really a design for a mural. He invited me to live with him and be supported for a time while we did a mural, somewhere in Iowa. I corresponded with him for a time; the reason I didn't go was that I had a chance to do a mural in Lake Wawasee, Indiana. It was the summer home for the Hoosier Salon, a big summer resort, and I had these walls to paint, two huge panels on either side of the stage, and I had it all visualized that when the curtain opened on the stage it would cover the mural so that you saw what was on the stage; then, when the curtains closed, the mural would be revealed. "I've always felt that murals should not be in a place where you have

to look at them. You should be able to go in there and stay as long as you want and look at them, but if you have to sit in the presence of murals, it's like someone lecturing to you all the time. The same with music. You can't stand having just the music all the time. For instance, Orozco's mural in the New School for Social Research in New York is in the dining room. I think they made it the dining room after he painted the murals. They're obtrusive. To have to sit there looking at paintings on the wall! It's something like being on a bus and having to listen to rock music all day.

Gerber: You were telling me that your Eugenics painting portrayed "devolution."

Wilson: I was trying to show that with Eugenics we take our finest cattle and horses, our finest bloodlines, and let them produce. The thoroughbreds are carefully guarded, but the plow horses are not. They just breed as they will. Man treats his cattle with such care, and yet his own progeny is many times neglected entirely. Nature is very cruel in subjecting everything to its wildest and rawest strength, and the weak die out; but in our society we take care of the retarded and the moronic, the child who is below standard. We're going to get to the point where we will have to recognize that this is not healthy. There are exceptions, of course, like Steinmetz, who was a cripple, and even Einstein, who was considered below standard in his early days. But biology has so progressed that they can find out in the genes beforehand whether the child is going to be a mongoloid. This is what the picture of my Eugenics mural is about, how the ugly, seamy, diseased part of life is encroaching on the healthy part of life and almost obscuring it.

Gerber: I note that you don't include painters among the men you scheduled to be in the Mural Song of the Midwest.

Wilson: There was one. Eugene Savage was from the Middle West, down in Indiana somewhere, and I would have included him, I'm sure, I worked with him as an apprentice for about a year. He gave me my start in murals. I had wanted to be an illustrator until I met him.

Gerber: Tell me about Steiglitz. You were mentioning an experience you had with him and his wife, Georgia O'Keefe.

Wilson: In going to New York, I sought out the places where art was being exhibited. There was a little gallery called 291 on Madison Avenue. I went in there one day, and there was this old man--well, first there were Georgia O'Keefe's paintings all over the walls--and the old man was a white-haired individual; he lay on a couch in the anteroom back of the gallery. When I passed the door there, he motioned me to come in. I was all alone in the gallery. He introduced himself as Alfred Steiglitz. That made a mark in my mind, because I knew that he was a famous photographer. We got to talking, and he asked me how I liked the paintings. I was rather taken aback. Someone has said that there's the shock of recognition. Many times I've had it. When I first saw Orozco's work I was shocked in just such a way. I thought it was horrible what he was painting, and yet I realized later that it had a great impact, of life itself, and so it was important. That's the way paintings do. Sometimes you don't like them at first. I didn't like Georgia O'Keefe's bones and things like that. I was impressed by the technicality of them. But I wondered why anyone would want to stack a pile of bones on top of

one another and then paint them in the desert. I was trying to be honest in reacting to Steiglitz's inquiry, and even though I stumbled around and told him they were very interesting, I didn't think I understood them. So he invited me back anytime I was free.

I had with me a briefcase of photographs of my murals which I always carried around, like a support--a security blanket. I showed my work to him, and then I started coming in every other day or so. I had a copy of Whitman's Leaves of Grass in the pocket of my corduroy coat, so while he lay there, sometimes with his eyes closed, I read Whitman to him. When I would stop reading, he would open his eyes and say, "Go on." I had thought he was going to sleep.

