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Place and Landscape in Midwestern American
Literature

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William David Barillas

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of the requirements for

Ph.D. degree in English


Major professor

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PLACE AND LANDSCAPE IN MIDWESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

William David Barillas

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English
Program in American Studies

1994

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ABSTRACT

PLACE AND LANDSCAPE IN MIDWESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

William David Barillas

Certain authors of the American Midwest, including Willa Cather, Aldo Leopold, James Wright, and Theodore Roethke, are part of a continuing American neo-Romantic tradition of literary place and landscape. These writers do more than merely describe their beloved landscapes, though they do that with poetic brilliance. Their deeper concern is how individuals and groups become or fail to become intellectually and emotionally attached to local landscapes. Asking why the land is as it now appears, they find answers in historical documentation, personal exploration of terrain, and Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity." They share, in other words, *sense of place*.

My first chapter deals with the larger American tradition of literary place and landscape, which true to its Romantic roots, values nature as a source of spiritual enlightenment and as a basis for democratic culture. This connection of nature, spirit, and culture lies at the heart of my second chapter, on the American Midwest and its defining myth or ideology: the pastoral ideal of a rural landscape inhabited by free-holding individuals, particularly farmers. Midwestern authors of the classic period, including Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and Carl Sandburg, censured utilitarianism and materialism while celebrating the region's natural beauty and cultural heritage. Since the Midwest is relatively level and non-sublime, their sense of place is subtle and picturesque, attentive to juxtapositions of

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human and natural elements and to enclaves of wild nature within the agrarian landscape. There is an implicit environmentalism in these authors' criticism of modern industrial society. They express the perennial desire of pastoralism for a balance between society and nature, sophistication and the bucolic.

Subsequent chapters examine the writings of individual authors in relation to Midwestern place, landscape, and the pastoral ideal: Willa Cather, Aldo Leopold, and James Wright. Chapter 6 considers four poets with strong attachments to the landscape of the state of Michigan: Theodore Roethke, Jim Harrison, Judith Minty, and Dan Gerber. The conclusion re-examines regionalism and sense of place as conceptual approaches to American literature.

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by William David Barillas

For Teresa

who lives
in earth, air, fire, and water
in our dreams, in our hands and hearts

*This is our body. Drawn up crosslegged by the flames
drinking icy water
hugging babies, kissing bellies,*

Laughing on the Great Earth

Come out from the bath.

--Gary Snyder, "The Bath"

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to recognize the gentlemen constituting my dissertation committee: David D. Anderson (University Distinguished Professor of American Thought and Language), Roger Bresnahan (Professor and Associate Chairperson of American Thought and Language), Justin L. Kestenbaum (Professor of History), and James I. McClintock (Professor of English and Director of the Program in American Studies). Each exemplifies the ideal of what an academic should be--scholar, teacher, and mentor. I take their self-effacing good spirits as a model for my own right practice, attitude, and understanding. They treated me as a peer and equal, though I wasn't, and always heard out my thoughts, however tentative. My scholarship is a result of their wisdom and patience.

I particularly wish to thank Dr. McClintock, author of *White Logic: Jack London's Short Stories* (1975) and *Nature's Kindred Spirits: Aldo Leopold, Joseph Wood Krutch, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Gary Snyder* (1994), director of this dissertation, who fostered its inception in the Michigan poets essay that I wrote for his graduate seminar on American responses to nature. I owe to him the career I have undertaken, and the confidence to succeed at it.

Gratitude also to my parents, Guillermo and Caroline, for everything, of course. Also deserving recognition for services rendered and random smiles and good words: Denise Grucz in the American Studies office; Sharon Tyree, Lorraine Hart, and Rosemary Ezzo in the English office; Peter Berg, Head of Special Collections at the M.S.U. Library.

Final

M.S.C.



Finally, thanks to poet Marcus Cafagna, my first and enduring friend at M.S.U., who is giving the world something well worth reading.

INTRO

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CONCERN

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INTRODUCTION

When we speak of an author's "sense of place," we usually mean that the writer in question evokes setting in a particularly vivid or accurate manner. The expression is applied to travelogues because of the generic expectation that such writings will describe exotic locations that the reader--an "armchair traveller"--will likely never visit. Novels are most often said to have a "sense of place" when the physical circumstances of events, whether rooms in a building or places outdoors, bear heavily on narrative conflict. A sense of place in all cases implies a use of imagery that enables readers to imagine themselves in a location, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting what is there to be sensed. Such writing sensually transports its readers through real geographies by imaginative means.

The chapters that follow are concerned with literary place in a representative region--the American Midwest--particularly in regard to external nature. That the terms "place" and "landscape" share emphasis in the title of this dissertation indicates its ecological and geographical focus. Just as humanistic geographers "read" the landscape, interpreting human history by the signs of change on the land, I view poems, stories, and essays as landmarks on the scene, part of the human presence on the planet and this continent. Chapter 1 establishes a broad, national context for American literature of place and landscape. I find the origin of American localism in the Transcendentalists of New England, whose spirituality of nature we hear echoed time and again

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among their literary descendants across America. Chapter 2 treats the development of Midwestern literature within and parallel to the larger national tradition, describing the response of major writers of the Midwestern classic period to changes in their region's society and landscape. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, the economic center of Midwestern life moved from the farm to the town, and then from the town to the city. Agrarianism gave way to commerce, which in turn was superseded by modern industrialism. Midwestern writers of this period, like modernists in America and abroad, were deeply affected by the recent flux in cultural values. Writers looked to the past for answers to new dilemmas, and ahead to further changes in relationships of individuals to society, society to nature, and individuals to nature.

Subsequent chapters give close readings of individual authors--Willia Cather, Aldo Leopold, and James Wright--as Midwestern American writers of place and landscape. The sixth and final chapter looks at the poetry of one of the United States, Michigan. Any other Midwestern state, Iowa perhaps, or Nebraska, would have served equally well as a sub-regional focus in this dissertation. That, however, is a chapter for another to write: Michigan is my state of origin and I feel particularly well suited to relate the role of poetry in its natural and cultural geography. The literature of any state dwells like a Chinese doll within that of the region at large, which exists in turn within American literature, one tradition in a world of cultures, each with its own story to tell. If there is any abstract lesson to be drawn here, it is the inexorable connection of the local and the universal. What goes around, comes around: an image of circles within circles, arcs intersecting, departure and return.

I conclude by reconsidering regionalism and sense of place as conceptual approaches to literature. Rather than a survey, this dissertation is an examination of representative texts in a literature that will continue to inspire love and respect for the ecological and cultural significance of places and regional landscapes.

Chapter 1

Place and Landscape in American Literature

Every continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality.

D.H. Lawrence

Studies in Classic American Literature (1951)

Place is the only reality, the true core of the universal. . . . We live in only one place at a time but far from being bound to it, only through it do we realize our freedom. Place then ceases to be a restriction, we do not have to abandon our familiar and known to achieve distinction . . . [only if we] make ourselves sufficiently aware of it do we join with others in other places.

William Carlos Williams (1952)

A central theme in American studies is the role of the natural environment in the formation of American culture. Scholarly interest in the subject has resulted in writings on a number of related topics, including landscape, place, nature, wilderness, pastoralism, regionalism, frontier and environmental history, ecological science, and the genre of nature writing usually traced back to Henry David Thoreau. John Conron, editor of *The American Landscape* (1973), an anthology of key primary sources--essays, fictions, and poetry--relevant to these topics, argues that the "growing body of critical scholarship in American studies" on the influence of nature attests to the fact that

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in no culture has the spatial construct of landscape been more indispensable [than in the United States], for we seem to see ourselves as a people living in space more than in time, in an environment more than in a history.¹

Conron's statement points to two key elements in any discussion of American nature and culture: a) the physical actuality of nature and its processes; and b) human perceptions of nature. All human visions of nature (and the place of humans within it) express values, inherent in the complexity of language. Despite their deceptive concreteness, terms such as *landscape* and *place* are actually abstract and ambiguous, holding different meanings for different people in different places at different times. In examining the role of place and landscape in American prose and poetry, the present chapter will: 1) clarify relevant terminology, 2) cite the major recent scholarship in a number of disciplines, and 3) outline the literary and intellectual history of major literary movements and trends, while emphasizing the art and philosophy of authors who directly address place and landscape as philosophical and spiritual concerns. The objective is a vision of place and landscape as consistent and continuing concerns in American thought and letters.

The term "landscape" has three connotations.² It first refers to the depiction of natural scenery in painting and other visual arts, exemplified in the American tradition by Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, and more recently, Russell Chatham. Landscape next means the topography of a geographical region, including forests and cities, hills and buildings, rivers and roads. Finally, by landscape we mean "vista" or "prospect," that terrain which a person can see at a single view from a single position. In speaking of landscape in one or more senses of the term, we allude to human agency in a natural context. Landscape is the

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It is appropriate, then, that "landscape" is also an active, transitive verb, signifying the shaping of natural landforms for aesthetic and functional purposes. Landscapes are actively made by people using tools as various as axes, bulldozers, paintbrushes, and language. Thus contemporary scholars refer to "literary landscape," suggesting not only written descriptions of the beauty and vagaries of nature, but the social contexts of history and ethics in the creation of national, regional, and local identity. In *Spirit of Place: The Making of an American Literary Landscape* (1989), Frederick Turner describes certain American authors, including Henry David Thoreau, Willa Cather, and William Carlos Williams as

men and women who learned in loneliness and silence and deprivation how truly to see where on the American earth they were: to see their specific places in such full and luminous detail that a radically native art, a literature, arose.⁴

One important concern of these authors is how individuals and groups become or fail to become attached--emotionally, intellectually, and practically--to the landscapes they inhabit. They ask why the land appears as it does, finding their answers in historical documentation, personal exploration of the terrain, and Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions . . . recollected in tranquillity."⁵ They share, in other words, *sense of place*.

The concept of place, which geographer James M. Houston defines as "space meaningful for man,"⁶ is used in widely varying ways by scholars in different fields. Indeed, in literary study it is possible to discuss place without regard to the related concepts of landscape and

region. This is largely the case with Leonard Lutwack's *The Role of Place in Literature* (1984), which employs phenomenological terminology in commenting on the significance to literary works of spatial properties such as extent, verticality, horizontality, and so forth. Lutwack's categories are useful for analysis of settings both interior (staircases in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, for example) and exterior (forests as symbolic of sexuality, as in D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*); but his likening of topoanalysis⁷ in literary study to "the kind of reductionism long practiced in science"⁸ is more accurate of his own book than of the interdisciplinary nature of less purely literary studies. As geographer Edward Relph writes in *Place and Placelessness* (1976), "any exploration of place . . . must . . . be concerned with the entire range of experience through which we all know and make places, and hence can be confined by the boundaries of no formally defined discipline."⁹ In discussing place and landscape in literature, therefore, we are well served in applying the insights of scholars from many fields who have recently examined the notion of a "sense of place," including contemporary geographers, ecophilosophers, scholars of religion, as well as literary theorists.

Clarence Mondale has described the recent humanistic interest in place as "a reassertion of the centrality of habitat to the definition of self and culture" based upon "the conviction that modern thought has been unduly abstract."¹⁰ Seeking to remedy this abstraction, psychologists, for example, have studied how infants learn to distinguish themselves from their environments and progressively to enlarge their understanding of spatial relations.¹¹ On the macrocosmic level, contemporary geographers and historians study physiographic regions and

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how resident cultures have shaped and in turn have been shaped by their geographical circumstances.¹² Recent research by geographers is especially relevant to the analysis of place and landscape in literature, not only in regional terms, but for what geographer Karl W. Butzer of the University of Chicago describes as a "humanistic resurgence" in the science of geography "emphasizing symbolic values, aesthetic norms, the artistic component of landscapes, or even existential phenomenology."¹³ The title of a recent anthology, *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines* (1987), illustrates this trend toward cooperation between the arts and sciences. William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley, the editors of that volume, state that

through their works novelists and poets foster a deeper appreciation of the essence of places than prosaic geographical description. Most literary landscapes, however, are rooted in reality, and landscapes have long been the domain of geographers. Their knowledge can help ground even highly symbolic literary landscapes in reality.¹⁴

To understand the concept of place as well as particular places, then, we combine knowledge of geographical "reality" with an examination of symbols and ideas of place, which have evolved over history. A necessary corollary to Crèvecoeur's famous question "What is an American?" is "What is America?" To answer either we must examine mythic understandings of place, which predominate in popular as well as intellectual conceptions of the American national identity, which tends to abstraction.¹⁵ As Jim Wayne Miller points out, the "American national identity is essentially extraterritorial. That is, the essence of America is found not in particular places but in an idea."¹⁶ This idea includes popular notions of America as a new, youthful society, as a continental nation with character traits to match the terrain's vast-

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vastness, and as a regionally and ethnically diverse "nation of nations." These and other notions of the American identity originated in the early nineteenth century, when the United States was in a literal sense a new nation, the first in the New World to liberate itself from European colonial rule. The mythologizing began with the attribution to the nation of qualities suggestive of a young person--strength, innocence, verve, hope and so forth. It was these virtues that Ralph Waldo Emerson celebrated in his first book, *Nature* (1836), "arguably the most important statement of American attitudes toward nature,"¹⁷ as well as the American intellectual declaration of independence.¹⁸ "Why," Emerson asks, "should not we . . . enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition . . . ?"¹⁹ Emerson urged the American, that new Adam, "to look at the world with new eyes" so as to "[b]uild . . . [his] own world."²⁰ The continent, in his view, was new, its history yet unwritten. A poetry of insight was possible in America because the landscape was unconquered and free of associations with a feudal past. Emerson and his contemporaries thus rejected current European aesthetics, which according to Roland Van Zandt "defined an ideal landscape in terms of its rich association with the ruins and relics, myths and legends, of all human history--a condition that could hardly be found in the raw American wilderness."²¹ Roderick Nash argues in *Wilderness in the American Mind* (1982) that "by the middle decades of the nineteenth century wilderness was recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem."²² Thomas Cole, the nation's first great landscape painter and Emerson's contemporary, noted that here was "no gorgeous temple to speak of ostentation: but freedom's offspring--

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peace, security, and happiness, dwell there, the spirits of the scene."²³ Americans first distinguished their land by what it was *not*, namely Europe.²⁴ "The same logic," according to Nash, "worked to convince Americans that because of the aesthetic and inspirational qualities of wilderness they were destined for artistic and literary excellence."²⁵

Of course, while the American nation was a new entity, the actual geographical place that this idea of America would be enacted upon was not, not even in a cultural sense. Native Americans had dwelled on the continent for at least ten thousand years, more than enough time to develop profound senses of place. Native American worldviews are intensely local, based on long associations with particular regional landscapes. For primal cultures, local landmarks are charged with spiritual potency--known as *manitou* among the Algonquians, *orenda* among the Iroquois, *wakan* among the Sioux--because, according to contemporary American poet and ecophilosopher Gary Snyder,

of their perceived animal or plant habitat peculiarities, or associations with legend and perhaps with human ancestry via totemic systems, or because of their association with spiritual training, or some combination of these features. These spots are seen as points on the landscape at which one can more easily enter a larger-than-human, larger-than-personal realm.²⁶

This numinous realm, much like what the Aborigines of Australia call "Dreamtime," is vividly depicted in Native American oral literature such as the adventures of culture heroes like the Western region's Coyote or the Algonquian tribes' Nanabozho (Great Hare), which occur in particular places identifiable to the people telling the stories.²⁷ Paul Shepard's observation in *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* (1967) that a sacred place "associated with events important to

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the mythos . . . consecrates and makes cosmic the territory"²⁸ is especially applicable to Native American senses of place. One does not own land in Native traditions; rather, a person belongs to a place, and is defined as a human being in relation to the home landscape.

In American written literature, a full expression of Native American toponophilia would await recent authors like Gerald Vizenor, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and James Welch, who combine Native worldviews with knowledge of Euroamerican traditions in novels, poetry, and other genres. Early American writers were slow to recognize Native American traditions as a stimulus to a uniquely American literature; even Walt Whitman, the great voice of diversity, was strangely silent on this point. All the Indians do in *Leaves of Grass* is "melt . . . [and] depart, charging the water and land with names."²⁹ Cooper and Longfellow wrote, famously, of Indians, but romanticized them into one dimensional Noble Savages. Only Thoreau went to the source, speaking to the few itinerant Indians who visited the Concord area, and travelling to Maine, in part, to learn wood-lore from native guides. His point was not to try in some facile way to "be an Indian," but to seek clues as to how he himself might be more native to his locality. Thoreau's statement that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World"³⁰ was an argument in favor of localism; wildness (as opposed to wilderness) is everywhere, even in a pastoral landscape like nineteenth century Massachusetts. As Gary Snyder suggests, "nativeness" is available to anyone who truly inhabits a place--it "doesn't matter what color your skin is, it's a matter of how you relate to the land."³¹ Thoreau's Transcendentalism required that he relate to the land as a seeker of truth, to perceive universal meaning in local particularities.

Frederick Turner

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Frederick Turner's description of Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is true of most subsequent American writings concerned with particular landscapes, which owe a great deal to Thoreau's life and work: "in its narrative of one man's confrontation with the discrete facts of a particular place . . . [Walden] tells all who will listen that America, the New World, is first and last a grand spiritual opportunity."³² That opportunity is to be native, that is, at home in a beloved landscape.

Americans, however, have usually related to the land as an abstraction, as potential real estate rather than as sacred space. The basic fact of American history is that a politically unified population on the Atlantic Coast gradually gained control of land, "vaguely realizing westward,"³³ as Robert Frost has it in the poem "The Gift Outright," though there is nothing vague about the Indian and Mexican Wars, broken treaties, and various land deals with foreign powers. The nineteenth century American sense of place was the mindset of conquest, expressed in the myth of "Manifest Destiny," by which America was fated to become a continental nation, according to Henry Nash Smith, "away from the feudal past of Europe to build a new order founded upon nature."³⁴ Whitman was the poet of this myth, in his vision of America as "essentially the greatest poem . . . a teeming nation of nations."³⁵ "Land of the ocean shores!" he exclaimed: "Land of sierras and peaks . . . inextricable lands!"³⁶ In such catalogs of the American landscape, Whitman expressed his hope that in expanding westward this big land would produce not only a regionally diverse American literature, but big-hearted, generous people to write and read that literature.

The full intellectualization of Manifest Destiny appeared in 1893, when Frederick Jackson Turner first published "The Significance of the

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Frontier in American History," identified by environmental historian William Cronon as "the single most influential essay ever written by an American historian."³⁷ Turner's famous "Frontier Thesis" held that American democratic institutions continually renewed themselves on the frontier of settlement and that the "expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish[ed] the forces dominating American character."³⁸ While generally abandoned by contemporary scholars as simplistic and even racist (what of the Native Americans?), Turner's thesis, as Cronon reminds us, was "a story of the American landscape"³⁹ marked by a historical sense of place. History, after all, happens on the land; landscape is the human record of settlement and occupation writ large in physiography.⁴⁰

The dark implication of Turner's vision was a fear that with the frontier officially closed (in 1890, according to the U.S. Census), American democratic virtues would wither. Turner's was one of a number of turn-of-the-century expressions of American uncertainty. Thorstein Veblen and H.L. Mencken were attacking what they perceived to be the nation's growing materialism and smug self-satisfaction. John Muir, by then an old man, was still fighting to preserve the remaining wild country, the source of American virtue, by Turner's thinking. In the sense of Whitman's hope for the nation, these fears were justified. America was rapidly becoming an urbanized, industrial nation, and the kind of spiritually invigorating contact with nature and locality that Emerson and Thoreau had stressed was not the life of most Americans. According to Roderick Nash, "By the 1890's a sufficient change had occurred in American life and thought to make possible a widespread



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reaction against the previous condemnation of wilderness."⁴¹ This back-to-nature reaction manifested itself not only in the increasing popularity of camping, the development of city parks, and even country clubs--all of which had profound implications for changes in the landscape--but in natural history literature, a newly identified genre. Muir and John Burroughs reached a large audience that clamored for accounts of outdoor adventures, and the previously neglected Thoreau was widely read for the first time. Nash reminds us that this new back-to-nature sentiment "was not, to be sure, overwhelming, nor was the popularity of primitivism the only manifestation of discontent and frustration at the end of the nineteenth century."⁴² Wendell Berry, contemporary poet and philosopher of place, notes that once "the unknown of geography was mapped, the industrial marketplace became the new frontier, and we continued . . . to displace ourselves."⁴³ That sense of displacement finds ample expression in twentieth century American literature, which responds in a variety of ways to the issues of place, displacement, and landscape.

In discussing modern and contemporary literature, we are again confronted with a number of slippery terms, which like "place" and "landscape" require clarification. We again encounter identifiable literary movements, naturalism and modernism, which like Transcendentalism, not only describe periods in cultural history when the humanistic disciplines shared certain philosophical beliefs and were concerned with many of the same issues, but characterize tendencies that may be found throughout intellectual history. Just as it may be useful to speak of a certain "classicism" in the poetry and criticism of T.S. Eliot, so in American cultural history the periods described as romantic



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(or Transcendentalist), realist (or naturalist), and modernist are not completely antithetical. This is clearly the case with landscape in American art and letters. While Emerson and Thoreau, for example, were clearly Romantic in asserting the spiritual symbolism of nature, they described landscape using concepts such as *sublimity*, developed by Edmund Burke and other eighteenth century classical aestheticians. Similarly, while late nineteenth century literary naturalists like Stephen Crane and Jack London rejected Emersonian philosophical idealism (nature as beneficent and wise) in favor of biological and environmental determinism (nature as arbitrary and indifferent), they did find beauty and order in the harsh natural landscapes they depicted in fiction. Stories such as Crane's "The Open Boat" (1897), about five men adrift in rough seas off the Florida coast, and London's "To Build a Fire" (1908), an account of a man trying to reach shelter from an Arctic storm, exhibit a naturalistic sublime, what Conron describes as "the arbitrary, implacable instrument of an infinitely indifferent mechanical universe"⁴⁴ which immerses and overwhelms the human figure in the landscape instead of elevating him, as in Emerson's *Nature*.

Naturalism was also related to Transcendentalism in that it initiated the regionally diverse literary landscape that Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman had championed. As Whitman had asked in "As I Sat By Blue Ontario's Shore":

Who are you, indeed, who would talk or sing to America?
Have you studied out the land, its idioms and men?
Have you learn'd the physiology, phrenology, politics,
geography, pride, freedom, friendship, of the land?
its substratums and objects?⁴⁵

Literary realists and naturalists wrote fictions based on the kind of close knowledge of local physiography and social customs that Whitman

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argued would endow literary representations of American places with both physical believability and symbolic power. Besides those of Crane and London, the works of major American realist and naturalist authors including Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Kate Chopin, Sarah Orne Jewett, and later, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and John Steinbeck, are in a literal sense, landmarks. They have profoundly influenced perceptions of American landscapes, wild, rural, and urban, reflecting, according to Donald Pizer in *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (1984), "their age's increasing sense of the limitation imposed upon man by his biological past and his social present" while insisting on "dramatizing man as a creature of significance and value."⁴⁶ The naturalists, as Conron observes, "apprehended the urban environment in the same terms that the Puritans had apprehended the wilderness: it was wild (that is, beyond human control), inhuman, and dangerous."⁴⁷ Similarly, when they turned to non-urban landscapes for their settings, as with London in Alaska and Faulkner in Mississippi, they found not Whitman's pastoralism but a harsh, Darwinian world. Still, in depicting the American landscape, from cities to wilderness, the naturalists continued the current of American literature which stresses the local, the commonplace, and the diversity of human experience across the American continent.

In considering twentieth-century trends in American literature, it is important to think of realism and naturalism as continuing trends, parallel and complementary to modernism, the next major cultural movement in European and American art and thought. Like realists and naturalists, modernists responded to changing social conditions based on new scientific, philosophical, and political understandings which tended



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to diminish old verities and optimisms. But whereas realists and naturalists addressed the perceived crisis in human existence by creating an "objective" art of verisimilitude and representation, modernists sought to make sense of a overwhelmingly complex world in a stylistically innovative art that was often more symbolic and abstract than representational and concrete. The three defining characteristics of modernism (according to Lawrence B. Gamache) are particularly relevant to the contexts of landscape and place:

- 1) a preoccupation with the present, usually urban and technical in its sense of place and time, is related to the loss of a meaningful context derived from the past, from its forms, styles, and traditions; 2) this sense of loss gives rise to a search for a new context--cosmopolitan, not provincial in scope--and for new techniques to evolve an acceptable perception of reality, often paradoxically, in the form of an attempt to rediscover roots in the depths of the past; 3) but this search tends to an increasingly relativistic, inward, often disillusioned vision and a compulsive need to develop techniques to embody it.⁴⁸

These characteristics may be illustrated by examining the work of two major American modernist poets, T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams, whose philosophical and aesthetic differences are evident in their literary use of landscape and place.

According to Nancy Duvall Hargrove in *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot* (1978), Eliot uses landscape "as a means of defining or suggesting emotional or moral states, a means of controlling and manipulating feeling."⁴⁹ Eliot's symbolic landscapes derive from literary sources like Dante, Tennyson, and Arthurian legend as well as personal memories of places where he had lived--St. Louis, Missouri by the Mississippi River, coastal New England, Boston, Paris, and London. Hargrove identifies five major landscapes and their symbolism in Eliot's work: "the city (boredom, triviality, sterility), the country (release,

fertility, rebirth), the desert (chaos, terror, emptiness), the garden (ecstasy, innocence, serenity), and the sea or river,"⁵⁰ the last possessing a number of symbolic connotations. Especially in his earlier poems Eliot tends to be primarily urban in his sense of place, as in *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot's most famous work and the prototypically modernist poem, by Gamache's criteria. *The Waste Land* became a standard for what many critics valued in modern poetry: allusiveness, irony, erudition--and, in a word, *difficulty*. It is also characteristically modernist as a critique of Western culture. In *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (1985), John Elder profitably compares Eliot's poetic vision of a corrupted civilization to that of Eliot's contemporary, California poet Robinson Jeffers, who from the perspective of a wild, coastal landscape denounced the materialism and solipsism of modern society. While differing in most regards, artistically and philosophically, Eliot and Jeffers are

joined by their sense that modern culture is corrupt precisely because it is cut off from nature's regenerative power. In *The Waste Land*, the city's sterility afflicts the whole world and its pollutions deny the poet any vision of a landscape beyond his spirit's unforgiving desert rocks.⁵¹

One implication of Eliot's famous poem, then, is clearly ecological; society is psychically separated from nature, and therefore corrupts both nature (Eliot's polluted, sterile River Thames) and itself (the "Unreal City"). Because place is so attenuated in *The Waste Land*, this implication only becomes clear when it is placed in a broader cultural context, as in Elder's juxtaposition.

One recurring question in Eliot scholarship is Eliot's status as an American poet. Those claiming him for the United States describe him as part of the American Puritan tradition and point to his return to



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American locales in "Landscapes" (1934-35) and *Four Quartets* (1935-43). Other critics emphasize Eliot's expatriation and eventual British citizenship, suggesting that his political conservatism and religious orthodoxy place him outside the mainstream of American poetry since Whitman, which has a distinctly romantic tendency. The question is largely moot, since Eliot's concerns were more temporal and transcendent than local. On the subject of place in Eliot's poetry, one passage from "Little Gidding" (1942) is frequently cited:

We will not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁵²

The "end of exploring" is metaphysical, not phenomenological; Eliot's attitude toward place and nature is in keeping with his orthodox Christianity, which holds that despite its beauty the earth is not sacred, that God is distinct from creation, and that the experience of life in place and time is primarily a transition before eternity. As Eliot says in another, less often quoted passage from his most specifically religious work, *Ash Wednesday* (1930):

. . . time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place.⁵³

And from another of the *Four Quartets*, "East Coker" (1940):

Home is where one starts from.
.
Old men should be explorers
Here and there do not matter.⁵⁴

Certainly Eliot's literary influence has been universal--even poets distinctly American in their concerns and locales, like William Carlos Williams, Theodore Roethke, and Charles Olson (each of whom

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expressed disdain for Eliot's manner and philosophy) owe a great deal to his experimentation with language. But Williams, especially, had a very different vision of the form and function of literature, and the relation of language to landscape and place. Consistently objecting to Eliot's obscurity, abstraction, and emphasis on European traditions, Williams championed an American literature based on localized experience and knowledge of human life, expressed in a poetically heightened colloquial speech (rather than English prosody).⁵⁵ When Eliot, Ezra Pound, and many others among Williams' contemporaries expatriated to Europe, Williams stayed in Rutherford, New Jersey, practicing medicine and writing poetry based on his observations of local life and readings in American history and culture. In a 1944 letter, mostly marked by diatribe against Eliot (who was still receiving most of the critical accolades), Williams speaks of his ideal union of place and culture, nature and the human:

. . . just as the city depends, literally, both for its men and its materials on the country, so general ideas, if they are to be living and valid, to some extent depend (at least for their testing) on local cultures. . . . The flow must originate from the local to the general as a river to the sea and then back to the local from the sea in rain. . . . It is the poet who lives locally, and whose senses are applied no way else than locally to particulars, who is the agent and the maker of all culture.⁵⁶

As one of Williams' critics, Walter Scott Peterson, points out, the "local" in Williams "is not, to be sure, necessarily American--except to the American--and it can be any locality, so long as it is local to the poet."⁵⁷ Truth and beauty for Williams are to be understood not by applying religious or intellectual precepts, but in keeping with Romanticism and American individualism, through *perception* and *experience*, communicated through a language appropriate to one's time and place.

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Williams' localism found its ultimate expression in his epic poem in five books, *Paterson* (1946-1963), named for the industrial city in New Jersey that is its subject. Like Thoreau's *Walden*, similarly named for its location, *Paterson* is a book of discovery and inhabitation in which person and place become inextricably connected in both emotional and intellectual terms. While its urban setting, innovative use of fragments and pastiche, and imagery and symbolism conveying a sense of cultural crisis make it a major text of the modernist canon, *Paterson* also lies within the American tradition of literary landscape. Poet Robert Lowell described *Paterson* as "Whitman's America, grown pathetic and tragic, brutalized by inequality, disorganized by industrial chaos, and faced with annihilation."⁵⁸ The central theme of Williams' great poem is divorce: divorce from place and nature, from history and culture, and from human love:

Divorce is
the sign of knowledge in our time,
divorce! divorce!⁵⁹

Williams embodies this state of divorce in *Paterson*'s central metaphor, "that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody."⁶⁰ "Paterson" is a character in the poem, who like Williams is a doctor and a poet, making his rounds and learning about the city. He is also the city itself, the cultural male principle:

Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls
its spent water forming the outline of his back. He
lies on his right side, head near the thunder
of the water filling his dreams!⁶¹

in sexual embrace with the female principle embodied in the natural landscape:

And there, against him, stretches the low mountain.
 The Park's her head, carved, above the Falls, by the quiet
 river. . . .

.
 . . . facing him, his
 arm supporting her, by the Valley of the Rocks, asleep.⁶²

This marriage, like all relationships in the poem, is based as much on misunderstanding as on love: "Marriage come to have a shuddering / implication."⁶³ Incorporating excerpts from books of local history to illustrate a historical pattern of environmental and social degradation, Williams envisions a city and its people--and by extension of the local to the universal, an entire nation--"divorced / from the insistence of place-- / from knowledge, / from learning . . . divorced / from time"⁶⁴ Just as Williams wished for poems such as the famous "The Red Wheelbarrow" to be more than mimetic representations of reality, but as artistic artifacts to approach the objective existence of the subject matter, so in *Paterson* did he seek to make his poem more than about the city, more even than a map of the city--he wanted the poem to be a city. To read fully such a poem as *Paterson* is to walk imaginatively through a landscape, reading the terrain through Williams' lines.

Among the modernists, Williams was the one writer to examine explicitly the issues of place and landscape in life and art, to champion a philosophy and aesthetic of the local. But several other modernists, particularly novelists contemporary to the doctor from Rutherford, created locales that are permanent additions to the American literary landscape. William Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, depicted in several novels including *The Sound and Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and *Light in August* (1932), may be the most completely and specifically realized location in American

literature, a place in which landscape, history, and dramatic conflict merge to create the kind of tragedy that places Faulkner in the company of Euripides, Shakespeare, and Melville. As Faulkner remarked, "I discovered that my little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it."⁶⁵ His accomplishment illustrates Williams' ideal of the local made universal, as do landscapes envisioned by other major twentieth-century American authors, including Robert Frost (New England), Willa Cather (Nebraska, among others), Ernest Hemingway (the northern Michigan of Nick Adams), A.B. Guthrie (Montana), John Steinbeck (California) and many others continuing to this day.

While the styles and attitudes of these authors can be meaningfully discussed as being in some sense "modernist," they collectively constitute a modern neo-romantic (or counter-modernist) tradition, which in its cultural, aesthetic, and even political tendencies contrasts strongly with the values of modernism as previously discussed. The following chart is meant to clarify these differences by juxtaposing them as paradigms:

	MODERNISM	COUNTER-MODERNISM
Sense of Place	European, Old World Urban	American, New World Rural / Wild as much as or more than urban.
Attitude	Cosmopolitan Intellectual. Universal symbols.	Provincial / Regional Experiential. Local particularities.
Historical Sensibility	Temporal. Linear, mechanistic, present / future oriented; dwelling in time.	Spatial (Geographical). Cyclical, organic, past / present oriented; dwelling in place.

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Aesthetics	Elitist. Art created for a select, refined audience. "High culture."	Populist. Democratic inclusiveness: art about and sometimes even for ordinary people and places. Popularity not a vice.
	Innovative. Abstract, ironic, analytical, cynical, "deconstructive."	Transformative. Concrete, literal, synthesizing, affirmative, "constructive."
Immediate Antecedents	European, particularly British literary traditions.	American Transcendentalism, realism and naturalism.
Exemplary Authors	T.S. Eliot Ezra Pound Gertrude Stein	William Carlos Williams Robert Frost Willa Cather

This contrast may be better understood by again consulting a geographer, in this case Raymond D. Gastil, who in *Cultural Regions of the United States* (1975) discusses cultural variations "in terms of regional cultural cores, domains, and peripheries . . . a model in which a bundle of cultural traits spreads in a coherent form from an identifiable area, becoming less dominant with distance."⁶⁶ American culture, at least American literary culture, can be traced back to its original domain in New England, with Boston as the cultural core. "Boston created a new core culture on the periphery of English culture," Gastil remarks, "but English culture was itself on the periphery of European culture."⁶⁷ As the American nation expanded westward and immigrants from many cultures, European, Asian, and African, populated the continent, new cultural cores developed on the periphery of New England's domain. Cities including Chicago, New Orleans, and San Francisco grew not only into economic centers for surrounding regions, but places where ideas and artistic culture were shared. Despite the contemporary dominance (through print, film, and broadcast media) of New York and Los Angeles, Gastil characterizes American culture as

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decentralized, with many cultural domains (ie. regions) and core cities with varying influences. His model has important implications for literary culture, modernist or otherwise:

Understanding of core and periphery makes possible a view of American history in terms of growth and contraction of core-domain-periphery relations in our society. It suggests that we look for further creativity through the revitalization of old core cultures or the creation of new cultures at the periphery of the old.⁶⁸

The "revitalization" of cities implies a role for artistic and intellectual culture as well as architectural planning and political reform. By emphasizing urban experience and the cosmopolitan world of ideas, modernist and post-modernist writers have maintained the cultural function of cities. Similarly, the "peripheral" perspectives of neo-Romantic counter-modernists cause readers to value small town, rural, and wild places as sources of artistic inspiration and cultural renewal. As Jim Wayne Miller argues, "writers play an important role in the process of our becoming a land and people, in discovering, through literature, the land and life of different parts of the nation."⁶⁹ This continuing literary diversification has contributed to the creation of distinct American regions.

The concept of region is essential to geography, which is in great part the study of regions. Geographer Robert E. Dickinson defines "the regional concept" as the process "whereby phenomena associate on the earth's surface in spatial groupings, physical, biotic, or human," bound by "symbiotic or interconnected relations of one place with another."⁷⁰ Regions, then, are not meaningful if thought of as isolated, hermetic entities. They are defined by contrast and comparison with other regions, by what they share--topographically and culturally--with their neighbors, as well as by their internal diversity, natural as well as



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cultural. Since humanistic studies are based on the belief that cultures benefit from an free exchange of ideas and materials, what James I. McClintock calls the "universal-particular paradox"⁷¹ is essential to the employment of the regional concept in the service of what Miller describes as a "cosmopolitan regionalism":

a regional perspective which does not exclude a knowledge of the wider world, but is concerned with and appreciative of the little traditions within the great traditions of human history, and of ways in which small and great traditions are connected--[which] can stimulate greater interest in and study of the role of place in literature generally. . . .⁷²

Contrary to the notion that "regionalism" and "localism" are synonymous with "separatism" and "parochialism," writers who express strong senses of place are often the most vocal proponents of cross-cultural study. The influence of Eastern philosophy and poetry on the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau has been well documented. William Carlos Williams immersed himself in the art of many cultures, including the poetry of Chaucer and the painting of Brueghel. Among American poets since World War II, midwesterners Robert Bly and James Wright have been instrumental in expanding the American understanding of the modern by popularizing, through translation, the poets of Spanish *modernismo* (Dario, García Lorca, Vallejo, Neruda) as well as Germans (Rilke and Trakl), incorporating lessons learned from these authors into their own poetry. As Wright once said in an interview, "I'm not saying that the value of poetry depends on writing about a place or not writing about a place, only that there is . . . a poetry of place. It appeals to me very much."⁷³ That appeal originates in the beauty and accuracy of an author's evocation of place, and culminates in the enrichment of cultures, local, regional, national, and international.



