MONIKA FLUDERNIK

"Winesburg, Ohio": The apprenticeship of George Willard

Originalbeitrag erschienen in:
Amerikastudien 32 (1987), S. [431]-452

Winesburg, Ohio: The Apprenticeship of George Willard

Monika Fludernik

ABSTRACT

The position of George Willard in *Winesburg, Ohio* remains a question of enduring fascination for most critics. The present paper attempts to discuss Anderson's portrait of the artist as a young man by reference to three different levels of argument in the book. George Willard's achievements are first evaluated against the background of the narrator's implicit statements about the true nature of the artist as it emerges from the book's imagery on dreaming, inspiration, and poetry. Secondly, George's interaction with his fellow townsmen will be examined. George receives good and bad advice from a number of Winesburgers, and his actions are also contrasted with those of other young men of the town. Finally, the paper will discuss George's encounter with verbal expression, silence, and even laughter, in Winesburg. George's artistic development is shaped, precisely, by what he learns from his surroundings, and it needs to be evaluated against the reader's more profound knowledge of life in Winesburg.

George Willard's special position in *Winesburg, Ohio* has been much debated in Winesburg criticism. Is he merely a 'grotesque,'[1] albeit one with whom the narrator (and, indeed, Sherwood Anderson) seems to sympathize, or does he occupy a privileged position among the villagers because of his artistic aspirations? Is *Winesburg, Ohio* a *Bildungsroman*, yet another portrait of the artist as a young man, in which the lives of Winesburg citizens serve as a backdrop, symbolizing the kind of sordidness against which the artist rebels and from which he strives to escape? Critical opinion is divided on these questions. To some, *Winesburg, Ohio* is about Winesburg, Ohio, and so the position of George Willard seems oddly central to them. To others, the book focusses on George Willard, and for them he turns out to be unaccountably marginal. Let us briefly rehearse some of the supporting evidence for both views.

It is first of all from a structural and representational point of view that George Willard seems to belong with the grotesques. The authorial narrator describes George in much the same way as other Winesburgers (although George comes back on stage, whereas the other characters, except for George's mother and Dr. Reefy, do not.) The book also presents much information which is beyond the ken of George. Indeed, some of the irony directed at George, and of our disappointment with him, stems precisely from the fact that, unlike George, we as readers have been granted intimate knowledge of other people's minds and are irritated with George's incomprehension.

Secondly, there are some muted hints at George's grotesqueness, when he is described as being "insane with anger and hate" (188) and as having "feverish eyes" (239).[2] Even

---

[1] The term 'grotesque' will be discussed and defined below.

[2] All references are to Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism*, ed. John H. Ferres, Viking Critical Library (New York: Viking, 1966). These descriptions of oddity are part of an extensive web of metaphors in the book which suggest 'grotesqueness' in the general sense of the word. "Nobody Knows" is the only story, to my knowledge, which does not include a reference to oddity or grotesqueness. In the following I list all the instances of grotesqueness which have come to my notice.

Wing Biddlebaum's hands are declared to make "more grotesque an already grotesque and elusive individuality" (2). Dr. Reefy's grotesqueness appears in his knuckles (36). Elizabeth Willard becomes a grotesque in her enactment of dramatic fury (45) and is called a ghost (39). Dr. Parcival acknowledges the "strange turns" of his character (50). In "Godliness" Jesse's father is "twisted" with toil (69); Jesse is "excited to the edge of insanity" (84) besides eliciting a frantic ("frantically" 101), "insane panic"

ιore so, George's behavior at times might strike one as clearly odd. We only need to recall is strange adventure with Louise Trunnion, and later with Belle Carpenter, as well as his ιwakening' in the alley. (It is perhaps no coincidence that "An Awakening" is bracketed y the stories of Enoch Robinson and Elmer Cowley, the two most obviously insane eople in *Winesburg, Ohio.*)

Thirdly, George seems to belong to the grotesques not merely as an individual but in-eed also *qua* aspiring artist. The writer's affinity with the characters of his imagination is xplicitly acknowledged in the "Book of the Grotesque," when the narrator admits that ιe old writer, too, had almost become a grotesque (26). This is anticipated earlier in a ɔndescending remark by the narrator, who describes the old writer as "ludicrous" (23) ıd then admits to the absurdity of trying to describe him (24). George, as a writer, more-ver *represents* Winesburg, which would also seem to argue for his–and, by extension, the 'tist's–essential kinship with his fellow citizens. George is sought out as the journalist ·presenting public opinion, and several Winesburgers apply to him for help, hoping that ; will be able to express their truths in his writing, his art.