One day this very smart-looking woman swept into the place. She had an aura of energy about her. I learned that this was Georgia O'Keefe. Steiglitz wanted her to see my work, so he asked me to come home with him that evening and have a cocktail. She was supposed to look at my paintings. I think I have described this in one of those volumes that I gave you of my Post-Mortem Letters to Dreiser. But she attacked me mercilessly because I was trying to use art as a social force and show the way that machinery is becoming a monster and man being dominated by the machine. She claimed that I had no right to paint this way in front of children. You should paint beautifully and positively, not negatively. It was as if she were a doctor throwing me on the table and operating on me without morphine or anything like that. Before I knew it I was crying and swearing. I said, "Damn it all to hell, would you put down the Greek tragedians because they painted the seamy side of life? Medea killing her children?" She didn't have an answer. She went on talking, saying that if you are painting the ugly side of life you have to do it

beautifully. There was a contradiction there that I couldn't see, but this is what she was aiming at, I suppose, in her paintings of bones--which is death and the disintegration of life, but is beautiful. It was not horrible and ugly. That was her contention. I had to respect her, because she was a pretty well-known woman by that time, as a painter, one of the greatest of the woman painters. And Steiglitz, seeing how hurt I was at the attack, took me out of there and down to his place 291 again and started showing me photographs of his work. I remember these Lombardy poplars, he showed me a whole series of them, the way they were when they were young, when they were grown, and finally when they were almost gone, dying out, just a few green leaves on the limbs. He showed me a photograph of some grass; he had taken many photographs of just grass. One in particular I liked so well because it reminded me of Whitman's Leaves of Grass. He said, "One of these days I'll make you a print of it, I promise." But why I never got it, I'll never know. When he died, I understand most of his work went to one of the Negro universities. Georgia O'Keeffe administered the will, and I felt like writing to her. I had no proof of his promise, but I never got the picture of Steiglitz's grass, which would be very valuable.

Gerber: Did I ask how you first became inspired to be a muralist?

Wilson: Eugene Savage had some designs for murals in the Hoosier Salon one year. He had the whole wall of his things, about one-fourth the final size of the murals, designs for a war memorial in Chicago. Because I was an Indiana artist, the head of the Hoosier Salon, who was interested in promoting young artists, said, "Would you like to meet Eugene Savage?"

He is a mural painter and comes into the gallery once in a while."

The gallery was in Chicago, in one of the big stores there. So I promised to come in and meet Savage. He said, "If you're interested in going to Chicago some time"--I was still in the Art Institute in Chicago then--"I'm doing some work there, putting some of these murals on the walls of the war memorial. So if you would like to come and help my assistants, I'll be glad to have you."

I will tell you a little anecdote about my work with Savage. We assistants had on our good clothes, and I was told to go in a room and put on an old pair of coveralls to protect my good clothes. We had gone to lunch, Mr. Savage and two of his assistants and myself. They were about my own age, boys from New York, and I felt strange with them because I heard them talking about lunch. They said, "Did you see how he ate his shrimps, with a spoon, instead of using the little shrimp fork?" I had never had shrimps before. Here I was in the other room; they didn't know I heard this, but I was afraid to pass through their room because I might embarrass them after they had said this about me. So I stayed in the room until I felt they had gone on, and then I came out. I was late getting back to work.

I was intrigued by Savage's work. It was art in a grand sort of symphonic way, compared with the sort of thing that I had wanted to do, which was illustrating stories. I think the seed for me becoming a mural painter was planted by seeing Eugene Savage's work.

Gerber: It was a direction that many painters went at the time. I thought it might have to do with your developing a social sense.

Wilson: The social side of the thing hadn't come in until Savage himself, when I was working with him as an apprentice, would go into New York and take me along with him and send me to the galleries to look at art. There was some by Siqueiros and Orozco and Rivera. He said, "Those are the young men who are going to be the great artists of tomorrow." I saw their work as a social force.

Gerber: What appealed to you about the mural as a form of painting?

Wilson: The mural itself seems to provide the artist with a way of making a public statement, something like putting up a billboard on a public building in full view. It's somehow even more public than publishing your work, because usually you have to buy a copy of a book or magazine to find it. But a mural makes a public declaration. You can't hide it.