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One social effect of the American literature of place has been an increased ecological awareness of the inseparability of human well-being, physical and spiritual, from the health of local environments. By appreciating not only the concept of "place," but particular *places* in larger cultural and geographical contexts, we learn, according to geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, "to contrast the evils of the arrogance of power, the threat of a world that is becoming uniform, and the destruction of nature, with the goodness and beauty of local pride and local customs."⁷⁴ There is, however, a growing consensus, according to Edward Relph, that "the means of experiencing, creating, and maintaining significant places . . . are disappearing and that 'placelessness'--the weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities of places--is now a dominant force."⁷⁵ Relph argues that our international consumer culture tends to homogenize landscapes, among other means, by developing identical roads and architecture in all regions and by failing to preserve natural communities such as forests and streams. Barry Lopez, author of *Arctic Dreams* (1986) and other books about particular landscapes, lists the threats to the "geographies of North America" as "ignorance of what makes them unique . . . utilitarian attitudes . . . failure to include them in the moral universe, and . . . brutal disregard."⁷⁶

By giving creative voice to the interconnectedness of culture and nature, of people and place, American authors provide a continuing critique of the attitudes contributing to placelessness and the misuse of landscape. Writers have played an important role in the environmental movement, indirectly by promoting a vision of life in harmony with nature, and directly by inspiring action to preserve



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landscapes and ecosystems. Thoreau's residence by Walden Pond is the symbolic beginning of modern environmentalism, his book *Walden* its first great text. John Muir's accounts of adventures in the Californian wilderness, including *The Mountains of California* (1894) and *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), were instrumental in the establishment of both Yosemite National Park and the Sierra Club. More recently, the essays and fiction of Edward Abbey, author of *Desert Solitaire* (1968), have increased awareness of the American Southwest desert, even inspiring the formation of a controversial direct action group, Earth First!, dedicated to the defense of the desert and other fragile landscapes. Wendell Berry of Kentucky has written several widely read books of essays, poetry, and fiction which celebrate and defend the integrity of rural communities, promoting a new, ecologically responsible ("sustainable") agriculture as well as a regionalism "defined simply as local life aware of itself" which "pertains to living as much as to writing, and . . . pertains to living before it pertains to writing."⁷⁷ Regional thinking seems to have culminated in *bioregionalism*, a new cultural and political philosophy promoting political decentralization, greater local control of natural resources, and a redefining of boundaries and sovereignty to match natural criteria. Not surprisingly, the most articulate proponent of this place-centered philosophy is an American poet, Gary Snyder, who advocates literary and political bioregionalism in poetry and prose statements that are an essential reference in discussing place and landscape in contemporary literature. Snyder introduces *Turtle Island* (1974), a Pulitzer Prize winning book of poetry, by dedicating his work to the bioregional ideal:

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watersheds and life-communities--plant zones, physiographic provinces, culture areas; following natural boundaries. The "U.S.A." and its states and counties are arbitrary and inaccurate impositions on what is really here.⁷⁸

The bioregional project, summarized by Kirkpatrick Sale in *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (1985) as a process of "knowing the land, learning the lore, developing the potential, and freeing the self,"⁷⁹ is a political extension of ideals developed in great part by the American literature here discussed. Places like Walden Pond, Yosemite Park, and even particular towns and neighborhoods are recognized and cherished because of their literary associations. But the protection of such valued places requires active citizenship, especially at the local level. The "ecological benefits of bioregionalism, of cultivating a sense of place," according to Snyder, "are that there will then be a people to be the People in the place . . . in terms of implementing and carrying through legislation as mandated."⁸⁰ The writing of a law is similar to the writing of a poem or novel as a recognition of a place's natural and cultural value. Protection of the place is potential, not inherent in the written word; bioregionalism therefore emphasizes a personal attachment to place that originates in emotion but is expressed in action.

The basis of this continuing American neo-romanticism is a deeply spiritual vision of nature and the human place in nature. As Mircea Eliade, one of the great scholars of religion, has written:

since to settle somewhere, to inhabit a space, is equivalent to repeating the cosmogony and hence to imitating the work of the gods, it follows that, for religious man, every existential decision to situate himself in space in fact constitutes a religious decision.⁸¹

The sacred quality of places enables individuals, according to Snyder,

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to make "intimate contact with wild world, wild self. Sacred refers to that which helps take us out of our little selves into the larger self of the whole universe."⁸² Though distinctly Buddhist, Snyder's description of a communion with place is compatible with Native American religions as well as the insights of American writers since Emerson, who confessed to finding in "the tranquil landscape" something "more dear and connate than in streets or villages." The most famous passage in *Nature* best exemplifies the experience of place epiphany:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. . . . Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.⁸³

Spiritually motivated or otherwise, the conservation of nature requires a respectful attitude toward place and landscape that exceeds mere utilitarianism. As ecologist Aldo Leopold states in summary of his famous "land ethic":

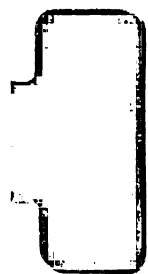
When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture.⁸⁴

Leopold's "esthetic harvest" includes the literature of landscape and place particularly strong and diverse in the United States, which by stressing the experience of place counteracts the trend toward placelessness and environmental ignorance of which writers have long been warning us. By knowing the land directly, and by learning the lore of places--including literature--specifically social and political goals of a developed potential and a freed selfhood become realizable.

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America may yet see itself from the vantage of Whitman's "democratic vistas," fulfilling Snyder's hope that "by our grandchildren's time there may begin to be a culture of place again in America."⁸⁵



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¹John Conron, *The American Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), xviii.

²I take the prioritizing for these definitions from Webster's Dictionary.

³See John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984) for an excellent etymological discussion of "landscape."

⁴Frederick Turner, *Spirit of Place: The Making of an American Literary Landscape* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1989), ix.

⁵William Wordsworth, "Preface, Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads," in *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 328.

⁶James Houston, "The Concepts of 'Place' and 'Landscape' in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition," in *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems*, ed. David Ley and Marwyn S. Samuels (Chicago: Maaroufa, 1978), 224.

⁷I borrow the term "topoanalysis" from Gaston Bachelard, who defines it as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives." Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 8.

⁸Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 2.

⁹Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 4.

¹⁰Clarence Mondale, "Concepts and Trends in Regional Studies," *American Studies International* 27, no. 1 (April 1989): 13-14.

¹¹See David Canter, *The Psychology of Place* (New York: St. Martin's, 1977).

¹²Outstanding among recent geography texts on region is Michael Bradshaw, *Regions and Regionalism in the United States* (Jackson, MS, 1988). The rather new field of environmental history offers numerous books of distinction; two volumes dealing with particular regions are William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) and William Ashworth, *The Late, Great Lakes* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987).

¹³Karl W. Butzer, ed., *Dimensions of Human Geography: Essays on Some Familiar and Neglected Themes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Department of Geography, 1978), 5. See Butzer's notes for citations of exemplary writings on these topics.

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¹⁴William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley, eds., *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), xi.

¹⁵The classic American Studies texts on American mythic visions of nature are Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage / Random House, 1950) and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

¹⁶Jim Wayne Miller, "Anytime the Ground is Uneven: The Outlook for Regional Studies and What to Look Out For," in Mallory and Simpson-Housley, eds., *Geography and Literature*, 4.

¹⁷James I. McClintock, "Gary Snyder's Poetry & Ecological Science," *Biology Teacher* 54, no. 2 (February 1992): 82.

¹⁸Frederick Turner, (*Spirit of Place*, 18) so designates Emerson's second major essay, "The American Scholar" (1837). I call it a draw.

¹⁹Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 7.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 48.

²¹Roland Van Zandt, cited in Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (London: Wiley, 1975), 41.

²²Roderick Nash, *Wilderness in the American Mind*, 3rd ed., (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 67.

²³Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery" (1835), in Conron, *American Landscape*, 568.

²⁴This lack of historical associations was both an incentive and a detriment to artistic expression. Turner argues that earliest American literature suffered from a lack of a "recognizable cultural context." It was, by turns, a "literature of resistance and bewilderment" or "an inventory of economic possibilities." Turner, *Spirit of Place*, 14-15.

²⁵Nash, *Wilderness*, 69.

²⁶Gary Snyder, "Good, Wild, Sacred," in *Meeting the Expectations of the Land*, ed. Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Bruce Colman (San Francisco: North Point, 1984), 204-205.

²⁷Two recent sources of these tales are Barry Lopez, *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping With His Daughter: Coyote Builds North America* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977) and Alethea K. Helbig, *Nanabozhoo, Giver of Life* (Brighton, MI: Green Oak, 1987).

²⁸Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 37.

²⁹Walt Whitman, "Starting from Paumanok," *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Vintage / Library of America, 1982), 186.

³⁰Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *The Natural History Essays* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1980), 112.

³¹Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks 1964-1979* (New

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York: New Directions, 1980), 86.

³²Turner, *Spirit of Place*, 39.

³³Robert Frost, "The Gift Outright," *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, 1969), 348.

³⁴Smith, *Virgin Land*, 47.

³⁵Whitman, "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), *Poetry and Prose*, 5.

³⁶Whitman, "Starting from Paumanok," *Poetry and Prose*, 185.

³⁷William Cronon, "Landscape and Home: Environmental Traditions in Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 74, no. 2 (Winter 1990-1991): 94.

³⁸Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1962), 2-3.

³⁹Cronon, "Landscape and Home," 95.

⁴⁰The following quotation from D.H. Lawrence will effectively clear the palate after this discussion of Manifest Destiny: "Men are free when they are in a living home land, not when they are straying and breaking away . . . the most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom." Lawrence, *Studies*, 186.

⁴¹Nash, *Wilderness*, 143.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 160.

⁴³Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 3.

⁴⁴Conron, *American Landscape*, 413.

⁴⁵Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 477.

⁴⁶Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, rev. ed., (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), xii.

⁴⁷Conron, *American Landscape*, 411.

⁴⁸Lawrence B. Gamache, "Toward a Definition of Modernism," in *The Modernists: Studies in a Literary Phenomenon*, ed. Lawrence B. Gamache and Ian S. Macniven (London: Associated University Presses, 1987), 33.

⁴⁹Nancy Duvall Hargrove, *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), 11.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 15.

⁵¹John Elder, *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 16.

⁵²T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 208.

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⁵³Ibid., 85.

⁵⁴Ibid., 189.

⁵⁵Williams described *The Waste Land* as "the great catastrophe to our letters," complaining that the work he and others like Marianne Moore had undertaken to rediscover "a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions . . . staggered . . . under the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics." William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), 146.

⁵⁶William Carlos Williams, *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, ed. John C. Thirlwall (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), 225.

⁵⁷Walter Scott Peterson, *An Approach to Paterson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 5.

⁵⁸Robert Lowell, cited in William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 2.

⁵⁹Williams, *Paterson*, 28.

⁶⁰Ibid., 7.

⁶¹Ibid., 14.

⁶²Ibid., 17.

⁶³Ibid., 20.

⁶⁴Ibid., 102-103.

⁶⁵William Faulkner, cited in James B. Meriwether and Michael Milgate, eds., *The Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1968), 255.

⁶⁶Raymond D. Gastil, *Cultural Regions of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 42-43.

⁶⁷Ibid., 44.

⁶⁸Ibid., 43.

⁶⁹Jim Wayne Miller, "Anytime the Ground is Uneven," 12.

⁷⁰Robert E. Dickinson, *Regional Ecology: The Study of Man's Environment* (New York: Wiley, 1970), 176.

⁷¹James I. McClintock, "Gary Snyder and Re-inhabiting Place," *Where? Place in Recent American Fiction: The Dolphin* 20 (Spring 1991): 33.

⁷²Miller, 13.

⁷³James Wright, *Collected Prose*, ed. Anne Wright (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 195.

⁷⁴Yi-Fu Tuan, "Cultural Pluralism and Technology," *The Geographical Review* 79, no. 3 (July 1989): 278-279.

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⁷⁵Relf, *Place and Placelessness*, 4.

⁷⁶Barry Lopez, "The American Geographies," *Orion* 8, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 59.

⁷⁷Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 67.

⁷⁸Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), unpaginated "Introductory Note."

⁷⁹Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985), 44-47.

⁸⁰Gary Snyder, *Real Work*, 140.

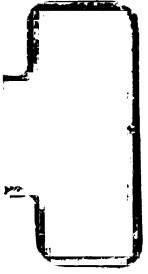
⁸¹Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 65.

⁸²Snyder, "Good, Wild, Sacred," 205.

⁸³Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 10.

⁸⁴Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine, 1970), xviii-xix.

⁸⁵Snyder, "Good, Wild, Sacred," 206.



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Chapter 2

Place and Landscape in Midwestern Literature

We shall never achieve harmony with land, any more
than we shall achieve absolute justice or liberty for
people. In these higher aspirations, the important
thing is not to achieve, but to strive.

Aldo Leopold
"Natural History," *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)

Topography is perfect, curio-size;
Deft as landscape in museum cases.
What is beautiful is friendly and underfoot,
Not flaunted like theater curtains in our faces.
No peak or jungle obscures the blue sky;
Our land rides smoothly in the softest eye.

John Frederick Nims
"Midwest," *The Iron Pastoral* (1947)

Like nations, regions exist as combinations of geographical fact and historically determined, culturally bound perceptions about place. All regions have defining myths or symbolic identities; the American East has its Puritan heritage and status as the cradle of Anglo-American culture, the West, its perpetual connection with wilderness, frontier opportunities, and youthful exuberance. The identity of the American Midwest (or Middle West) is perhaps more complex than that of other regions; literally the "middle" of the North American continent, it is also the perceptual core--the "Heartland"--of the United States, a region whose people, culture, and landscape are often described as being typically "American."¹ In *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989), James R. Shortridge argues for a national context for Midwestern regional identity, based on three controlling American myths: "pastoral idealism, unfettered youthfulness, and world leadership in



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technology." These myths have been longitudinally generalized to three regions: the "East as the embodiment of American technological might and the West as the land of eternal youth,"² leaving the Midwest, the agricultural heartland, to exemplify through images of fruitful fields, hardworking, conservative folk, and quiet small towns, the pastoral vision or myth of America: a peaceful agrarian kingdom between--and away from--the extremes of urban sophistication (and corruption) and the moral license of unsettled frontiers. Although urbanization and industrialization continue to claim much of the region's landscape, particularly in the Lower Great Lakes, the Midwest is consistently defined by what Leo Marx identifies in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) as "the cardinal image of American aspirations . . . a rural landscape, a well-ordered green garden magnified to continental size."³ This image is central to the regional identity of the Midwest, particularly as expressed in its century old literary tradition. In poems, fictions, and essays, noted authors from the Midwest have done much to develop this pastoral myth, while testing its validity in their artistic depictions of the region's people and landscapes.

Though by now the Midwest, according to geographers Stephen S. Birdsall and John W. Florin "is clearly a region of farms and factories, of a white, Protestant, dispersed, agricultural population and black and immigrant, clustered, urban populations,"⁴ the region's pastoral image has deep historical roots. The territory that would become the present states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota was settled under the auspices of a series of Federal Land Acts, beginning in 1784 and climaxing with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787,

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which provided for the division of the "western" territories into states, counties, townships, sections, and parts of sections for farming, and for the democratic governance of these new political units. The "Northwest Territory," as it came to be known, was the first planned settlement of a large region in history, the manner of its settlement and development being largely determined before a single legal settler entered the area. That this territory would be free, not slave-holding, agricultural, not industrial, governed by reason and not by anarchy, was the wish and design largely of one man, who may deserve the designation of the first Midwesterner: Thomas Jefferson. According to Graham Hutton in *Midwest at Noon* (1946), Jefferson "deliberately fostered Midwest settlement to offset the dominance of commercial New England . . . [seeing] in the new Midwest the basis of a free peasant-farmers' society which would never (he thought) be run by city mobs and a city proletariat."⁵ To create this American Arcadia, Jefferson sought to provide, as he wrote to James Madison in 1785, "by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land [because] small landholders are the most precious part of a state."⁶

But if Jefferson's motives were democratic and idealistic, his means were rationalist and Cartesian. The immense size of the Northwest Territory (and the Louisiana Purchase of Jefferson's presidency, for that matter) required a more systematic and predictable system for establishing land tenure than the traditional "metes and bounds" of New England, by which land holdings were legally described in terms of natural borders between properties such as streams, lakes, ridges, even individual trees and rocks. The American Midwest would instead be surveyed, sold, and developed according to a system of intersecting

lines and square subdivisions; upon what Richard Rhodes describes in *The Inland Ground: An Evocation of the American Middle West* (1991) as a "Dionysian land, a Dionysian continent, plains and torturous rivers and sharp mountains and wandering shores," Jefferson overlaid "a Euclidian grid as if Apollo truly reigned and the Furies were forever banished."⁷ The present day Midwestern landscape, including the Old Northwest and the states of Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and North Dakota, bears Jefferson's grid as its distinguishing characteristic. Most roads, often at one mile intervals to correspond with section lines, run north-south or east-west, and the township (a square with six mile sides, divided into thirty-six sections of one square mile each, each square mile of six hundred and forty acres broken into eighty or forty acre parcels) marks the landscape like no other feature. As Michael Martone, editor of *Townships* (1992), a book of essays about Midwestern places, writes, "We know the Midwest by this arbitrary and artificial pattern that has been imposed upon it."⁸

We also know the Midwest by its relatively level topography, a feature obvious enough that geographer John Frazier Hart begins his noted essay on the region with the tersest possible statement: "The Middle West is flat."⁹ Popular conceptions inherited from the Romantic era about what constitutes natural beauty favor the sublimity of mountain or maritime landscapes not present in the Midwest, which as contemporary novelist and poet Jim Harrison writes of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, "lacks the drama and differentiation favored by the garden-variety nature buff."¹⁰ A century and a half of dramatic alterations of Midwestern landscapes for agriculture, forestry, industry, and human residence are a further challenge to those who would celebrate the

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natural character of this almost completely humanized inland environment. Since the region's primeval forests and tall grass prairies were early reduced to small remnants, Midwestern writers have tended to dwell on picturesque qualities in the landscape--quieter, less dramatic beauty resulting from subtle irregularities and the juxtaposition of human and natural elements--and to observe natural enclaves within the altered landscape with an attention that is reverent and at times even transcendental. Even when they have been harshly critical of the region's culture, Midwestern writers have written lovingly of its landscapes and unique places.

The necessary context for reading works of classic Midwestern literature is the agrarian culture that matured in the region during the nineteenth century and came to national recognition through the acceptance of "Middle West" as a regional label by 1915.¹¹ By that time, according to James R. Shortridge, "development and self-confidence had reached such a stage that the Middle West had become the standard by which to judge the rest of the nation." Values associated with the region's pastoral image--democracy, egalitarianism, progressivism, hard work, and moral rectitude--contributed to what Shortridge describes as "the tendency to see the region as the 'middle ground' both figuratively and literally between the urbanized East and the western wilderness."¹² This pastoral idealism amounted to what John Frazier Hart terms a "family farm ideology [which] took root and flourished in the Middle West," distinguished by the following seven core beliefs:

- 1) hard work is a virtue;
- 2) anyone who works hard can make good;
- 3) anyone who fails to make good is lazy;
- 4) a man's true worth can be determined by his income;
- 5) a self-made man is better than one to the manor born;

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- 6) a family is responsible for its own economic security; and
- 7) the best government is the least government.¹³

This essentially middle-class world view, described by Lewis Atherton in *Main Street on the Middle Border* (1954) as "the cult of the immediately useful and the practical,"¹⁴ originated with the exigencies of frontier survival and matured in the market oriented culture of small towns. Twentieth century advances in technology and in mass culture entertainment and fashion would reinforce the pragmatic tendency of Midwestern (and by extension, American) culture by promoting materialistic values including short term profit, mobility, fashion, and convenience.

In respect to regional landscape and literature, this ideology manifested itself in utilitarian attitudes toward nature and a strong current of anti-intellectualism in Midwestern culture. Alexis de Tocqueville, French observer of American customs who travelled from New York to Michigan in the 1830's, noted both of these cultural traits in *Democracy in America* (1840):

I readily admit that Americans have no poets; I cannot allow that they have no poetic ideas. In Europe the people talk a great deal of the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them: they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate Nature, and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests which surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet. Their eyes are fixed upon another sight: the American people views its own march across these wilds--drying swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing Nature.¹⁵

As Atherton observes, Tocqueville's was "a discriminating judgement that was still applicable . . . for years to come."¹⁶ The forests of the eastern part of the Midwest and the original prairies to the west were so extensive in their natural state that they were perceived to be inexhaustible, and were therefore not missed until they were gone. At the end of the nineteenth century, conservationists promoted the



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planting of trees as an effective safeguard against drought, deluge, and damaging winds--in other words, in terms of "the immediately useful and practical." Aesthetic and spiritual reasons for preserving nature were much harder to promulgate in such a utilitarian society.

Atherton also posits three corollaries to the "cult of the immediately useful and the practical": (1) the belief that "every art and profession must justify itself financially"; (2) "that 'artistic matters' should be left to females"; and (3) "that artistic and intellectual activities must conform to local standards of morality."¹⁷ These social standards for the arts were evidenced by the popularity of sentimental verse, such as was written by Will Carleton, one of the most widely read poets in the nineteenth century Midwest. In the poem "Tom Was Goin' For a Poet," Carleton tells of the reaction in a farming community to one young man's interest in poetry. Tom's neighbors "watched him from a distance, an' held his mind in doubt, / An' wondered if Tom wasn't shaky, or knew what he was about." Tom's father questions his son's masculinity, hoping the young man will concentrate on more practical activities like plowing a straight furrow:

Tom was goin' for a poet, an' said he'd a poet be;
 One of these long-haired fellers a feller hates to see;

 Poets are good for somethin', so long as they stand at the head;
 But poetry's worth whatever it fetches in butter an' bread.¹⁸

As contemporary Illinois poet and critic Lisel Mueller writes, "[f]or these people, experience was the touchstone of knowledge. As a result, the society was characterized by considerable anti-intellectualism and a distrust of 'impractical,' abstract thinking. . . . the folksy, home-spun versifier may be able to feel at home, but the real poet must put up with the status of village idiot."¹⁹

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Midwestern literature developed in the early twentieth century in reaction to American anti-intellectualism, materialism, and puritanical social proprieties; authors sought in the best tradition of realism to depict life as they knew it, not according to outdated ideals. Poets and novelists such as Edgar Lee Masters and Sinclair Lewis were at times harshly critical of Midwestern society as it was developing out of its agrarian period into the modern industrial order. But these early masters of Midwestern literature were not dismissive or contemptuous of the region and its people; rather, in depicting individual experiences in Midwestern places, their fictions contrasted what the region had become--oligarchical, impersonal, and industrial (*Hamiltonian* according to some, after Alexander Hamilton, Jefferson's Federalist nemesis)--with the Jeffersonian ideals that had settled it: egalitarianism, individualism, and a life lived close to nature.²⁰ They shared not only social philosopher (and Wisconsin native) Thorstein Veblen's dismay over America's growing materialism, but the hope of historian (and Veblen's fellow Wisconsin native) Frederick Jackson Turner that "if the ideals of the pioneers shall survive the inundation of material success, we may expect to see in the Middle West the rise of a highly intelligent society where culture shall be reconciled with democracy in the large."²¹ Like reformers, journalists, and labor activists of the period, these literary artists, in Lisel Mueller's words, "attacked the gradual debasement of the pioneer heritage by industrial encroachment, which brought with it ugliness, conformity, corruption, crime, the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few, and . . . [the] cheapening of life values. . . ."²² They sought to break repressive traditions by representing life as they knew it, and to find reason

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for optimism about the region's future, social as well as literary.

One early sign of an emergent Midwestern literature was the publication of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), the book that Ernest Hemingway would later claim marked the beginning of American literature. Twain's dramatization of a Missouri boy's travails in a harsh social environment, accompanied by an accurate representation of regional speech and poetic description of the mighty Mississippi River made the novel a central text of American realism and naturalism and an acknowledged classic of world literature. It speaks to universal human desires and conflicts, while figuring prominently in the mythic formation of national and regional identities. Subsequent authors in the Midwestern literary tradition sought, with varying degrees of success, the kind of universality Twain had achieved by writing realistically about human dilemmas--social, economic, environmental, and spiritual--as worked out in particular places. Authors like Hamlin Garland, Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Ernest Hemingway expressed their social and geographical senses of place in language that is both spare and fluid, descriptive and evocative, and hence characteristically Midwestern. Since the Midwestern landscape was successively experienced as rural, small town, and urban, it is useful to consider these authors in terms of those settings, rather than according to the chronology of publication dates in discussing the role of place and landscape in their writings.

There are two conflicting views of the Midwestern agrarian frontier, both expressed in literature about the pioneer experience.²³ The first is consistent with the American pastoral ideal in its purest

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symbolic form--the vision of the continental interior as what Henry Nash Smith calls in *Virgin Land* (1950) "the Garden of the World," a "master symbol [that] . . . embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow."²⁴ No writer expressed this vision of the early Midwest as memorably as Willa Cather, particularly in her three novels of pioneer Nebraska: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Antonia* (1918), and *A Lost Lady* (1923), the central characters of which must become physically and emotionally attached to the prairie landscape in order to achieve spiritual fulfillment as well as financial success. In her Nebraska novels, as I discuss in Chapter 3, Cather combines elements of literary genres including epic and classical pastoral in expressing her romantic view of people and nature.

The second literary view of the early agrarian Midwest is as paradise lost. Speaking of the 1862 Homestead Act, which in Jeffersonian fashion was meant to ease the transfer of public lands to individual farmers, Henry Nash Smith observes that the pastoral dream of an "agrarian utopia in the garden of the world was destroyed, or rather aborted, by the land speculator and the railroad monopolists" who represented "larger forces in American society after the Civil War--the machine, the devices of corporation finance, and the power of big business. . . ."²⁵ Cather personifies these forces in Ivy Peters, the snake-like villain of *A Lost Lady* who not only corrupts the gracious Mrs. Forrester but obtains her land, going so far as to drain a beautiful wetland just out of spite. Such callousness is the dominant source of conflict in Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), a central text in American

realism that is perhaps the strongest literary expression of populist discontent over conditions in the agricultural Midwest. Garland occasionally evokes the beauty of the "Middle Border" landscape in passages that anticipate Cather's lyricism, admitting in a brief preface to the collection that the symbolic "main-travelled road" of the title "does sometimes cross a rich meadow where the songs of the larks and bobolinks and blackbirds are tangled . . . it may lead past a bend in the river where the water laughs eternally over its shadows." But the natural terrain has imposed upon it a parsimonious human landscape that defeats even honest work and planning: the road "is long and wearyful, and has a dull little town at one end and a home of toil at the other . . . it is traversed by many classes of people, but the poor and the weary predominate."²⁶ Prosperity and repose are hard to achieve not through any deficiency in the land, but because of usurious characters like Jim Butler in the story "Under the Lion's Paw," who deceives renters into making improvements that they will never profit by. Garland's stories depict life on the agricultural frontier not only as tiring, lonely, and uncomfortable, but positively tragic when empathy and fairness were absent in economic relations.

Classic Midwestern writers were as unrelentingly critical--and, by dint of their attentions, celebratory--of the small town as Garland had been of frontier life. The realism of now canonical works by Edgar Lee Masters, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson went beyond the precedent set by Twain and European writers like Gustave Flaubert in frankly treating theretofore taboo aspects of human behavior, including sexuality. Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) caused a popular and critical uproar for portraying a fictional Illinois town not as a mythic

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haven of virtue in an ever more sophisticated and corrupt urban America, but as the home of real, flawed people as prone to hypocrisy, greed, and lust as anyone. These free verse poems, modeled on classical Greek epigrams, give voices to the dead in the town cemetery; they amount to what critic Robert Narveson calls a "simple assertion of common nature and motives in city people and country people [that] was not only shocking but liberating":

The individual portraits portray the gamut of human emotions, desires, compulsions; and petty viciousness in one character is balanced by grandeur of soul in another. Far from repudiating the American pastoral myth, Masters made it central in his thought; but he was aware that the agrarian ideal differed from the actual condition of life in his times.²⁷

This contrast between pastoral possibility and usurious reality is made clear by Schroeder the Fisherman, who characterizes himself and his relation to significant place, sitting "on the bank above Bernadotte" throwing crumbs to the minnows, or going to his "little pasture / Where the peaceful swine were asleep in the wallow," to feed corn to his hogs. The competition of animals, both wild and domestic, over food reminds Schroeder of "how Christian Dallman's farm, / Of more than three thousand acres, / Swallowed the patch of Felix Schmidt, / As a bass will swallow a minnow." Men in Illinois, Schroeder concludes, are showing themselves to be no better than fish or hogs; at three thousand acres (and growing) Dallman's farm is, as Masters implies, much larger than can be worked and intimately appreciated as a landscape, as is Schroeder's "little pasture." In wishing to see at work a "Spirit, or conscience, or breath of God / That makes [man] different from fishes or hogs," Schroeder invokes the pastoral ideal of a generous and egalitarian society.²⁸

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Sinclair Lewis' novel *Main Street* (1920) is another highly critical view of Midwestern small town society in the early twentieth century, a picture of a smugly self-satisfied society ignoring its best traditions and valuing above all else material possessions and social propriety. This best selling satire had a major impact on popular perceptions of the Midwest; as Lewis Atherton says, it "penetrated the consciousness of even the obtuse, and thus joined with *Spoon River* in completing an indictment which now influenced all classes of Americans."²⁹ *Main Street* is the story of Carol Kennicott, a young college graduate with dreams of making a difference, of bringing artistic culture and civic pride to a small Midwestern town. As she exclaims one day on her way to class, "That's what I'll do after college! I'll get my hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful. Be an inspiration. . . . I'll make 'em put in a village green, and darling cottages, and a quaint Main Street!"³⁰ But the town of Gopher Prairie, to which Carol moves after marrying the staid Dr. Will Kennecott, is anything but quaint and picturesque. Its architecture is ugly and barely functional and there is no park or village green; there is, in short, nothing to suggest "that, in the fifty years of Gopher Prairie's existence, the citizens had realized that it was either desirable or possible to make this, their common home, amusing or attractive."³¹ The residents of this desolate place are a "savorless people, gulping tasteless food . . . listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world."³²

The story of *Main Street* is essentially Carol's struggle to improve Gopher Prairie, not only to beautify the town but to enlighten

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the artless, trivial, and prejudiced townspeople, who resist and eventually defeat her plans. Lewis portrays the conformity, priggishness, and materialism of Gopher Prairie in such detail that the book's satire has become its most famous aspect. But Lewis had a broad vision of how this fictional town, and the real Midwest, had come to be, and what it might become.³³ James R. Shortridge observes that "Lewis ultimately pictured Gopher Prairie, and thus the Middle West, as a tragedy":

The potential for a great civilization existed in the fertile land, and a vision of this greatness had been glimpsed by the first generation of settlers. The second generation had lost sight of the dream. Corrupted by an obsession with the material side of success, they broke the pastoral tie.³⁴

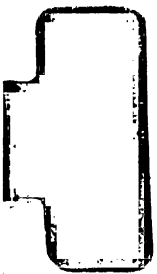
From the novel's first sentence Lewis places his critique in this historical and geographical context: "On a hill by the Mississippi where Chippewas camped two generations ago, a girl stood in relief against the cornflower blue of Northern sky." Of course, the satire begins immediately; Carol isn't thinking about Indians or pioneers, but about "walnut fudge, the plays of Brieux, the reasons why heels run over, and the fact that the chemistry instructor had stared at the new coiffure which concealed her ears." But despite her shortcomings--the pretensions, insecurities, and escapist tendencies that Lewis satirizes almost as much as the dullness and hypocrisy of Gopher Prairie--Carol is the heroine of *Main Street*, a "rebellious girl [who] is the spirit of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest."³⁵ Had Carol lived in an era less repressive of women's ambitions, she might have been a landscape architect or planning commissioner: her critique of Gopher Prairie is a study in environmental perceptions consistent with the work of recent geographers like Edward Relph who see in modern land use and mass attitudes an "inauthentic attitude to place" in which places "are



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seen only in terms of their functional and technical properties and potentials."³⁶ Carol understands that what makes the town so dull is the standardization and loss of regional and ethnic diversity that is occurring everywhere in America. While she never approaches the mystical oneness with the prairie associated with Willa Cather's heroines, Carol does perceive in the landscape and in people like the Swedish farmers who still live closely with nature, "the dignity and greatness which had failed her in Main Street."³⁷ Carol recognizes in the wholesale assimilation of diverse ethnic customs ("Scandinavian women zealously exchanging their spiced pudding and red jackets for fried pork chops and congealed white blouses, trading the ancient Christmas hymns of the fjords for 'She's My Jazzland Cutie'") the loss of "whatever pleasant new customs they might have added to the life of the town."³⁸ Her critique of placelessness is similarly insightful, extending beyond architecture to encompass the "neglect of natural advantages, so that the hills are covered with brush, the lakes shut off by railroads, and the creeks lined with dumping-grounds."³⁹ Through Carol Kennecott, Sinclair Lewis expresses his outrage over this indifference toward nature and place, one symptom of the materialism and lack of cultural vision he believed limited human freedom and fulfillment not only in the Midwest, but everywhere in modern America.

We find in the life and work of Sherwood Anderson perhaps the best illustration of the transformation of the Midwest from a rural to an urban oriented society, and of the psychic conflict resulting from this massive change. A product of small town society who lived in cities during crucial periods of his life, Anderson addressed what David D. Anderson calls "the difference between the American ideal as he had



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learned it and its actuality as he had seen it put into practice during the years when America became dominated by material things at the cost of the values inherent in the ideal."⁴⁰ From his boyhood in late nineteenth century Clyde, Ohio, Anderson was intimately familiar with the positive aspects of small town life--neighborliness, participatory democracy, the proximity of natural landscapes--and the negative attributes which he would characterize as "the grotesque." His best fictions are concerned with the tension between ideals and realities as understood by individuals who have widely varying abilities to act on their desires, and for whom any success is ambiguous.

The notion of success, particularly financial success, was central to Anderson's emergence as a writer. As the son of a harness maker who was unable to adjust to the economic changes then underway, Anderson was bound to see in the American ideology of hard work and "the immediately useful and practical" his own best hope for an improved station. He was nicknamed "Jobby" for the opportunism and diligence which eventually took him to the presidency first of a Cleveland merchandising firm, then of his own successful paint company. By the prevailing standards Anderson was himself a great success--a prosperous businessman with a wife and three children, who wrote fiction in his spare time. But he became increasingly troubled with his life, torn between his literary aspirations and his family and business duties. In 1912, Anderson's nervous system forced a decision: he experienced a breakdown, and after wandering the streets of Cleveland for some time was found, dazed and incoherent. After being hospitalized, Anderson disposed of his business obligations and left his family to pursue his writing career in Chicago.

As important as the actual events which led to Anderson's decision

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is Anderson's story about his crisis, which though apocryphal provides insight into the writer he was then becoming. According to Anderson, he was dictating a letter to his secretary when of a sudden he was struck by the pointlessness of his life in business. In a visionary moment, he looked down at his feet and said "I have been wading in a long river and my feet are wet. My feet are cold, wet, and heavy from long walking in a river. Now I shall go walk on dry land."⁴¹ He then arose to walk out the door and away from his business forever, determined to follow his muse.

The metaphor of a river and dry land is significant for its romantic organicism and as a mythical representation of Anderson's situation in the imagery of landscape. In this image, Anderson arises from powerless wading in the stream of time to walk on dry earth, on the solid ground of the region that would be the subject matter of his writing. Within six years Anderson would publish the two novels, *Windy McPherson's Son* (1916) and *Marching Men* (1917), on which he had been working for a number of years, as well as *Mid-American Chants* (1918), a book of poems that magnifies Anderson's visionary moment into a mythology of the Midwest poised between eras, between the pastoral past and the industrial present and future. While admittedly poor, these poems were, according to critic Bernard Duffey, "unquestionably of first-rate importance for their author" because they represent "a deep conversion from fear and bewilderment at the Midwest and its ways [characteristic of Anderson's first two novels] to a sympathetic concern for it."⁴² Anderson acknowledges the book's deficiencies in his foreword, offering the poems as encouragement for other, superior poets who may deliver "an answering and clearer call in the hearts of other

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Mid-Americans."⁴³ The poems seek a conciliation between pastoral values, symbolized by rich cornfields, slow rivers, and self-sufficient nineteenth century villages, and the new industrial urban order which threatens these values and landscapes, "Chicago triumphant--factories and / marts and the roar of machines--horrible, terrible, ugly, / and brutal."⁴⁴ For Anderson, the creation of a region involves a mythical struggle that can be mediated only by song, which "belongs with and has its birth in the memory of older things than we know." A place, in other words, is a place only "when many generations of men have walked the streets of the city or wandered at night in the hills of an old land" to identify "the memory haunted places."⁴⁵ These singers must know the land and learn the lore in order to sing the place into being.

The one remarkable, even lovely poem among the *Mid-American Chants* is "Mid-American Prayer," a meditation on place in which Anderson asks the people of the Midwest to fulfill the promise of their region, to balance the traditional and the modern by sacralizing the landscape:

that these
fields and places, out here west of Pittsburgh, may become sacred places, that because of this terrible thing, of which we may now become a part, there is hope of hardness and leanness--that we may get to lives of which we may be unashamed.