George Willard's resemblance to the Winesburgers becomes apparent also in his many ilings. Thus George is repeatedly shown to be inadequate to the trust placed in him. ιme and again, the narrator exposes George's insipidity, insensitivity, and incomprehen-ɔn, but he does so sympathetically, revealing George's failure to be the typical Winesburg nd. Hence in this manner, too, George comes to epitomize for the reader what is ulti-ately disappointing in the Winesburgers.

On the other hand, George appears to be central as a character of *Winesburg, Ohio* ·cause of his sheer presence in the book. His own experiences are centered on in at least ·ur stories ("Nobody Knows," "An Awakening," "Sophistication," and "Departure"), ıd he functions as a listener or bystander in all other stories except "The Book of the rotesque," "Paper Pills," "Godliness," and "Adventure." George also does not participate "The Untold Lie," but the narrator mentions him and Seth Richmond (203) in setting ı his chronology. Thus almost all, but not quite all, of the tales revolve around George

---

)2) in David. Louise is "obsessed" with trying to scale her wall of loneliness (91) and "half beside her-f with grief" at her inability to do so (94). Joe Welling's seizures are decidedly "uncanny" (103). Alice ndman thinks of herself as becoming "queer" (117), is "desparate" (119), and evinces "madness" (119). ısh Williams is compared to a grotesque monkey (121). Seth, his mother thinks, is "an unfortunate" 29). He laughs at his own "absurdity" (137) and makes Helen succumb to "madness" when she ad-:sses love notes to him (138). Rd. Curtis Hartman becomes "distracted" at the sight of Kate Swift 54), who, in turn, finds herself laughing in a "queer, hesitating way" (154) and makes the minister pear "insane" (166) to George Willard. Elmer Cowley's queerness is repeated variously in the story and title. He also characterizes his father as "crazy" (193). Elmer is furthermore referred to as "distraught")4) and "distracted" (199), and he calls Mook the half-wit "queer" (197). Enoch Robinson, too, ιerges as "slightly insane" (172) and "a little off his head" (174). In "The Untold Lie" Windpeter nters goes to his death "raving" and maddens the horses (203); Ray Pearson becomes "distracted")4) by the beauty of the countryside and evinces a wish to shout and scream at his wife as well as hit r (206), another sign of incipient madness. Tom Foster's grandmother has twisted hands (210). Her ındson, when drunk, seems to have eaten from some "maddening weed" (216) and is "out of his head" 18). George Willard, in "Death," is affected by "a madness" (231) to lift the linen from his dead ıther's face. This echoes the earlier description of Elizabeth Willard's love affair, in which her lover says · same words "madly over and over" (223). When Dr. Reefy comes to the point of repeating those ·rds, a "grotesque ... incident" (228) prevents the consummation of their love. George Willard succumbs the general excitement of the fair (people running about "madly" [233]), and looks about with "fever-eyes," just as Helen laughs "hysterically" (239) after escaping from the instructor. On the morning of orge's departure, the wind blows the leaves "crazily" about (244).

Willard, who seems to provide a kind of pivot or scaffolding for them. Besides, the obvious centrality of George's artistic development in the book has contributed to the reading of *Winesburg, Ohio* as a *Bildungsroman*. George undeniably undergoes a perceptible maturation in the course of events. His attitude towards women, for instance, improves considerably, a point on which there is general consensus among critics. George's eventual artistic achievement, however, remains a moot point. The evidence is contradictory and stimulates the reader's interest in George as a complex personality.[3]

Thus it seems to me that the emphasis on George's artistic development undoubtedly marks him as a/the central figure in the book, whereas–from a different perspective–he turns out to be another specimen of the Winesburg grotesque. This contradiction can, however, be resolved if we take George's relation to Winesburg life to parallel the artist's ambiguous position in society as part of, and apart from, his surroundings. The old controversy of whether *Winesburg* is primarily a 'book of the grotesque(s)' or a *Bildungsroman* could then perhaps be answered by a both/and solution. George's artistic development becomes estimable precisely against this background of the Winesburg grotesques with whom he belongs. In this reading, the grotesques constitute a necessary foil to George Willard, the artist-to-be, supplying him with good and bad examples, advice, and warnings, while at the same time providing him with a subject for his art. George's emotional and artistic maturation hinges on his compassionate understanding of his fellow townsmen and on his recognition that he is one of them. Only when he has gained this knowledge will he be enabled to practise his art.