I took to working in pastel and chalk because it was a temporary medium. I began to see murals as celebrated posters. I felt that we were in a crisis period, a real changing of our times. I remember my talk to the Artists Congress asked--Why paint on a crumbling wall? That's what is happening today. The life of a building in America on the average is fifty years. So a mural has got to be something that is temporary. It should be "reborn" every decade or so. New ideas continue to come in. Art need not last forever; it should be like a fresh breeze. If we were to let the air we breathe stay the same all the time, we would suffocate. We can suffocate with old art, celebrating the old, established artist and leaving the young one with nowhere to go. He's struggling all the time. He's old before he becomes recognized.

The mural is exposed, isn't it? Open at least to the indoor weather, humidity, temperature, and can't really be protected. Open to wear and

tear of all sorts, to remodeling, and to all the various things that happen to a building. Within that fifty-year lifetime, you may have leaking pipes and the like, so it's not like an easel painting that you could hide away, put in a vault. You really are putting up a kind of billboard.

Gerber: Can a mural ever last longer than fifty years?

Wilson: The Mexican University has put murals on the outside of the buildings, with mosaics and acrylic paints that are able to take the weather, so they are doing something unique and very exciting. I feel it's something that needs to be explored. I've tried to talk with the architects in Terre Haute about trying to bring the artist and the sculptor back into architecture. Right after the Renaissance they both seemed to go their separate ways, and the unity of art as a cultural statement has been hurt. Architects today no longer seem to feel that murals or a sculpture belong, unless it's an abstraction or something that is almost a piece of architecture itself.

Gerber: It seems as if they say the building itself is a work of art and doesn't need anything else.

Wilson: Frank Lloyd Wright established that idea and I've always held it against him. He finally tried to get Orozco to come to Taliesin to be with his community of young architects. Orozco visited the place and spent about one day before saying, "This is not for me, because it's out of this world." It's interesting that several of the architects who have grown up through Taliesin have committed suicide. They came back out into the world and they hated it so much, because they had worked for Wright in

an atmosphere of beautiful music and big beautiful sights and sounds, and then to come out into the world, where realism is the fact, they couldn't take it. They'd been like hothouse flowers; they couldn't grow on their own anymore.

Gerber: I note that Chicago has made some efforts to combine art and architecture. They brought in this big Picasso sculpture, and had somebody do a mural, one of the French artists. They seem to be countering this other trend.

Wilson: I think that's why I've taken to writing. It's easier to write by yourself than to go out and get people to let you paint on the public walls. Usually you have to deal with a group, not with an individual.

Gerber: They're so afraid of what might be put on those walls. It might not be liked by everyone who saw it.

Wilson: Even Michelangelo had people who protested against his work. When he painted "The Last Judgment," this cardinal or someone said it was only fit for a bordello, all those naked figures. He put this figure in the bottom of the mural right above the doorway, with a serpent around his loins and said, "That's for you. Go down in infamy. You came into this world naked and when you die you go out of this world naked." So nudity is not for a bordello.

Gerber: It seems to be one of the givens, with mural painting, that someone is going to object.

Wilson: That's why it's so necessary to write what you honestly believe and not try to play up to public approval.

Sherwood Anderson, Letter-Writer

David D. Anderson

Perhaps the most prolific letter writer of his literary generation and the last that we may see in an age increasingly demanding instant if innocuous electronic communication, Sherwood Anderson left us, in his literary legacy, 28 volumes of fiction, verse, essays, and autobiography published in his own lifetime; hundreds of published but uncollected shorter works from that same period, with new discoveries still being made; and a wealth of material unfinished and unpublished at his death. He has also left us more than 7000 known letters written during his literary lifetime of little more than twenty-five years, beginning at the age of forty, when he became a published author. That number of letters approximates the number of days of his active literary life, and it continues to increase as previously unknown letters turn up.

Of those thousands of letters, most of them in the superb Newberry Library Collection and others in library and private collections across the country, fewer than 1000 have been published. Of them, 401 appear in The Letters of Sherwood Anderson, edited by Howard Mumford Jones with Walter Rideout, a carefully-edited, well-selected collection, published in 1953. Until recently the only readily available chronological assembly of Anderson's letters, the Jones-Rideout volume has recently been joined by an excellent selection of 201 additional letters in Sherwood Anderson: Selected Letters, edited by Charles Modlin (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984). Numerous other letters, some to individuals, including Gertrude Stein, have also appeared in various

1

periodicals and collections.