Anderson recalls his boyhood in Ohio, when he perceived the sacredness of places, "defying the New Englanders' gods, trying to find honest, mid-western American gods" by praying "in the night by a strip of broken rail fence--in the rain--walking alone in meadows--in the hundred secret places that youth knows," much as had the Indians who once lived there, "dancing and fighting and praying while they said big words--medicine words." But all of this ritual and reflection is less retrospective

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than anticipatory: Anderson is praying for the infusion of the old pastoral values into the modern industrial age:

It is the time of the opening of doors.
No talk now of what we can do for the old world.
Talk and dream now of what the old world can bring to us
--the true sense of real suffering out of which may come
the sweeter brotherhood.⁴⁶

Like that of other Midwestern authors, Anderson's "sense of place" was inseparable from a "sense of time," described by David D. Anderson as the knowledge "that the Midwest out of which they came was historical as well as geographical and psychological, and that its time had passed."⁴⁷ In *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), his most noteworthy contribution to American literature, Anderson recreated the historical moment when the Midwest was poised between eras, the agricultural and the industrial, and the small town was about to lose its brief dominance over the region's cultural landscape. The opening of "Hands," the first narrative in *Winesburg*, is appropriate to the tone Anderson wished to establish for the entire volume:

Upon the half decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio, a fat little old man walked nervously up and down. Across a long field that had been seeded for clover but that had produced a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds, he could see the public highway. . . .⁴⁸

There is in this description a strong sense of the liminal, of a place and its people perched precariously between the past and an unknown future. The veranda, one of many similar locations in *Winesburg*, is "half decayed" as are the certitudes and confidences of the town's inhabitants, who may be said to be "near the edge of a ravine" in a spiritual sense. Nervousness like the old man's is the predominant emotion in *Winesburg*--nervousness about the future, about how to express feelings and establish intimacies, and about the efficacy of pastoral

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values which are having a hard time surviving--a field seeded for clover producing weeds, a highway leading into an unimaginable future.⁴⁹

One story which illustrates many of the themes of *Winesburg, Ohio* is "The Untold Lie," in which Hal, a young farm hand, reveals to Ray, his older coworker, that he has gotten his girlfriend Nell pregnant and is torn between his desire for freedom and his sense of responsibility. Though Ray faced a similar crisis when he was young, he finds himself unable to give Hal any advice. The momentary bond shared by these two normally uncommunicative men is reinforced by Anderson's description of the landscape:

There they stood in the big empty field with the quiet corn shocks standing in rows behind them and the red and yellow hills in the distance, and from being just two indifferent workmen they had become all alive to each other. Hal sensed it and because that was his way he laughed. "Well, old daddy," he said awkwardly, "come on, advise me. . . ." ⁵⁰

But Ray fails to convey his mixed feelings about his own life and youthful dreams. When he returns to his house that day, everything appears bleak and hopeless--his rather ramshackle house, his aged wife and weeping children. Anderson magnifies Ray's sense of defeat by contrasting the farm hand's domestic situation with the beauty of the Ohio countryside at sunset, when "the low hills were washed with color and even the little clusters of bushes in the corners of the fences were alive with beauty." Ray experiences another moment of profound realization, "just as he and Hal had suddenly become alive when they stood in the corn field staring into each other's eyes":

The beauty of the country about Winesburg was too much for Ray on that fall evening. That is all there was to it. He could not stand it. Of a sudden he forgot all about being a quiet old farm hand and throwing off the torn overcoat began to run across the field. As he ran he shouted a protest against his life, against all life, against everything that makes life ugly.⁵¹

He runs to catch Hal before the young man speaks to Nell, before Hal has accepted as his fate the kind of life Ray himself has lived to regret. But Hal has already made up his mind, already told his girlfriend, truthfully, that he wants to marry her, settle down, and have a family. The "untold lie" of the story's title is whatever advice Ray might have given Hal. Empathy, after all, is a feeling *for*, not a feeling *with*. The moment shared by these two men makes them more completely human, less lonely and "grotesque," to use Anderson's term. But each lives, necessarily, in a kind of isolation, and must judge his own life for its merits and failures.

"Departure," the last story in *Winesburg, Ohio*, ends with George Willard, the stories' recurring character and sometime protagonist, leaving town in a train to try his fortunes in a city to the west, presumably Chicago. George is the archetypal young man of the period, taking the journey from town to city as did so many young people, both in real life and in other Midwestern fiction of the period, notably in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900). Chicago had not only become the economic nexus of the Midwest, but a gathering place for artists seeking the creative freedom and artistic company unavailable in small towns and cities. As Bernard Duffey writes in *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters* (1954), "the group reality of twentieth-century American literature began in Chicago because in Chicago a chief strain which has formed our modern writing was first recognized . . . a literary culture deliberately hostile to and liberated from the dominant forces of a modern business America."⁵² Between 1890 and 1920, a number of important writers lived in Chicago, including Henry Fuller, Hamlin Garlin, Joseph Kirkland, and Robert Herrick in the earlier period, and

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Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, Sherwood Anderson, and Carl Sandburg in the later. These writers knew one another and benefitted from their associations. Literary magazines, particularly *Poetry* (founded by Harriet Monroe in 1912) and *The Little Review* (founded by Margaret Anderson in 1914) not only published Midwestern writers but placed them in an international context: European and American poets with different regional identifications who appeared in *Poetry* included W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, D.H. Lawrence, and William Carlos Williams.⁵³ By endowing Chicago with a literary life that bore influences both native and foreign, the writers of the Chicago Renaissance made of that mercantile and industrial midland metropolis a cultural core for the Midwest; their work, in turn, made of the provincial Midwest a region proper--a place with its own internationally recognized indigenous art.

There also emerged at this time a literature about Chicago which, according to Carl S. Smith in *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination 1880-1920* (1984), constituted "a major episode in the aesthetic response to the rise of the modern industrial city in America, of which Chicago was by wide agreement a leading example, if not the leading example."⁵⁴ Chicago was ideally situated to become a national center of trade, especially after railroads connected it with the industrial East and the agricultural West. The city's location at the southern end of Lake Michigan (and connection to the Mississippi River via the Illinois and Michigan Canal) made the city a world port, shipping industrial and agricultural products to distant destinations. As newcomers arrived from farms and small towns, and foreign immigrants

from many nations, Chicago grew enormously in population and diversity, as well as in physical terms of city blocks and size of buildings. The human cost of this growth in social stratification and alienation from nature have provided imagery and dramatic conflict for writers who take, according to Smith, "the most overwhelming physical elements of the cityscape . . . and then use them to analyze the city in its entirety."⁵⁵

One notable early effort at a Chicago cityscape in literature is Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* (1916), a major work of the Chicago Renaissance. While much of his later writing is rather diffuse and prosaic, many of Sandburg's early poems successfully express the author's Whitmanian populism by portraying in vivid, specific language the lives of Chicago people. One of the book's best poems is "The Harbor," which reenacts a walk through a poor section of Chicago, a place of "huddled and ugly walls" and "doorways where women / Looked from their hunger-deep eyes." Contrasting with this scene of degradation is the beauty and exuberance of Lake Michigan, as the poet emerges into a "blue burst of lake" above which "a fluttering storm of gulls" soars, pointedly "free in the open"⁵⁶ unlike the people of the city. Sandburg directly addresses the implication of "The Harbor" in the book's next poem, "They Will Say":

Of my city the worst that men will ever say is this:
 You took little children away from the sun and the dew,
 And the glimmer that played in the grass under the great sky,
 And the reckless rain; you put them between walls
 To work, broken and smothered, for bread and wages,
 To eat dust in their throats and die empty-hearted
 For a little handful of pay on a few Saturday nights.⁵⁷

Despite the bleakness of such lines, Sandburg is generally celebratory of the city's energy and potential, as in the famous first lines of

"Chicago":

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the big shoulders. . . .

Sandburg goes on to acknowledge the "terrible burden of destiny" borne by the people who live in this corrupt and brutal place, capturing in his image of "painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys" both the attraction and danger of urban modernity. But the dominant tone of "Chicago" and other Sandburg poems about the city is one of defiant pride, as in his personification of Chicago as a laborer "with lifted head singing so proud to be / alive and coarse and strong and cunning."⁵⁸ The modern world, Sandburg believes, will strike a balance between nature and culture; the excesses of industrialism will be mitigated through a renewal of the traditional pastoral values symbolized by the Midwestern prairie. "Prairie," the first poem in Sandburg's second book, *Cornhuskers* (1918), celebrates "the milk of [the prairie's] wheat, the red of its clover, / the eyes of its women" which gave Sandburg "a song and a slogan." The prairie itself is given lines (slogans perhaps) to speak which affirm Sandburg's faith in a pastoral region with a modern city as its cultural core:

I am here when the cities are gone.
I am here before the cities come.
I nourished the lonely men on horses.
I will keep the laughing men who ride iron.
I am the dust of men.⁵⁹

There is also a long and continuing tradition of Chicago fiction, in which the physical circumstances of the city contribute significantly to narrative conflict. Thus we have Caroline Meeber in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, fresh from a small Indiana town and feeling insignificant amid



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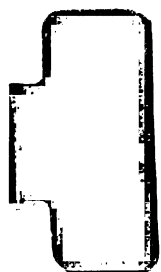
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the massive downtown buildings and glittering department stores. In *The Pit* (1903), Frank Norris depicts the trading room of the Chicago Board of Trade as a scene of economic battle on a mythological level, with Herculean capitalists attempting to corner the wheat market. Upton Sinclair envisions Chicago's enormous stockyards in the muckraking novel *The Jungle* (1906) as a Dantean landscape with rivers of blood and forests of hogs on meathooks, a hellish place that brutalizes those unfortunate enough to inhabit it. The Chicago tradition in fiction continued with James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* (trilogy, 1932-1935), Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), and Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), novels distinguished by the particular ethnic perspectives of protagonists who wish, according to Carl S. Smith, "to be part of a world that satisfies them, that does not deny their personal value and exclude them," but read "in the physical face of the city the forces that crush their spirits and turn them away."⁶⁰ While the sense of place in these novels is primarily urban, the natural landscape is always present beneath the pavement, waiting to be evoked in contrast to the dehumanizing urban environment. In his essay on the sense of place in Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*, Peter A. Carino correlates Studs' youthful potential and that of nineteenth-century America, citing as an illustration Studs' reverie in Washington Park, a moment of transcendental connection with nature ended by the hard reality Studs must return to when he leaves the park. Such moments, according to Carino, remind the reader of nature's "subjugation to urban development and the subsequent ascendance of money and competition at the expense of the humane values and respect for nature which characterized the potential of an earlier America."⁶¹

The Midwest today consists of rural, small town, urban, and scattered "wild" landscapes, which writers continue to employ as settings for their poems, essays, and fictions. The Midwestern pastoral ideal is just that: an ideal, an abstraction against which writers measure the contemporary reality of people and place. Midwestern writers like Sherwood Anderson, and more recently, Theodore Roethke and James Wright, are not wistful for an Arcadia that never was; rather, they exhibit what Leo Marx calls a complex (as opposed to a sentimental) pastoralism which not only invokes "the image of a green landscape--a terrain either wild, or if cultivated, rural--as a symbolic repository of meaning and value" but "acknowledges the reality of history" and "the forces which have stripped the old ideal of most, if not all, of its meaning."⁶² These writers are realists as well as dreamers; if modern society is materialistic and ignorant of (or even antagonistic toward) regional landscapes and history, they present it as such. But in their love of land and lore, of place and people, Midwestern writers abide by the optimistic, if pragmatic, pastoralism of Thomas Jefferson, whose "dialectical" politics, according to Marx, recognize "the constant need to redefine the 'middle landscape' ideal, pushing it ahead, so to speak, into an unknown future to adjust it to ever-changing circumstances."⁶³ We have in the region's literature a vision of a beautiful land full of natural resources--rich soil for farming, trees for lumber, and minerals and metals for industry which can make people rich--and fields, forests, rivers, and lakes which can make people richer yet, if society follows the lead of its writers, artists who have loved Midwestern landscapes and places for their intrinsic beauty and spiritual worth.



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Notes

¹Topographically, the American Midwest may be described as the Interior Plains of North America, situated west and north of the Ohio River, south of Canada, north of the Ozark Plateau, and east of the shortgrass prairie which begins between the ninety-eighth and one-hundredth meridian (an ecotone, or ecological transition, dividing North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas into eastern and western halves, accounting for the simultaneous Western and Midwestern regional identities of those states). Its humid continental climate is characterized by cold winters, warm to hot summers, and by precipitation sufficient for the vegetation of three main biotic provinces: mixed deciduous forest, northern pine-oak forest, and long-grass prairie. The region's climate and rich soils have made it the agricultural (especially corn, wheat, and dairy) heartland of North America. States with at least a partially Midwestern image and self-identification are Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas.

²James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1989), 134.

³Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 141.

⁴Stephen S. Birdsall and John W. Florin, *Regional Landscapes of the United States and Canada*. Second Edition. (New York: Wiley, 1981), 271.

⁵Graham Hutton, *Midwest at Noon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 24.

⁶Thomas Jefferson, cited in Hildegard Binder Johnson, *Order Upon the Land: The U.S. Rectangular Survey and the Upper Mississippi Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 39.

⁷Richard Rhodes, *The Inland Ground: An Evocation of the American Middle West*. Revised ed. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 12.

⁸Michael Martone, ed., *Townships* (Iowa City, IO: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 5.

⁹John Frazier Hart, "The Middle West," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62, no. 2 (June 1972): 258.

¹⁰Jim Harrison, "Passacaglia on Getting Lost," *Just Before Dark: Collected Nonfiction* (Livingston, MT: Clark City, 1991), 263.

¹¹As Birdsall and Florin note, the term "Midwest" and its variants imply "that 'the West' begins at the Appalachians with the closer Middle West gradually merging into the Far West somewhere between the Mississippi River and the Rockies" (Birdsall and Florin 270-271).



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¹²Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 27-28.

¹³John Frazier Hart, "The Middle West," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62, no. 2 (June 1972): 272.

¹⁴Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1954), 116.

¹⁵Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Two volumes. (New York: Knopf, 1945), 74.

¹⁶Atherton, *Main Street*, 31.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 116-117.

¹⁸Will Carleton, *Farm Ballads* (New York: Harper, 1898), 48-49.

¹⁹Lisel Mueller, "Midwestern Poetry: Goodbye to All That," in *In the Middle: Ten Midwestern Women Poets*, ed. Sylvia Griffith Wheeler (Kansas City, MO: BkMk / University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1985), 70.

²⁰Critic Carl Van Doren's notion that classic Midwestern literature constituted a "revolt from the village," a rejection of an apparently "revolting" small town provinciality can be dismissed not only because of the reverence in which the authors concerned--Masters, Lewis, and Anderson--held Midwestern Jeffersonian and pioneer ideals, but because these authors found models for their characters in city dwellers as well as town people. Anderson wrote about Winesburg, and Masters about Spoon River, while living in Chicago. My point is that these authors were concerned with conflicts and changes in the newly industrial society which were affecting people in every environment, rural, small-town, and urban.

²¹Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1948), 156.

²²Mueller, "Midwestern Poetry," 70.

²³See Meyer (1965) for the characteristics of Midwestern farm fiction and an annotated bibliography of the genre.

²⁴Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage, 1950), 138.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 223.

²⁶Hamlin Garland, *Main-Travelled Roads* (New York: Fawcett, 1961), 12.

²⁷Robert Narveson, "Spoon River Anthology: An Introduction," *Midamerica* 7 (1980): 58.

²⁸Edgar Lee Masters, "Schroeder the Fisherman," *Spoon River Anthology* (New York: Collier, 1962), 188. For a personification of Jeffersonianism, see Masters' epitaph for "Jefferson Howard," the Spoon River resident who followed his "father's beliefs from old Virginia" in opposing the town's "dominant forces drawn from New England, Republicans, Calvinists, merchants, bankers . . . the church with its charnel dankness" (Masters 116).

²⁹Atherton, *Main Street*, 109.

³⁰Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York: Harcourt, 1920), 5.

³¹*Ibid.*, 37.

³²*Ibid.*, 265.

³³While based on Lewis' hometown of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, Gopher Prairie is one town in the mythical Midwestern state of Winnemac, the geography of which Lewis develops in several novels, including *Main Street*, *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), and *Elmer Gantry* (1927). The regional representiveness of this fictional state bears comparison with Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi.

³⁴Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 45.

³⁵Lewis, *Main Street*, 1.

³⁶Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 121.

³⁷Lewis, *Main Street*, 58.

³⁸Lewis, *Main Street*, 265-266.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 268.

⁴⁰David D. Anderson, *Sherwood Anderson: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, 1967), 166.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁴²Bernard Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1954), 204.

⁴³Sherwood Anderson, *Mid-American Chants* (New York: Lane, 1918), 8.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 69-72.

⁴⁷David D. Anderson, "The Dimensions of the Midwest." *Midamerica* 1 (1974): 13.

⁴⁸Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 27.

⁴⁹Anderson's novel *Poor White* (1920) depicts the transformation of a Ohio town much like Winesburg into an industrial city. His theme is the human cost of the change from an agrarian, democratic society to an industrial, oligarchic one.

⁵⁰Anderson, "The Untold Lie," *Winesburg, Ohio*, 205.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 207.

⁵²Duffey, *Chicago Renaissance*, 261-262.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 186.

⁵⁴Carl S. Smith, *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), ix.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁶Carl Sandburg, "The Harbor," *Complete Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 5.

⁵⁷Sandburg, "They Will Say," *Complete Poems*, 6.

⁵⁸Sandburg, "Chicago," *Complete Poems*, 3.

⁵⁹Sandburg, "Prairie," *Complete Poems*, 79.

⁶⁰Smith, *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination*, 75.

⁶¹Peter A. Carino, "Chicago in Studs Lonigan: Neighborhood and Nation." *Midamerica* 15 (1988): 75.

⁶²Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 363.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 139.

Chapter 3

Place and Placelessness in Willa Cather's Nebraska Novels

Improvement makes strait [sic] roads; but the crooked
roads without Improvement are roads of Genius.

William Blake
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1793)

The experience of landscape and place pervades the writing of Willa Cather, from her early stories to her late novels. Although Cather was born in Virginia and lived most of her adult life in eastern cities, she is most often identified with the long grass prairie landscape of southeastern Nebraska, the setting of many of her best fictions. Cather's family moved to Nebraska in 1883, when the region was still in its frontier period. Having previously known only the forested, hilly terrain of Virginia, the nine-year old Cather initially felt homesick and lonely in the "Divide," as the country between the Republican and Blue Rivers was known, experiencing "a kind of erasure of personality" in the vast and seemingly barren plains. This sense of dislocation motivated Cather to befriend her immigrant neighbors, especially the Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, and Czechs, who then greatly outnumbered American born settlers in Nebraska. These foreign born pioneers, Cather recalled, "made up for what I missed in the country. I particularly liked the old women; they understood my homesickness and were kind to me. . . ." Just as she learned to love the prairie landscape, confessing that "the shaggy grass country . . . gripped me

with a passion that I have never been able to shake,"¹ Cather came to view the pioneers as heroic creators of the Midwestern cultural landscape; they "spread across our bronze prairies like the daubs of color on a painter's palette . . . [bringing] with them something that this neutral new world needed even more than the immigrants needed land."² This synthesis of Old World traditions and acquired knowledge of an American place inspired Cather's own creative endeavor: an American regional literature with European roots, a literature about imaginative, industrious people who relate profoundly to place and landscape.

In her early stories about pioneer life on the Great Plains, Cather is often concerned with the isolation of frontier folk, portraying the prairie as "a cultural desert," according to Bruce P. Baker, "a setting often hostile to those of artistic bent, a place indifferent if not actively hostile to man's creative spirit."³ Typical of this period is "A Wagner Matinee" (1904), a story about a woman who revisits Boston after thirty years of toil on a Nebraska farm. Once a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory, the narrator's Aunt Georgiana is now a "misshapen figure" with "ill-fitting false teeth," and skin "as yellow as a Mongolian's from constant exposure to a pitiless wind and to the alkaline water. . . ."⁴ When the narrator takes his aunt to the opera, Cather emphasizes the pathos of the old woman's life by contrasting the beauty of the music with the bleakness of the frontier landscape:

The first number . . . broke a silence of thirty years; the inconceivable silence of the plains. . . . I saw again the tall, naked house on the prairie, black and grim as a wooden fortress; the black pond where I had learned to swim, its margin pitted with sun-dried cattle tracks; the rain gullied clay banks about the naked house, the four dwarf ash seedlings where the dish-cloths were always hung to dry before the kitchen door. The world there was the flat world of the ancients; to the east, a cornfield that stretched to daybreak; to the west, a corral that reached to

sunset; between, the conquests of peace, dearer bought than those of war.⁵

There is a heroic quality to Aunt Georgiana, who has sacrificed herself for the betterment of others, including the story's narrator. But the story's dominant impression is of her loss, her exile from art and beauty. When the concert has concluded, Aunt Georgiana bursts into tears, crying that she doesn't want to return to the farm. From his own boyhood experience of Nebraska, the narrator understands his aunt's despair, symbolizing the apparently inimical relation of frontier and civilization with the story's final image of the bleak Nebraska prairie laying "just outside the door of the concert hall. . . ." Cather's juxtaposition is starker still for the near repetition of her earlier descriptive catalog of the farm with its "black pond," "tall, unpainted house," and "naked . . . crook-backed ash seedlings. . . ."⁶

In "A Wagner Matinee" and other early stories, Cather emphasized tragic themes of failure, loneliness, and despair on the frontier plains; the bleak landscapes and deterministic social environments depicted in these stories places them in the naturalistic genre of Hamlin Garland and Stephen Crane. The novels of her mature period present a more balanced view of both people and place, maintaining a tragic sensibility while describing the prairie landscape and the human experience there in more positive terms.⁷ Cather's three novels of the Nebraska prairie, *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Ántonia* (1918), and *A Lost Lady* (1923), present a view of people and nature that owes more to American Romanticism and classical pastoral than to the traditions of realism and naturalism, prompting Cather scholar Susan J. Rosowski to describe them as a "trilogy of place," the work of "a creative artist considering how

to establish a spatial context within which society might operate"⁸ Whereas Cather's heroes are characters like Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!* and Antonia Shimerda in *My Ántonia* who express their love of place by working to make their surroundings productive and beautiful, much of the dramatic conflict of the stories derives from the presence of characters who are displaced from their original homeland, and miss it, or are by reason of occupation or inclination physically or emotionally unattached to local landscapes. Though Cather celebrates a sense of place unique to Nebraska's early homesteaders, she posits an opposing placelessness as a force pulling this rural society both back in time to origins in Europe and forward into the materialistic modern age.

O Pioneers! was Cather's breakthrough work, the novel which established her Nebraska as a notable locality in the geography of world literature. Borrowing a term from C.S. Lewis, critic David Stouck characterizes the novel as "primary epic," which articulates "society's most fundamental and cherished values, giving voice to the quest and aspirations of a whole people."⁹ The traditional source of epic narrative in American literature is the struggle of westering pioneers to subdue the wilderness and establish Euro-American civilization in the vast continental interior. That *O Pioneers!* is one version of this national myth is evident even from its title. In "Pioneers! O Pioneers!," the poem from which Cather derived her title, Whitman repeats the words as a refrain, idealizing through exclamation the collective heroism of a "Central inland race":

We primeval forests felling,
We the rivers stemming, vexing we, and piercing deep the
mines within;
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!¹⁰

Cather shares with Whitman (and Frederick Jackson Turner) a sense of national pride in the adventure of Western settlement. But epic is only one of her thematic concerns. Cather referred to *O Pioneers!* as a "two-part pastoral,"¹¹ the two parts being separate stories that Cather combined, one about a Swedish pioneer woman and another about a tragic love affair. These narratives constitute pastoral not merely because of their rural setting, but by virtue of Cather's use of classical pastoral conventions derived from Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. Primary among these conventions is a comparison of life in the city and in the country, often achieved by the contrast of characters representing urban and rural experience. What John H. Randall refers to as pastoral's "dissociated sensibility" derives from the perception that "city life has gotten out of tune with the cycles of nature: the seasons, fertility and drought, birth and death." Comparing Cather's characters and situations to Virgil's, Randall and other critics have described her Nebraska novels as "good pastoral," which does not sentimentalize or oversimplify life, but makes issues like death, time, and love "stand out by clearing away all the adventitious accretions that clutter things in more complicated and sophisticated city life."¹² Nature, including the description of landscape, is but one aspect of pastoral, which as Rosowski observes is typically concerned with social conflict and the individual's striving for a meaningful life:

The *Eclogues* presented [Cather] a model of bringing together apparently disparate subjects--farmers and poets, the land and love --as two forms of the human desire for perfection. Approximately half the eclogues present a primary impulse toward perfect harmony in nature, the other half a primary impulse toward perfect happiness in love. Both follow the tragic pattern characteristic of good pastoral, by which moments of perfection are surrounded by disillusionment and loss.¹³

In the case of Cather's prairie pioneers, tragedy looms in the unpredictability of weather and economic trends, as well as in the fortunes of love and health. As Renaissance painters were wont to inscribe on their pastoral scenes, "Et in Arcadia ego": Latin for "I (Death) am even in Arcadia." The Arcadia that is Cather's Nebraska is no exception.

Appropriate to its epic theme of struggle against a hostile environment, *O Pioneers!* begins in winter, when the prairie is bitterly cold and depressingly colorless. The year is 1882, when frontier conditions prevail and "the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away." Like Aunt Georgiana's farm in "A Wagner Matinee," Hanover and surrounding farms are in need of spatial ordering and aesthetic improvement. The town is merely a "cluster of low drab buildings huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky."¹⁴ Homesteads are similarly "few and far apart; here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky, a sod house crouching in a hollow." Cather personifies this "stern frozen country"¹⁵ as "a wild thing that had its ugly moods. . . . Its Genius was unfriendly to man."¹⁶ By "Genius," Cather invokes Roman myth and folklore, in which places were said to be inhabited by "genii loci," tutelary spirits that can help or hinder man, and must therefore be appeased. The local spirit of wild Nebraska does its best "to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes." The land wants "to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness."¹⁷ As the adversary in this epic struggle, it is an "enigma" to be solved, not an opponent to be conquered.

Alexandra Bergson, the novel's central character, is the person to

solve the enigma. She possesses the intelligence and fortitude expected of an epic heroine, but more importantly, the imagination and aesthetic discrimination of an artist. Alexandra's strength of character is established early in the narrative when her dying father gives her, rather than his wife or sons, responsibility for the farm and family. A Swedish immigrant, John Bergson subscribes to "the Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable."¹⁸ He knows "every ridge and draw and gully between him and the horizon,"¹⁹ and believes in the land's potential, but has "an idea that no one understood how to farm it properly"²⁰ In eleven years Bergson "had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame,"²¹ either in its appearance or productivity. His one accomplishment after years of crop failures and natural disasters is to have completed payments on his land (a typical farm of the prairie Midwest: a full section of six hundred and forty acres). He senses, however, that his intelligent, hard working daughter, "who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors,"²² will come to understand the enigmatic land, and succeed where he has failed. His two older sons Lou and Oscar are hard workers but lack imagination and foresight. Mrs. Bergson contributes significantly to the household, but is of a rather nostalgic mind: Mr. Bergson tells his sons not to grudge her nonessential work, "plowing her garden and setting out fruit trees, even if it comes in a busy season."²³ While reasonably well adjusted to life in Nebraska, Mrs. Bergson misses Sweden; she "had never quite forgiven John Bergson for bringing her to the end of the earth; but now that she was there, she wanted to be let alone to reconstruct her old life in so far as that was possible."²⁴ By gardening and gathering Mrs. Bergson attempts to

create the old world in the new, even though the "insipid ground-cherries," "garden tomatoes," and "rank buffalo-pea"²⁵ do not make the best preserves. Among her family, only Alexandra has the courage, patience, and intelligence to make the prairie bloom, to transform it from undifferentiated space to significant place.

Alexandra learns not only from her neighbors' mistakes, but from their successes. One neighbor whose wisdom she comes to rely on is Ivar, an old Norwegian who lives alone in "the most inaccessible place he could find,"²⁶ a beautiful but unproductive piece of land full of hummocks and ridges. Ivar practices "a peculiar religion of his own";²⁷ an ascetic, he goes barefoot most of the year, wears his white hair long, and makes his home in a sod hut almost indistinguishable from the hillside. He also exhibits a Franciscan love of nature: a vegetarian, he doctors his neighbors' animals and puts out grain for the wild birds attracted to his pond. "He best expressed his preference for his wild homestead," Cather tells us, "by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there. If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land . . . one understood what Ivar meant."²⁸ Though her ostensible reason for visiting Ivar, one day six months after John Bergson's death, is to buy his handmade hammocks, Alexandra is actually more interested in obtaining his advice about hogs, which so many of her neighbors are losing to disease. Ivar tells Alexandra to move her hogs from their dirty pen to her sorghum patch, feed them grain instead of slop, and give them shade and clean, fresh water. Oscar and Lou hear this advice with dismay; unlike Alexandra, they worry about the criticism of neighbors and prefer to be inconspicuous. Back home from the trip to Ivar's farm, Alexandra's "eyes went back to the sorghum

patch south of the barn, where she was planning to make her new pig corral."²⁹ Alexandra possesses qualities critical for success in pioneering: imagination and a willingness to experiment. "A pioneer should have imagination," Cather observes, "should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves."³⁰ Alexandra listens to those who have learned from experience, seeking to duplicate their successes and avoid their failures in changing nature to fit human ends, and in adapting themselves to the landscape.³¹

Alexandra's conflict with her brothers over the farm comes to a crisis after their initial prosperity gives way to "three years of drouth and failure, the last struggle of a wild soil against the encroaching plowshare."³² Lou and Oscar fear the risk of a new mortgage and wish to leave the Divide, as many of their neighbors are then doing. Alexandra must take pains to convince them that "the right thing is usually just what everybody don't do,"³³ which is to note changes in agricultural methods and economic trends so as to properly invest and plan for the future. Returning from what amounts to a research trip to the river country, Alexandra tells her youngest brother Emil of her new resolve to keep the land. Approaching their farm in their horse drawn wagon, Alexandra realizes how deeply she loves and understands her adopted home landscape, experiencing an transcendental epiphany of place:

Her face was so radiant that [Emil] felt shy about asking her. For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.³⁴

O Pioneers! thus presents the American epic of pioneering in unconventional terms: the land is tamed by imagination and love rather than by force and active will. Alexandra's epiphany on the Divide is evidence of Cather's primary philosophical and aesthetic tendency to romanticism, rather than to realism or epic. As biographer James Woodress writes, "Cather belongs in the tradition of American Romanticism,"³⁵ and it is the place-centered idealism of Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau that anticipates such visionary realizations of being at home in a beloved landscape as experienced by Alexandra.

Because Lou and Oscar accede (though reluctantly) to Alexandra's plans, they all become well-to-do farmers, among the wealthiest on the Divide. But only Alexandra owns a "new consciousness of the country,"³⁶ a love of place that will change the wilderness into a well ordered pastoral space, distinguished by "the beauty and fruitfulness of the outlying fields" and "a most unusual trimness and care for detail," including the "big white house" and "so many sheds and outbuildings . . . that the place looked not unlike a tiny village."³⁷ Alexandra prefers to live simply, in close contact with both nature and those in her employ. In contrast, Lou and Oscar lack Alexandra's love for the land, concerning themselves instead with conspicuous consumption ("the general conviction that the more useless and utterly unusable objects were, the greater their virtue,"³⁸) and politics, for which Lou "neglects his farm to attend conventions and to run for county offices."³⁹ In their placelessness, Lou and Oscar represent the new materialistic spirit of the settled Midwest, and are suspicious and unaffectionate toward their sister. They believe she is too generous and personal with her hired help, including old Ivar, who has lived with Alexandra since

he lost his farm to mismanagement. Lou and Oscar want to send Ivar away to an asylum because his eccentricities strike them as the signs of a potentially violent insanity; their conflict with Alexandra over this matter is one example of their effort to gain control over Alexandra's portion of the divided property.⁴⁰

Another conflict involving place and placelessness in *O Pioneers!* is between Alexandra and Carl Linstrum, whose friendship since childhood has always seemed to promise romance. But Carl's family takes the route that tempted Lou and Oscar, selling their farm when conditions were poor and moving away. While Alexandra is making the decisions and supervising the work that make her family wealthy, Carl works but fails as an engraver in Chicago, returning years later to visit Alexandra before trying his luck in the goldfields of Alaska. At the age of thirty-five, Carl is a displaced country person, "homely and wayward and definitely personal,"⁴¹ who enjoyed the sophistication of city life but never successfully adjusted to the urban scene. In a conversation about the advantages and disadvantages of a mobile, unattached life, like his own, and of a settled, grounded existence, such as Alexandra's, this would-be couple reveal their envy of the other's lot. When Carl expresses his sense of failure, Alexandra tells him "I'd rather have had your freedom than my land." But Carl insists that attachment to a place brings greater happiness in the long run, because "Freedom so often means that one isn't needed anywhere":

Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him. . . . We have no house, no place, no people of our own.

Alexandra counters Carl by noting how a country life can stultify the spirit if one comes to feel isolated:

We grow hard and heavy here. We don't move lightly and easily as you do, and our minds get stiff. If the world were no wider than my cornfields, if there were not something beside this, I wouldn't feel that it was much worth while to work.

But Alexandra's characterization of country folk as "hard and heavy" holds truer of her brothers and those of their commercial bent than of herself. Alexandra mentions Carrie Jensen, the sister of one of her hired men, who became depressed and suicidal because of the slow pace and repetitiveness of life on the Divide. A trip to visit relations in Iowa restored her spirits by reminding her that the world is made up of many places, the Divide being significant among them in its own way. Alexandra, too, would benefit from the experience of travel, that like Carrie she too can become "contented to live and work in a world that's so big and interesting" because "it's what goes on in the world that reconciles [her]."⁴² At the novel's end, when Carl has begun to succeed in Alaska, and has again returned to Nebraska after the murder of Alexandra's beloved younger brother Emil and his lover Marie, Alexandra is presented with the opportunity to broaden her horizons, to travel with Carl to Alaska. This they plan to do, and to marry, with the understanding that they will return to the farm, where even after tragedy and loneliness there is "great peace . . . and freedom." Alexandra's first devotion is to the land, and Carl must give up his wanderlust, if not become a creature of place, to be her husband. "We come and go," Alexandra tells Carl, "but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it--for a little while."⁴³



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O Pioneers! concludes with the heroic pioneer period passed into history, become the American Golden Age in contrast to a new, prosperous era which forsakes pastoral values (including a strong sense of place) and European immigrant traditions in favor of the convenience and conformity of town and city life. Cather's nostalgia for the prairie landscape and the people who tamed it is stronger yet in *My Ántonia*, her second Nebraska pioneer novel and, by a near consensus, her greatest work. Etymologically, nostalgia means "the pain in returning," suggesting wistful thoughts of an earlier time and a personally significant place. David Stouck observes that nostalgia "is the emotion evinced by pastoral art," fusing together "the pleasure of remembrance with the painful awareness of mutability."⁴⁴ Cather strikes this very note with the novel's Virgilian epigraph, *Optima dies . . . prima fugit*: "The best days are the first to flee." The central theme of *My Ántonia* is the nostalgic (and tragically futile) desire to recapture the innocence of childhood when material and social success has not fulfilled spiritual and emotional needs. The life of Jim Burden, the novel's narrator, serves as a synecdochic representation of Midwestern society in its transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: his childhood is spent in the country, his adolescence in a small town, and his adulthood in cities. Along the way, Jim has lost something, as has his developing civilization.

Jim Burden, like Carl Linstrum of *O Pioneers!*, is a sensitive and restless man. Our first view of Jim is in motion, travelling through Iowa in a train "flash[ing] through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun." In the novel's brief "Introduction," the author meets Jim on the



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train; the two old friends grew up together in the same Nebraska town, and both now live in New York, Jim being employed as legal counsel for the railroad. Despite his worldly success, Jim has not found happiness in adult life. A man of a "romantic disposition" and "quiet tastes," Jim is unsuitably married to an sophisticated woman who strikes the author as "unimpressible and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm." Dissatisfied with the present, Jim dwells on his Nebraska childhood, particularly his friendship with a Bohemian girl named Antonia, who "seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood."⁴⁵ Since re-establishing contact with Antonia after many years, Jim has been writing a memoir centering on Antonia and treating her as an emblematic figure of pioneer days. When he gives the manuscript, told in his first-person point of view, to the author, the novel proper begins.

Jim Burden comes to Nebraska from Virginia upon the death of his parents. He rarely mentions his family or experiences back east, and from the start is concerned with telling how he came to the Divide and became a native. In his train voyage west, the child Jim experiences the same dislocation Cather initially felt on the prairie. He remembers nothing about crossing the great Missouri River, and "the only thing very noticeable about Nebraska was that it was still, all day long, Nebraska."⁴⁶ The prairie is for the newcomer a mere expanse of space, a place only in name and "not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." The region's outstanding characteristic is the sky, "the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it."⁴⁷ Though Jim claims not to have been homesick, he admits to having felt "erased, blotted out" by his initial impression of Nebraska. He surrenders him-



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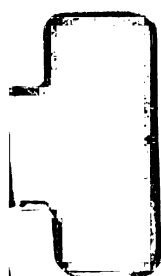
self to an apparent emptiness that he will fill with experiences.

Cather devotes the second chapter to Jim's first explorations of place on his grandfather's farm--"down to the kitchen" contrasting with his memory of "out in the kitchen" back in Virginia--the cellar, and the landscape outside, which varies more than he had thought. The passages relating to Jim's visit with his grandmother to her garden are among Cather's most lyrical, evoking a feeling of "motion in the landscape . . . as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping."⁴⁸ In the peaceable kingdom of this prairie Eden, the serpents are likely to be only bull-snakes who keep the gophers down. Jim's grandmother even protects a chicken-thieving badger, because in "a new country a body feels friendly to the animals." The chapter builds up to another of Cather's memorable epiphanies of place, when Grandmother leaves Jim at his request to sit alone at the center of the garden. Once he is still and observant, the plant and animal world around him comes fully alive, and he discovers a "new feeling of lightness and content":⁴⁹

I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.⁵⁰

From this point, Jim feels at home in Nebraska, which he has experienced as a place, its open space made significant by his appreciation of its variety and differentiation.

Antonia, namelessly introduced in the first chapter as a Bohemian girl travelling to the town of Black Hawk on the same train as Jim,



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makes her first substantive appearance in a scene reminiscent of Alexandra's first visit to Old Ivar in *O Pioneers!* Like Ivar, Antonia's family lives on a beautiful but not very promising piece of land, a place of "broken, grassy clay cliffs," "cottonwoods and ash trees," and "rough red hillocks."⁵¹ Also like Ivar, they live in an earth cave dwelling, the best they can manage, from which they emerge as if the earth is giving them birth. Antonia and Jim quickly establish a friendship, and because we know from the introduction that Jim will ultimately leave the Divide, Cather has here established the conventional pastoral pairing of a city person with a rural counterpart. Antonia, who is destined to become "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races," embodies pastoral values--the love of place and "the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting."⁵² When she is mature enough to articulate her values she will tell Jim "I'd always be miserable in a city. I'd die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly."⁵³ Antonia brings Old World intuitions about nature and beauty to this very American landscape. Jim will teach her to speak and write English, but Antonia will inspire in Jim an enthusiasm for the possibilities of life and the glory of nature.

The first of the novel's five parts (or "books") takes Jim through a year on the prairie, one full seasonal cycle beginning in autumn and ending the following summer. In her 1923 *Nation* essay on "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," Cather describes autumn as "the season of beauty and sentiment" on the Great Plains, "as spring is in the Old World."⁵⁴ Cather's description of the prairie in autumn lends a romantic, nostalgic glow to the first chapters involving Jim's explora-

tions and adventures with Antonia. Among the places Jim comes to love are the "sunflower-bordered roads," "damp spots" at the edges of "pale-yellow cornfields" where "the smartweed soon turned a rich copper colour," a neighbor's catalpa grove, and "a big elm tree that grew up out of a deep crack in the earth and had a hawk's nest in its branches." Jim learns to look closely to find the poetry in what would seem a prosaic landscape to a casual and unengaged observer. The scenery is composed of subtle details and contrasts, such as that lone elm tree emerging from the fissured terrain. Trees are especially appreciated by prairie dwellers:

Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons. It must have been the scarcity of detail in that tawny landscape that made detail so precious.⁵⁵

Against this scenery, we see Jim and Antonia play and talk their way into being best friends. So long as this first autumn endures, life seems a golden idyll, an long afternoon when "miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight," a mystical hour owning "the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero's death. . . ."⁵⁶

As winter approaches, and "the autumn colour was growing pale on the grass and cornfields,"⁵⁷ we are reminded of death's residence in Arcadia by the onset of tragedies which Jim's nostalgic tone can mute but not diminish. Place and displacement play an important role in the tragic fates of the Russians Pavel and Peter and of Mr. Shimerda, Antonia's father. Pavel and Peter are immigrant bachelors who share a farm; Jim and Antonia visit them there and are treated with melons from their sizable patch. Late autumn visits disaster on the two men: first they develop an impossible debt to Wick Cutter, the villainous Black

Hawk money-lender, then Pavel strains himself at work--an injury that will prove fatal. On his death-bed, Pavel reveals the "great trouble" he had earlier alluded to which necessitated their emigration from Russia. Pavel and Peter were known to have sacrificed two people to save their own lives--they were riding in a sleigh in the forest, and in being chased by a large pack of wolves were forced to throw a newly wedded couple off the sleigh to lighten the load. Shunned by their neighbors and family, Pavel and Peter wandered to "strange towns," always having to move on because their story followed them. The friends came to America, where they hid their terrible secret and were plagued by "such bad luck that people were afraid of them and liked to put them out of mind."⁵⁸ Pavel dies a painful death in this foreign land, and Peter leaves the Divide to work in a railway construction camp--the railroad again symbolizing motion and displacement.

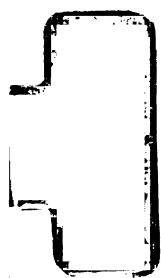
The fate of Pavel and Peter anticipates that of their friend Mr. Shimerda, who hears Pavel's death-bed confession. Mr. Shimerda never wanted to leave Europe, and is terribly homesick for the places and society of his native Bohemia. Unlike his conceited, boastful, and rather ignorant wife, Mr. Shimerda is dignified, sensitive, and educated; Antonia later tells Jim that her father "know a great deal; how to make the fine cloth like what you not got here. He play horn and violin, and he read so many books that the priests in Bohemie [sic] come to talk to him."⁵⁹ In Nebraska, to which his wife wished to immigrate for the sake of her oldest son, Mr. Shimerda is displaced from the cultural life he so treasures. He cares for his family, showing particular solicitousness for Antonia's education, but is always melancholy and ultimately suicidal. He shoots himself during the worst snowstorm



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of the winter, during the bleak frozen season when the plains landscape is least comforting, particularly to a man so overcome by homesickness.

Cather develops two remarkable vignettes relating to the aftermath of Mr. Shimerda's suicide and the themes of immigrant homesickness and the Midwestern cultural landscape. The first occurs while the adults in Jim's household are busy assisting with funeral preparations and the official investigation, leaving Jim alone in his grandparents' house. His thoughts soon turn to the unfortunate Mr. Shimerda: "I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country."⁶⁰ This recalls Jim's feelings about his dead parents when he first arrived in Nebraska, that he had left their spirits back in Virginia among the places familiar to them, "looking for me at the sheep-fold down by the creek, or along the white road that led to the mountain pastures."⁶¹ Human spirit and geographical locality were of such a unity to Willa Cather that she often wrote of the dead persisting in their beloved places, as in the triumphant final sentence of *O Pioneers!*, which describes the Divide as a "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom. . . ."⁶² But like the Spanish explorer Coronado, who may have reached Nebraska in the sixteenth century, Mr. Shimerda "died in the wilderness, of a broken heart,"⁶³ and his spirit is not in its proper place. Alone at home that winter day, Jim senses Mr. Shimerda's spirit with him in the room, resting before its long journey back to Bohemia. Years later, when Antonia herself wonders if "maybe my father's spirit can go back to those old places," Jim recalls that winter day and his intuition: "I said I felt sure then that he was on his way back to his own country,



and that even now, when I passed his grave, I always thought of him as being among the woods and fields that were so dear to him."⁶⁴

Mr. Shimerda's unusual grave occasions the second vignette resulting from his death. In accordance with Bohemian tradition, Mrs. Shimerda and her son Ambrosch decide that the old man should be buried on the southwest corner of their land, at the very point where section roads will converge once roads and fences follow the rectangular survey. Though Jim's sternly Protestant grandfather objects, the grave is dug and a simple ceremony performed. In the dead of winter, the grave "looked a very little spot in that snow-covered waste," one that the mourners assume that traffic will eventually ride over. Something curious happens though: years later, when the wildness has been plowed out of the land and "the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines," the grave remains, untouched. The converging roads were made to curve slightly in order to avoid Mr. Shimerda's grave, its unmown red prairie grass a remnant of wilderness that survives the pioneer period. The grave is sacred space in several senses--religious, personal, aesthetic, and ecological. There is another image in the novel that most readers and critics think of as central to *My Ántonia*: the plow silhouetted against the flaming sunset which Jim and Ántonia see soon before Jim goes to college--a hieroglyph of the pastoral ideal. But in a novel so concerned with wilderness and pastoralism, place and the tragedy of displacement, the image of Mr. Shimerda's grave--*Jim's favorite place on the Divide*--bears equal consideration:

. . . at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft grey rivers flowing past it. I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country

it was the spot most dear to me. I loved the dim superstition, the propitiatory intent, that had put the grave there; and still more I loved the spirit that could not carry out the sentence--the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along which the home-coming wagons rattled after sunset.⁶⁵

The spirit that could not carry out the sentence is the spirit of place Cather hoped would emerge in the Midwest: circularity to temper linearity, wildness to survive development, and Old World aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities to complement American utilitarianism and "common sense." By such small gestures pastoral values might endure in the new materialistic age.

After the tragic winter, the seasonal cycle of Jim's first year is completed by spring, "the throb of it, the light restlessness, the vital essence of it everywhere,"⁶⁶ and summer, which brings "that breathless, brilliant heat which makes the plains of Kansas and Nebraska the best corn country in the world."⁶⁷ Jim lives on his Grandfather's farm for three years but narrates only the events of the first, which for Jim constitutes the "best days" of his life--and of American society, in Cather's view. Antonia, who faces a difficult future breaking the land, expresses the conventional pastoral desire to stop time so that "no winter ever come again."⁶⁸ But neither life or history can stop, and Jim's move to town coincides with the beginning of his adolescence and the period of small town dominance on the Midwestern cultural landscape.

The town of Black Hawk, like the Hanover of *O Pioneers!* and prairie villages in other Cather stories, is a fictionalized representation of Cather's actual hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Like her contemporaries Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, Cather cast a critical eye on Midwestern small town life just before and after the turn of the century. Jim first describes Black Hawk, glowingly, as "a

clean, well-planted little prairie town, with white fences and good green yards about the dwelling, wide, dusty streets, and shapely little trees growing along the wooden sidewalks."⁶⁹ As an adolescent with burgeoning social (and sexual) desires, Jim benefits from living where he can attend school, dances, and musical recitals. But the mainstream society of Black Hawk is marked by conformity, boredom, snobbishness, and materialism--a town full of Babbitts like Alexandra Bergson's brothers Lou and Oscar. In yet another winter scene--the bleak season again reinforcing the theme of environmental and spiritual malaise--Jim explores the back streets of Black Hawk, where he deduces much about his townspeople from their architectural use of space:

On starlight nights I used to pace up and down those long, cold streets, scowling at the little, sleeping houses on either side, with their storm-windows and covered back porches. They were flimsy shelters, most of them poorly built of light wood, with spindle porch-posts horribly mutilated by the turning-lathe. Yet for all their frailness, how much jealousy and envy and unhappiness some of them managed to contain!⁷⁰

In striving to maintain the impression of propriety, the people of Black Hawk exercise extreme caution in speech and action. As in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, colorful immigrant traditions that might enliven the place are ignored and even reviled. The dominant attitude is that "foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English," even though there is no one in town with "the intelligence or cultivation, much less the personal distinction, of Antonia's father."⁷¹ Jim's best experiences of the town are those that recall pastoral values and transplanted European culture: the home of the neighboring Harling family, which is like a little farm, frequent visits from farmers come to town, and most importantly, the presence of Antonia and other immigrant girls like Lena Lingard who have hired into local families as



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domestic help. In preferring the company of the hired girls to that of the "refined" but dull town girls, Jim breaks unwritten social proprieties based on distinctions of ethnicity and class. Unlike most Black Hawk boys who "looked forward to marrying Black Hawk girls, and living in a brand-new little house with best chairs that must not be sat upon, and hand-painted china that must not be used," Jim is loath to conceal his affection and admiration for Antonia, Lena, and the other girls "who helped to break up the wild sod, [and] learned so much from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grandmothers. . . ." Their beauty, vigor, and knowledge derive from European traditions and their direct experience of an American landscape; they "had been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new."⁷²

One might expect Jim to court one of the country girls, but he defers to the very prejudice he abjures in his townspeople. Despite his attraction to Antonia, their relationship stays on the level of a childhood friendship; even his dreams about Antonia innocently recall the places and play of their country childhood, "sliding down straw-stacks as we used to do; climbing the yellow mountains over and over, and slipping down the smooth sides into soft piles of chaff." His recurring dream about the Swedish beauty Lena Lingard is, however, strongly sexual--in a harvested field Lena "came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping-hook in her hand . . . flushed like the dawn, with a kind of luminous rosiness all about her." Lena sits by Jim, sighs and says "Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like."⁷³ Jim does in fact have something of an affair with Lena once he is in Lincoln attending the University, but the



dalliance distracts him from his studies and he is soon off to Harvard, eventually settling in New York to a conventional and unhappy marriage.

Cather's treatment of sexuality has interested many of her critics, many of whom note in her characters an aversion to sex and a corresponding idealization of childhood. James Woodress goes so far as to say that Cather's "greatest failing as an artist is her inability to depict heterosexual adult relationships affirmatively."⁷⁴ Blanche H. Gelfant sees Jim Burden as a "disingenuous and self-deluded narrator" who "celebrates the myth of creation but fails to participate."⁷⁵ James E. Miller similarly argues that *My Ántonia* depicts not the fulfillment of the American dream, but its loss, finding in the name "Jim Burden" an allegory "not only [of] his acute sense of personal loss but also a deep sense of national unease, a burden of guilt for having missed a chance, for having passed up an opportunity. . . ."⁷⁶ Just as America traded nature for industry, and democracy for republic, so Jim passes up his chances with Ántonia, earth goddess and mother of races, settling instead for a passionless marriage and exile in the city. He tells her "I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister--anything that a woman can be to a man,"⁷⁷ but then leaves the Divide for twenty years. He embraces the aesthetic and not the physical aspects of Ántonia and the place, nostalgically preserving both in his memory as "a succession of . . . pictures, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one's first primer. . . ."⁷⁸ In dread of change, Jim sublimates life into art, because "Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again."⁷⁹

One such sublimation of life into art is occasioned by Jim's reading of Virgil's pastorals. One evening in Lincoln, while reviewing

Georgics Book 3, Jim mulls over the melancholy thought that "the best days are the first to flee." He then turns to an earlier passage where Virgil proclaims "*Primus ego in patriam mecum . . . deducam Musas*": "I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country." Before he can get far with his study, Lena Lingard knocks at the door, there to pay Jim a visit for the first time. Though Lena is as beautiful and sensuous as ever--more so for her fine new clothing and deportment, she doesn't so much arouse Jim's sexual interest as his nostalgia for the people and places of his childhood. As soon as the actual flesh and blood Lena, sexy Swedish farm girl turned successful fashion designer, has left him to his books, Jim reverts to his fantasy image of her, now transformed by his experience of literary art: "my old dream about Lena coming across the harvest-field in her short skirt . . . floated before me on the page like a picture, [emphasis added] and underneath it stood the mournful line: '*Optima dies . . . prima fugit.*'" The lesson he has drawn from this conjoining of life and art is "the relation between girls like those [Lena, Antonia, and other transplanted Europeans] and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry."⁸⁰ Cather's citation of Virgil certainly reinforces the nostalgia of her narrative, but it also universalizes the Nebraska locality. Gaston Cleric, Jim's mentor at Lincoln, had explained to his students that what Virgil meant by "patria" was "not a nation or even a province, but the little rural neighbourhood on the Mincio where the poet was born." Virgil prayed to bring poetry not to Rome, but "to his own little 'country'; to his father's fields, 'sloping down to the river and to the old beech trees with broken tops.'⁸¹ Jim's relation of Virgil and the "hired girls" of

Black Hawk is an imaginative leap substantiated by his memoir, which brings the muse to the Divide, his (and Cather's) "patria."

But Jim is only half an artist, and like Carl Linstrum in *O Pioneers!*, whose talent is confined to the engraving of others' work, he must content himself with secondhand pastoral--an aesthetic appreciation of the very real art that *Ántonia* (like Alexandra Bergson) has created with the Nebraska landscape as her medium. Jim's belated return to the Divide reenacts his boyhood arrival, with *Ántonia* to greet him instead of his grandmother, and another beautiful garden landscape to explore. Cather again lyrically describes a place in which trees and children are at home. In the orchards and grape arbors where *Ántonia*'s many sons and daughters play, Jim experiences the same deep peace he felt sitting alone in his Grandmother's garden as a child, a feeling that recurs when his discovery of a remnant of the old pioneer road brings him "the sense of coming home to himself. . . ." This contentment is, however, only a respite from a disappointing life. *Ántonia*, on the other hand, has always been at home with herself and her place, and for this reason the lofty sentiment with which Jim concludes the novel is a half-truth: "Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past."⁸² *Ántonia* also possesses the present; for her the pastoral ideal is a reality, as alive for her as her children and the plants and animals on her farm. Susan Rosowski aptly concludes of *My Ántonia* that the "early male myths of adventure have led to pointless wandering and lonely exile, and the women, originally assigned roles of passivity, have become the vital sources of meaning."⁸³ Jim's solitary fate speaks to the passage of an era, but *Ántonia*'s success as a agriculturalist, mother, and wife confirms that the pastoral ideal has

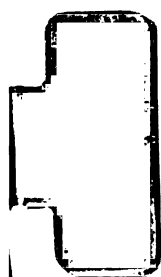
endured.

My Ántonia marked the end of Cather's first period as a novelist, a period characterized by a celebration of America's past and optimism for its future. In her book of collected essays, *Not Under Forty* (1936), Cather made the oft quoted statement that for her, the "world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts. . . ." ⁸⁴ There were a number of reasons for her new pessimism. Though she was at the height of her career as a popular and critically acclaimed novelist, Cather felt let down by success, according to biographer James Woodress. Her personal and professional life was in transition; for example, her best friend Isabelle Hambourg had permanently expatriated to Europe, and her novel of World War I, *One of Ours* (1922), won her the Pulitzer Prize but was described as a failure by previously vociferous supporters like H.L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis. Cather's disillusionment, however, was deeper than personal or professional; like many other authors and artists of the period, Cather's attitude toward American life and culture was affected by major events of the time. Woodress reiterates a familiar historical litany: "World War I, Prohibition, Communist witch hunts, the gaudy extravagances of the Jazz Age--all these extrinsic factors that sent other American writers to self-imposed exile in Europe contributed to Cather's sense of alienation." ⁸⁵ The four novels of her middle period, *One of Ours* (1922), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), all reject the present time--the 1920's--which Cather described in her *Nation* essay on Nebraska as "stamped with the ugly crest of materialism. . . ." ⁸⁶ In *A Lost Lady*, her third and final novel of the pioneer era in Nebraska, Cather directly attacked that materialism as the force destroying the dominant

pastoral ideal in the Midwest, particularly the love of nature and sense of place she attributed to the first generation of Nebraskans. As John H. Randall notes, Cather's "image of the garden is replaced by that of the wasteland. . . . It is not that the land is suffering from any physical blight, for the Middle West is as blooming as ever; the land is fruitful but the people are parched."⁸⁷

From the moment of its publication *A Lost Lady* was recognized as a model of stylistic grace and even perfection. Cather wrote the novel according to principles she expounded upon in "The Novel Demeublé," an article published by the *New Republic* in 1922. A "novel demeublé," or "unfurnished novel," dispenses with the descriptive cataloging of physical sensations that Cather felt cluttered many works of realistic fiction. By reducing exposition, description, and dialogue to an essential minimum, such a novel creates "the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed. . . ."⁸⁸ In its formal innovation and sense of cultural crisis, *A Lost Lady* is strongly modernist, leading Harold Bloom to place it in the "aesthetic context" of major works of the period including Eliot's "The Waste Land," Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. "Subtler and gentler" than such writings, according to Bloom, *A Lost Lady* "elegizes just as profoundly a lost radiance or harmony, a defeat of a peculiarly American dream of innocence, grace, hope."⁸⁹ In the American Midwest, where the novel is set, that dream is course the pastoral ideal of humanity in harmony with the natural environment.

A Lost Lady is concerned with the childhood and young adulthood of Niel Herbert, the son of a small town Nebraska judge, who is befriended



by the attractive and gracious Marian Forrester and her older husband, Captain Daniel Forrester. Captain Forrester is not a pioneer homesteader like Alexandra Bergson or Antonia Shimerda, but a wealthy railroad contractor who owns a summer home at the edge of Sweet Water, another version of Red Cloud, Nebraska. The Forresters lead a luxurious life, dividing their time between their idyllic country retreat and soirées with their society friends in Denver. While their house is architecturally unremarkable and even ugly, its location atop a hill above two creeks and a wetland is lovely. Captain Forrester "had selected this place long ago because it looked beautiful to him, and he happened to like the way the creek wound through his pasture, with mint and joint-grass and twinkling willows along its banks."⁹⁰ In this pastoral setting the Forresters entertain their wealthy and refined guests, each of whom is charmed by their lively and well spoken hostess, Marian Forrester.

Since Niel lives in town, his experience of nature and significant place occurs on the Forrester property, where the story proper begins in chapter two as Niel and his friends spend a day playing and picnicking by the marsh. The Forrester marsh is a central image in the story; "its delicate ecology," Susan Rosowski observes, "suggests a fragile beauty that is all the more precious because it is so easily destroyed by change."⁹¹ That change is embodied in the person of Ivy Peters, a boy about six years older than Niel, nearly an adult at the time the story begins. Ivy interrupts the boys at their picnic, taunts them for enjoying nature ("I thought girls went on picnics"), and expresses his disregard for the Forresters' stewardship of the marsh. In a shocking dramatization of his callous placelessness, Ivy uses a slingshot to stun

a woodpecker, which he claims is damaging the trees. After slitting its eyes with a knife, Ivy releases the bird, which flies in blind panic before managing to find its way to its hole. Niel climbs the tree in order to catch the bird and euthanize it, but he falls and breaks his leg. His friends take him to the Forrester home to be cared for; thus begins Niel's friendship with that refined couple, and thus Ivy Peters emerges as the story's villain--indeed, as the snake in the garden of Eden, with physical ugliness to match his spiritual wretchedness:

"narrow beady eyes," red skin "flecked with tiny freckles, like rust spots," very small eyes "and an absence of eyelashes [that] gave his pupils the fixed, unblinking hardness of a snake's or a lizard's."⁹²

Though Niel is attracted to Mrs. Forrester's glamour, fine taste, and uncanny ability to make people comfortable with themselves and other company, "it was as Captain Forrester's wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her."⁹³ Captain Forrester, after all, created the place to showcase her charms. As a young man, he saw Nebraska when wilderness conditions prevailed: "good hunting, plenty of antelope and buffalo, boundless sunny sky, boundless plains of waving grass, long fresh-water lagoons yellow with lagoon flowers, where the bison in their periodic migrations stopped to drink and bathe and wallow." One particular place, the site of an Indian encampment by the Sweet Water creek, intrigued the young Captain Forrester. There he envisioned a garden, a house for his friends to visit, and "a wife like Mrs. Forrester to make it attractive to them." All this came to be, as the Captain tells a dinner party, less out of design than through his imagination. The statement with which he concludes the story of his country home conveys Cather's own

conception of the pioneer era:

"... my philosophy is that what you think of and plan for day by day, in spite of yourself, so to speak--you will get. You will get it more or less . . . because a thing that is dreamed of in the way I mean, is already an accomplished fact. All our great West has been developed from such dreams; the homesteader's and the prospector's and the contractor's. We dreamed the railroads across the mountains, just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water. All these things will be everyday facts to the coming generation, but to us--"⁹⁴

For the pioneer generation of Captain Forrester, Alexandra Bergson, and Antonia Shimerda, human labor in contact with the native landscape provided spiritual rewards: again, the pastoral dream. But the new generation concerns itself with facts instead of dreams, with economic rather than spiritual enrichment, and Nebraska will be poorer for it.

When the Captain sickens and then dies, his fears prove to have been well-founded. Mrs. Forrester loses control of the property not only because of the late Captain's financial reverses, but through her own loss of balance, of proper relation to her home. Without her husband, Mrs. Forrester is "like a ship without ballast, driven hither and thither by every wind," having "lost her faculty of discrimination; her power of easily and graciously keeping everyone in his proper place."⁹⁵ The person whom Niel is most disturbed to see leave his proper place is Ivy Peters, who becomes a shyster lawyer with more than a passing interest in the late Captain Forrester's land and beautiful widow. Peters succeeds in both cases, much to Niel's disgust. He drains the marsh, rents and then purchases the Forrester home, thereby obliterating "a few acres of something he hated, though he could not name it," and asserting "power over the people who had loved those unproductive meadows for their idleness and silvery beauty." Ivy is the prototype of the new capitalist speculator who will commodify the

prairie, cheat the Indians, and "root out the great brooding spirit of freedom" by destroying "the space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer." Nebraska society has come to be dominated not by place loving people like Alexandra, Ántonia, and Captain Forrester, but by a placeless commercial "generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies by hard times," who "do exactly what Ivy Peters had done when he drained the Forrester marsh."⁹⁶

Though *A Lost Lady* concludes Cather's Nebraska trilogy of place on the disillusioned and melancholy note of the land subjugated and the people either indifferent to nature or dispersed, like Marian Forrester in South America, Cather hoped that the topophilia exemplified by the likes of Alexandra, Ántonia, and Captain Forrester, and displaced but still place-loving characters like Carl Linstrum, Jim Burden, and Niel Herbert, had not entirely passed into history with the end of the pioneer era. In her *Nation* essay Cather faced "the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished, and that no new story worthy to take its place has yet begun." Yet she still believed that it was "in that great cosmopolitan country known as the Middle West that we may hope to see the hard molds of American provincialism broken up":⁹⁷

I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again. Something that will come out not only in sturdy traits of character, but in elasticity of mind, in an honest attitude toward the realities of life, in certain qualities of feeling and imagination.⁹⁸

As Susan Rosowski observes, "Cather's belief in an essential relationship with place remained firm,"⁹⁹ and it may indeed be said that Cather wrote this great trilogy partly in encouragement of the place-centeredness of Alexandra Bergson, Ántonia Shimerda, and Daniel Forrester, sensitive earth-dwelling heroes of the Nebraska prairie.

Notes

¹Willa Cather, *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896*, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 448.

²Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," *The Nation* 117 (September 5, 1923): 237.

³Bruce P. Baker, "Nebraska's Cultural Desert: Willa Cather's Early Short Stories," *Midamerica* 14 (1987): 12.

⁴Willa Cather, "A Wagner Matinee," *Early Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 103-104.

⁵*Ibid.*, 106-107

⁶*Ibid.*, 110.

⁷The duality of Cather's response to the frontier is consistent with women's frontier narratives as discussed by Annette Kolodny in *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). Kolodny writes of the need of pioneer women to create home and community in contrast to typically male narratives of action, conquest, and domination of nature. In the literature she examines, Kolodny finds that pioneer women "avoided male anguish at lost Edens and male guilt in the face of the raping of the continent by confining themselves, instead, to the 'innocent . . . amusement' of a garden's narrow space" (Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, 7). Many women, in letters, poems, and fictions, found the open prairie a particularly apt landscape upon which to project the garden ideal. On the other hand, the lot of many women, particularly during the early days of settlement, was confinement to a bleak homestead, far from family and friends. For these unfortunates, the "dream of a domestic Eden had become a nightmare of domestic captivity" (Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, 9). Drawing from her first hand experience of frontier conditions, and from her friendships with immigrant women, Cather depicts both visions of the wilderness--as wasteland and as Eden--in her fictions.

⁸Susan J. Rosowski, "Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place: *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, and *A Lost Lady*," in *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines*, ed. William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 81, 83.

⁹David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 23.

¹⁰Walt Whitman, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" *Poetry and Prose*. (New York: Vintage / Library of America, 1982), 372.

¹¹Quoted by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953), 11.

¹²John H. Randall, "Willa Cather and the Pastoral Tradition," in *Five Essays on Willa Cather*, ed. John J. Murphy (North Andover, MA: Merrimack College, 1974), 78.

¹³Susan J. Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 46-47.

¹⁴Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 3.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 22.

²¹*Ibid.*, 20.

²²*Ibid.*, 23.

²³*Ibid.*, 28.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 30.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 29.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 34.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 37.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 38.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 46.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 48.

³¹Among a number of parallels between *O Pioneers!* and Virgil's *Eclogues* that Rosowski draws is between Old Ivar in his sod home retreat, visited by Alexandra and the boys, and the nature god Silenus, who sings of nature and love to visiting youths. Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous*, 47.

³²Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 47.

³³*Ibid.*, 68.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 65.

³⁵James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 243.

³⁶Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 71.



³⁷Ibid., 83.

³⁸Ibid., 97.

³⁹Ibid., 98.

⁴⁰Cather characterizes ethnicity with great accuracy: Swedish ethnologists note a strong tendency to conformity in their population. The notion of *lagom*, meaning appropriateness, inconspicuousness, and moderation in all things, is a decisive factor in Swedish culture. National Geographic Assistant Editor Don Belt writes that the idea of *lagom* "colors all sides of Swedish life--the home, the workplace, the schools. And while it makes for an orderly society, some Swedes fear that the *lagom* ethic . . . discourages the best and the brightest" See Don Belt, "Sweden: In Search of a New Model," *National Geographic* 184, no. 2 (August 1993): 22. *Lagom* is certainly an element of Cather's characterization of Lou and Oscar, though she does not use the term.

Another Swedish tradition depicted but not named in *O Pioneers!* is *allemansträtten*, or everyman's right, by which anyone "can wander freely --even over private property--and glory in the solitude and perfect stillness." Thus the pleasure Alexandra finds in nature is something she brings to Nebraska from Sweden, just as her friend Marie confesses to a love for trees similar to that of her Bohemian ancestors who worshipped trees before the advent of Christianity. Belt's observation of the Swedish holds true of other ethnic groups, and of the relation between groups like the Swedes and the Bohemians who met in the Americas: "Rather than history, it is geography that unifies the Swedes, and silence that keeps them apart" (Belt, 13).

⁴¹Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 115.

⁴²Ibid., 122-124.

⁴³Ibid., 307-308.

⁴⁴Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination*, 46.

⁴⁵Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), unpaginated "Introduction."

⁴⁶Ibid., 5.

⁴⁷Ibid., 8.

⁴⁸Ibid., 16.

⁴⁹Ibid., 17.

⁵⁰Ibid., 18.

⁵¹Ibid., 21.

⁵²Ibid., 353.

⁵³Ibid., 320.

⁵⁴Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," 236.

⁵⁵Cather, *My Ántonia*, 29.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 50.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 124.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 101.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 8.

⁶²Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 309.

⁶³Cather, *My Ántonia*, 244.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 236.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 117-119.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 120.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 137.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 140.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 145.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 219.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 200-201.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 198.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 225-226.

⁷⁴Woodress, Willa Cather, 299. Many feminist readings of Cather emphasize her apparent lesbianism. According to Deborah Lambert, "Cather was a lesbian who could not, or did not, acknowledge her homosexuality and who, in her fiction, transformed her emotional life and experiences into acceptable, heterosexual forms and guises" (Deborah Lambert, "The Defeat of a Hero: Autonomy and Sexuality in *My Ántonia*," in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (Modern Critical Interpretations), ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 119-120. In Lambert's reading, the relationships of Emil and Marie in *O Pioneers!*, Jim and Ántonia in *My Ántonia*, and Niel and Marion in *A Lost Lady* are actually lesbian relationships in disguise. On Cather's sexual orientation, Woodress offers an appropriate caution. "If one defines a lesbian as a woman who has sexual relations with another woman," Woodress argues, "Cather cannot be called a lesbian on the basis of available records. On the other hand, if a lesbian is a woman whose primary emotional attachments are to other women, regardless of sexual relations, then Cather was most certainly a lesbian" (Woodress, 141).

⁷⁵Blanche H. Gelfant, "The Forgotten Reaping-hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*," in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, ed. Harold Bloom, 79, 89.

⁷⁶James E. Miller, Jr., "My Ántonia and the American Dream," in

Willa Cather's *"My Ántonia,"* ed. Harold Bloom, 102.

⁷⁷Cather, *My Ántonia*, 321.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 353.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 328.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 270-271.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 264.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 371-372.

⁸³Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous*, 91.

⁸⁴Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (New York: Knopf, 1936), v.

⁸⁵Woodress, *Willa Cather*, 336.

⁸⁶Cather, "Nebraska: End of the First Cycle," 238. Consistent with her rejection of the present, the major works of Cather's third and final period, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), are historical romances set in eras long past and places far from Nebraska. Cather did return to Nebraska locales in *Obscure Destinies* (1932) and in *Lucy Gayhart* (1935); the stories in the former volume are equal in quality and importance to her best novels.

⁸⁷John H. Randall, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 155.

⁸⁸Willa Cather, "The Novel D  meubl  ," in *Willa Cather on Writing* (New York: Knopf, 1949), 41-42.

⁸⁹Harold Bloom, "Introduction," *Willa Cather's "My Ántonia,"* 1-2.

⁹⁰Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady* (New York: Knopf, 1923), 11.

⁹¹Rosowski, "Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place," *Geography and Literature*, 90.

⁹²Cather, *A Lost Lady*, 20-22.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 78. Cather's ambiguity toward sexuality plays as important a role in *A Lost Lady* as in *My Ántonia*. Just as Jim Burden tells us of "his" Ántonia, so does Niel Herbert's perspective alter and distort our view of the woman he idealizes, Marian Forrester. Like Jim, Niel is uncomfortable with sex--he remains a bachelor and reacts with disgust to Mrs. Forrester's dalliances. Just as Jim's view of life is colored by the books he has read, from *The Life of Jesse James* to Virgil's pastorals, so is Niel's interpretation of people and events mediated by his reading of such authors as Byron, Fielding, Montaigne, and Ovid. The chapter that deals with Niel's reading ends with his discovery of her adultery, which shocks and angers him not from "a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal" (Cather, *A Lost Lady*, 87). Out of their dissatisfaction with life, both Jim and Niel sublimate experience through art.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 52-55.

⁹⁵Ibid., 152-153.

⁹⁶Ibid., 106-107.

⁹⁷Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," 238.

⁹⁸Ibid., 237.

⁹⁹Rosowski, "Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place," *Geography and Literature*, 93.



Chapter 4

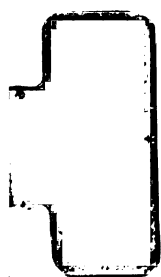
Aldo Leopold: Ecologist and Midwesterner

Ecologist Aldo Leopold, who was born in Iowa in 1877 and lived in Wisconsin from 1924 until his death in 1948, is best remembered as the author of *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), a volume described by Leopold scholar J. Baird Callicott as "a best seller, the environmentalist's bible, and a twentieth-century landmark in a genre of American letters pioneered by Thoreau. . . ."¹ This classic of nature writing is primarily noted for the thesis of its capstone essay, "The Land Ethic," that society needs to expand its ethical boundaries to include "man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it."² Leopold's "land ethic" is the philosophical "upshot" of a book largely devoted to the illustration of ecological, ethical, and aesthetic imperatives regarding nature through narratives relating the author's experience of landscape, particularly in Wisconsin. While of interest for its considerable influence on contemporary environmentalism (including such new fields as environmental history, environmental ethics, restoration ecology, and bioregionalism), *A Sand County Almanac* is also remarkable as literature. Among the book's strong literary qualities are its regionalism and sense of place. Aldo Leopold was by birth, outlook, and ultimate residence a Midwesterner; in style and substance, *A Sand County Almanac* addresses the pastoral identity of his home region--the Midwest as America's agrarian heartland--with the aim of reforming the human-nature relationship there and elsewhere.

The man who would become a major figure in twentieth-century conservation was born and raised in Burlington, Iowa, on the Mississippi River.³ Like Mark Twain before him, many of Leopold's first significant experiences of nature occurred near the greatest American river, the heartland stream memorialized by T.S. Eliot as "a strong brown god."⁴ Leopold's father, a prominent Burlington businessman, instructed Aldo and his brothers in outdoorsmanship on hunting trips to the Illinois side of the river. In admonishing Aldo to shoot partridges in flight and never from trees, for example, Carl Leopold inculcated a basic conservationism in his son; Leopold would one day write that "to forego a sure shot in the tree in favor of a hopeless one at the fleeing bird was my first exercise in ethical codes." In his essay "Red Legs Kicking," Leopold remembers the shooting of his first partridge not as an exploit to boast about, but as a moment when he intensely appreciated the integrity and beauty of a wild place. "I could draw a map today," Leopold writes, "of each clump of red bunchberry and each blue aster that adorned the mossy spot where he lay, my first partridge on the wing. I suspect my present affection for bunchberries and asters dates from that moment."⁵

But as Leopold famously observed, "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds."⁶ While he was at college, "progress" consumed that little remnant of wildness in the agrarian Midwest, prompting Leopold to entertain his "first doubt about man in the role of conqueror":

I came home one Christmas to find that land promoters, with the help of the Corps of Engineers, had dyked and drained my boyhood hunting grounds on the Mississippi River bottoms. The job was so complete that I could not even trace the outlines of my beloved lakes and sloughs under their new blanket of cornstalks.



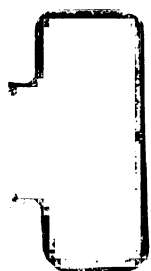
The conversion of this marsh to cropland was for Leopold a formative experience; his shock and "sense of loss" were such that he did not write about his former hunting grounds until late in his life: "my old lake had been under corn for forty years before I wrote "Red Legs Kicking."⁷ Speaking of children's first experiences of nature and significant place, Paul Shepard argues that "territory and the sacred places within it orient the individual to topography, position him in the land and in the cosmos, an environmental gestalt of figure and ground."⁸ By extension, the desecration of a child's sacred ground is a source of spiritual trauma, as we will see in the case of Ohio poet James Wright. Aldo Leopold turned his sorrow to commitment, continuing his ecological education so as to help heal this "world of wounds" as a "doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise."⁹

As was the experience of the young Ernest Hemingway of Oak Park, Illinois, Leopold's well-to-do family travelled by boat and rail each summer to a resort community in northern Michigan; Leopold's first experience of near-wilderness occurred at Marquette Island in the Les Cheneaux group in northern Lake Huron. Like Hemingway at Walloon Lake, Leopold was more interested in fishing, boating, and hunting than in social diversions available among the "summer people." He explored Marquette Island intensely, drawing detailed maps of the well-forested terrain and continuing his special interest in ornithology. According to Leopold's biographer Curt Meine, Leopold's father maintained strict conservation rules while on vacation, seeing to it that "Aldo never kept a bass under a pound-and-a-half, nor a pike under three pounds."

Northern Michigan was, as Meine describes it, "a land rich in the raw

material of adventure, and wild enough to inspire the imagination."¹⁰ Though Leopold never fulfilled his dream of canoeing northward into wild Ontario toward Hudson Bay, his early encounters with the woods and waters of Les Cheneaux and the Michigan mainland instilled in him a love for nature in untrammelled expanses, and an ardent desire to see it preserved.

Leopold earned bachelor's and master's degrees at the Yale School of Forestry, which had been founded by conservationist Gifford Pinchot in 1900. For Pinchot, the first U.S. Forest Service chief (under President Theodore Roosevelt), "the first principle of conservation [was] development, the use of the natural resources now existing on this continent for the benefit of the people who live here now."¹¹ Though Leopold did not at first significantly deviate from this reductively economic view of nature (it was many years, for example, before he decided that predatory animals deserve protection), he was from the beginning of his career interested in expanding the application of conservation principles beyond the Forest Service mandate for timber management. In his fifteen years as a forest supervisor in Arizona and New Mexico, Leopold focused on issues relating to game protection, including the need for hunting laws and habitat preservation. His leadership among conservationists in the Southwest included playing a critical role in the establishment of the Gila Wilderness Area, the first tract to be so designated. Leopold learned during his Forest Service years to build community consensus for conservation measures. He wrote articles in popular and professional journals, and established rapport with ranchers and hunters as well as scientists and government officials. His final position with the Forest Service as Associate



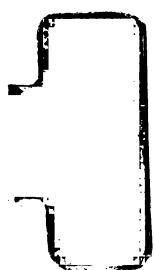
Director of the Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin removed Leopold from field work for four years. But he had returned to the Midwest, his home and the regional focus of his work during the last twenty-four years of his life.