As the new Modlin collection and earlier publications make vividly clear, the continued interest in Anderson's letters is neither prurient nor the product of a continued scholarly search for facts. Anderson's letters are rarely mundane and almost as rarely reliably factual as they record not the daily life of a literary man nor his literary life but the essence of a man's exploration of what he was later to call "the great adventure."

From the time he learned that he was a writer, as he wrote the stories that were to become Winesburg, Ohio in late 1915, Anderson not only wrote letters almost daily, but at times, as in the long months of 1923-24 that he spent in Reno waiting for Tennessee Mitchell's consent to their divorce, wrote them almost constantly as he reached out of his isolation to those whose lives had meaningfully touched his.

Of all Anderson's letters, the most appealing are those in which he reaches out to others, whether from the Chicago advertising office of Critchfield and Co. as he sought to make his work not only true but known; from the shadows of the mountains in Reno; or from his re-discovered identity in Marion, Virginia, and the rolling hills of Ripshin Farm. During these periods of emotional as well as physical isolation, he demonstrates most clearly the theme that gives unity to his letters as it had to his life and his work.

In the letters from those periods and from other moments of isolation, too, often in the midst of friends, colleagues, family, or other writers, Anderson writes as he has in the best of his fiction, both stylistically and philosophically, as he demonstrates most clearly

the nature of human isolation and alienation and his never-ending attempts to transcend them and find an ultimate, if elusive, human oneness. At the end of the sketch "Sophistication" in Winesburg, Ohio he wrote of George Willard and Helen White: "...they had for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible."² Each of many such intimate moments transcribed to paper with dozens of different letterheads or none, in the attempt to transcend time and space, make up the substance of the bulk of his letters. Each is, to Anderson, to the recipient, to the reader half a century and more later, an attempt to penetrate for a moment--and in his work Anderson makes clear that it can only be done in such moments--the shell that isolated him, as it isolated the people of Winesburg, from the fullest understanding and enjoyment of the totality of life.

At the same time, each of the letters, written with a haste that often results in questionable spelling and dubious punctuation, in a scrawl that demands careful deciphering, is written in the oral idiom and style that Anderson discovered and perfected in writing the Winesburg, Ohio stories and that marked his best work to the end. Anderson's style in his letters as in his work is first rooted in the tradition that had dominated the Midwestern towns and countryside in the years following the Civil War and that he had learned in listening to the stories of his father, Irwin Anderson, former Ohio Volunteer Cavalryman, harnessmaker-craftsman displaced by the new technology, sign painter, book salesman, magic lantern showman, and teller of tales. The model of Windy McPherson in Anderson's first published novel, he was also and truly,

as Anderson learned when he began to understand his own identity and role as a story-teller, an oral artist in a society that no longer had time for art or for craft, or for understanding itself. In his letters, echoes of an earlier and younger America are clear, echoes of an America that had time to reach out, to talk, and to listen, echoes, too, of the voice of the father, transmuted into a higher reality by the son who had, in discovering himself, discovered both his father and an America not yet corrupted and had learned to transmute those discoveries into myth.

Another dimension of Anderson's letters that fascinates their readers then and now is the insight that each gives into the various aspects of the complex personality of the man who wrote them and the equally complex mosaic of his life. Here is Anderson, the young writer, at forty, bluntly telling "Mr. Dreiser" that "I want you to read one of my novels,"³ the unpublished Windy McPherson's Son. Here, too, is Anderson nine months later, after its publication, writing "Mr. Frank," Waldo Frank, one of the founders and editors of Seven Arts, that "I cannot resist the desire to write you at once and thank you for your intelligent discussion of my book in the 10th issue of Seven Arts," in the review essay "Emerging Greatness," heady praise for a new novelist. Yet, a year later, Anderson discusses with "My dear Dreiser" "the complete and terrible fact of the wall in the shadow of which American artists must work,"⁵ and Frank has become "Dear Brother," to whom he writes, "Perhaps one has to grow old before he can realize the great truth that life can only be beautiful at odd moments and in quite unexpected ways,"⁶ and again, "All day my mind has

reached out and out. Minute little happenings in the lives of many people have been revealed to me. Today, had I a dozen hands, I could write a dozen tales, strange, wonderful tales, all at one time."⁷