Leopold's first major project after leaving the Forest Service was a game survey of eight midwestern states, sponsored by the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute. Between 1928 and 1931, he travelled extensively to gather data relating to hunting laws and practices, habitat, and animal populations in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan; this information went into his *Report on a Game Survey of the North Central States* (1931). "Affection born of nativity," Leopold writes in the *Report*, "is probably in part responsible for my conviction that no region in the world was originally more richly endowed with game than this one [the American Midwest]. . . ." ¹² But decades of intensive commercial farming had decimated game populations by destroying their habitat, necessitating a new understanding between government, land owners, and the public. Laws, certainly, were needed to regulate hunting and other uses of land, but the success of game management rested with private landowners, particularly farmers. Leopold wrote his second book with that insight in mind; *Game Management* (1933) provided landowners, professionals, and bureaucrats alike with sound techniques for correcting the adverse conditions he had observed during the Midwestern survey. These two publications became essential to conservation research and public policy at mid-century, earning Leopold the title of "father of game management."

Leopold's appointment in 1933 as Professor in a new Department of

Game Management at the University of Wisconsin provided him with a base to conduct further research and disseminate his conservation philosophy. While maintaining his prominent role in the national conservation movement (he was a founding member of the Wilderness Society in 1935), Leopold applied himself most vigorously to conservation at the local level.¹³ He instructed young farmers as well as graduate students in game management theory and technique; he gave radio talks on conservation, addressing his commentary to Wisconsin's agricultural community; he helped establish a University Arboretum at Madison for educational, recreational, and research purposes; he served on the new Wisconsin State Conservation Department's game and fisheries committees; he initiated cooperative ventures between farmers and sportsmen to improve habitat. Finally, and most significantly for Leopold's enduring influence, he bought eighty acres of land on the Wisconsin River in the sand country of central Wisconsin, a place where he and his family--wife Estella and five children--would enjoy close contact with wild nature and put game management theory to work in the field. Through each of these endeavors Leopold sought to reconcile democratic individualism with the lessons of scientific ecology, to take Midwestern pastoralism beyond utilitarian considerations of "the immediately useful and practical" to encompass the long term health of the land. Leopold was, as Curt Meine describes him, "an Anglo-Saxon midwesterner, nonpolitical, nondoctrinaire,"¹⁴ and more: he was an ecological Jeffersonian.

The sand country of Wisconsin lies at the convergence of three biotic provinces--prairie, deciduous hardwoods, and northern coniferous forest. Though rich in biological diversity, the region was and is poor for farming. Interestingly, two other major figures in American



environmental thought spent significant portions of their lives in the area: frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner and preservationist John Muir spent their boyhoods not far from the abandoned farm Leopold bought in 1935. In an essay on environmental traditions in Wisconsin, environmental historian William Cronon writes that all three men "found their environmental compass, their most intimate sense of place, in a small area within fifteen miles of [the town of] Portage, in the sandy, low-lying country near where the headwaters of the Fox River converge with the Wisconsin River."¹⁵ Turner, who was briefly Leopold's neighbor and acquaintance in Madison, grew up in Portage and studied at the University of Wisconsin; his famous "frontier thesis" originated with research into land-tenure patterns around his home town. Muir, who is most famous for his writings about the Sierra Nevada of California and his fight for wilderness protection in the West, came to the Wisconsin sand country with his family from Scotland in 1849. Muir experienced the Midwestern wilderness first hand, helping to turn a rugged forest into productive farm land. Whereas Turner celebrated the pioneer period for its supposed democratizing effect, Muir loved the Wisconsin landscape for its own sake, writing his memoir *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (1912) as a transcendentalist celebration of the wild nature he believed to be literally sacred, revelatory of God's splendor. The sand country, as Muir's account implies, was never cut out for intensive farming. Overproduction of wheat, excessive grazing, clear cut lumbering, and marsh drainage caused erosion, peat fires, and the creation of inland sand dunes. As environmental historian Susan Flader relates, the land Aldo Leopold bought in 1935 was hardly a mid-American Arcadia:

. . . less than half the land in any of the sand counties was in farms, and of that very little was actively cultivated. The rest was considered wasteland--weeds, brush, runty jack pine, scrub oak, and raw peat sprouting dense thickets of seemingly worthless aspen. Much of the land had reverted to the counties for nonpayment of real estate and drainage taxes. There it reposed, for few would think of buying it.¹⁶

Leopold, in fact, selected his farm "for its lack of goodness and its lack of highway; indeed my whole neighborhood lies in a backwash of the River Progress."¹⁷ Seeing the place as a living laboratory for applied ecology, Leopold set to healing the wounds inflicted on the land by a long history of abuse. In the terminology of contemporary bioregionalism, he "reinhabited" the country of Turner and Muir, finding that country "may be rich despite a conspicuous poverty of physical endowment, and its quality may not be apparent at first glance, nor at all times."¹⁸

For the rest of his life Leopold spent every weekend and moment he could spare at the farm, staying in the converted chicken coop affectionately known as the "Shack." He and his family planted native trees and other vegetation, provided cover for wildlife, and kept a detailed record of their work and observations. By this time, Leopold was a convert from utilitarian, Pinchot-style conservation; he now embraced a holistic, ecological view of land management that considered the welfare not only of game animals, but of all creatures, including predators, within the context of the entire "land community." He was still an avid hunter, but the chase had become just one of many possible outdoor activities. His motivation in owning and improving the land went beyond diversion, research, or environmental restoration--the larger purpose was educational. Leopold meant to present his Sand Country experience as a model for others to follow, and to that end he

wrote narrative pieces about life at the shack for publications such as *Wisconsin Agriculturalist and Farmer* and *Aububon*. By 1941, Leopold was envisioning a book of collected essays balancing narrative description of what *is* in nature and current land use with ecological exhortation--a prescription of what *ought* to be the norm in human-nature relations. Up until his death in 1948 (caused by a heart attack suffered while fighting a brush fire at the Shack), Leopold worked on the manuscript that his family and friends would edit and posthumously publish as *A Sand County Almanac*.

A *Sand County Almanac* is arranged into three parts (the most popular recent edition adds a fourth section of essays). Part I, the "Almanac" itself, reflects the influence of Thoreau's *Walden* in representing the passage of a full year's cycle, January to December, at Leopold's "week-end refuge from too much modernity: 'the shack.'" ¹⁹ Part II is concerned with "The Quality of Landscape" not only in the Midwest, but across North America, as Leopold recounts episodes in his life that taught him vital lessons in conservation. The Part III of recent paperback editions collects essays from *Round River* (1953), the second posthumous Leopold volume, on educational issues of nature and outdoor recreation. Part IV (originally Part III) is titled "The Upshot" for its directly philosophical arguments concerning a "Conservation Esthetic," "Wilderness," and most importantly, "The Land Ethic." This arrangement works to acquaint us with a man through his life and works before explicitly seeking to convert us to his way of thinking. By moving from the local to the universal, from natural history through memoir to ecological theory, the structure of Leopold's book creates, as John Tallmadge comments, "a climate of belief that will make us recep-

tive to Leopold's doctrine of land citizenship."²⁰ If Leopold changes his reader's outlook, he has done so by first providing entertainment and instruction regarding ecological issues as they affect particular places and people. Like all good nature writing, *A Sand County Almanac* succeeds as both polemic and poetry.

Leopold's philosophy centers on the concept of a "land community," elaborated upon in "The Land Ethic." There Leopold argues that Western culture has gradually expanded its definition of "community" by extending its range of ethical consideration. Having evolved from tribal obligations to a general humanitarianism, society now needs to include nature itself in its ethical constructs. "The land ethic," Leopold writes, "simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." It "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it."²¹ While consistent with ecological science (which now uses the term "ecosystem" to convey the concept of biological interdependence), Leopold's use of the term "community" has strong cultural connotations. Since Leopold subscribed to the Jeffersonian vision of a democracy of independent land owners, his "land community" invokes midwestern pastoralism at its best--a democratic sense of place predicated on social virtue on the responsible husbandry of nature. Thus from ecological and ethical values Leopold proceeds to aesthetics, employing a pastoral metaphor in asserting that "land yields a cultural harvest."²² This harvest includes works of art and literature such as *A Sand County Almanac* that celebrate and defend "the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community."²³

Leopold writes in a relaxed and conversational style, using

"simple rhetorical figures" and "turns of phrase" to achieve what John Tallmadge calls the "memorable succinctness"²⁴ of his prose. Figurative language is especially important in *A Sand County Almanac*, including the recurring metaphor of landscape as language and literature, as a book from which nature-literate people can read lessons in ecology, ethics, and aesthetics.²⁵ "Every farm woodland," Leopold declares, "in addition to yielding lumber, fuel, and posts, should provide its owner a liberal education."²⁶ Thus, "every farm is a textbook on animal ecology,"²⁷ and "he who owns a veteran bur oak owns more than a tree. He owns a historical library. . . ."²⁸ This is the premise of "Good Oak," the essay for February in which Leopold tells of sawing down an old oak tree that had been killed by lightning. Leopold introduces an environmental history of Wisconsin by imagining his saw "biting its way, stroke by stroke, decade by decade, into the chronology of a lifetime, written in concentric annual rings of good oak." After "a dozen pulls of the saw to transect the few years of our ownership, during which we have learned to love and cherish this farm," Leopold cuts into "the reign of the bootlegger"²⁹ who wasted the soil and burned the farmhouse; he then continues to saw progressively back into history. Some of the stories he reads in the wood grain are encouraging, such as John Muir's attempt to establish a wildflower sanctuary just thirty miles from Leopold's farm: "1865 still stands in Wisconsin history as the birthyear of mercy for things natural, wild, and free."³⁰ Most of the history, however, is a continuum of environmental neglect and abuse, a chronology of years such as 1899, when "the last passenger pigeon collided with a charge of shot near Babcock, two counties to the north. . . ."³¹ Leopold concludes the essay by comparing the saw with the wedge and the axe as tools for

splitting wood and as "an allegory for historians."³² These homely metaphors are also likely to appeal to people, such as farmers, who may be better convinced of an ecological argument if it is phrased in colloquial, commonsensical language. By speaking the vernacular of rural Wisconsin, Leopold creates for himself a persona, described by James I. McClintock as "a twentieth century variant of the mythic American yeoman farmer, the traditional repository of Jeffersonian virtue and homespun wisdom."³³ Leopold's rhetoric is in this regard distinctly Midwestern.

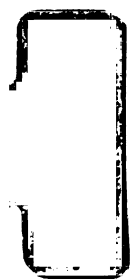
Comments made by Donald Worster, dean of environmental historians, about Leopold's metaphorical language should be considered in light of Leopold's regionalism. Worster describes Leopold's interchanging use of the terms "mechanism" and "organism" to represent land ecology as a "vacillation between root metaphors . . . consistently identified with fundamentally antithetical world views."³⁴ Worster's point is well taken, particularly since the terms occur even within single paragraphs, as in a section of the essay "Round River" concluding with a mechanical metaphor: "To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering."³⁵ Though Leopold made relatively few such comparisons of land to mechanical structures (there are none at all in the "Almanac" section, where the "community" paradigm dominates), Worster concludes that Leopold's land ethic was "in many ways . . . merely a more enlightened, long-range prudence: a surer means to an infinite expansion of material wealth. . . ." This overstates the case, as does Worster's claim that by Leopold's use of "agronomic terms . . . the entire earth became a crop to be harvested, though not one wholly planted or cultivated by man."³⁶ Leopold applied the word "harvest" to the cultural, rather than economic, rewards of prudent land management;

he strenuously objected to those in his own field, forestry, who are "quite content to grow trees like cabbages, with cellulose as the basic forest commodity." Such specialists feel "no inhibition against violence; [their] ideology is agronomic."³⁷ Leopold's "ideology," as it were, was pastoral, not agronomic, as Worster has it. A major cause of environmental distress in the Midwest was and is the kind of agriculture Leopold called "clean farming," which "means a food chain aimed solely at economic profit and purged of all non-conforming links," including native flora and fauna. Leopold abjured this "Pax Germanica of the agricultural world," a bleak monoculture that he would replace with a simultaneously ecological and democratic diversity: "a food chain aimed to harmonize the wild and the tame in the joint interest of stability, productivity, and beauty."³⁸ Animals, plants, and humans would all be able to "make a living" in an economy of nature so constituted. But to initiate such a profound social change Leopold first needed to fit his style to his intended audience, the people whom he wished to convert from a utilitarian to an ecological perspective on land. Herein lies the subversive nature of Leopold's ethic and rhetoric: he communicated a deeply radical proposition--that nature has rights--by coopting the archetypes and idiomatic language of his native region. Leopold's personas as yeoman farmer, "intelligent tinkerer," doctor to the land organism, or landlord to plant and animal tenants derive from typically Midwestern speech and cultural norms. That *A Sand County Almanac* is revered by state game officers, farmers, and high school biology teachers as well as conservation professionals in government and academia is testimony to Leopold's success in articulating values that must operate locally if wider social objectives are to be achieved.

Leopold accepted the fact that Midwestern landscapes would be cultivated and intensely managed; he desired, however, a stewardship that would work with rather than against ecology, that would allow for enclaves of wild nature. He observed that many such places had survived to remind observers of ecosystems that were once intact and could be again. Driving through Illinois, for example, he saw that in "the narrow thread of sod between the shaved banks and the toppling fences grow the relics of what was once Illinois: the prairie."³⁹ As have many other Midwestern writers (including Willa Cather and James Wright), Leopold also noticed that cemeteries in the Midwest often harbor native species of plants that have been extirpated elsewhere. "Every July," Leopold writes in "Prairie Birthday," "I watch eagerly a certain country graveyard that I pass in driving to and from my farm":

It is extraordinary only in being triangular instead of square, and in harboring, within the sharp angle of its fence, a pinpoint remnant of the native prairie on which the graveyard was established in the 1840's. Heretofore unreachable by scythe or mower, the yard-square relic of original Wisconsin gives birth, each July, to a man-high stalk of compass plant or cutleaf Silphium, spangled with saucer-sized yellow blooms resembling sunflowers. It is the sole remnant of this plant along this highway, and perhaps the sole remnant in the western half of our county. What a thousand acres of Silphiums looked like when they tickled the bellies of the buffalo is a question never again to be answered, and perhaps not even asked.⁴⁰

The flowers, described as "man-high" to emphasize their citizenship in the land community, are beautiful to Leopold for their own sake and because they constitute an important page in the history book of nature, a page that tells of the great herds of bison that once roamed freely across the plains. Because Silphium is a long-lived plant, the specimen in the cemetery may have been a hundred years old; it may have "watched the fugitive Black Hawk retreat from the Madison lakes to the Wisconsin



River. . . . Certainly it saw the successive funerals of the local pioneers as they retired, one by one, to their repose beneath the blue-stem."⁴¹ But the cultural significance of this plant is lost on most people. When Leopold returned in August, he was angered and hurt to find that a road crew had removed the fence and cut the Silphium. This desecration of a sacred place was more offensive for being part of an ethically and aesthetically bankrupt system of land management. Leopold emphasizes the spiritual as well as ecological dimensions of the loss by considering the nominal steward of the graveyard's doubly consecrated ground: "If I were to tell a preacher of the adjoining church that the road crew has been burning history books in his cemetery, under the guise of mowing weeds, he would be amazed and uncomprehending. How could a weed be a book?"⁴²

Such commodification and abuse of landscape results in part from an inadequate sense of the beautiful in nature. J. Baird Callicott describes in his essay on "The Land Aesthetic" how the "prevailing natural aesthetic . . . is not autonomous but derivative from art," particularly from eighteenth century notions of the "picturesque," those perspectives of nature that suggest pictures or paintings. The way most people look at nature is

conventionalized, not well informed by the ecological and evolutionary revolutions in natural history; and it is sensational and self-referential, not genuinely oriented to nature on nature's own terms. In a word, it is trivial.

We appreciate picturesque countryside and sublime mountain landscapes because our culture conditions us to value such views; our national park system, for example, originated as a means to preserve places that had been recognized as classically picturesque or romantically sublime--

Yosemite, Yellowstone, and so forth. Few have loved the grand American wilderness as much as Aldo Leopold, or worked so hard for its preservation. But Leopold saw that ignorance of history and ecology had led to the aesthetic undervaluation and subsequent abuse of less obviously "beautiful" places as the sand country of Wisconsin. To counteract this harmful tendency in American culture, Leopold proposed an evolutionary land aesthetic, parallel and complementary to his land ethic. Leopold's aesthetic, as Callicott notes, strives to extend human perception of nature beyond the visual to include the other four senses and, most importantly, "the mind, the faculty of cognition."⁴³ To this effect Leopold suggests that the "ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language."⁴⁴ Valuing nature for its ecological and evolutionary integrity enables one to "see America as history, to conceive of destiny as a becoming, to smell a hickory tree through the still lapse of ages. . . ."⁴⁵

Such an ability to see into nature is especially important in a region like the American Midwest, where landscapes are often apparently prosaic. In his essay on "Country," as in "Prairie Birthday," Leopold invokes the memory of the American bison in respect to prevailing perceptions of Midwestern landscapes:

The taste for country displays the same diversity in aesthetic competence among individuals as the taste for opera, or oils. There are those who are willing to be herded in droves through "scenic" places; who find mountains grand if they be proper mountains with waterfalls, cliffs, and lakes. To such the Kansas plains are tedious. They see the endless corn, but not the heave and the grunt of ox teams breaking the prairie. History, for them, grows on campuses. They look at the low horizon, but they cannot see it, as de Vaca did, under the bellies of the buffalo.

Leopold learned to see nature in this way, "under the bellies of the

buffalo," through long study and observation of his sand country farm, where he learned that in "country, as in people, a plain exterior often conceals hidden riches, to perceive which requires much living in and with."⁴⁶ Among the most lyrical passages of the "Almanac" are descriptions of particular places that Leopold came to know intimately, such as a "streambank where hillside briars adjoin dank beds of frozen ferns and jewelweeds on the boggy bottom,"⁴⁷ and the fork of a river, "narrow, deep, and fed by cold springs that gurgled out under its close-hemmed walls of alder."⁴⁸ These typically Midwestern places offer hidden riches of subtle beauty to the sensitive and discerning observer. A deeper-than-visual curiosity is required to apprehend their significance; the observer needs to "enter the picture," figuratively and literally:

There are woods that are plain to look at, but not to look into. Nothing is plainer than a cornbelt woodlot; yet if it be August, a crushed pennyroyal, or an over-ripe mayapple, tells you here is a place.⁴⁹

Pennyroyal and mayapple dwell in this woodlot as members of the land community; Leopold's recognition of them by name serves as his passport into their domain. He achieved full naturalization (to complete the metaphor) as a citizen of the place by protecting and propagating these and other native life-forms.

Recognizing that the mass of people in the Midwest and elsewhere in America lack such an informed sense of place, Leopold proposed environmental education as the best means of instilling in succeeding generations "a little healthy contempt for a plethora of material blessings"⁵⁰ and a corresponding love for natural endowments. Such education must transcend ordinary injunctions to "obey the law, vote

right, join some organizations, and practice what conservation is profitable on your own land"⁵¹; it must build "an ethical underpinning for land economics and a universal curiosity to understand the land mechanism."⁵² Leopold admitted an important role for government in conservation, but he felt that too many people wrongly delegate their responsibility for nature to bureaus and agencies. In the Midwest, where relatively little land is in the public domain, commitment on the part of private landowners and amateur naturalists is essential to a successful "revolt against the tedium of the merely economic attitude toward land."⁵³ Among Leopold's heroes in this revolt were farmers he knew who reintroduced native tamarack trees on their land, "an industrial chemist who spends his spare time reconstructing the history of the passenger pigeon,"⁵⁴ and an Ohio housewife whose study of the common sparrow was recognized by professional ornithologists as a major contribution to their field. Such commitment to nature, in Leopold's view, needs to be included in biology curriculum, which typically emphasizes laboratory work like dissection at the expense of field work that will teach students to see their "native countryside with appreciation and intelligence. . . ." Like Leopold's students at the University of Wisconsin, a college student in a class so designed could expect an examination such as the following, presumably tailored to fit his or her own state of residence:

We are driving down a country road in northern Missouri. Here is a farmstead. Look at the trees in the yard and the soil in the field and tell us whether the original settler carved his farm out of prairie or woods. Did he eat prairie chicken or wild turkey for his Thanksgiving? What plants grew here originally which do not grow here now? Why did they disappear? What did the prairie plants have to do with creating the corn-yielding capacity of this soil? Why does this soil erode now but not then?⁵⁵

Leopold asks, in effect, that we "read the land" for lessons in human history and the intrinsic order and beauty, or "poetry," of nature. This kind of learning will in Leopold's view help us overcome "the most serious obstacle impeding the evolution of a land ethic . . . the fact that our educational and economic system is headed away from, rather than toward, an intense consciousness of land."⁵⁶

Leopold harbored no illusions about the enormity of this task, which in the Midwest required no less than a reform of middle class, middle brow values--such as novelist Sinclair Lewis of Minnesota embodied in a man named Babbitt, in the eponymous satire to which Leopold frequently alludes. In valuing wealth and social prestige above all else, Babbitt represents one polarity in the Midwestern mind; the other is the yeoman farmer, personified by Leopold as an ecologist, hunter, or weekend bird-watcher. Since Babbitt prioritizes wealth, Leopold would transform our conception of wealth to include the intrinsic value of nature. To this end he occasionally resorts to humorously economic language:

If you are thriftily inclined, you will find pines congenial company, for unlike the hand-to-mouth hardwoods, they never pay current bills out of current earnings; they live solely on their savings of the year before.⁵⁷

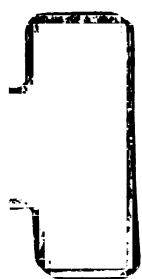
Since Babbitt values his good reputation almost as much as wealth, we must also redefine civic virtue to include responsibility to the entire land community; there must be "social stigma in the possession of a gullied farm, a wrecked forest, or a polluted stream. . . ."⁵⁸ As

Leopold wrote in the concluding paragraph of *Game Management*:

. . . twenty centuries of "progress" have brought the average citizen a vote, a national anthem, a Ford, a bank account, and a high opinion of himself, but not the capacity to live in high density without befouling and denuding his environment, nor a

conviction that such capacity, rather than such density, is the true test of whether he is civilized.⁵⁹

The universally applicable message about land stewardship expressed in *A Sand County Almanac* has a special resonance in the American Midwest because of Aldo Leopold's long and profound association with the region. His special genius was in finding common ground for apparently irreconcilable perspectives--materialism and idealism, science and spirituality, domestication and wildness. Between these dualities lies the mythic pastoral middlescape, "a state of harmony between men and land"⁶⁰ for which Midwestern writers have long yearned. "In these higher aspirations," Leopold insisted, "the important thing is not to achieve, but to strive."⁶¹ This typically Midwestern pragmatism inspired Leopold in his lifelong work as a conservationist, an occupation he defined as "one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of the land."⁶² With axe and shovel, Leopold wrote a bright new chapter in the often sad history of a remote Wisconsin county; with his expressive pen he wrote a book that makes that place a microcosm for a world in need of love and respect. His example is instructive for people in all places who seek to be better citizens of the earth's diversely beautiful land communities.



Notes

¹J. Baird Callicott, "Introduction," ed. J. Baird Callicott, *Companion to A Sand County Almanac: Interpretive & Critical Essays* (hereafter *Companion*). (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 3-4.

²Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," *A Sand County Almanac With Essays On Conservation From Round River* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 238. I cite this standard paperback edition of the book because it is the most universally available.

³Leopold's biography is Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). Callicott's *Companion* makes a useful supplement, as does Susan Flader, *Thinking like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of an Ecological Attitude Toward Deer, Wolves and Forests* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1974).

⁴T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages" from "Four Quartets," *The Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), 191.

⁵Leopold, "Red Legs Kicking," *A Sand County Almanac*, 129.

⁶Leopold, "The Round River," *A Sand County Almanac*, 197.

⁷Leopold, "Foreword" to 1947 manuscript entitled *Great Possessions, Companion*, 282-283.

⁸Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 37.

⁹Leopold, "The Round River," *A Sand County Almanac*, 197.

¹⁰Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, 23-24.

¹¹Gifford Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1910) cited in Donald Worster, *American Environmentalism: The Formative Period, 1860-1915* (New York: Wiley, 1973), 85.

¹²Aldo Leopold, *Report on a Game Survey of the North Central States* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, for the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute, 1931), 15.

¹³Leopold had mixed feelings about federal conservation efforts, including New Deal era programs under "Alphabet" agencies like the C.C.C. (Civilian Conservation Corps), for which Leopold briefly worked as a supervisor. While well-intentioned and often productive, these governmental efforts to plant forests and alleviate soil erosion did not address the cultural causes of land abuse, which lay with private organizations and individuals. "It is easy," Leopold wrote, "to

side-step the issue of getting lumbermen to practice forestry, or the farmer to crop game or conserve soil, and to pass these functions to government. But it won't work. I assert this, not as a political opinion, but as a geographical fact. The basic problem is to induce the private landowner to conserve on his own land, and no conceivable millions or billions for public land purchase can alter that fact" (Leopold, cited by Meine, Aldo Leopold, 320-321). Leopold supported public conservation initiatives, but chose to work with regional, state, and local institutions to promote the deeper changes he hoped would occur in how society views and uses the land.

¹⁴Meine, Aldo Leopold, 352.

¹⁵William Cronon, "Landscape and Home: Environmental Traditions in Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 74, no. 2 (Winter 1990-1991): 93.

¹⁶Susan Flader, "Aldo Leopold's Sand Country," *Companion*, 49.

¹⁷Leopold, "Prairie Birthday," *A Sand County Almanac*, 50.

¹⁸Leopold, "Country," *A Sand County Almanac*, 177.

¹⁹Leopold, "Foreword to Sand County Almanac," *A Sand County Almanac*, xviii.

²⁰John Tallmadge, "Anatomy of a Classic," *Companion*, 114.

²¹Leopold, "The Land Ethic," *A Sand County Almanac*, 239-241.

²²Leopold, "Foreword," *A Sand County Almanac*, xix.

²³Leopold, "The Land Ethic," *A Sand County Almanac*, 262.

²⁴Tallmadge, "Anatomy," *Companion*, 116.

²⁵Tallmadge discusses this metaphor at length, drawing a parallel between the "book of nature" and the "cultural harvest" of Leopold's land aesthetic. Certain figures of speech, such as Leopold's reference to "the olfactory poems" written by animals ("Great Possessions" 46), thus evoke the "literary" quality of landscape. More explicitly illustrative of the land aesthetic are related metaphors of nature as art or artist: "I know a painting . . . it is a river who wields the brush" ("The Green Pasture," 54); as music or musician: "The wind that makes music in November corn is in a hurry" ("If I Were the Wind," 70); and as dance or choreographer: "The drama of the [woodcock] sky dance is enacted nightly on hundreds of farms, the owners of which sigh for entertainment, but harbor the illusion that it is to be sought in theatres" ("Sky Dance," 36). Since "literature" has arguments to make about ecology, history, and ethics, Leopold's "book of nature" metaphor also illustrates his land ethic.

²⁶Leopold, "A Mighty Fortress," *A Sand County Almanac*, 77-78.

²⁷Leopold, "Home Range," *A Sand County Almanac*, 86.

²⁸Leopold, "Bur Oak," *A Sand County Almanac*, 32.

²⁹Leopold, "Good Oak," *A Sand County Almanac*, 10.

³⁰Ibid., 17.

³¹Ibid., 13.

³²Ibid., 17.

³³James I. McClintock, *Nature's Kindred Spirits: Aldo Leopold, Joseph Wood Krutch, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Gary Snyder* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming).

³⁴Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 290.

³⁵Leopold, "The Round River," *A Sand County Almanac*, 190.

³⁶Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 289.

³⁷Leopold, "The Land Ethic," *A Sand County Almanac*, 259.

³⁸Leopold, "The Round River," *A Sand County Almanac*, 199. My case for the regional nature of Leopold's metaphorical language is further supported by the first and central image of "The Round River," derived from the Midwestern folklore of giant lumberman Paul Bunyan. The Round River, according to Leopold, was one "of the marvels of early Wisconsin . . . a river that flowed into itself, and thus sped around and around in a never-ending circuit" (Leopold, "The Round River," *A Sand County Almanac*, 188). Leopold uses this image to illustrate the cyclicity of all ecosystems. Since Paul Bunyan represents the aggressive, conquering attitude toward nature which led to the deforestation of Wisconsin and other Upper Midwestern states with pine forests, Leopold's archetypal cooptation of this familiar folk hero is a particularly deft expository strategy.

³⁹Leopold, "Illinois Bus Ride," *A Sand County Almanac*, 125.

⁴⁰Leopold, "Prairie Birthday," *A Sand County Almanac*, 48-49.

⁴¹Ibid., 53.

⁴²Ibid., 50.

⁴³J. Baird Callicott, "The Land Aesthetic," *Companion*, 160.

⁴⁴Leopold, "Marshland Elegy," *A Sand County Almanac*, 102.

⁴⁵Leopold, "On a Monument to the Pigeon," *A Sand County Almanac*, 119.

⁴⁶Leopold, "Country," *A Sand County Almanac*, 178-180.

⁴⁷Leopold, "Red Lanterns," *A Sand County Almanac*, 67.

⁴⁸Leopold, "The Alder Fork--A Fishing Idyl," *A Sand County Almanac*, 40.

⁴⁹Leopold, "Country," *A Sand County Almanac*, 178.

⁵⁰Leopold, "Foreword to *Sand County Almanac*," *A Sand County Almanac*, xix.

⁵¹Leopold, "The Land Ethic," *A Sand County Almanac*, 143-144.

⁵²Leopold, "The Round River," *A Sand County Almanac*, 202.

⁵³Leopold, "Natural History," *A Sand County Almanac*, 202.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 204.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 208.

⁵⁶Leopold, "The Land Ethic," *A Sand County Almanac*, 261.

⁵⁷Leopold, "Pines Above the Snow," *A Sand County Almanac*, 88.

⁵⁸Leopold, "The Round River," *A Sand County Almanac*, 202.

⁵⁹Aldo Leopold, *Game Management* (New York: Scribner's, 1933), 422-423.

⁶⁰Leopold, "The Land Ethic," *A Sand County Almanac*, 243.

⁶¹Leopold, "Natural History," *A Sand County Almanac*, 210.

⁶²Leopold, "Axe-in-Hand," *A Sand County Almanac*, 73.

Chapter 5

The Jaded Pastoralism of James Wright

. . . one day the demons of America must be placated,
the ghosts must be appeased, the Spirit of Place
atoned for. Then the true passionate love for
American soil will appear. As yet, there is too much
menace in the landscape.

D.H. Lawrence

Studies in Classic American Literature

Pity so old and alone, it is not alone, yours, or
mine,
The pity of rivers and children, the pity of brothers,
the pity
Of our country, which is our lives.

James Wright

"Many of Our Waters:

Variations on a Poem by a Black Child"

Among Midwestern poets most attuned to the region's landscape was James Wright (1927-1980), whom critic Bonnie Costello describes as an "elegiac poet of place."¹ Born and raised in the industrial city of Martins Ferry, Ohio, across the Ohio River from West Virginia, Wright was a self-described "jaded pastoralist"² who saw the earth from the perspective of his native Ohio Valley as "rifted paradise"³--a beautiful place significantly degraded by human inhabitation and industry. Central to Wright's poetry is a struggle between contrary views of the humanized landscape, the human body, and the efficacy of poetry in making sense of an apparently fallen world. Some of Wright's poems are set in a pastoral paradise, like the "field of sunlight" in the poem "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota,"

where even the "droppings of last year's horses / Blaze up into golden stones."⁴ At such moments Wright is apt to feel as he does in concluding the poem "Northern Pike": "There must be something very beautiful in my body, / I am so happy."⁵ More typically however, Wright speaks of a "loneliness of body,"⁶ of "the rotting slit of my body,"⁷ analogous to the corruption of Ohio and its dying river. He despairs then of himself, of nature, and of the significance of his work as a poet. A set of lines from the poem "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child" encapsulates Wright's connection of landscape, body, and poetry. They are spoken to the polluted Ohio River, one of Wright's major images and settings:

Oh my back-broken beloved Ohio.
I, too, was beautiful, once,
Just like you.
We were both still a little
Young, then.
Now, all I am is a poet,
Just like you.⁸

Wright is of a divided mind about Ohio, the Midwest, and America as a whole; his native country is by turns a garden and a graveyard. Torn between celebration and bereavement, Wright alternately wishes to embrace and escape place, person, and poetry, the sources of his joy and grief.

Wright was fond of D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, particularly the chapter on "The Spirit of Place," which he considered to be "a very beautiful essay":

There is such a genius of place, a presence, and because there is, people's feelings accumulate about it. You can share in that feeling when you become aware of particular historical events and the significance of monuments and so on.⁹

Monuments do in fact figure significantly in Wright's poetry, especially

graves of notable (or notorious) people. A signature piece in Wright's collected poems is "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," which deals with George Doty, whom the State of Ohio executed for the rape and murder of a girl. Critics, including Jane Robinett, generally regard the poem "as a turning point in the development of this poet's career, the point at which he breaks away from his apprenticeship and begins his real work."¹⁰ Forsaking the abstraction and complicated syntax of his early poems, Wright specifically identifies himself in relation to place:

My name is James A. Wright, and I was born
 Twenty-five miles from this infected grave
 In Martins Ferry, Ohio, where one slave
 To Hazel-Atlas Glass became my father.
 He tried to teach me kindness. I return
 Only in memory now, aloof, unhurried,
 To dead Ohio, where I might lie buried,
 Had I not run away before my time.
 Ohio caught George Doty. Clean as lime,
 His skull rots empty here.

The setting of this poem in a graveyard in familiar territory recalls not only Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, but Theodore Roethke's breakthrough poem "The Lost Son," which enacts a spiritual crisis in a Michigan cemetery.¹¹ While Roethke's sustained emotion was grief, Wright is concerned with guilt--the obvious criminal guilt of Doty, an "idiot" who "demanded love from girls, / And murdered one," as well as the guilt Wright purports to share with Doty by virtue of their common humanity in a fallen and corrupt world. Admitting to his own "sneaking crimes," Wright insists on the universality of evil; in his view, Doty's actions constituted an extreme manifestation of the malice and destructiveness latent in all people:

Staring politely, they will not mark my face
 From any murderer's, buried in this place.
 Why should they? We are nothing but a man.

Wright's sense of guilt in this poem is mythic rather than historical; Doty's grave is to be found in the "rifted paradise" of Eden after the fall. Wright's comments about Edenic imagery in his first book, *The Green Wall*, also apply to "At the Executed Murderer's Grave":

I tried to begin with the fall of man, and acknowledge that the fall of man was a good thing, the *felix culpa*, the happy guilt. And then I tried to weave my way in and out through nature poems and people suffering in nature because they were conscious.

Wright's biographer Peter Stitt has noted the contradiction in this statement, wondering "just how 'happy' was the fall of man in Wright's view if he also was convinced that it caused such a wealth of conscious 'suffering.'"¹² Since the poet feels himself tainted by sin and guilt, there is little hope for redemption; Wright characterizes poetry as mercenary and therefore psychically and socially ineffectual:

I croon my tears at fifty cents per line.

 Alive and dead, those giggling muckers who
 Saddled my nightmares thirty years ago
 Can do without my widely printed sighing
 Over their pains with paid sincerity.

Wright vows in this poem to change his approaches to life and to poetry. If his writing was once a "loud display, / Leaning for language on a dead man's voice" (presumably E.A. Robinson, whom Wright had considered his model) he is now "sick of lies" and ready "to face the past" with honesty and clear language. His materials--the broken people and abused landscape of Ohio--require direct, not oblique, treatment. Traditional literary pastoralism will not suffice:

It does no good to woo the grass, to veil
 The quicklime hole of a man's defeat and shame.
 Nature-lovers are dead. To hell with them.
 I kick the clods away, and speak my name.

It is of course by speaking his name, and the name of his place, that

Wright began the poem. Nature here offers no refuge from guilt or fear, but by confronting these emotions the poet has made other responses to his environment possible. "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" serves as a bridge between Wright's early and later work: it rhymes and is metrical, but irregularly so; it occasionally lapses into archly literary language ("Open, dungeon! Open, roof of the ground!"), but hews closely to specifics of place and person.

Had he dwelled entirely on the country of his origin, Wright's collected work would be extremely bleak. Ohio is to Wright a place of death, with the Ohio River serving as the River Styx. For him to see beauty in that place, he needed to experience (and write about) other landscapes. The first and most memorable of these locations was the plains country of western Minnesota, which Wright explored at the invitation of poet Robert Bly (b. 1926). The two poets met in 1958, when Wright was teaching at the University of Minnesota. During this crucial stage of his career, Wright was rejecting his previous poetic models (including Robert Frost and E.A. Robinson) and struggling toward a new style to match his thematic concern with character and landscape. Wright's new style was showcased in *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963), a book deeply influenced by Bly, who had published his own first book, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, the previous year. The two books are often discussed in tandem, and rightly so, for Wright's stylistic and thematic growth as a poet owed much to Bly's poetry, as well as to his criticism and friendship. The subsequent course of Wright's poetry can be better understood by examining Bly's ideas about poetry and the treatment of landscape in his first book.

Robert Bly, who was born and still lives in western Minnesota, has

profoundly influenced contemporary poetry, both as poet and critic. Like Ezra Pound in an earlier literary generation, he has been an arbiter of taste, a champion of the new and experimental, and through his translations of European and South American poets like Rilke, Trakl, Neruda, and Vallejo, an advocate of internationalism in literature. For many years Bly edited a magazine called *The Fifties* (later, *The Sixties* and *The Seventies*) that promoted what he considered the best in contemporary poetry and poetic principles. In his influential essay "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry" (1963), Bly illustrates his principles by contrasting twentieth century American poets with their Spanish and German counterparts. Beginning with T.S. Eliot's notion of an "objective correlative" in poetry (defined by Eliot as "a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion"),¹³ Bly argues that Eliot and the other modernists "have more trust in the objective, outer world than in the inner world. As poets they want to concern themselves with objects."¹⁴ Bly inveighs against any such formulaic or objectivist notion of poetry, including William Carlos Williams' dictum of "No ideas but in things" and Ezra Pound's belief that "the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object."¹⁵ These prescriptions for poetry, according to Bly, derive from the American "puritan fear of the unconscious and the business drive toward dealing with outward things" which "meet in our poetry to push out the unconscious."¹⁶ By following modernist and "New Critical" precepts, American poetry of the 1940's and '50's became in Bly's view "a poetry without spiritual life . . . in which the poem is considered to be a construction independent of the poet,"¹⁷ a dryly formalist verse either cluttered by objects or lost in flights of abstraction. Bly prefers the inwardness of García Lorca, Neruda, and

Rilke, for whom a "poem is something that penetrates for instant into the unconscious."¹⁸ By means of vivid and associative imagery, these poets aim (as in transcendentalism and Zen Buddhism) "to make men more and more inward until they stop admiring objects, at which point they will be able to see them clearly, if they wish to."¹⁹ Rilke and the others, in Bly's opinion, should replace Eliot, Pound, and Williams as primary models for American poets.

Bly's innovation was not confined to his absorption of international influences. The colloquial diction and simple declarative sentences of Bly's *Silence* poems came as something of a shock in 1962, when formalist verse was just beginning to lose its dominance in American poetry. Typical readings of these poems focus on their use of both mundane and "deep," surreal images to explore the unconscious mind and its relationship to the physical world. Thus in "Laziness and Silence," Bly relates a "dream of moles with golden wings" which he experiences one fall day ("a Saturday afternoon in the football season") while sleeping near a lake. True to the dominant motion of the book, which is downward, into darkneses of mind and earth, the poet awakens to perceive the symbolic significance of the lake:

I know that far out in the Minnesota lake
Fish are nosing the mouths of cold springs,
Whose water causes ripples in the sleeping sand,
Like a spirit moving in a body.²⁰

Whatever its private significance, the dream of moles has reminded the speaker of nature's hidden life and consciousness. The epigraph for Bly's book is a quote from German philosopher Jacob Boehme: "We are all asleep in the outward man." It is by dreaming that the speaker of "Laziness and Silence" has awakened to his inner man, and to the natural

landscape around him.

G.A.M. Janssens describes the cumulative effect of Bly's *Silence* poems as emerging from "a sense of space, of wide, bleak landscapes dotted with small midwestern towns, of the seasons, and of the time of the day."²¹ The speaker of these poems is a version of the Romantic archetype of a solitary figure in nature, a seeker of transcendental truth. Though Bly occasionally expresses a sense of bleak foreboding ("A strange unrest hovers over the nation: / This is the last dance, the wild tossing of Morgan's seas"²²), his characteristic emotion is a delight in nature reminiscent of Wordsworth, accompanied by an ease with his body recalling Whitman's celebration of the "body electric." The following lines are representative of the book's dominant tone:

Oh, on an early morning I think I shall live forever!
I am wrapped in my joyful flesh,
As the grass is wrapped in its clouds of green.
("Poem in Three Parts")

All morning I have felt the sense of death;
I am full of love, and love this torpid land.
("Driving Through Ohio")

How beautiful to walk out at midnight in the moonlight
Dreaming of animals.
("September Night With an Old Horse")²³

The directness and sincerity of such sentiments bothered some critics when *Silence in the Snowy Fields* first appeared. William Heyden, who later changed his mind about the book, initially felt that Bly's "risks . . . were all bad ones":

Where was his "heightened speech"? How, if to suggest something is to destroy it, could he write lines such as "I have awakened at Missoula, Montana, utterly happy" ("In a Train") and "There is a privacy I love in this snowy night" ("Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter")? Didn't he know such bare statements were against the rules?²⁴

James Wright endured similar criticisms of his own more tranquil poems,

many of which he wrote while visiting Bly's farm in Minnesota. Bly attributed such reactions to the insularity of many in the literary and academic communities, "where the very process of studying poetry often increases one's store of irony, ambiguity, wariness, and anger. . . ." Like Whitman before them, Bly and Wright engaged in a Romantic rebellion against poetic formalism, which in the early 1960's meant fighting against "a kind of low level conspiracy to keep out of view the poems of tenderness and quiet."²⁵

For many poets of the period, including Bly and Wright, as well as Gary Snyder, Denise Levertov, and William Stafford, a revaluation of the contemplative in poetry necessitated a strong sense of place, a return to nature in order to explore human nature. As Bly once told an interviewer, "unless American poetry can grow naturally out of American ground, we may as well give up now and quit."²⁶ Noting this statement by Bly, Howard Nelson writes that Bly's early work "belongs among the best regional writing this country has produced":

. . . not regionalism of the superficial or strictly external variety. His scenes of farms, woods, and lakes are deepened; they have spiritual resonance. The inward world is entered in *Snowy Fields* through the outward world: the soul is known through the body and the places it moves through.²⁷

From Bly's influence and example, Wright's poetry acquired this kind of regionalism, moving away from postmodern abstraction and irony and toward geographical specificity and directness of manner. According to Wright, Bly "made it clear to me that the tradition of poetry which I had tried to master, and in which I'd come to a dead end, was not the only one."²⁸ Wright undertook his own translations of modern European and South American poets, and began experimenting with imagery and free verse styles in his own poetry. The poems that resulted would firmly

place Wright in the American neo-Romantic tradition of place poetry.

Wright's new aesthetic made its debut in *The Branch Will Not Break*, in which his happiest poems appear. According to Wright, his experiences walking around Bly's Minnesota farm, observing animals and the landscape, provided him with the "center of that book": "my rediscovery of the abounding delight of the body that I had forgotten about."²⁹ But that rediscovery comes as a struggle in the book, as Wright emphasizes through his arrangement of poems. Bleak Ohio poems predominate at first, followed by increasingly peaceful visions of nature, mainly in Minnesota. The first poem, "As I Step over a Puddle at the End of Winter, I Think of an Ancient Chinese Governor," sets the tone, as Wright asks "Where is the sea, that once solved the whole loneliness / Of the Midwest? Where is Minneapolis? I can see nothing / But the great terrible oak tree darkening with winter."³⁰ In keeping with those lines, most of the poems in the beginning of *The Branch Will Not Break* present the natural world as frightening, and people as alienated from their own places and bodies. Ohio is still a place of pollution, despair, and death, and Wright's frequent use of geographical place names, like Martins Ferry, Tiltonsville, Benwood, and Marion, lends a poignant specificity to these poems. The frequently anthologized "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," for example, pictures a football stadium full of lonely people projecting their shattered dreams onto youthful athletes who "grow suicidally beautiful / At the beginning of October, / And gallop terribly against each other's bodies."³¹ In "A Message Hidden in an Empty Wine Bottle That I Threw into a Gully of Maple Trees One Night at an Indecent Hour," Wright observes the ghosts of women "dancing around a fire / By a pond of creosote and waste water

from the river / In the dank fog of Ohio."³² Corruption of body, spirit, and place is pervasive in Wright's imagery: the violence of bodies colliding in a football game, the acrid smell of creosote, and the dampness and chill in the Ohio air.

Given the almost charnel tone of these poems, the frequent appearance of grave and cemetery imagery is not surprising:

Somewhere in a vein of Bridgeport, Ohio;
 Deep in a coal hill behind Hanna's name;
 Below the tipples, and dark as a drowsy woodchuck;
 A man, alone,
 Stumbles upon the outside locks of a grave, whispering
Oh let me in.
 ("Miners")³³

A hundred slag piles north of us,
 At the mercy of the moon and rain,
 He lies in his ridiculous
 Tomb, our fellow citizen.
 ("Two Poems about President Harding")

Wright's perspective on place has become less mythic and more historical, as in the poems about Warren G. Harding of Marion, Ohio, whose scandalous administration ended when he "died of crab meat on the way back from Alaska."³⁴ Ohio, which has produced more presidents than any other state, is emblematic of the entire nation's failure to come to terms with the native ground. Despite its pastoral ideal, the Midwest has produced a graveyard as much as a garden; Wright is looking for a way out of the first into the second, offering his pastoral poems (as the titles of two poems have it) as "A Prayer to Escape from the Market Place" and a contribution to "The Undermining of the Defense Economy." He rejects the prevailing economic and political worldview of America, a rationalistic mindset that abhors weakness and seeks to control nature, human or otherwise. Thus Wright begins his poem on "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco, 1959" by lamenting how the "American hero must triumph over /

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The forces of darkness."³⁵ Given the social crises about to unfold in the United States in the 1960's, including the Vietnam War and the beginning of the contemporary environmental movement, Wright's vision of American society was both timely and prescient. As he elegizes in "Stages on a Journey Westward,":

I lie down between tombstones.
At the bottom of the cliff
America is over and done with.
America,
Plunged into the dark furrows
Of the sea again.³⁶

After a group of political poems, Wright shifts from the wasteland of industrial Ohio to the pastoral plains of western Minnesota. The turning point of *The Branch Will Not Break* occurs in the poem "Two Hangovers," where the book's title appears as a line. Wright first describes a morning in Ohio, having woken from a dream "Of green butterflies searching for diamonds / In coal seams; / And children chasing each other for a game / Through hills of fresh graves." The dream represents his search for redemption in a place where "All groves are bare" and "a sparrow outside / Sings of the Hanna Coal Co. and the dead moon." He briefly achieves the longed for state of grace during hang-over "Number Two: / I Try to Waken and Greet the World Once Again." The complete change of tone in this section, as well as the detail of a pine tree, suggests a Minnesota setting. "A brilliant blue jay . . . springing up and down, up and down, / On a branch" brings the poet an intimation of immortality recalling Whitman's observation of the placidity and self-containment of animals, who "do not sweat and whine about their condition."³⁷ Wright's tone finally relaxes: "I laugh, as I see him abandon himself / To utter delight, for he knows as well as I do /

That the branch will not break."³⁸

Wright's discovery of a sustaining joy in nature comes as a respite not only from ego but from the mediation of experience by literature. The title of the book's second poem wishes "Goodbye to the Poetry of Calcium"; the poem following the transition of "Two Hangovers" expresses both escape and arrival in its long title: "Depressed by a Book of Bad Poetry, I Walk toward an Unused Pasture and Invite the Insects to Join Me." Wright has taken Transcendentalism to heart, following Emerson's pronouncement in "The American Scholar" that books "are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings."³⁹ In a moment resonating with the graveyard imagery of so many of his poems, Wright drops the book of bad poetry "behind a stone," that he may unencumbered "climb a slight rise of grass" to observe ants and listen to grasshoppers and crickets. For once, Wright senses the possibility of being at home in nature, in his own body, and in the words of his poetry. His sense of wholeness wavers between the tentative and the consummate: the "old grasshoppers" have not yet begun to sing, though the poet is certain that "they have clear sounds to make." Nature strikes but one note, and that at the poem's conclusion: "lovely, far off, a dark cricket begins / In the maple trees." The sound is distant, but the poet has at least located its source. His motion toward the animal world is slow but persistent, like "the ants / Who are walking single file up the fence post," or the grasshoppers who are "tired" and "leap heavily" because "their thighs are burdened."⁴⁰ Wright still feels the "depressing" burden of the bad poetry book, but has begun to move with grace and attentiveness in the natural world.

Most of the remaining poems in *The Branch Will Not Break* share this motif of a potential oneness with nature as experienced in particular locations, often in the company of animals. Several poems express yearning for transcendence even in their titles, as in "Trying to Pray," "Arriving in the Country Again," and "Beginning," in which "The wheat leans back toward its own darkness, / And I lean toward mine."⁴¹ In "A Prayer to Escape from the Market Place," Wright again rejects the primacy of the written word: "I renounce the blindness of the magazines. / I want to lie down under a tree. / This is the only duty that is not death." But this realization is only a fleeting glimpse of "everlasting happiness," as "A pheasant flutters, and I turn / Only to see him vanishing at the damp edge / Of the road."⁴² Even Wright's most famous poem, "A Blessing," in which Wright and a friend (Bly in real life) visit two Indian ponies in a pasture "Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota," is an incipient, rather than realized, epiphany. Wright's contact with one of the horses, caressing "her long ear / That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist," awakens him to his own potential for freedom and belonging: "Suddenly I realize / That if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom."⁴³ The enjambment of the last two lines stresses both the pain of growth ("breaking") and the beauty that results from a widening of consciousness ("blossoming"). The poet has not yet "stepped out of his body"; he has only realized that it is possible to do so. His state of mind resembles that at the end of "Two Horses Playing in the Orchard," which appears earlier in the book: "I feel / Like half a horse myself, although / Too soon, too soon, already. Now."⁴⁴

Three poems at the end of *The Branch Will Not Break*, however, are

consummate epiphanies of place: "Today I Was Happy, So I Made This Poem"

("The moon suddenly stands up in the darkness, / And I see that it is impossible to die.")⁴⁵, "To the Evening Star: Central Minnesota"

("Beautiful daylight of the body, your hands carry seashells.")⁴⁶, and

"Milkweed." Vividly evocative of place, the last requires quotation in full:

While I stood here, in the open, lost in myself,
I must have looked a long time
Down the corn rows, beyond grass,
The small house,
White walls, animals lumbering toward the barn.
I look down now. It is all changed.
Whatever it was I lost, whatever I wept for
Was a wild, gentle thing, the small dark eyes
Loving me in secret.
It is here. At a touch of my hand,
The air fills with delicate creatures
From the other world.⁴⁷

In seeking spiritual significance in his surroundings, the poet has not until now truly perceived what is before him. Constrained by his ego, he has impatiently looked down the corn rows and beyond the grass. By releasing the downy milkweed seeds to float in the wind, Wright also frees his own original nature from the confinement of rational thought and obsessive guilt and grief. It is not the world that has changed, but the poet's perception of it. The pastoral quest of *The Branch Will Not Break* has brought Wright, as Peter Stitt describes, "from solipsistic self-absorption to identification with the animals, from an end-stopped despair at death to an inherent faith in natural immortality, from man to nature and beyond."⁴⁸ He sees miraculousness in the ordinary, the beauty within himself as well as in nature. "I can be happy sometimes," Wright told Stitt in an interview. "And I'd forgotten that. And with those animals I remembered then. And that is what that book is

about, the rediscovery. I didn't hate my body at all. I like myself very much."⁴⁹

But as Wright also told Stitt, "I am not a happy man by talent. Sometimes I have been very happy, but characteristically I'm a miserable son of a bitch."⁵⁰ The contentment of *The Branch Will Not Break* proved to be short-lived, as Wright continued his struggle with private and public griefs. In his next two books, *Shall We Gather at the River* (1968) and *Two Citizens* (1973), Wright "speak[s] of flat defeat / In a flat voice,"⁵¹ once again "lonely / And sick for home."⁵² Three themes dominate this period of Wright's career: loneliness and dislocation, American history as benighted and guilt-ridden, and the blighted lives and landscapes of Ohio. This renewed ambivalence about place, poetry, and his body leads Wright to examine pastoralism both as a literary genre and a social ideal.

The pastoral imagery of Wright's *Branch* poems--animals, trees, and grass--carries over into this period, but is treated quite differently. As did Willa Cather in her Nebraska novels, Wright symbolizes spiritual malaise in the bleakness of the prairie during the cold months. In "Late November in a Field," for example, Wright finds himself "walking alone in a bare place" observing a pair of squirrels whose "Frail paws rifle the troughs between cornstalks when the moon / Is looking away." In alluding to his poem "The Blessing," Wright seems to have given up all hope of transcendence in nature or in language:

The earth is hard now,
The soles of my shoes need repairs.
I have nothing to ask a blessing for,
Except these words.
I wish they were
Grass.⁵³

Wright is back in the graveyard, "Listening to the Mourners," as he titles another poem that finds him crouched "down by a roadside wind-break / At the edge of the prairie. . . ." ⁵⁴ But unlike the vague and mythical guilt of "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," Wright's grief is specific and historical. He mourns not only for himself, but for the dislocation of his nation from its place and its history:

So: it is not me, it is not my love
 Alone lost.
 The grief that I hear is my life somewhere.

 This field is the beginning of my native land,
 This place of skull where I hear myself weeping. ⁵⁵

Wright is not alone in his perception of national guilt. In his book of essays *Earth House Hold* (1969), Gary Snyder recapitulates D.H. Lawrence's comment about the "menace" in the American landscape in a manner useful to our understanding of James Wright:

The American Indian is the vengeful ghost lurking in the back of the troubled American mind. Which is why we lash out with such ferocity and passion, so muddled a heart, at the black-haired young peasants and soldiers who are the "Viet Cong." That ghost will claim the next generation as its own. When this has happened, citizens of the USA will at last begin to be Americans, truly at home on the continent, in love with their land. ⁵⁶

Robert Bly, in fact, attacked the cultural roots of the Vietnam War in terms identical to Snyder's. At a poetry reading in 1969, Bly expressed the opinion that "what we're doing [in Vietnam] is repeating the crime with Indians. The Vietnamese are our Indians. We don't want to end this war! We didn't want to quit killing the Indians but we ran out of Indians, and they were all on reservations." ⁵⁷ In his National Book Award winning *The Light Around the Body* (1968), Bly illustrates the frontier / Vietnam connection with statements such as "underneath all the cement of the Pentagon / There is a drop of Indian blood preserved

in snow. . . ."⁵⁸ According to James F. Mersmann, Bly's Vietnam poems attempt an "expiation of the burden of guilt accumulated from the rape of the frontier and the ecology, from puritanical morality and discipline, from killing Indians, from a history of violence and socio-economic inequities. . . ."⁵⁹ Mersmann's commentary also applies to James Wright. Whereas Bly borrowed from surrealism and Jungian psychology to explore the national psyche, Wright chose to continue writing extensively about his personal relationship to American places. It is natural that American Indians, the original inhabitants of the place, would arise as a theme in Wright's poetry, as in Roethke's and Snyder's. To discover a true love for America, Wright needed to follow Lawrence's directive in appeasing the nation's ghosts in atonement for the American Spirit of Place, the national "soul history" described by Michigan author Jim Harrison as stained "with the blood of over two hundred Native American civilizations we destroyed. . . ."⁶⁰

Wright's first expression of national guilt over the Indians comes early in *The Branch Will Not Break*, in "Stages on a Journey Westward." The four parts of this poem retrace the westward movement of conquest, creating place images for Ohio during the Great Depression, western Minnesota, Nevada, and Washington state. Landscapes in each location bear the marks of callous economic exploitation. Wright's memory of Ohio is of his father prowling in bread lines, returning home "grimy with machinery" to sing his young son a lullaby, while "Outside the house, the slag heaps waited." In Minnesota, the winter wind howling "out of the abandoned prairies / . . . sounds like the voices of bums and gamblers, / Rattling through the bare nineteenth-century whorehouses / In Nevada." Standing in a graveyard with "the half-educated sheriff

of Mukilteo, Washington," Wright imagines the miners who "paused on the way up to Alaska . . . / [spading] their broken women's bodies / Into ditches of crab grass." Americans, here represented by bums, gamblers, whores, and prospectors, have always been on the way to somewhere else, abandoning one place for another and leaving slag heaps and graves in their wake. These people and places haunt the American national conscience, which speaks to Wright one night in a dream:

In western Minnesota, just now,
I slept again.
In my dream, I crouched over a fire.
The only human beings between me and the Pacific Ocean
Were old Indians, who wanted to kill me.
They squat and stare for hours into small fires
Far off in the mountains.
The blades of their hatchets are dirty with the grease
Of huge, silent buffaloes.⁶¹

Western Minnesota, as Wright told Dave Smith, is where you "start to get a hint of what the western United States is like."⁶² The prairie begins there; before the arrival of settlers, the whole state was contested ground, home to woodland Ojibwa and their ancient adversaries, the Sioux. The American war of conquest against the plains Indians began in Minnesota in reaction to the Sioux revolt of 1862, when Indian resentment over being swindled out of their land led to the killing of hundreds of white settlers and the subsequent exile of the Minnesota Sioux. Wright's meditation on that historical event resulted in a poem essential to his oeuvre, "A Centenary Ode: Inscribed to Little Crow, Leader of the Sioux Rebellion in Minnesota, 1862."⁶³

In that poem, Wright addresses Little Crow, identifying him as the "true father / Of my dark America." He first assumes a defensive tone: "I had nothing to do with it [Little Crow's death]. I was not here. / I was not born." Wright's Ohio ancestors, "a lot of singing drunks and

good carpenters," also had an alibi: they were busy fighting on both sides of the Civil War. But they, and Wright, share a measure of guilt: "it was not my fathers / Who murdered you. / Not much." Wright here implies that atonement for the genocide of America's native people must begin with a recognition of guilt, followed by appropriate mourning. But the exact location of Little Crow's grave is unknown, a fact that symbolizes the difficulty of national (and individual) redemption. "I don't know," Wright tells the chief, "Where the fathers of Minneapolis finalized / Your flayed carcass. . . . / If only I knew where to mourn you, / I would surely mourn. / But I don't know." Lacking a specific location or monument upon which to meditate, Wright's thoughts shift from the conquered Sioux to his own people; his confession to Little Crow that "When I close my eyes I lose you among / Old lonelinesses" suggests the psychic cost that all whites have paid for America's crime against the Indians. Despite the preservation of the Union and the conquest of the West, white Americans are in another sense a defeated people, who have never been more than superficially at home on the land. Wright feels himself fated to homelessness, like "Old Paddy Beck, [his] great-uncle . . . dead / At the old soldiers' home near Tiffen, Ohio." The concluding stanza projects this dislocation even beyond death:

Oh all around us,
 The hobo jungles of America grow wild again.
 The pick handles bloom like your skinned spine.
 I don't even know where
 My own grave is.⁶⁴

In *Reading the Fire* (1983), a study of Native American oral literature, Jarold Ramsey contrasts the Indian approach to geography and nature with "the vaguely guilty and nostalgic sense of place and feeling for landscape that we inherit from Romanticism; it is altogether

sterner, more pragmatic as to ecological necessities, and more caught up in the narrative."⁶⁵ Ramsey's observation holds true of a number of Native American poets and novelists who emerged during the 1960's and '70's, including Leslie Marmon Silko. Wright's correspondence with Silko, author of *Ceremony* (1977) and *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), represents a remarkable cultural convergence: the meeting, on equal terms, of Euro-American Romanticism with a Native American worldview. Their letters, published in *The Strength and Delicacy of Lace* (1986), do not dwell on the tragic aspects of American history or on literary aesthetics. Instead, Wright and Silko wrote of their admiration for each other's work, of their travels, of their daily struggles as individuals and artists. Each recognized in the other a kindred spirit, another author giving voice to previously voiceless people. Silko's narrative in *Ceremony* of Pueblo Indians facing the loss of their traditional way of life is not far removed from Wright's elegies to Ohio people worn down by the industrial age. Both write from a tremendous sympathy for human suffering, particularly as caused by abrupt social change and geographical dislocation.⁶⁶ In struggling to reconcile the ideal sense of place with the bleak reality of his native landscape, Wright derived lessons in language from many sources. Native American sensibilities about poetry and place proved to be as crucial in Wright's development as his European and South American influences:

My rotted Ohio,
It was only a little while ago
That I learned the meaning of your name.
The Winnebago gave you your name, Ohio,
And Ohio means beautiful river.
("Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem By a Black Child")⁶⁷

Wright did indeed find that "pragmatism as to ecological necessi-

ties" required that he become "caught up in the narrative" of his place and people. While retaining the vivid imagery and terse colloquialism of his middle period, Wright increasingly employed storytelling to convey what he felt as "an abrupt pang that rises not only from the shape of my parents' lives but also from the very disruption of the earth in southeastern Ohio."⁶⁸ Because Wright refused to idealize his place of origin or the people he knew there, the landscapes and portraits in his later books are colored by both admiration and revulsion. The poem "On a Phrase from Southern Ohio," for example, centers on Wright's memory of a patch of native wildflowers atop a strip mined hill across the Ohio River in West Virginia, "the only / Beauty we found, outraged in that naked hell." The trip he shared with a group of "lazy and thieving" friends reenacts the conquest of America: white people cross a body of water, discover a sacred garden, and commit an act of racial violence:

Well, we found two black boys up there
In the wild cliff garden.
Well, we beat the hell out of one
And chased out the other.⁶⁹

By finding an analogue for American history in his own experience, Wright sharpened the irony of his pastoralism: this narrative achieves the authenticity Wright wished for in "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" but could not achieve, because as Robert Bly points out, "a convicted rapist-murderer is a different piece of goods from James Wright."⁷⁰ The sense of guilt in the earlier poem seems contrived in comparison to the confession of "On a Phrase from Southern Ohio," which occurs in a fully realized context of environmental and social debasement. This is honest sorrow, rather than literary posturing. If nostalgia is the generic

emotion of pastoral art, then Wright has revised the pastoral convention of yearning for an primal innocence and verdure. The Ohio River valley was always degraded in Wright's lifetime, and the discovery of a lovely remnant of wildness, "a garden of bloodroot, tangled there, a vicious secret / Of trilliums," only emphasizes the horrors of industrialism:

It is summer chilblain, it is blowtorch, it is not
Maiden and morning on the way up that cliff.
Not where I come from.

It is a slab of concrete that for all I know
Is beginning to crumble.⁷¹

At times Wright is so strident in his condemnation of American society as to resemble Robinson Jeffers, whose poems denounce human solipsism and corruption as much as they celebrate the northern California coast that Jeffers made his home. Wright's poem "Ohioan Pastoral" is a catalog of ugliness quite similar to that in Jeffers' famous poem "November Surf," right down to the imagery of discarded condoms. Wright asks us to see "the other side / Of Salt Creek," a place polluted by "orange rinds, / Oil cans, cold balloons of lovers," where a barn "Sags, sags and oozes / Down one side of the copperous gully." The poem's final image is bleaker yet: the sound of a "buried gas main" hissing "among the green rings / On fingers in coffins."⁷² Again, corruption of body and nature persists even after death, because places that should have been treated with reverence have been ruthlessly defiled. The most concise expression of Wright's divided vision of the Midwest, "Ohioan Pastoral" implies an ironic optimism: salvation may lie in entropy--in the crumbling of the slab, in the erosion by natural forces of excessive human interference. Such was Jeffers' hope in imagining a storm that would cleanse North America beyond the sea-lines, in a future with

the "cities gone down, the people fewer and the hawks more numerous, / The rivers mouth to source pure. . . ." Even "inhumanist" Jeffers had to admit that "the two-footed / mammal" is "somedays one of the nobler animals,"⁷³ and Wright at his bleakest is reminded by nature of a persistent beauty in himself and other people that will not allow the bond between person and place to be severed--that will keep the branch from breaking. Since that branch appeared as the title of one book, the decision of Anne Wright, the poet's widow and executor, to derive the title for his complete poems from the last stanza of "On a Phrase from Southern Ohio" is consistent with the essential humanism of his work:

And still in my dreams I sway like one fainting strand
Of spiderweb, glittering and vanishing and frail
Above the river.⁷⁴

Unlike Jeffers, Wright was guided by a profound sympathy for human suffering. Despite his anger at modern placelessness, Wright admires certain resilient individuals who confronted the harshness of life in industrial Ohio. The poem "A Flower Passage," for example, memorializes Joe Shank (elsewhere, John Shunk), a man who made a living recovering the bodies of drowned children from the Ohio River. In Wright's ironic pastoralism, Shank was a "Shepherd of the dead" who "dragged . . . hooks / All over the rubble sludge and lifted / The twelve year old bones." As an adult Wright lived elsewhere, and could not bring flowers to Shank's funeral service. Instead he offers the memory of the same native plants discovered in "On a Phrase from Southern Ohio":

The true sumac, and the foul trillium
Whose varicose bloom swells the soil with its bruise;
And a little later, I bring
The still totally unbelievable spring beauty
That for some hidden reason nobody raped
To death in Ohio.⁷⁵

In his "Childhood Sketch," Wright remembers feeling that Shank had "a kind of solitary holiness about him . . . he carried the visible terror of good and frightened people in his arms, and he was brave as even the river never knew how to be brave." Shank and the wildflowers represent an indestructible spirit, a genius of place as beautiful as the river "in its rawness and wildness," even though, as Wright recalled, "something was forever drifting past to remind us of the factories that lined the banks to the north."⁷⁶ In "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio," Wright attributes that spirit to his father and uncles, "good men who lived along that shore" who dug a hole ("No grave for once") so children would have a safe place to swim. Though redemption eludes them, these people have made the best of their situation: when "the river, / That is supposed to be some holiness / Starts dying, / They swim in the earth."⁷⁷ In his poems and prose Wright testifies to a "goodness" and "holiness" that persists in places and people, however abused. As he wrote to Leslie Marmon Silko, "When you love a place, really and almost hopelessly love it, I think you love it even for its signs of disaster, just as you come to realize how you love the particular irregularities and even the scars on some person's face."⁷⁸

Wright's love for his place of origin was deepened and clarified by his travels in Europe, where he experienced landscapes and cultures that had survived centuries of change, peaceful and violent. His last two books of poetry, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* (1977) and the posthumous *This Journey* (1982), are dominated by poems set in France, Austria, Yugoslavia, and especially Italy, where he fell in love with the cities of Mantua (birthplace of Virgil, greatest of all pastoral poets) and Verona, where Romeo and Juliet loved and died. Wright's visits to Italy

with his wife Anne provided the happiest, most peaceful moments of his last years. Wright maintained his cynicism about poetry and landscape while in Europe; in "Notes of a Pastoralist," for example, he observes that the sheep in a field outside of Pisa "did not flock together / As they do in Spenser and Theocritus."⁷⁹ Yet these late poems pay homage to the ancient pastoral poets, whom Wright loved for writing about their homelands in language appropriate to their time and place. Horace and Virgil communicate across distances of geography and historical time by means of a visionary localism; as Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance," the ancients made their places "venerable in the imagination . . . by sticking fast where they were, like an axis in the earth." Since he travelled not to escape, but to gain perspective on his experience (and use of language), Wright fairly fits Emerson's description of a wise traveller:

when his necessities, his duties, on any occasion call him from his house, or into foreign lands, he is at home still . . . he goes the missionary of wisdom and virtue, and visits cities and men like a sovereign, and not like an interloper or a valet.⁸⁰

Wright struggled throughout his career to balance his love of poetic traditions ancient and modern with the necessity of writing in a natural and regional idiom. As a young poet, he mastered the formal style of the period, but soon resisted it as an unnecessary constraint on his imagination. "All this time," he confesses in "Many of Our Waters," "I've been slicking into my own words / The beautiful language of my friends. / I have to use my own, now. / That's why this scattering poem sounds the way it does."⁸¹ By abandoning the iconoclasm and self-doubt of *Saint Judas* and *The Branch Will Not Break*, Wright came to accept not only his Ohio experience, but what he called "The one tongue

I can write in / . . . my Ohioan."⁸² When in *Two Citizens* he addresses the Roman poet Horace, he is able to do so in a spirit of geographical and idiomatic mutuality:

Easy, easy, I ask you, easy, easy
 Early, evening, by Tiber, by Ohio,
 Give the gift to each lovely other.
 I would be happy.

 Quintus Horatius Flaccus, my good father,
 You were just the beginning, you quick and lonely
 Metrical crystals of February.
 It is just snow.⁸³

This conciliatory tone resounds throughout Wright's last two books, even though some of his darkest visions of American culture and landscape, such as "Flower Passage" and "Ohioan Pastoral," appear in this period. The gift that Wright speaks of sharing with Horace is love of *patria*--of native language and landscape. Wright's last poems brim with confidence in the power of poetry to ease psychic pain, particularly homesickness and nostalgia. Wright longed for an Ohio he could not have, an Ohio of pastures and forests rather than strip mines and graveyards, its river pure from mouth to source. By contemplating the pastures, towns, and rivers beloved of the classical poets, and by trusting the redemptive power of his own writing, Wright came home to his ideal Ohio. The city of Mantua, for example, inspired him to meditate--as did Willa Cather in *My Ántonia*--upon the famous lament of Virgil's *Georgics*: *Optima dies prima fugit*: "The best days are the first / To flee, sang the lovely / Musician born in this town / So like my own."⁸⁴ Likewise, in the poem "One Last Look at the Adige: Verona in the Rain," he observes that the Ohio River "must have looked / Something like this / To the people who loved it / Long before I was born." Wright has taken a broader view of history; though "Steubenville [Ohio]

is a black crust," and America a "shallow hell where evil / Is an easy
joke, forgotten / In a week," rivers yet flow to remind him of the earth
(or paradise) just beneath the crust:

Now, Adige, flow on.
Adige, river on earth,
Only you can hear
A half-witted angel drawling Ohioan
In the warm Italian rain.

In the middle of my own life
I woke up and found myself
Dying, fair enough, still
Alive in the friendly city
Of my body, my secret Verona,
Milky and green,
My moving jewel, the last
Pure vein left to me.⁸⁵

Wright did not arrive at an easy resolution of his ambivalence toward poetry, place, and body. America, represented by the city of Martins Ferry, is still in ruins, its pastoral dream alive but as tenuous as a branch, a spider web, a garden of trilliums atop a strip mined hill. Wright's search for home did not bring him literally back to Ohio, but to a way of being, a gracefulness of word and deed. "The secret / Of this journey," Wright discovered, "is to let the wind / Blow its dust all over your body, / To let it go on blowing, to step lightly, lightly / All the way through your ruins, and not to lose / Any sleep over the dead. . . ." ⁸⁶ Wright finally placed his faith in poetry as his own best means to bridge the rift in paradise, to reestablish the vital link between person and place. He was a "jaded pastoralist," yet a pastoralist nonetheless, who affirmed the basic message of American Romantic literature since Emerson, what Robert Bly calls "the truth of the soul's interior abundance":

. . . that nature is not below the divine, but is itself divine,
"perpetual youth." Most important of all . . . that despite the

Industrial Revolution certain things are as they have always been, and that in human growth the road of development goes through nature, not around it.⁸⁷

The best of James Wright's poetry--much of it about the reality and promise of the American Midwest--will endure as testimony to that essential insight into the nature of our human residence on earth.

Notes

¹Bonnie Costello, "James Wright: Returning to the Heartland," in *The Pure Clear Word: Essays on the Poetry of James Wright*, ed. Dave Smith (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 221.

²James Wright, "Notes of a Pastoralist," *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux / University Press of New England, 1990), 328.

³Wright, "The Quest," *Above the River*, 3.

⁴Wright, "A Blessing," *Above the River*, 143.

⁵Wright, "Northern Pike," *Above the River*, 217.

⁶Wright, "The Offense," *Above the River*, 205.

⁷Wright, "To a Friendly Dun," *Above the River*, 206. Wright suffered from manic depression and alcoholism, and was often in poor health. He died of throat cancer at the age of fifty-two.

⁸Wright, "Many of Our Waters," *Above the River*, 212.

⁹James Wright, "The Pure Clear Word: An Interview with Dave Smith," in *Collected Prose*, ed. Anne Wright (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 194.

¹⁰Jane Robinett, "Two Poems and Two Poets," in *James Wright: The Heart of the Light*, ed. Peter Stitt and Frank Graziano (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 49.

¹¹Theodore Roethke taught Wright at the University of Washington. His influence is evident in Wright's dedication to poetic craftsmanship, use of childhood memories of people and places, and his nature based spirituality achieved through psychic struggle with painful emotions.

¹²Peter Stitt, "The Quest for Home," in *The World's Hieroglyphic Beauty: Five American Poets* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 165.

¹³T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," cited in Robert Bly, "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry," in *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* (New York: Harper & Row: 1990), 8.

¹⁴Bly, "A Wrong Turning," *American Poetry*, 8.

¹⁵William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, cited in Bly, "A Wrong Turning," *American Poetry*, 10-11.

¹⁶Bly, "A Wrong Turning," *American Poetry*, 21.

¹⁷Ibid., 15-16. Bly mentions Theodore Roethke as an exception to post-war poetic outwardness and objectivism. The influence of Roethke on Bly, Wright, and other poets of their generation is documented by Harry Williams in *"The Edge is What I Have": Theodore Roethke and After* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1977). Williams characterizes a "Roethkean mode" in Bly and Wright by their sense of place, recognition of spirit in nature, and rejection of dominant American institutions. In his section on Bly, Williams argues that Bly, like Roethke, "sees a link between the spirit of a nation, its national psyche, and the psyche of the poet, that is, the poet who goes beyond the personal, the ego, into the archetypal and impersonal depths of the unconscious. . . ." (Williams, *"The Edge is What I Have,"* 164).

¹⁸Ibid., 33.

¹⁹Ibid., 14.

²⁰Robert Bly, "Laziness and Silence," *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England / Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 53.

²¹G.A.M. Janssens, "The Present State of American Poetry: Robert Bly and James Wright" in *James Wright: The Heart of the Light*, ed. Stitt and Graziano, 204.

²²Bly, "Unrest," *Silence*, 25.

²³Bly, "Poem in Three Parts," *Silence*, 21; "Driving Through Ohio," *Silence*, 33; "September Night With an Old Horse," *Silence*, 54.

²⁴William Heyen, "Inward to the World: The Poetry of Robert Bly" in *Robert Bly: When Sleepers Awake*, ed. Joyce Peseroff (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 13.

²⁵Robert Bly, "James Wright and the Mysterious Woman," in *American Poetry*, 73.

²⁶Robert Bly, *Talking All Morning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 56.

²⁷Howard Nelson, *Robert Bly: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 7. A poem in *Silence in the Snowy Fields* that typifies the book's place epiphanies is "Hunting Pheasants in a Cornfield," the actual subject of which is a willow tree visited by the poet. At first he feels separate from the tree, and from nature around him:

What is so strange about a tree alone in an open field?
It is a willow tree. I walk around and around it.
The body is strangely torn, and cannot leave it.
At last I sit down beneath it.

Like a Druid by a sacred oak, or Buddha under the bo tree, the poet finds enlightenment under this native willow, suddenly sensing his oneness with the tree and all nature:

The mind has shed leaves alone for years.
It stands apart with small creatures near its roots.
I am happy in this ancient place,
A spot easily caught sight of above the corn,
If I were a young animal ready to turn home at dusk.