In 1918, he confesses to Burton Rascoe, then literary editor of the Chicago Tribune, that he "started writing for the salvation of my soul..."⁸

and have been writing for that end ever since," and to Van Wyck Brooks, "My dear Brooks," he writes, on the verge of the critical success and financial failure of Winesburg, Ohio, of Mark Twain and American writing and intuitively of himself:

Now, Brooks, you know a man cannot be a pessimist who lives near a brook or a cornfield. When the brook chatters or at night when the moon comes up and the wind plays in the corn, a man hears the whisper of the gods.

Mark got to that once--when he wrote Huck Finn....It poured out of him. I fancy that at night he came down from his hill stepping like a king, a splendid playboy playing with rivers and men, riding on the Mississippi, on the broad river that is the great artery flowing out of the heart of the land.⁹

Then, in a self-image that recurs periodically to the end of his life, in terms that reflect his concern with the myth of America, the wonder of his being a writer, and the origin of his style, he continues:

Well, Brooks, I'm alone in a boat on that stream sometimes. The rhythm and swing of it is in some of my songs that are to be published next month. It sometimes gets into some of the Winesburg things. I'll ride it some more, perhaps. It depends on whether or not I can avoid taking myself serious^{ly}. Whom the gods wish to destroy they first make drunk with the notion of being a writer.¹⁰

This is the Anderson who, more than two decades later, can extract from that apparent drunkenness a cogent meaning as he tells a young writer that "the whole glory of writing lies in the fact that it forces us out of ourselves and into the lives of others. In the end

the real writer becomes a lover."¹¹ He writes to a young painter that "I think most people in life are pretty lonely. I think there is a tendency to live on this loneliness, make it something precious and personal."¹² This is the Anderson, too, who, near the end of his life, can tell his young painter son that "I guess what a man¹³ has to learn is just to live the day," to experience fully that moment in which for Anderson all meaning is found.

In his letters Anderson fuses reality and myth, frustration and fulfillment, self-definition and the definition of the artist, a search for identity and an assurance of that identity, a sense of the continuity and oneness of the human experience and his own. And in so doing, he provides a record, a context, a psychological environment in which our experience of his works, from his discovery of self at the expense of his father in Windy McPherson's Son to the final summation in Home Town and the unfinished Memoirs, is enhanced. And we see, too, in both letters and works, the ultimate fusion of self and work and closeness with others that Anderson sought for a lifetime, that, too, in such moments as those in "Hands," in "Death in the Woods," in "Brother Death," and in the many other moments he defined so completely.

Michigan State University

Notes

1. The Jones-Rideout collection and the Modlin collection are both comprehensive. More specialized publications include those to Gertrude Stein in Sherwood Anderson/Gertrude Stein: Correspondence and Personal Essays, edited by Ray Lewis White (Chapel Hill, 1972); to Paul Rosenfeld in Paul Rosenfeld: Voyager in the Arts, edited by Jerome Mellquist and Lucie Weise (New York, 1948); to Upton Sinclair in his My Lifetime in Letters (Columbia, Mo., 1960); to F. Scott Fitzgerald in The Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald, edited by Matthew Bruccoli and Margaret M. Dugan (New York, 1980). Others appear in periodicals and in more eclectic collections. We still await publication of two important series of letters.
2. Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio (New York, 1919), p. 298.
3. Sherwood Anderson: Collected Letters, edited by Charles Modlin (Knoxville, 1984), p. 4.
4. Letters of Sherwood Anderson, edited by Howard Mumford Jones with Walter Rideout (Boston, 1953), p. 3.
5. Ibid., p. 9.
6. Ibid., pp. 28-29.
7. Ibid., p. 19.
8. Modlin, p. 10.
9. Jones and Rideout, p. 33.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 464.
12. Ibid., p. 451.
13. Modlin, p. 254.

Thomas P. Linkfield

Before the electronic age of marvelous gadgetry and before the numbing effects of television, Americans relied upon the vaudeville circuit for entertainment. Vaudeville provided high-class entertainment for the entire family. Harry Houdini (1874-1926) was one of the greatest, if not the greatest, acts in the history of vaudeville. Between 1900 and 1926 Houdini amazed, shocked, and mystified hundreds of thousands of people in America and Europe. His name became synonymous with magic and with death-defying escapes, and some people even believed him capable of supernatural power -- the power to dematerialize and materialize at will. Houdini had scores of imitators, but never an equal. His name has magnetic appeal for professionals and amateurs even today. As recently as July of 1984 a Houdini fanatic, who called himself "Rayburn the Great," drowned in Lake Winona, Indiana, while attempting a handcuff escape under water.¹ During his professional career, Houdini could escape from anything, but then he was truly unique.

Although he enjoyed fame and could command a salary before World War I of over \$1,000 a week, success did not come easily for Harry Houdini. Before he became a hit on vaudeville, Houdini spent over ten years inventing and perfecting his technique. He had to serve a long and arduous apprenticeship in cheap saloons and side-shows, many of them in the Midwest. In fact, the Midwest did a great deal for Harry Houdini, whose real name was Ehrich Weiss. Though born in Budapest, Hungary, Houdini spent his childhood in Wisconsin. After he moved to New York in 1886, he returned frequently to the Midwest to gain needed experience or to introduce a new routine. It was in the Midwest where Harry first became acquainted with spiritual séances, a dark force that would haunt him for the rest of his life. The Midwest served as a springboard and a training ground for Houdini, providing him with a setting where he could direct his unlimited ambition and harness his incredible mental and physical powers.

Houdini's childhood in the Midwest was not an easy one. His father was a rabbi at a synagogue in Appleton, Wisconsin, but never a successful one because of his extreme, old world conservatism. Because his parents refused to learn English, Harry had to master German for his home and English for the outside world. With his father Samuel unable to find work, Harry and the family had five different addresses in Milwaukee between 1883 and 1887. The father lived in a state of depression and spent much of his time brooding on death. At age nine, as if he were a character from one of Horatio Alger's novels, Harry worked the streets as a newsboy and a bootblack. It was in this domestic situation that Harry developed his lifelong obsession for his mother.² Driven by a hard life and meager income, Harry fled his home and the Midwest in 1886 and ended up in New York City where the family followed him eventually.

Harry returned to the Midwest in 1892 with his brother Theo as "The Brothers Houdini." Harry had been a professional magician for a year and wanted desperately to succeed on the vaudeville circuit. The brothers' reputation in New York was tarnished because one night at the Imperial Music Hall while performing Metamorphosis, which became a Houdini Trademark, Theo could not escape from the locked box. Embarrassed and disillusioned, the brothers decided on a tour of the Midwest to improve their act. They played dime museums for small salaries, but gained valuable experience and polished their act. Throughout his stage career, Houdini relied upon Metamorphosis as a consistent crowd pleaser, and it was in the Midwest where he perfected the timing for this escape. His wife Bess would later replace brother Theo in the locked box. During this same tour, Houdini also experienced spiritualism for the first time while attending a seance in Milwaukee by Dr. Josef Gregorovich, a self-styled spiritual healer.

1893 proved to be an important year in the development of Harry Houdini's professional career. "The Brothers Houdini" returned to the Midwest to work the

Midway at the Chicago World's Fair. From a Hindu conjurer, Harry learned his famous needle trick in which he appeared to swallow fifty sewing needles and a length of thread. He would then pull the threaded needles from his mouth to the bewilderment of any onlooker. On the Midway Houdini also witnessed for the first time a man escaping from locked handcuffs. Handcuffs (in fact metal restraints of all kinds) fascinated Harry, and he soon mastered the escape technique for himself. He added an audience challenge to the routine and performed for \$12 per week at Kohl & Middleton's Dime Museum, billed as the "Handcuff King and Escape Artist." Chicago's World's Fair was an important school for the ambitious and restless Houdini, and he always regarded Chicago as a lucky city.