Bly, "Hunting Pheasants in a Cornfield," *Silence*, 14.

The tree is important both as a symbol (it is an "axis mundi," or vertical pole around which the world is perceived to revolve) and as an actual organism, a fellow being in the locality. Lines from Wendell Berry's poem "The Sycamore" provide a useful gloss on Bly's willow:

It is a fact, sublime, mystical, and unassailable.
In all the country there is no other like it.
I recognize in it a principle, an indwelling
the same as itself, and greater, that I would be ruled by.
I see that it stands in its place, and feeds upon it,
and is fed upon, and is native, and maker.

Wendell Berry, "The Sycamore," *Collected Poems*
(San Francisco: North Point, 1985), 65.

²⁸Peter Stitt, "An Interview with James Wright," *The World's Hieroglyphic Beauty: Five American Poets* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 203.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Wright, "As I Step over a Puddle at the End of Winter, I Think of an Ancient Chinese Governor," *Above the River*, 119.

³¹Wright, "Autumn Begins in Martin's Ferry, Ohio," *Above the River*, 121.

³²Wright, "A Message Hidden in an Empty Wine Bottle That I Threw into a Gully of Maple Trees One Night at an Indecent Hour," *Above the River*, 123.

³³Wright, "Miners," *Above the River*, 126.

³⁴"Two Poems about President Harding," *Above the River*, 127-128..

³⁵Wright, "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco, 1959," *Above the River*, 129.

³⁶Wright, "Stages on a Journey Westward," *Above the River*, 125.

³⁷Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 218.

³⁸Wright, "Two Hangovers," *Above the River*, 132-133.

³⁹Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Essays & Lectures* (New York, Library of America, 1983), 58. Whitman echoes Emerson's sentiment in Part 2 of "Song of Myself": "You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor / look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the / spectres in books, / You shall not look through my eyes either; nor take things / from me, / You shall listen to all sides, and filter them from your self." Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Poetry and Prose*, 189-90.

⁴⁰Wright, "Depressed by a Book of Bad Poetry, I Walk toward an Unused Pasture and Invite the Insects to Join Me," *Above the River*, 133.

⁴¹Wright, "Beginning," *Above the River*, 135.

⁴²Wright, "A Prayer to Escape from the Market Place," *Above the River*, 140.

⁴³Wright, "A Blessing," *Above the River*, 143.

⁴⁴Wright, "Two Horses Playing in the Orchard," *Above the River*, 134.

⁴⁵Wright, "Today I was Happy, So I Made This Poem," *Above the River*, 141.

⁴⁶Wright, "To the Evening Star: Central Minnesota," *Above the River*, 142.

⁴⁷Wright, "Milkweed," *Above the River*, 143-144. The image of seeds being released harkens back to another Branch poem, "In Memory of a Spanish Poet," about Miguel Hernández. Wright dreams of the poet's "slow voice, flying, / Planting the dark waters of the spirit / With lutes and seeds." Wright envisions such foreign poets as Hernández as literary pastoralists in an extended sense of the term. Their poems were planted as new stock in the fallow soil of American poetry in the 1950's and '60's, bringing new music ("lutes") and new life ("seeds") to a literature in need of cross-fertilization. Thus we read: "Here, in the American Midwest, / Those seeds fly out of the field and across the strange heaven of my skull. / They scatter out of their wings a quiet farewell, / A greeting to my country" (Wright, "In Memory of a Spanish Poet," *Above the River*, 130). Wright's similar release of seeds at the end of "Milkweed" represents his new-found poetic confidence: each of the poems in the book is a seed, scattered to grow in the heart of America.

⁴⁸Stitt, "Introduction," *James Wright: A Profile*, 15.

⁴⁹Stitt, "An Interview with James Wright," *The World's Hieroglyphic Beauty*, 204.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 202.

⁵¹Wright, "Speak," *Above the River*, 158.

⁵²Wright, "Outside Fargo, North Dakota," *Above the River*, 158.

⁵³Wright, "Late November in a Field," *Above the River*, 160.

⁵⁴Wright, "Listening to the Mourners," *Above the River*, 161.

⁵⁵Wright, "Late November in a Field," *Above the River*, 160.

⁵⁶Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1969),

112.

⁵⁷Robert Bly, comments at a poetry reading at Lawrence, Kansas, April 10, 1969, cited by James F. Mersmann, "Robert Bly: Watering the Rocks," in Joyce Peseroff, ed. *Robert Bly: When Sleepers Awake* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 65.

⁵⁸Robert Bly, "Hatred of Men With Black Hair," *The Light Around*

the Body (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 36.

⁵⁹Mersmann, "Robert Bly: Watering the Rocks," 72.

⁶⁰Jim Harrison, "Poetry as Survival," in *Just Before Dark: Collected Nonfiction* (Livingston, MT: Clark City, 1990), 300.

⁶¹Wright, "Stages on a Journey Westward," *Above the River*, 124-125.

⁶²Wright, "The Pure Clear Word: An Interview with Dave Smith," *Collected Prose*, 195.

⁶³For a concise and well-narrated account of the Minnesota Sioux uprising, see Chapter 2 of Ralph K. Andrist, *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians* (New York: MacMillan, 1964). The rebellion stemmed from the murder of a group of settlers by four impetuous young braves returning from an unsuccessful summer hunting trip to the Big Woods of central Minnesota. At a council of tribal leaders, the party advocating war held sway, having argued, according to Andrist, "with any amount of historical precedent to back them up--that it would do no good to turn the four murderers over to the whites for punishment because all Indians would be punished indiscriminately anyway" (Andrist, 34). Little Crow, who had been working to adapt his people to agriculture, argued eloquently against attack, which would surely prove futile. But as Andrist relates, when the peaceful chief "found the Sioux meant to fight regardless of his warnings, he had decided that it was better to fight a lost cause than become a nobody" (Andrist, 36). The days that followed saw the brutal killing of hundreds of settlers, followed by an all out engagement with the Minnesota 6th Infantry and state militia. The Sioux lost this first installment of the Plains War; even those who had remained neutral or had assisted whites during the uprising were exiled to reservations in Dakota Territory. Thirty-eight Sioux men were hung on a single scaffold in the town of Mankato to satisfy the whites' desire for revenge (306 had been sentenced to death, but President Lincoln signed an order of executive clemency). Little Crow, who had not wanted to fight, who had tried to convert his people to a agrarian existence, was shot to death one year later by a farmer near the town of Hutchinson. He had been picking berries with his son, who escaped. The chief's body, unidentified at the time, ended up in the offal pit of a slaughterhouse.

⁶⁴"A Centenary Ode: Inscribed to Little Crow, Leader of the Sioux Rebellion in Minnesota, 1862," *Above the River*, 186-187.

⁶⁵Jarold Ramsey, *Reading the Fire: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literatures of the Far West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 188.

⁶⁶Silko particularly appreciated Wright's mastery of regional, spoken English, which she contrasted with "that hideous, empty, artificial language television speaks . . . the result of the past 50 years of working to eradicate regional usages, regional pronunciations, ie., regional and community expression from American English, always with the melting pot theory in mind. . . . That is what I love most in your writing, Jim, the gully and railroad track, the sumac and coal smoke--

all could only be from the place you give us or that gives you to us, that Ohio country." Leslie Marmon Silko, in Anne Wright, ed., *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters Between Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1986), 82.

⁶⁷Wright, "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child," *Above the River*, 211.

⁶⁸Wright, "A Childhood Sketch," in *Collected Prose*, 330-334.

⁶⁹Wright, "On a Phrase from Southern Ohio," *Above the River*, 300.

⁷⁰Robert Bly, "The Work of James Wright," in Stitt and Graziano, eds., *James Wright: The Heart of the Light*, 100.

⁷¹Wright, "On a Phrase from Southern Ohio," *Above the River*, 300.

⁷²Wright, "Ohioan Pastoral," *Above the River*, 348.

⁷³Robinson Jeffers, "November Surf," *The Collected Poems of Robinson Jeffers*, vol. 2 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 159.

⁷⁴Wright, "On a Phrase from Southern Ohio," *Above the River*, 301.

⁷⁵Wright, "A Flower Passage," *Above the River*, 355.

⁷⁶Wright, "Childhood Sketch," in *Collected Prose*, 332-333.

⁷⁷Wright, "The Old WPA Swimming Hole in Martins Ferry, Ohio," *Above the River*, 236.

⁷⁸James Wright, in Anne Wright, ed., *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace*, 32.

⁷⁹Wright, "Notes of a Pastoralist," *Above the River*, 328.

⁸⁰Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays and Lectures*, 277.

⁸¹Wright, "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child," *Above the River*, 216.

⁸²Wright, "To the Creature of the Creation," *Above the River*, 261.

⁸³Wright, "Prayer to the Good Poet," *Above the River*, 228.

⁸⁴Wright, "The First Days," *Above the River*, 312.

⁸⁵Wright, "One Last Look at the Adige: Verona in the Rain," *Above the River*, 284-285.

⁸⁶Wright, "The Journey," *Above the River*, 338.

⁸⁷Robert Bly, ed., *The Winged Life: The Poetic Voice of Henry David Thoreau* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 5.



Chapter 6

A Water With Some Land Running Through It: Michigan Poetry of Place

The edge is what I have.

Theodore Roethke
"In a Dark Time"

Just as we speak of a nation's literature, or of a region's, there are distinctive literary traditions in areas within regions like the American Midwest. The Midwest is a plurality as well as a unity, consisting of several states whose unique landscapes and cultures have encouraged the development of state and local literatures. There is for example, as the present chapter will illustrate, a poetry of Michigan, a poetry centrally concerned with the uniqueness of Michigan's natural and human history, a poetry by Michigan authors about Michigan experience. Without being directly tied to the political implications of bioregionalism, poets Theodore Roethke (1908-1963), Jim Harrison (b. 1937), Judith Minty (b. 1937), and Dan Gerber (b. 1940), have written of Michigan's land and lore in a manner which may deepen our appreciation of the state's bioregional character.¹ Their poems are of course interesting for other formal and thematic reasons, but a sense of place is central to each poet's vision of life. They are "poets of place" because they recognize, as William Carlos Williams was fond of saying, that "the local is the only universal"²; their knowledge and love of place helps them create art with insight into general truths.

Michigan as a political entity has a greater bioregional validity

than most states because of the natural continuity of most of its border, defined by its two peninsulas' coasts on four of the five Great Lakes. Limnologically, the Lakes are actually seas, causing massive climatological effects such as the milder weather (cooler summers and less frigid winters) experienced in the state as compared to areas west of Lakes Michigan and Superior, and the state's characteristic cloud cover and precipitation. Like no other location in the world, Michigan's elemental character derives from an abundance of fresh water, leading poet Dan Gerber to declare that "This isn't a land at all, / but a water with some land running through it."³ Michigan is a collection of distinct watersheds, each with a particular glacial terrain, from the flat glacial till plains of Saginaw and the "Thumb" to the high moraines overlooking Lake Michigan and the Precambrian bedrock exposures of the western Upper Peninsula. Southern Michigan is forested mainly with deciduous species; farther north, the soils become thinner and more sandy, the climate harsher, and the forest coniferous. This distinction between north and south determined the distribution of Indian tribes according to their means of subsistence, and the settlement of Euroamericans according to economic activity--farming and industry as opposed to lumbering and mining.⁴ For historian Bruce Catton, who grew up in Benzonia, Michigan, the state offered an excellent vantage from which to view the changes wrought on an ancient landscape by a society based on a utilitarian view of nature: "The contrast between the old and the new," Catton observes in his memoir *Waiting for the Morning Train* (1972):

was too great. There was nothing for the mind to get hold of:[the ice age] was hardly more real than what possibly might yet be. We lived less than three hundred miles from Detroit, which seemed to be a door looking into the future, showing unimaginable things; and three hundred miles in the other direction, off into the desolate

north country, lay the bleak spine of the upper peninsula of Michigan, a reef of the oldest rocks on earth . . . rocks dead since the hour of creation.⁵

Michigan poets of nature and place exemplify in their work this tension between the past and the future, the wild and the tame, the primitive and the sophisticated, in the context of the landscape and how our civilization has thought of and treated the land. They find in nature's order an alternative to the hurried, detached way of life in modern Michigan.

Theodore Roethke is the precursor of later Michigan poets for whom nature and place are central concerns; his experience of nature tamed in his father's greenhouses provided him with a detailed knowledge of natural growth and decay that he applied both to descriptions of wild landscapes and to his own psychological and spiritual development.⁶ Roethke was a poet of place and a poet of Michigan despite and because of the fact that he was more interested in expressing his personal relationship to nature than in dealing with historical themes. As his biographer Allan Seager points out,

[Roethke] ignores all the vivid tales of the lumber boom, tales that expressed courage, will, and cunning that might have engaged another man . . . he ignores in his poetry the events of this region's history . . . which expresses in modes of physical action an energy like his own. It is as if he had inherited the best part and did not need to acknowledge it.⁷

Roethke was certainly aware of how drastically the area he knew as home had been altered in the half-century preceding his birth. "The Saginaw Valley," he said in a 1953 BBC broadcast, "where I was born, had been great lumbering country in the 1880's. It is very fertile flat country in Michigan, and the principal towns, Saginaw and Flint, lie at the northern edge of what is now the central industrial area of the United

States."⁸ In an admittedly inferior poem, "Suburbia: Michigan," published in his letters, Roethke bemoaned the common lack of appreciation for regional history, correlating such ignorance with tolerance of environmental degradation: "The immediate past as remote as Carthage; / Bulldozers levelled the curving hillside / . . . Tourists stare at an absolute marvel: / A monarch pine, saved by quixotic fancy." The poet pictures Michigan residents as living in "a land of lubritoriums [and] super milk-shakes" within "the geography of despair," where spiritual, nonmaterialistic people who value nature and will not "live by objects" are "driven from the land" to

seek the comfort of water,
Crawl back to the eternal womb, the beneficent mother.
Like dazed turtles in spring, they creep to the river
To dangle bent pins at the mouth of a roaring sewer.

"Who said, 'Yes, but,' was never a hero,"⁹ Roethke opines, counting himself among those who in questioning material progress object to the placelessness of modern culture in Michigan.

A major theme of Roethke's poetry is a struggle to overcome fear of death and disintegration by identifying with the regenerative power of nature as experienced in special locations within the poet's familiar territory: the greenhouses and their environs, the Tittabawassee River, adjoining woodlands, and the "far field," the spaciousness of which comes to represent eternity and hope. "It was a wonderful place for a child to grow up in and around," Roethke told his British audience over the BBC:

There were not only twenty-five acres in the town, mostly under glass and intensely cultivated, but farther out in the country the last stand of virgin timber in the Saginaw Valley, and elsewhere, a wild area of cut-over second-growth timber, which my father and uncle made into a small game preserve. As a child . . . I had several worlds to live in, which I felt were mine.¹⁰

Roethke acknowledges that such a sensitivity to location is uncommon in modern society, that "there are those to whom place is unimportant."¹¹ But he differs with T.S. Eliot's assertion in "Four Quartets" that "Old men should be explorers / Here and there does not matter"¹²: "Old men should be explorers? / I'll be an Indian."¹³ In the poem "The Far Field," Roethke states his spiritual philosophy in a phrase worthy of Emerson: "All finite things reveal infinitude." The poet's mind moves "in more than one place, / In a country half-land, half-water," remembering an early encounter with death:

At the field's end, in the corner missed by the mower
Haunt of the cat-bird, nesting place of the field-mouse,
Not too far away from the ever-changing flower-dump,
Among the tin cans, tires, rusted pipes, broken machinery,--
One learned of the eternal;
And in the shrunken face of a dead rat, eaten by rain and ground-
beetles
(I found it lying among the rubble of an old coal bin)
And the tom-cat, caught near the pheasant-run,
Blasted to death by the night watchman.¹⁴

These lines typify Roethke's constant juxtaposition of the human and natural worlds--the mower's swath and the "corner missed by the mower." Repeatedly in Roethke's verse we find ourselves "at the field's end," as in "Idyll," "at the edge of a meadow,"¹⁵ or "the field's edge" of "Highway: Michigan" where "we survey / The progress of the jaded."¹⁶ That edge is liminal ground, a transition zone between nature and humanity where one can be immersed in the nature of the place, while perceiving "the progress of the jaded," environmental degradation resulting from human insensitivity to bioregional integrity.

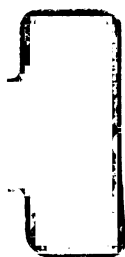
In the poem "Moss-Gathering," Roethke remembers a task by which the economy of the greenhouses impinged upon "the natural order of things": the task was "to loosen with all ten fingers held wide and

limber / And lift up a patch, dark-green, the kind for lining cemetery baskets." The moss is taken to make an item that will be purchased by mourners, people who have experience a personal loss for which a form of natural beauty can provide solace. But taking the moss from its rightful place, where it is most beautiful, seemed wrong to Roethke, even as a boy:

. . . something always went out of me when I dug loss those
carpets
of green, or plunged to my elbows in the spongy yellowish moss of
the marshes:
And afterwards I always felt mean, jogging back over the logging
road,
As if I had broken the natural order of things in that swampland;
Disturbed some rhythm, old and of vast importance,
By pulling off flesh from the living planet;
As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of life, a
desecration.¹⁷

The fact that the boy walks home on a logging road ties his experience to the larger context of Michigan environmental history. The land has been used often without regard for "the whole scheme of life" in the place--a destructive process that continues to this day. Roethke's point of social observation was from the field or the wood looking out at the results of people living a life concerned first and foremost to obtaining wealth and moving about oblivious to natural beauty and ecological harmony. In "Highway: Michigan" he notes the dominance of the automobile and its products over the landscape: "Here from the field's edge we survey / The progress of the jaded. Mile / On mile of traffic from the town / Rides by, for at the end of day / The time of workers is their own."¹⁸

Many of Roethke's poems express joy in being and faith in the natural order of living things; increasingly in his poetry, fear of death gives way to a confidence that "Great Nature has another thing to



do to you and me,"¹⁹ But especially in the poems of his earlier period, Roethke insists on the difficulty of subsuming the human ego, with all its fears and doubts, to a greater wisdom in nature and to a communion with the place one knows as the ground of one's being. Roethke's breakthrough sequence "The Lost Son" depicts an emotional and spiritual crisis played out in the Tittabawassee River valley, beginning at "Woodland," a version of "the far field" and a renaming of Oakwood Cemetery in Saginaw, where Roethke's father was buried when the poet was only twelve years old, and where the poet's own ashes would later be interred.²⁰ The speaker of "The Lost Son" searches the river bank for some evidence that life is cyclical, that death is not an absolute end. The loss of his father, the man who brought life into flowering, resplendent being, underlies the pain that the lost son is trying to assuage. As in the earlier poem "On the Road to Woodland," which he begins by saying "I miss the polished brass, the powerful black horses, / The driver creaking the seats of the baroque hearses,"²¹ Roethke employs irony in depicting his grief as highly disturbed: "I was lulled by the slamming of iron, / A slow drip over stones." He asks the powers of nature to comfort him: "Snail, snail, glister me forward, / Bird, soft-sigh me home, / Worm, be with me. / This is my hard time." The speaker then moves through a pastoral scene, "Running lightly over spongy grounds, / Past the pasture of flat stones / . . . Over a rickety bridge / Toward the quick-water, wrinkling and rippling."²² In a shorter poem, "The Premonition," Roethke contrasts the permanence of the river's flow with the transience of human life, in particular Roethke's father, who "dipped his hand in the shallow" so that "Water ran over and under / Hair on a narrow wrist bone."²³ In "The Lost Son" he searches

the very place that his father taught him to love for some sign by which he can rise from despair:

Hunting along the river,
Down among the rubbish, the bug-riddled foliage,
By the muddy pond-edge, by the bog-holes,
By the shrunken lake, hunting, in the heat of summer.

The poem continues with nature offering no comfort from loss, as the poet explores emotional analogues to summer's process of growth and decay. It is only in remembering winter at the greenhouses that hope arises: "the roses kept breathing in the dark" because Papa Roethke had the boiler running. A human labor, literally of love, was sustaining life and beauty in what might otherwise be a dead time. Looking out at the surrounding fields, "the landscape still partly brown," winter's stillness provides a solace that summer's exuberance could not: "Light traveled over the wide field; / Stayed. / The weeds stopped swinging. / The mind moved, not alone, / Through the clear air, in the silence." The sequence ends with the promise of spring to succeed winter, of new life to follow death: "A lively understandable spirit / Once entertained you. / It will come again. / Be still. / Wait."²⁴

Roethke's later poems are dominated by that "lively, understandable spirit," again symbolized by the flow of water, which gives life not only to snails, birds, and worms, but to the speaker himself: as Roethke proclaims in "Meditation at Oyster River," "Water's my will, and my way." Many poems, including "Meditation," find the poet on the banks of a river; here a river in Washington State makes him remember the river he knew first, and probably best:

. . . the Tittabawassee, in the time between winter and spring,
When the ice melts along the edge in early afternoon.
And the midchannel begins cracking and heaving from the pressure
beneath,

The ice piling high against the iron-bound spiles,
 Gleaming, freezing again, creaking at midnight.
 And I long for the blast of dynamite,
 The sudden sucking roar as the culvert loosens its debris of
 branches and sticks,
 Welter of tin cans, pails, old bird nests, a child's shoe riding a
 log,
 As the piled ice breaks away from the battered spiles,
 And the whole river begins to move forward, its bridges shaking.

In "Meditation" the river has the dual power to cleanse itself of pollution and to renew the human spirit. Invoking the other mortal creatures who depend on the river for life--the deer, the young snake, the hummingbird--Roethke confesses that "With these I would be. / And with water: the waves coming forward, without cessation. . . ." ²⁵

Another of the "North American Sequence" poems, "Journey to the Interior," recalls driving into northern Michigan to "the sand dunes and fish flies, hanging thicker than moths," to experience "The stand at the stretch in the face of death, / Delighting in surface change, the glitter of light on waves. . . ." ²⁶ Such images typify Roethke's ideal of spiritual union with the elemental character of place, especially the element of water which held symbolic value for him, wherever he found it, in the Tittabawasee River of Michigan or on the Pacific Coast where he spent his last years as a professor at the University of Washington. Though Roethke lived away from Michigan for much of his adult life, the preponderance of his natural imagery comes from his early life in Saginaw, Michigan, in the Tittabawasee River watershed of the Saginaw valley. With rich and detailed local imagery he contributed not only to Michigan culture and land-lore, but to the fund of world literature.

According to Lisel Mueller, Jim Harrison, who was born in 1937 in Grayling, Michigan, "shares with that other Michigan poet, Theodore Roethke, not only the longing to be part of the instinctual world, but

also the remarkable knowledge of plant and animal life that comes only with long familiarity and close observation."²⁷ Harrison's discovery of Roethke's poetry when he was a college sophomore encouraged his own early poetic efforts, and since Harrison's father was a trained agriculturalist, Harrison perceived "the direct sense that our backgrounds were similar enough that there was some hope for me as a poet, so I absorbed him rather than read him."²⁸ Like Roethke's, Harrison's Michigan is a landscape bruised by years of environmentally unsound economic activity, the natural beauty of which nonetheless offers relief from the complexities of our modern industrial society.²⁹ His early poem "Northern Michigan" belongs with Roethke's "Highway: Michigan" in any anthology of Michigan verse:

On this back road the land
has the juice taken out of it:

stump fences surround nothing
worth their tearing down

by a deserted filling station
a Veedol sign, the rusted hulk

of a Frazer, "live bait"
on battered tin.³⁰

Like Roethke, Harrison describes "the progress of the jaded": the "back road" lacks even the sheen of economic activity--the only cars in view are junked, and the gas station is closed. Similar to Roethke "at the field's end, in the corner missed by the mower,"³¹ Harrison juxtaposes a scene of human failure (his catalog of static human artifacts) with nature's exuberance, expressed by the active verbs of the poem's second half, which shows nature surviving even in a land with "the juice taken out of it":

In the far corner of the pasture,

lumbered off for a hundred years with few traces of the grand white pine which once covered it, an occasional charred almost petrified stump four feet in diameter, evidence of trees which rose nearly two hundred feet and covered the northern half of the state and the Upper Peninsula, razed with truly insolent completeness by the lumber barons after the Civil War with all the money going to the cities of the south--Saginaw, Lansing, Detroit--and east to Boston and New York.³³

All of Harrison's writing involving Michigan scenes is informed by this knowledge of how the land was stripped of its ancient grandeur by what Harrison describes in his essay "Passacaglia on Getting Lost" as the "greed that discovered the country, greed that propelled the Westward movement, greed that shipped the blacks, greed that murdered the Indians, greed that daily shits on the heads of those who love nature."³⁴ Harrison's use of Michigan history results in what Gary Snyder calls "instantly-apprehended because so-well-digested larger loopings of lore."³⁵ This kind of "lore-digestion" operates in Harrison's novel *Sundog* (1984), the main character of which is named Corvus Strang--Corvus is the genus appellation of crows and ravens, birds common to northern Michigan--and Strang after James Strang, the nineteenth century Mormon leader who declared himself king of Beaver Island in Lake Michigan. Harrison's Strang parallels his namesake in the religious fundamentalism of his youth and in his love for nature:

his life as a foreman to large construction projects in isolated places around the world is something of a modern day version of King Strang's attempt to found a new Eden in the then wilderness of northern Michigan.

With regional history in mind, Harrison explores in his poetry special places in his familiar terrain, which like Roethke's Tittabawassee locales relieve confusion and psychic distress. Citing *The Poetics of Space* (1969) by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, Harrison lists such natural features of Northern Michigan as "gullies, hummocks in swamps, swales in the middle of large fields, the small alluvial fan created by feeder creeks, undercut river banks, miniature springs, dense thickets of the tops of hills: like Bachelard's attics, seashells, drawers, cellars, these places are a balm to me."³⁶ The poem "Walking," aptly designated as the first poem in the aptly titled collection *Locations* (1968), explores many such places:

Walking back on a chill morning past Kilmer's Lake
into the first broad gully down its trough
and over a ridge of poplar, scrub oak, and into
a large gully, walking into the slow fresh warmth
of midmorning to Spider Lake where I drank
at a small spring remembered from ten years back;
walking northwest two miles where another gully
opened, seeing a stump on a knoll where my father
stood one deer season, and tiring of sleet and cold
burned a pine stump, the snow gathering fire-orange
on a dull day; walking past charred stumps blackened
by the '81 fire to a great hollow stump near a basswood
swale. . . .³⁷

These lines are characteristic of Harrison in their wealth of prepositions--into, down, and over, for example, which trace the speaker's movement--and the many location-identifying nouns such as lake, gully, ridge, spring, knoll, and swale. These words are particular to the subtle gradations of Harrison's Michigan landscape, gradations that require a fine eye to observe and a specific vocabulary

Harrison states in "Passacaglia" the pleasure he takes in finding (and writing about) the kind of natural beauty many people overlook:

I prefer places valued by no one else. The Upper Peninsula has many of these places that lack the drama and differentiation favored by the garden variety nature buff. I have a personal stump back in a forest clearing. Someone, probably a deer hunter, has left a beer bottle beside the stump. I leave the beer bottle there to conceal the value of the stump.³⁸

In "Walking," Harrison mentions the 1881 fire as one important reason for the condition of the present landscape. But the more immediate context is of the speaker's personal association with certain locations. As if noting significant sites on a pilgrimage, Harrison drinks at a spring he had visited ten years before and recognizes the knoll where his father once burned a stump to keep warm. He remembers a "great hollow stump near a basswood / swale" for the time it offered him hunting cover in his youth, when he "sat within it on a November morning / watching deer browse beyond my young range of shotgun." That memory of close observation of nature (even incorporation into it--note the preposition "within") is only a brief glance into the speaker's mind. In the poem's many subsequent line, Harrison resumes his walk through cedar swamps, more lakes, finally to "the larger water" where a rather Roethkean submersion takes place:

. . . there walking along the troughs
of waves folding in upon themselves; walking to an island
small, narrow, sandy, sparsely wooded, in the middle
of the island in a clump of cedars a small spring
which I enter, sliding far down into a deep cool
dark endless weight of water.³⁹

While Harrison's immersion into the spring does not share the explicit connotation of death and acceptance of mortality expressed by Roethke's watery "North American Sequence," it shares Roethke's relief and expanded sense of self. Harrison describes the many locations of

"Walking" with himself being not much more than the one who is doing the walking into, through, and over. The poem's final image, of the speaker sliding into the spring, focuses us on the person in the place, who becomes not merely an observer but a part of the landscape itself. Harrison's "larger water" recalls the conclusion of Roethke's "The Long Waters" in "North American Sequence":

My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom of the waves;
 I lose and find myself in the long water;
 I am gathered together once more;
 I embrace the world.⁴⁰

The flow of water shapes these poets' lives, as well as their Michigan landscape: as Harrison has it in his long poem "The Theory and Practice of Rivers," which begins with a description of floating on "the rivers of [his] life":

. . . the current
 lifts me up and out
 into the dark, gathering motion,
 drifting into an eddy
 with a sideways swirl,
 the sandbar cooler than the air:
 to speak it clearly,
 how the water goes
 is how the earth is shaped.⁴¹

Yet like Roethke, Harrison modifies his romantic yearning to be part of the natural world by insisting on the difficulties posed by such an embrace. A recurring motif in Harrison's work is the experience of "getting lost," which literally means to lose one's bearing in the back country. In "Passacaglia on Getting Lost," Harrison states that "getting lost is to sense the 'animus' of nature," thereby recognizing the landscape as a living force, a natural context outside the ordinary, indoor, social world. "Perhaps getting lost temporarily destroys the acquisitive sense," Harrison suggests.⁴² In "The Theory and Practice of

Rivers," written in the isolation of his Upper Peninsula cabin, Harrison considers the locations of his life, such as Key West, Los Angeles, and Grove Street in New York, where at age nineteen he discovered "red wine, garlic, Rimbaud, / and a red haired girl."⁴³ At the river, which Harrison says "is as far as I move / from the world of numbers," he seeks a sense of himself independent of his memories:

What is it to actually go outside the nest
we have built for ourselves, and earlier
our father's nest: to go into a forest
alone with our eyes open? It's different
when you don't know what's over the hill--
keep the river on your left, then you see
the river on your right. I have simply
forgotten left and right, even up and down,
whirl then sleep on a cloudy day to forget
direction. It is hard to learn how
to be lost after so much training.⁴⁴

Getting lost, according to Harrison, is less dangerous for the body than for the soul; as Swanson, the narrator of *Wolf* observes, "the rare deaths that occur are simply a matter of the lost waiting too long to turn around."⁴⁵ Such was the fate of two snowmobilers near Harrison's cabin one winter: "They could have piled deadfall wood around their machines," Harrison writes in "Passacaglia," "and dropped matches into the remnants of the gas in the tanks, creating an enormous pyre for the search planes."⁴⁶ These men were doomed by their attachment to machines: their "acquisitive sense" was too strong for them to consider the one act which could have saved their lives.

For a person in the back country whose resourcefulness would prevent such a tragedy, the more immediate danger in becoming lost is psychic: the possibility of projecting one's own psychological crises onto the surroundings:

When we are lost we lose our peripheries. Our thoughts zoom

outward and infect the landscape. Years later you can revisit an area and find these thoughts still diseasing the same landscape. It requires a particular kind of behavior to heal the location.⁴⁷

By behavior Harrison implies ritual. These places have a spiritual significance that calls for reverence in visiting them, the kind of circumspection Roethke means in declaring "I'll be an Indian."⁴⁸ In "Passacaglia" Harrison identifies with Michigan's Native Americans for their traditional expertise in the art of "getting lost," telling about a Chippewa elder he knows who "carries a folded-up garbage bag in his pocket":

He claims it is his portable home, keeping him warm and dry if he gets lost or tired. He finds coyote dens by scent, and whittles the heads of canes into renditions of his "dream birds." His favorite drink is a double martini. He asked me to check for a phone number of a "love" he had lost in 1931. He was somewhat disturbed, he told me, when it occurred to him that people didn't know that every single tree was different from every other tree.

Despite his sense of brotherhood with a man so sensitive to nature, Harrison reminds himself that he isn't literally an Indian; the old man is carving one of his "dream bird" canes for the poet, but Harrison plans to hang the cane in his cabin, "being too genetically Calvinist to have any interest in sorcery."⁴⁹ As he wrote in an early poem, "Sketch for a Job Application Blank":

From my ancestors, the Swedes,
I suppose I inherit the love of rainy woods,
kegs of herring and neat whiskey. . . .
(But on the other side, from the German Mennonites,
their rag smoke prayers and porky daughters
I got intolerance, an aimless diligence.)⁵⁰

Harrison clearly has mixed feeling about his inheritance, but believes that the personality characteristic of his heritage can as be grounded in place as the Native American. Roethke expressed a similar ambivalence about his own identity, describing his beloved greenhouses as

"both heaven and hell, a kind of tropics created in the savage climate of Michigan, where austere German-Americans turned their love of order and their terrifying efficiency into something truly beautiful."⁵¹

Because ethnic diversity is fundamental to a region's character, a honest, historically conscious individual will recognize in the past something of his own disposition; as Gary Snyder says to his Pacific Northwest ancestors, his "fathers / and grandfathers" who "killd [sic] off the cougar and grizzly":

Your itch
in my boots too,

--your sea roving
tree hearted son.⁵²

This, finally, is the significance of going "outside the nest / we have built for ourselves, and earlier / our father's nest: to go into a forest alone with our eyes open[.]"⁵³ Harrison's experience of "getting lost" correlates to that of Roethke's "Lost Son" in how the past, both historical and personal, necessarily colors one's first perception of the native ground. His poetry of place is in part a ritual observance, a "particular kind of behavior" that can "heal the location" for the poet and potentially for the poet's culture--an act in behalf of the bioregion.

A number of other contemporary Michigan poets share with Harrison a sense of place, and have found in Michigan's natural character the imagery to develop their themes. The sesquicentennial of Michigan's statehood in 1987 saw the publication of the *Contemporary Michigan Poetry* anthology, the preface to which notes how "the Michigan landscape ranges from Woodward Avenue [in Detroit] to the Porcupine Mountains."⁵⁴ Judith Minty, in her anthologized poem "A Sense of Place," remembers an

occasion in Northern Michigan when the migration of butterflies provided an analogue to her own peregrinations across the continent:

Summers ago in Leland, I watched a swimmer
walk out of Lake Michigan, her wet hair gleaming
and her skin, with its coat of oil,
glittering in the sun. Behind her, blue
and stretching to the sky, the water sparkled.
Everything shone, even crystals of sand around our blanket.
That was the month of butterflies, thousands
of monarchs on their way to Mexico--
I don't know how they can make it so far.
Once, in California, I walked
through the eucalyptus trees at night
and heard the whisper of their wings while they slept.⁵⁵

Shores on the Great Lakes occur frequently as settings in Minty's poetry; as the edge or transition zone between land and lake ecologies, the beach is a place of great spiritual significance as well as optimum biotic diversity. Lake Michigan especially figures in Minty's poems as a simultaneously beneficent and destructive force whose waters define both the land and Minty's self. "This lake is cruel," she writes in beginning the poem entitled "Lake Michigan":

This lake chews at dunes,
bites off chunks of sand,
then ebbs back
as firs lean and topple, their roots
dragging deeper roots
until cellars, kitchens, toilets collapse. . . .
This lake has a memory. It knows
the fingerprints of my cry.
I strip off my clothes,
fall into the waves. I will
go deep, let it lick my skin,
feel its pulse as we sink together.⁵⁶

"The fingerprints of my cry" suggests Minty's many references to the common observation that Michigan's Lower Peninsula has the shape of a mittened hand. Just as residents of the state will point out locations and give directions using the palm of the right hand as a map, Minty asks us, in the title of one poem, to "Look to the Back of the Hand."

This "water hand, this right one, / changed by the will and actions" is at once "the hand perhaps of an artist" and an "atlas surrounded by lakes, / full of paths and roads, hills valleys plains."⁵⁷ This metaphor unites Minty's senses of place and self; she lovingly holds the Michigan landscape, shaping it with words just as the lakes and rivers shape it with water. In the poem "Grand Valley," Minty considers the watershed of the Grand River, the longest Michigan river, as a geographical and spiritual center for her life and art:

I have slept there with long
extended metaphors, caressed the body of syntax,
kissed simile's ear. Appetites
move with a rhythm like tides. They are
seldom satisfied. We eat, knowing we will be hungry again.

The valley fills the cup of the hand
with its gorges and meadows, its reservoirs
named after lakes. Fish swim there
almost free, tethered by invisible silver cords. They roll
in the river, fold their gills back with the current.

Minty admits that she has learned much by travelling and residing in distant places: "I have traveled to other cities / to fondle their books, proposition their young verbs." But knowledge in the abstract will not sustain her--"desire dies for weak nouns, for prepositions / that fall limp into voids"--and she longs for the ground, actual and mythic, of her being:

It is back to that valley we trudge
when we feel ourselves thinning. Only there
can we dance in the fire, chew raw meat,
distill water from Indian lakes. There, baying at the moon,
we can suck eyes from all the little fish heads.⁵⁸

The symbolically feminine image of a valley also appears in the poem "Beginnings," in which Minty speaks to the lake in a tender and confessional tone: "Oh my mother, I always meant / to sleep close to your breasts, / in that valley of the old sea."⁵⁹ The mother figure of

the great freshwater sea becomes in Minty's poetry a power to be feared as well as loved, as in the poem "In the Presence of Mothers" where we find ourselves "cradled / at the shore's arm, / we fold into the sweet / breath of her hum / and dream / through flashes of light. Her fury / rocks us."⁶⁰ This ironically gentle fury contrasts with the blind, purposeless anger of a "fisherman, or madman" in the poem "Destroying the Cormorant Eggs," based on an actual case in which rookeries of that rare bird were destroyed on Little Gull Island and Gravelly Island in Lake Michigan. The act is particularly horrible because of its calculation; the responsible party evidently had a knowledge of birds:

knowing which eggs, only lovely pale blue,
not the gull's and tern's brown or buff, then
to lift out, hurl against the granite,
to punish them for fishing these waters
to crush them under boot or beat with his stick,
2000 eggs. . . .