1897 found Harry returning once again to the Midwest, searching desperately for the success that had eluded him so far. His wife Bess was his partner now, and in the winter of that year the two of them joined Dr. Hill's California Concert Company, a Midwestern medicine show. For \$25 per week the job provided temporary security, but not the fame and recognition Harry pursued so relentlessly. He and Bess performed magic and escapes and even doubled as actors in the company's plays. To generate more interest for their act, Harry and Bess began performing séances in January of 1896. The séance was a great crowd pleaser, and Houdini continued with spiritualism for a year in Kansas and Missouri. He found it disturbing, however, that an audience was more willing to believe in spiritualism than in magic.³ Houdini was good at spiritualism, but the public's gullibility bothered him. Harry decided it was an evil, loathsome practice and discontinued it.⁴ Houdini desired recognition and star-billing on the vaudeville circuit, but Dr. Hill's mobile medicine show did not provide them.

In 1899 when Houdini was seriously contemplating leaving the entertainment business, he received the break he needed to propel him to stardom in vaudeville. In St. Paul, Minnesota, he came to the attention of Martin Beck, an important theatrical agent. Harry escaped from manacles that Beck had purchased, and Beck

was so impressed with Houdini's potential that he signed him to the Orpheum vaudeville circuit for \$60 per week. On Beck's insistence, Houdini dropped the magic tricks from his act and concentrated on escapes.⁵ This contract with Martin Beck led to successful tours in San Francisco, Boston, Toronto, and the Midwest. Harry's pay mushroomed to \$90 per week, and he billed himself as "The Undisputed King of Handcuffs" and "Monarch of Leg Shackles." Not only did Houdini receive his big break in the Midwest, but he demonstrated his drawing power there also.

In 1906, after successful and very lucrative tours of the eastern United States and Europe (where he actually made more money), Houdini returned to the Midwest to initiate an escape that propelled him to a new level of escapology -- one that was beyond mere handcuffs and city jails. While booked at the Temple Theater in Detroit, Harry performed his first bridge leap on November 27 from the Belle Island Bridge into the Detroit River. Harry used two pairs of handcuffs and a safety rope. It was one of Harry's most daring and entertaining acts, but it also disturbed a few people because it was potentially so dangerous. One of Houdini's recent biographers has theorized that his bridge leap was a symbolic re-enactment of birth.⁶ Harry would repeat this symbolic drama in most of his escapes on vaudeville. Of course Harry was always a great showman, and this may have been his way of exciting his fans and gaining an edge over his competition, since not many entertainers were eager to jump handcuffed off a bridge.

Before World War I, Houdini developed and pursued an obsession with aviation, a new sport just in its infancy. Harry was a pioneer aviator, and in 1909 he entertained German troops by flying his own Voisin. During his 1910 Australian tour, Houdini made the first sustained flight in that nation's history. In August of 1911 Harry attended the International Air Meet at Grant Park in Chicago. During a benefit

flying show for an aviator killed during the air meet, Harry performed a feat for the startled audience that he would never duplicate. He jumped with his hands and feet shackled from a plane fifty feet above Lake Michigan, escaped underwater, and swam to shore before the gaping fans. Harry could never resist an opportunity to be a showman.

Although Houdini would remain a vaudeville star until the night he died, his life and career entered a new phase after World War I. He became a crusader intent on exposing spiritualists and mediums. They were all frauds according to Houdini, and he channeled a considerable amount of time, energy, and money into his crusade, which he felt was his true purpose in this life. He refused several lucrative billings just to expose these charlatans, who were simply preying on a gullible public. He even testified in Washington in support of a bill to outlaw fortune telling in the District of Columbia: "There are only two kinds of mediums, those who are mental degenerates and who ought to be under observation, and those who are deliberate cheats and frauds."⁷ Harry even produced a new act for the stage that included magic tricks, escapes, and exposures of mediums and their fraudulent methods.

The Midwest figured prominently in Houdini's campaign against fake spiritualists. He gave several talks at universities that served as rehearsals for a professional tour with the Coit-Albee Lyceum. In the fall of 1923 he addressed a psychology class at the University of Illinois on "The Psychology of Audiences" and "The Negative Side of Spiritualism." Harry lectured on mediums at Marquette University in Milwaukee, and he also lectured on spirit frauds at the Universities of Wisconsin and Notre Dame. Harry enjoyed these talks before college audiences, believing education an important part of his crusade against spiritualists. In 1925 in Cleveland, Ohio, he helped County Prosecutor Edward B. Stanton expose the medium

George Renner as a fraud. Renner received a \$25.00 fine and a six-month jail sentence for obtaining money under false pretenses.⁸ Because Harry knew from first-hand experience how mediums operated, he was determined to expose them to public ridicule and end their evil influence.

In 1925 in Chicago Houdini became involved in a bizarre court fight over the issue of spiritualism. While Harry played the Princess Theater for eight weeks, his staff investigated over forty mediums. He had a standing challenge of a \$10,000 reward to any medium who could produce valid proof of spiritualism. Herbert O. Breedlove, who ran the Mission of Love on Dearborn Street, filed a criminal libel suit against Houdini, claiming that Harry's anti-spiritualist crusade was harrassing his spirits. Houdini, insisting that mediums were a menace to society, challenged Breedlove to reveal the name his father used to call him. He backed his court challenge with a \$1,000 reward. Breedlove failed the test and lost the case. The acknowledged King of Escapology had performed another magnificent escape -- this time from a libel suit.⁹ Chicago remained a lucky city for Harry.

In Detroit, however, Harry Houdini was not so lucky, for it was here that the vaudeville star whom Variety had praised as "the master magician of all times" met a strange and untimely end. Harry arrived in Detroit on October 24, 1926 for an engagement at the Garrick Theater. The house was sold out in anticipation of the King of Escapology. But Harry suffered from an inflamed stomach and a broken left ankle. To urgent pleas that he cancel Houdini replied, "They're here to see me. I won't disappoint them."¹⁰ A trooper to the end, Harry played through his last act with a temperature of 104 and collapsed after the final curtain. He underwent surgery at Grace Hospital on October 25 (Monday) for a ruptured appendix. On Friday of that week Houdini suffered a relapse and underwent a second operation -- this one for peritonitis. He as dead at 1:26 p. m. on October 31, 1926 -- Halloween morning. Vaudeville had lost perhaps its greatest showman, while

spiritualists had lost their greatest and most relentless enemy. With a final twist of irony, officials placed his body in a bronze box that resembled a coffin, a prop Houdini had purchased for a new escape.

Harry Houdini's name is now immortal, but he had to fight hard for a place in vaudeville's pantheon of stars. Much of what Harry learned he acquired in the Midwest while laboring in sleazy carnivals and dime museums. The Midwest served as a training ground for the King of Escapology, and he returned repeatedly to delight thousands with his magic, his escapes, and his exposures of mediums. Houdini himself best expressed the secret of his phenomenal success when he said, "The secret of showmanship consists not of what you really do, but what the mystery-loving public thinks you do."¹¹ Much of what Houdini did on vaudeville was illusory, but then audiences received precisely what they paid for. Harry Houdini gave American and European audiences the highest degree of live entertainment possible and elevated the art of magic to a new level, one that modern performers such as David Coperfield and Doug Henning are still trying to surpass.

Michigan State University

Notes

- ¹David Allen, "The Deadly Trick," Detroit Free Press, 18 July 1984, p. 1A.
- ²Bernard C. Meyer, M. D., Houdini: A Mind in Chains (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1976).
- ³Melbourne Christopher, Houdini: The Untold Story (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969), p. 30.
- ⁴Raymund Fitzsimons, Death and the Magician: The Mystery of Houdini (London: Harnish Hamilton, 1980), p. 34.
- ⁵Christopher, pp. 35-39.
- ⁶Meyer, p. 122.
- ⁷Christopher, p. 223.
- ⁸Christopher, pp. 210-12.
- ⁹Christopher, p. 226.
- ¹⁰Meyer, p. 175.
- ¹¹Meyer, p. 136.