Minty conjectures that the culprit was driven by a kind of mad jealousy against another creature taking sustenance from the lake, "fishing these waters." What Minty calls the "old hungers," which have consumed so much of the bioregion's integrity over history, have become suicidal, when one considers acts against ecology as acts against oneself--a nightmare:

. . . a man's dream where he gropes
below the surface, groaning with the old hungers,
the luminescence of his skin now covered by something
so thick his arms stroke heavy with it, the water
without end, and no island, no island in sight.⁶¹

Poet Dan Gerber, originally of Fremont, Michigan, provides a synonym for Minty's "old hungers," Harrison's "acquisitive sense," and Roethke's "progress of the jaded" in his poem "Speaking to Horses." Recalling a man in his town who handled horses, "pursuing a life

technology / and economics had declared defunct. . . . a life in the present, of caring and slow time," Gerber praises his refusal to concur with "that progress-driven consensus in its race for prosperity and oblivion."⁶² Gerber's poetry poses sensitivity to life-cycles, such as Michigan's distinct seasonal changes and the passing of generations, as an alternative to such a displaced worldview. Jim Harrison, who was co-editor with Gerber of the former *Sumac* magazine and press, has noted Gerber's "attention to animal and human life, and to the natural world, that is generally lost in the sump of ego. . . ."⁶³ From his first poems, landscape has been one of Gerber's central themes. "In Ruts and Stars" from his first book, *The Revenant* (1971), finds him "sitting here in the woods" contemplating nature's rhythms:

There is no greater truth
than what I see in this landscape
O ever-returning spring!
each man, this earth
and the way he sees it⁶⁴

Gerber's Michigan is the rural western side of the Lower Peninsula, a landscape of "huddled fields and creaking woods"⁶⁵ which he explores mostly alone, thinking of family, friends, and the inevitability that he and they will pass as do the seasons. One recent poem owns a revealing title, "Moral Concerns," which considering the poem's first stanza could have been "Mortal Concerns":

More and more I think of winter.
More and more time I spend
with those I love who are gone now.⁶⁶

Among those people loved and lost is Gerber's father, who plays a central role in Gerber's poetry. Like Roethke, Gerber finds consolation for grief in nature's recurrence, perceived in the life of places he and his father once shared, as in the poem "Adumbratio":

In his death, my father has been wandering
 through the forest. He enters a clearing
 and stops to ponder the living sweep of the
 sky.

.
 Sometimes he takes the form of
 a bird or a pebble or the wind's high rejoinder
 in the pines. When clouds build over the
 afternoon, his shadow dissolves into moss,
 lichen, the dry carpet of leaves. I walk
 eastward along the bed of a stream where
 a stream once was or will be.⁶⁷

While human relationships in Gerber's poetry are problematic, and
 communication always tenuous (from "Afterwords": "We say *I love you*, /
 acknowledging the failure / of whatever there was / to speak for
 itself"),⁶⁸ contact with nature as experienced in particular places is
 always a potential restorative, as in "A Clatter of Wings," when the
 sound evoked by the title breaks the morning silence over a lake, "and
 the world / that has been my world all along, / suddenly has my
 attention."⁶⁹ The locations and the realization of Gerber's early poem
 "In Michigan" are characteristic:

Here like the tropics
 in summer
 in the forest, in the lake
 or where the forest ends
 a desert of dry grass and stone
 over dirt roads, the heat
 making you one with
 the air
 and thus not being one
 separate
 from that which surrounds you⁷⁰

"When you're in a landscape," Gerber has said in an interview, "or a
 waterscape or a combination thereof you become absorbed in it. You lose
 yourself . . . you cease to be aware of yourself as separate from your
 surroundings."⁷¹ Gerber's experience of nature is informed by Zen
 Buddhism, one objective of which is to transcend the ego, or "little

]

self," to assume one's greater being in unity with nature. As Zen Master Dogen stressed, "to study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."⁷² The study and forgetting of self is the theme of Gerber's poem "The Way Back," which begins with the poet locating himself, as in "In Michigan," at the edge where the forest ends (and begins):

At the edge of the woods, I take off my skis and
sit back against a tree, enjoying the midwinter
sun. The sky, a blue bowl after weeks of grey
and listless snow. All day long now I've been watched,
an intruder, lumbering through the dark trees.

He feels awkward, alien, as one separate from his surroundings until he stops and closes his eyes, so as to be absorbed into the natural environment. Once he is quiet and still, the animals return, and he can "see through their eyes, many eyes all / together." There is no "man" and no "nature," only consciousness and observation; a soaring hawk is "a white spot against the sky," the skier "a blue spot / against the snow, borne away by some instinct / from this thing I have been."⁷³

Related to Gerber's Buddhism is the influence on his work of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, American transcendentalists for whom, as Emerson wrote, "Nature is the symbol of spirit."⁷⁴ This philosophical idealism, by which natural forms and phenomena are perceived as symbols of an ineffable spiritual reality, concludes Gerber's "I Have Often Thought with Women," which from a series of erotic reminiscences shifts to declamation: "It's the pineness of the pine I love, / not its semblance, / the hardness of the stone, all the way through. . . ."⁷⁵ These lines echo the "Idealism" section of "Nature," in which Emerson argues that the "magnitude of material things is relative, and all objects shrink and expand to serve the passion of the poet."⁷⁶ Gerber

himself cites Emerson in "Solitude in Michigan" (the poem that considers Michigan as "a water with some land running through it"), in lines that connect a sublime experience of place (similar to Emerson's "naked eyeball" epiphany in "Nature") with a transcendental striving to see through and beyond the beauty of nature:

Emerson said his finest toy
 was a woodlot and an axe for opening vistas.
 Revelation isn't discovery
 but a clearing away of impediments. . . .

 Coming to the edge of the forest,
 the sudden glimpse of a field
 fills me with exultation,
 and the lone tree out there,
 a great dark pine in the evening wind,
 calms me
 as the night calms the sky.⁷⁷

Poetry such as Roethke, Harrison, Minty, and Gerber have written contributes to the ultimate objective of bioregionalism--a spiritual regeneration based on the love of place and landscape. Gary Snyder argues that

by being in place, we get the largest sense of community. We learn that community is of spiritual benefit and of health for everyone, that ongoing working relationships and shared concerns, music, poetry, and stories all evolve into the shared practice of a set of values, vision, and quests.⁷⁸

This evolution is occurring in Michigan, in schools, in the print media, even around campfires. At the Stone Circle just north of Elk Rapids, Michigan, poet Terry Wooten sponsors weekly events in the summer that can only be described as tribal gatherings. Tourists, children from youth camps, the young and old, gather at a bonfire inside concentric rings of boulders to hear professional poets, singers, and storytellers, and to share their own tall tales and songs. The general rule is that work must be recited, not read. Wooten himself is a bard in the oral

tradition, reciting poetry from hours of material he has committed to memory. He decided upon his calling in life while hitchhiking through Death Valley in California one summer as a teenager:

I made a silent pledge to myself
that if I made it
I would become a Michigan poet
and absorb the land, lakes, rivers,
and rhythm of the folk
to the best of my ability.⁷⁹

For several years now Wooten has done just that, making his living by bringing poetry to schools and other public forums across the state and beyond. He fits his performance to the audience, reciting (for example) classic and modern poetry, children's verse, poems about his youth in northern Michigan, and versions of Indian myth--including the classic story explaining the origin of the Sleeping Bear Dunes and the Manitou Islands, one of the areas most sacred to Michigan's native people.

The oral tradition practiced by Wooten and others is likely to become more common, as poets seek to expand their audiences. Theodore Roethke knew his poetry by heart, and his readings have become the stuff of legend. Gary Snyder considers locally sponsored poetry readings, either dramatic or subdued, "the pinnacle of poetic activity and precision"⁸⁰ because the "decentralization of 'culture' is as important to our long-range ecological and social health as the decentralization of agriculture, production, energy, and government."⁸¹ Considering as equal honors his invitations to read the Library of Congress and the North San Juan (California) Fire Hall, Snyder observes that

if a poet keeps on living in one place, he is going to have to admit to everyone in town and on the backroad that he write poetry. To appear locally is to put your own work to the real test--the lady who delivers the mail might be there, and the head sawyer of the local mill. What a delight to mix all levels of poems together, and to see the pleasure in the eyes of the audience when

a local tree, a local river or mountain, comes swirling forth as part of protoepic or myth.⁸²

The pleasure for the poet is in reliving the moment of creation, seeing one's effort to know the land and learn the lore come to fruition, as generations meet to share history and personal experiences in the place. In his tenth "Chinese Poem," Dan Gerber recalls a memorable exchange that took place in Fremont:

When I read my poems to the locals
an old teacher said
"It doesn't seem like writing could be work."
"Only getting ready is work." I laughed.⁸³

That work is underway across the state of Michigan, by authors in the wilder north and the variously developed south. Poetry is one element among many--the water, the air, the soil--that makes Michigan what it is. Any sustainable political change must begin with a renewal of culture and a resensitizing to nature. It is up to people, including poets, to effect this transformation with an informed love of place and landscape.

Notes

¹These four poets are representative of a growing Michigan literature. Other well known and prolific poets who often write with a strong Michigan sense of place are Charles Baxter, Michael Delp, Jack Driscoll, Janet Kauffman, Thomas Lynch, Stephen Tudor, and Robert VanderMolen. The first four mentioned have also written outstanding fiction set in Michigan, as have Jim Harrison and Dan Gerber. Though urban Michigan is outside the scope of the present study, important poetic visions of Michigan cities have been written by Jim Daniels, Murray Jackson, Phillip Levine, and Naomi Long Madgett. *Michigan in Literature* by Clarence Andrews (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992) is a bibliographical survey of the topic. Wayne State University Press's Great Lakes Books is the best current series of Michigan literature and history.

²William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1967), 391.

³Dan Gerber, "Solitude in Michigan," as yet unpublished poem.

⁴Michigan shares this major biotic and cultural division with the Canadian province of Ontario to the east and the neighboring states of Wisconsin and Minnesota to the west; the distinction is quite evident on maps showing soil type, forest cover, land use, or population density. James R. Shortridge traces the line of transition, "separating a traditionally agricultural southern sector from a northland of lumber mills, mines, and more recently, tourism," westward from Bay City, Michigan on Saginaw Bay:

It passes just north of the Grand River, intercepts Lake Michigan at Muskegon and Manitowoc [Wisconsin], and then follows the Fox River southwest to Portage, Wisconsin. Some observers have said that the line continues west from Portage along the Wisconsin River to the Mississippi, but others opt for a northwesterly tack. . . .

(This transition zone includes Aldo Leopold's Wisconsin farm, described in *A Sand County Almanac*. See Chapter 4, above).

Because the central perceptual definition of the Midwest is pastoral, the mixed economy states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota are perceptually less Midwestern than states closer to the region's perceptual core in Iowa. Michigan has a particularly complex regional identity: Midwestern, Eastern industrial, Great Lakes, north woods, and so forth. Of course, regions are defined not only by their cores but by their peripheries; Michigan is part of the "Upper Midwest," or in Shortridge's phrase, the Midwestern "Northern Fringe." James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 109-110.

⁵Bruce Catton, *Waiting for the Morning Train* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972; reprint Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 1-2.

⁶Roethke's images of nature and place are both literal and



symbolic, as in his noted poem "In a Dark Time": "That place among the rocks--is it a cave, / Or winding path? The edge is what I have" Theodore Roethke, "In a Dark Time," *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (hereafter *Collected*), (Garden City: Anchor / Doubleday, 1975), 231. The edge is an ecotone, or ecological transition zone in nature, as well as a psychological frontier.

⁷Allan Seager, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke* (hereafter *Glass House*), (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; reprint Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 90-91.

⁸Theodore Roethke, *On the Poet and His Craft* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), 7.

⁹Theodore Roethke, *The Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 90-91.

¹⁰Roethke, *On the Poet and His Craft*, 8. Roethke portrays his father Otto as a variant of the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer, whose pastoral middlescape is largely indoors, within glass.

¹¹Theodore Roethke, "The Rose," *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (hereafter *Collected*), (Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday, 1975), 196.

¹²T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 189.

¹³Roethke, "The Longing," *Collected*, 183.

¹⁴Roethke, "The Far Field," *Collected*, 193-195.

¹⁵Roethke, "Idyll," *Collected*, 31.

¹⁶Roethke, "Highway: Michigan," *Collected*, 31.

¹⁷Roethke, "Moss Gathering," *Collected*, 38.

¹⁸Roethke, "Highway: Michigan," *Collected*, 31.

¹⁹Roethke, "The Waking," *Collected*, 104.

²⁰William Carlos Williams, as Seager tells us, was instrumental in encouraging Roethke to abandon the terse, formal, rather abstract voice of his first book, *Open House* (1941), and to undertake the stylistic experimentation which led to the vivid and deeply personal "greenhouse poems" of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948). Seager, *Glass House*, 148, 154. Roethke and Williams corresponded and often met at writers' conferences.

²¹Roethke, "On the Road to Woodlawn," *Collected*, 21.

²²Roethke, "The Lost Son," *Collected*, 50-51.

²³Roethke, "The Premonition," *Collected*, 6.

²⁴Roethke, "The Lost Son," *Collected*, 55.

²⁵Roethke, "Meditation at Oyster River," *Collected*, 184-186.

²⁶Roethke, "Journey to the Interior," *Collected*, 187-189.

²⁷Lisel Mueller, "Versions of Reality" (Review of *Locations* by Jim Harrison and books by other poets), *Poetry* 117 (February 1971): 322.

²⁸Jim Harrison, correspondence with author, September 29, 1989.

²⁹Harrison made a reputation for himself as a poet before publishing his first novel, *Wolf*. He has since become more famous for his fiction, much of which is set in Michigan. The following works of Harrison fiction are at least partially set in Michigan: the novels *Wolf* (1971), *Farmer* (1976), *Warlock* (1981), *Sundog* (1984), and "Brown Dog," one of three novellas in *The Woman Lit By Fireflies* (1990). The experience of landscape and place is as important in Harrison's fiction as in his poetry; *Farmer*, for example, is a pastoral comparable to the Nebraska novels of Willa Cather in its interweaving of characterization, conflict, and rural and wild landscapes. Many of Harrison's journalistic and literary essays, collected in *Just Before Dark* (1991), also deal with Michigan life and landscape.

³⁰Jim Harrison, "Northern Michigan," *Selected and New Poems* (hereafter *Selected*) (New York: Delacorte / Lawrence, 1982), 9.

³¹Roethke, "The Far Field," *Collected*, 193.

³²Harrison, "Northern Michigan," *Selected*, 9.

³³Jim Harrison, *Wolf* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 18.

³⁴Jim Harrison, "Passacaglia on Getting Lost," (hereafter "Passacaglia") *Just Before Dark* (Livingston, MT: Clark City, 1991), 263.

³⁵Gary Snyder, "The Real Work," *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964-1979*. (New York: New Directions, 1980), 62.

³⁶Harrison, "Passacaglia," *Just Before Dark*, 262-263.

³⁷Harrison, "Walking," *Selected*, 31.

³⁸Harrison, "Passacaglia," *Just Before Dark*, 263.

³⁹Harrison, "Walking," *Selected*, 32.

⁴⁰Roethke, "The Long Waters," *Collected*, 192.

⁴¹Jim Harrison, "The Theory and Practice of Rivers," *The Theory and Practice of Rivers and New Poems* (hereafter "Rivers"), (Livingston, MT: Clark City, 1989), 3.

⁴²Harrison, "Passacaglia," *Just Before Dark*, 262-263.

⁴³Harrison, "Rivers," *Rivers*, 20.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁴⁵Harrison, *Wolf*, 18.

⁴⁶Harrison, "Passacaglia," *Just Before Dark*, 264.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 262.

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- ⁴⁸Roethke, "The Longing," *Collected*, 183.
- ⁴⁹Harrison, "Passacaglia," *Just Before Dark*, 264-265.
- ⁵⁰Harrison, "Sketch for a Job Application Blank," *Selected*, 4.
- ⁵¹Roethke, *On the Poet and His Craft*, 8.
- ⁵²Gary Snyder, "Dusty Braces," *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 75.
- ⁵³Harrison, "Rivers," *Rivers*, 17.
- ⁵⁴Michael Delp, Conrad Hilberry, and Herbert Scott, eds., *Contemporary Michigan Poetry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 19.
- ⁵⁵Judith Minty, "A Sense of Place," Delp et al. 214.
- ⁵⁶Judith Minty, "Lake Michigan," *Lake Songs and Other Fears* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 7.
- ⁵⁷Judith Minty, "Look to the Back of the Hand," *In the Presence of Mothers* (hereafter *Mothers*), (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 11.
- ⁵⁸Minty, "Grand Valley," *Mothers*, 35.
- ⁵⁹Minty, "Beginnings," *Mothers*, 7.
- ⁶⁰"In the Presence of Mothers," *Mothers*, 69.
- ⁶¹Minty, "Destroying the Cormorant Eggs," Delp et al., 211. See also Minty's long poem *Counting the Losses* (Aptos, CA: Jazz, 1986), a meditation on place, sexuality and gender roles, relationships with family and friends, and death. In that poem, Minty recalls her childhood in Detroit and experiences in Michigan's Leelanau Peninsula and Yellow Dog River country. The Yellow Dog is also the scene of Minty's *Yellow Dog Journals* (1979), poems resulting from a Walden-like retreat to a cabin in the Upper Peninsula.
- ⁶²Dan Gerber, "Speaking to Horses," *A Last Bridge Home: New and Selected Poems* (hereafter *Last Bridge*), (Livingston, MT: Clark City, 1992), 83.
- ⁶³Jim Harrison, dust jacket of Gerber's *Last Bridge*.
- ⁶⁴Gerber, "In Ruts and Stars," *Last Bridge*, 14.
- ⁶⁵Gerber, "Return," *Last Bridge*, 85.
- ⁶⁶Gerber, "Moral Concerns," *Last Bridge*, 160.
- ⁶⁷Gerber, "Adumbratio," *Last Bridge*, 128.
- ⁶⁸Gerber, "Afterwords," *Last Bridge*, 123.
- ⁶⁹Gerber, "A Clatter of Wings," *Last Bridge*, 140.
- ⁷⁰Gerber, "In Michigan," *Last Bridge*, 4.

⁷¹William Barillas, "An Interview with Dan Gerber," *Passages North* 13, no. 1 (Summer 1992): 23.

⁷²Dogen Kigen, cited in Stephen Mitchell, ed., *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 157.

⁷³Gerber, "The Way Back," *Last Bridge*, 81.

⁷⁴Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 20. A famous example of philosophical idealism in American poetry is the sixth section of Whitman's "Song of Myself," beginning "A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full / hands. . . ." Whitman ends a catalog of speculations about what the grass symbolizes by stating that

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was, it led forward life, and does not wait
at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward--nothing collapses;
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and
luckier.

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 192-194.

Given Roethke's botanical affinities and explicit allusion to Whitman ("Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues"; Roethke, "The Abyss," *Collected*, 212), the passage would have made a fitting epigraph for Roethke's collected poems.

Gerber's work shows strong affinities with major Midwestern writers whose transcendentalist feelings about nature and culture were deeply influenced by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman: *Grass Fires* (1987), his book of short stories, echoes Sherwood Anderson and Willa Cather in its representation of Midwestern small town life. Anderson is a particularly important antecedent for Gerber because of both authors' experience in corporate industry--Gerber was heir to the baby food company founded by his grandfather and father. While he did not renounce the life of business so emphatically as did Anderson, he did decline to pursue a full time career that would have included presidency of the firm. Gerber's first novel, *American Atlas* (1973), is a comedy (set partly in Michigan) involving a heir to a major pie company who does renounce all family and corporate expectations. In Gerber's most recent novel, *A Voice from the River* (1990), the retired president of a fictional Michigan lumber company reevaluates his life after reading Thoreau and resolves to vivify his atrophied spiritual life. The conflicts of these fictions echo the concerns of Sherwood Anderson, who also knew American business at first hand.

Two contemporary poets in the American transcendental tradition, Robert Bly and James Wright, are important recent antecedents to Gerber's poetry. Gerber's *Snow on the Backs of Animals* is resonant with Bly's first book, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, not in title alone. The poem "Dogwood," from the "New" section of *Last Bridge*, concludes with an image of a "rust-rimmed hole in an old board / lying out in the summer grass" (Gerber, "Dogwood," *Last Bridge*, 152) that echoes Bly's poem "Old Boards":

I love to see boards lying on the ground in early spring
The ground beneath them is wet, and muddy--
Perhaps covered with chicken tracks--

And they are dry and eternal.

Robert Bly, "Old Boards," *Silence in the Snowy Fields*. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 58.

Aldo Leopold used the same image:

The autobiography of an old board is a kind of literature not yet taught on campuses, but any riverbank farm is a library where he who hammers or saws may read at will. Come high water, there is always an accession of new books.

Aldo Leopold, "Come High Water," in *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine, 1970), 27.

The recurrence of this image is partly a matter of coincidence, partly of osmotic influence (Bly's was an important book to Gerber's poetic generation), and partly of a shared regional affinity for the spiritual symbolism of ordinary and humble things, from boards and chicken tracks to people and landscapes.

⁷⁵Gerber, "I Have Often Thought with Women," *Last Bridge*, 150.

⁷⁶Emerson, "Nature," *Essays and Lectures*, 35.

⁷⁷Gerber, "Solitude in Michigan."

⁷⁸Snyder, "The Bioregional Ethic," *Real Work*, 141.

⁷⁹Terry Wooten, "Emergency Message," *Jutting Out into the Water* (Kewadin, MI: Stone Circle, 1991), unpaginated.

⁸⁰Snyder, "Poetry, Community & Climax," *Real Work*, 164.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 169.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 168.

⁸³Gerber, "Chinese Poem" number 10, *Last Bridge*, 59.

Conclusion

In his essay "The Spirit of Place," novelist Larry Woiwode recalls Theodore Roethke's observation in "The Rose" of "those to whom place is unimportant," citing lines from that poem that distance Roethke from such company. Having lived and written fiction set in a number of places, including Michigan, Wisconsin, and New York City, Woiwode has returned to his own place of origin, North Dakota: "not a North Dakota of the mind, or a visitor's or Easterner's misconception of it, nor one you may encounter in a general book about the Great Plains, but a real place; a region, perhaps: now my home."¹ Against the homogenizing power of the mass media and distant market forces, Woiwode defends regional and local awareness, offering a familiar argument for the spiritual function of language and literature:

I write about an infinitely smaller region than North Dakota; actually about the size of a fist: the heart. . . . I believe that American writing now stands at the threshold of being able to speak of the habitations of spirituality, or the lack of them, within the human heart as in no other period in history. And if those of us at the center of America can retain what we presently possess or, even better, turn farther inward toward what we've inherited, clearing away the falseness and superficiality that is constantly and electronically beamed into us from either coast, as if by its repetitiveness it could become the truth, and approach the land and the people who live on it as our ancestors did, with the cautious reverence of mutual regard, then I believe that a new form of expression, if not a new manner of literature, could, by the grace of God, be created for any generations who might come historically after us and wish to listen to our voices speak the truth to them about the places we have inhabited and that inhabit us through the unmerited gift of particular love.²

Woiwode lyrically recapitulates the same hope for Midwestern culture that Sherwood Anderson and Willa Cather expressed three quarters of a

century earlier: that people would love, understand, and sustain the life around them and not unnecessarily elevate the pursuit of wealth, fashion, and technology. The difference between Woiwode and his predecessors is that he has their work to refer to as example and encouragement. The literary map of the American Midwest features a number of major landmarks, including Roethke's Saginaw, as well as Anderson's Clyde, Ohio, Cather's Red Cloud, Nebraska, among others. The authors who first brought the muse to these *patria* struggled to affirm the literary value of their native ground; the task before Woiwode, his contemporaries, and succeeding generations is to be worthy of an already rich regional tradition.

One expression of contemporary interest in regional culture is the publication of regional and state literary anthologies, particularly of poetry, the genre best lending itself to such treatment. Popular collections including *Heartland: Poets of the Midwest* (1967) and *Heartland II* (1975), edited by poet and translator Lucien Stryk, serve what Stryk calls "a uniquely spiritual purpose: to raise men to an awareness of the wonders around them, the perennial gift of poetry wherever it is made."³ Yet the introductions to these volumes are often marked by a curiously apologetic tone, such as David Wagoner strikes in *The Third Coast*:

Contemporary Michigan Poetry (1976):

A Michigan poet may be undistinguishable [sic] from an Illinois poet or an Arizona poet (except for subject matter), but the publication of this anthology serves to underline one layer of regional cultural strength, even though these are not "regional poets."⁴

Wagoner correctly recognizes, as Stryk writes, "that to be an effective writer a poet need not respond constantly to place and that there are some whose works do not in the least suggest where they happen to be

produced. . . ."⁵ But what of writers who are distinguishable from others elsewhere, who speak to the exigencies of citizenship in local communities, both human and natural? And why should "subject matter" be whispered in parentheses, as if the content, origin, and inspiration of a literary work are secondary considerations? Why is there such resistance to regionalism and sense of place as conceptual approaches to literature?

There are a number of reasons for this situation. One is the understandable desire of writers for recognition beyond their homelands. They wish for favorable judgement of their work on aesthetic grounds, and to win a larger readership. In the United States, that usually means being accepted by literary critics and publishers on the ocean coasts, particularly New York, where the label "regional" wins friends for no one. Jim Harrison, whose writing has won grudging acceptance from the Eastern establishment (largely due to his wide popularity and growing international reputation), goes so far as to say "there's no such thing as regional literature," but his subsequent remarks suggest that he means "regional" as understood (or misunderstood) by certain New York intellectuals:

In the view of those on the Eastern seaboard, everything which is not amorphous, anything that has any peculiarities of geography, is considered regional fiction, whereas if it's from New York, it's evidently supposed to be mainstream. . . . years ago it struck me that the Upper East Side of New York was constitutionally the most provincial place I'd ever been.⁶

Such ignorance in the guise of cosmopolitanism led one New York publisher to reject *A River Runs Through It* (1976), Norman Maclean's now classic collection of stories about his Montana youth, because there were trees in Maclean's book. That sort of story can be attributed to

what Paul Shepard terms "an urban attitude toward nature which is insular, cultivated, ignorant, dilettante, and sophisticated."⁷ Among intellectuals on the heavily urbanized Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the United States, there is a tendency to view the continental interior (which is rural and wild as well as urban) as a hinterland, its people as "flyovers," and its culture and literature as "regional"--that is, limited in importance to its place of origin.

This cosmopolitan provinciality is not limited to New York, nor to literary critics who ignore writing from west of Pittsburgh. When a writer of unquestionable importance emerges from the Midwest (or the South or West, for that matter), there are critics everywhere ready to deny the regional dimension of his or her work. Such critics stress an author's style and relation to the literary canon at the expense of historical and geographical considerations; they seek to claim writers, even those with deep attachments to particular places, for the world of ideas, the rarefied realm of literature. One such critic is Kathy Callaway, as suggested by her 1983 *Parnassus* article on James Wright's *This Journey*. After elucidating Wright's book in terms of a European "iconography" (in particular, the Roman past of the poet's beloved Italy), Callaway dismisses "poetry of place"--a phrase that Wright himself found useful--in a particularly revealing manner:

Poetry of place? Not in the sense of regionalism with which it's usually applied. "Regionalism" has no meaning in poetry. Regional poems are local messages, and the label of "regional poet" applied to writers of the stature and complexity of James Wright . . . is insulting and incorrect. What's more it ignores a fact we've been ignoring ever since that fact became uncomfortable: that major American writers are still being nourished by something not American. . . . Among poets and their serious readers there is no room for xenophobia--a special danger in circles that like to talk about regionalism.

In the considerable body of scholarship on Wright, it would be hard to find a reference to him as a "regional poet." Many critics have discussed regionalism as an aspect of Wright's poetry, in which localism of imagery and idiom complements and even validates his broad range of cultural reference. In accusing those who "like to talk about regionalism" of being reductive, Callaway is herself reductive--she denies the importance of a writer to his human community:

Supposed poets of place like James Wright . . . seem to have located their dynamos wherever they felt it, on terra firma that Martins Ferry . . . would never have understood--past a literal reading of the iconography, which looked like a moral, and wasn't. Those readers and fellow-poets who hoped to use Wright and other "poets of place" to shore up their own spiritual uneasiness are going to have to let them go.

Callaway's argument is essentially modernist, as I have defined the term in Chapter 1--her attitude is cosmopolitan and intellectual, her aesthetics formalist and elitist, her own senses of place and time Eurocentric and linear:

There is, I think, a spirit of place. Although a person or an animal or even an insect can carry it, it most often exudes from those human locales where trouble and thought and attention of the have impressed the stones for several millennia, through more than one culture, more than one people. . . . It takes considerably more than two hundred years . . . to impress a stone.

Callaway here espouses the outdated landscape aesthetic of early nineteenth century Europe, which valued places with ruins and towers from centuries past as the ideal inspiration for art. Figures such as Thomas Cole and Ralph Waldo Emerson countered the contention that America had no history by celebrating the newness of its culture and the wildness of its terrain. Wright's problem was quite the opposite--by his lifetime, America had a history, and the ruins to show it: the strip mines and factories of Martins Ferry which so often palsied Wright in his effort

to embrace the American landscape. Claiming a culturally subservient role for Americans, who in her view "so love and envy" Europeans, Callaway argues for Wright's poems as "examples of the American's only way of having any history, of taking part in the larger, slower pageant of peoples."⁸ Wright does indeed take part in that pageant, as shown by his long and fruitful meditation on Roman poetry and landscape. Yet his primary "way of having a history," like other American neo-romantics, is the transformation of local particularities into symbolically rich and thematically universal art. His relationship with the great traditions was one of joyful participation, not fawning admiration.

A special danger among those who denigrate regionalism is aestheticism, in the negative sense of "art for art's sake." Wendell Berry speaks of a "Territory of artistic primacy or autonomy, in which it is assumed that no value is inherent in subjects but that value is conferred upon objects by the art and the attention of the artist."⁹ This "Territory" is coterminous with Callaway's "Terra Firma" and the "common ground" that editor Mark Sanders seeks to establish in his anthology and study of four important Nebraska poets:

Not one of these poets will be remembered by where he lived; not one of these poems will be remembered by where it was created. I would rather think the worth of the poem is due to its intrinsic qualities, the stuff in the verse. . . . the common ground is the immutable perception of each poet, that drive to see and explain in terms that create the image of knowing.¹⁰

No one denies the importance of close textual reading in literary study; as mid-twentieth century "New Critics" properly admonished, scholars should respect texts for their form, and give the poem itself the first and last say. But formalist and aestheticist approaches risk abnegating the moral and cultural function of art, including its role in creating a

sense of responsibility and love for nature and place. Leonard Lutwack, who believes that the "maturation of an individual is not possible without the successive abandonment of places," concludes *The Role of Place in Literature* by calling for an "accommodation with placelessness"¹¹ on the part of writers and society. For such ecologically defeatist (and ultimately amoral) rhetoric, Wendell Berry's defiant localism may be the best tonic:

The test of imagination, ultimately, is not the territory of art or the territory of the mind, but the territory underfoot. To assume that the context of literature is "the literary world" is . . . simply wrong. That its real habitat is the household and the community--that it can and does affect, even in practical ways, the life of a place--may not be recognized by most theorists and critics for a while yet. But they will finally come to it, because finally they will have to. And when they do, they will renew the study of literature and restore it to importance.¹²

Berry's defense of the referentiality and purposiveness of literary art is in direct line with the spiritual and democratic ideals of American Romanticism, which held the individual experience of nature in primary regard, with books and all other art playing a supporting role. The same refrain repeatedly emerges in *Nature*, *Walden*, and *Leaves of Grass*: that any sensitive individual may perceive the sacredness of nature; that anyone, as Whitman says, "pocketless of a dime, may purchase the pick of the earth, / And to glance with an eye, or show a bean in its pod, confounds the learning of all times. . . ."¹³ In a similar but more critical vein, Emerson complains in *The American Scholar* that "instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm":

Hence, the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making sort of a Third Estate with the world and the soul. . . . Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire.¹⁴

Emerson's ideal intellectual is a Man or Woman Thinking who has been inspired by books (ironically enough) to leave books behind and go directly to nature for its deeper tuition. If so moved, he or she will write poems, essays, and fictions that invite readers to do the same, perpetuating the relation of literature, nature, and location.

Midwestern authors concerned with place participate in such a continuum with the Transcendentalists, as their frequent citations of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman attest. Cather titled *O Pioneers!* as a nod to Whitman; Leopold alludes to Emerson's late essay "Civilization" on the very first page of his "Almanac"; Roethke and Wright both address Whitman in their lines--an impulse shared by Dan Gerber, who confesses a desire "to talk with Whitman / of the origin of poems."¹⁵ These references speak to a broader cultural relationship between the Midwest and the east coast. The first major American settlement in the Midwest was by people from New York and New England, whose belief in free labor, agrarianism, and education provided the basis for all future social development in the region. Political division by township, Greek Revival architecture, and liberal arts colleges founded by Yale graduates are visible reminders of what historian Thomas J. Schlereth calls "the New England presence on the Midwest landscape."¹⁶ The persistent Romanticism of certain Midwestern authors--their reverence for place and nature, their individualism and egalitarianism--as well as explicit allusions to their Eastern literary forebears is evidence of the continuing New England presence on the Midwestern literary landscape.

A region, of course, is known by its cultural singularity as well as by its relationship to other traditions. That Midwestern authors are beginning to allude to Midwestern precursors and to acknowledge their

influence suggests an increasing regional self-awareness. In her poem "Counting the Losses," for example, Judith Minty approvingly quotes James Wright on the writer's sense of place. Wright himself used dialogue from Hemingway's story "The Killers" as the epigraph for *Two Citizens*; one of the epigraphs for *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* is from Sherwood Anderson's *Midamerican Chants*--a stanza that speaks of being "long alone in a strange place where no gods came."¹⁷ Awareness of tradition--regional or otherwise--enables an artist to feel less alone, to perceive his or her place as numinously familiar rather than strange, *thereby summoning the gods*. The central message of literary topophilia is spiritual; it teaches us, as Gary Snyder encourages, "that community is of spiritual benefit and of health for everyone, that ongoing working relationships and shared concerns, music, poetry, and stories all evolve into the shared practice of a set of values, visions, and quests."¹⁸ This commitment to human ecology and natural communities, rather than a merely aesthetic awareness of environment, is the true meaning of a "spirit of place."

Midwestern authors of place--the likes of Willa Cather, Aldo Leopold, James Wright, Theodore Roethke, and their literary descendants--sustain the region's spirit of place: the pastoral ideal of a predominantly agrarian landscape where natural processes of birth, growth, and death are the immediate context of human life. In opposition to the dominant American worldview, which thinks of nature as an abstract other, as a mine from which to extract material wealth, these writers speak of human nature in unity with the land. Having married nature for vision rather than possession (to invoke Robert Bly's terminology), they value places for their intrinsic beauty and organic integrity, as well

as for what the phenomenal world of biology and geography reveals of the noumenal world within and beyond. In the individual's spiritually charged experience of place--represented in Midwestern literature by Cather's Alexandra on the Divide, Leopold hunting in a Illinois marsh, Wright releasing milkweed seeds to float across the prairie, Roethke collecting moss in a Saginaw forest--aesthetic and moral imperatives originate that are essential to the political defense of natural and cultural diversity. We cannot sustain what we do not love and respect, and these writers, visionaries all, show us how to cherish our inheritance of the land we live upon--the land that lives within us.

Notes

¹Larry Woiwode, "The Spirit of Place," in *Inheriting the Land: Contemporary Voices from the Midwest*, ed. Mark Vinz and Thom Tammaro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 53.

²*Ibid.*, 65.

³Lucien Stryk, *Heartland II: Poets of the Midwest* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1975), xxiii.

⁴David Wagoner, "Preface," *The Third Coast: Contemporary Michigan Poetry*, ed. Conrad Hilberry, Herbert Scott, and James Tipton (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), 15.

⁵Stryk, *Heartland II*, xviii.

⁶Jim Fergus, "The Art of Fiction CIV: Jim Harrison" (interview) *Paris Review* 107 (1988): 64.

⁷Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 64.

⁸Kathy Callaway, "The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Fano: James Wright's *This Journey*," in *James Wright: The Heart of the Light*, ed. Peter Stitt and Frank Graziano (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 403-405.

⁹Wendell Berry, "Writer and Region," in *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point, 1990), 82.

¹⁰Mark Sanders, "Foreword," in *On Common Ground: The Poetry of William Kloefkorn, Ted Kooser, Greg Kuzma, and Don Welch*, ed. Mark Sanders and J.V. Brummels (Ord, NE: Sandhills, 1983), 15.

¹¹Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 236.

¹²Berry, "Writer and Region," *What Are People For?*, 83-84.

¹³Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" verse 48, *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 244.

¹⁴Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of American, 1983), 57.

¹⁵Leopold's Emersonian allusion occurs in his description of a skunk track, which "leads straight across country, as if its maker had hitched his wagon to a star and dropped the reins." Aldo Leopold, "January," *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine, 1970), 3;

Roethke addresses Whitman in "The Abyss": "Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues." Theodore Roethke, "The Abyss," *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (Garden City: Anchor / Doubleday, 1975), 212; Dan Gerber, "A Fine Excess," *A Last Bridge Home: New and Selected Poems* (Livingston, MT: Clark City, 1992), 50.

¹⁶Thomas J. Schlereth, "The New England Presence on the Midwest Landscape," *The Old Northwest* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1983).

¹⁷Judith Minty, *Counting the Losses* (Aptos, CA: Jazz, 1986), 9. Minty cites James Wright, "The Pure Clear Word: An Interview with Dave Smith," in *Collected Prose* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983), 194; James Wright, *Two Citizens*, in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (New York: Noonday and University Press of New England, 1990), 221; Wright, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, in *Above the River*, 282.

¹⁸Gary Snyder, "The Bioregional Ethic," in *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964-1979* (New York: New Directions, 1980), 141.

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