In the framework of such a reading of *Winesburg, Ohio* George Willard's ambiguous position as, on the one hand, one of the Winesburgers, and–on the other–the major character of the book, is made to signify as the central predicament of the artist *per se*. It is in this framework that I wish to analyze three related areas which impinge on our estimation of George Willard. First, George Willard's achievements are set against the backdrop of the book's implicit statements about the true nature of art and the artist's real vocation. These statements are provided by the narrator of the stories, and George Willard has no access to them. They are therefore directed at the narratee, who can compare the achieve-

[3] When George leaves Winesburg, not having written anything of note yet, we cannot be sure whether he will eventually become a noteworthy artist. So far he has been observed taking down the small-talk of the town, the surface of things only (cf. Rideout, p. 290), and although he is wise and compassionate enough not to enquire into Wing Biddlebaum's secret ("Hands" 29–30), many of the insights proffered to him by his friends leave no immediate effect on him. On the other hand, George is a dreamer by inclination, and this would seem to indicate that he might develop the kind of intuition requisite for the writer's métier. George twice attains inspiration, in "An Awakening" and at the death of his mother. However, it remains unclear whether he will be able to act on it by producing something that would express his insights and thus render them accessible to others as well. Indeed, his departure from Winesburg is a let-down, and anti-climax, as has frequently been noted. (Cf. Fussell, p. 392, and D. Anderson, p. 431). In the final story George, who is trying to look smart, turns out to be vain, self-conscious, and ill at ease. Proving his superiority and manhood–though on a level above the merely sexual–appears to be a continuing concern of his. Thus the emotional and intellectual achievement portrayed in "Sophistication" is well-nigh denied by George's concentration on trivialities when the train pulls out of town. However, as I have tried to show elsewhere, the imagery in *Winesburg, Ohio* does seem to support a positive estimation of George's development in the book. References are to Walter B. Rideout, "The Simplicity of *Winesburg, Ohio*," in *Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism*, ed. John H. Ferres (see note 2), pp. 287–300; Edwin Fussell, "*Winesburg, Ohio*: Art and Isolation," in *Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism*, pp. 383–95; David D. Anderson, "The Grotesques and George Willard," in *Winesburg, Ohio: Text and Criticism*, pp. 421–31; and my "'The Divine Accident of Life': Metaphoric Structure and Meaning in *Winesburg, Ohio*," *Style*, 22:1 (1988), forthcoming.

ments of individual Winesburgers, foremost among these George Willard, with the standards of the ideal (re)presented by the narrator. This frame of reference and evaluation is set up, primarily, by the book's imagery on dreaming, inspiration, and poetry, and by the stories of the old writer, Dr. Reefy, Wing Biddlebaum, and Wash Williams.

Secondly, George's achievements will be contrasted with the behavior of his fellow townsmen, and his interaction with them supplies a further basis for an estimation of his merits and demerits. Since the reader knows more than George Willard, having been granted additional insights by the authorial narrator, s/he is able to judge George's use of the information which he comes by, while at the same time considering the relative merit of the advice tendered to him by his various Winesburg acquaintances. George is the recipient of admonitions, warnings, and prescriptions on the part of his father, Wing Biddlebaum, Dr. Parcival, Joe Welling, Wash Williams, and Kate Swift. He and his actions are moreover contrasted with those of other young men of the town. Tom Foster, Seth Richmond, and Elmer Cowley, serve as foils to George's own development. His artistic aspirations are also nourished by his encounter with Enoch Robinson, the painter, the only other artist in the book. George learns from all these people, although in some cases the influence is arguably detrimental.

In this second area of George's interaction with his fellow townsmen I have also included a discussion of Elizabeth Willard, although she does not seem to have very much direct influence on George. Her attitudes are, however, contrasted with those of George's father, and she serves as a link to Dr. Reefy, whose views on art the narrator endorses. Elizabeth Willard is moreover one of the many women whom George encounters in Winesburg. In the present paper we will, however, pass over George's relation to women because the subject has been studied in detail.[4]

The third area that will be examined in this article concerns the linguistic environment which George encounters in Winesburg. The book teems with statements about verbal expression and its inhibition, to an extent that suggests a symbolic reading of speech, silence, and even laughter. Language is the medium of George's prospective art, and his confrontation with the practice of speech and silence in Winesburg can be viewed as yet another backdrop to his artistic development. George's capacities are shaped, precisely, by what he learns from his surroundings—whether from the people who try to influence him, or from the society in which he grew up and from its use of language. His achievements will eventually be evaluated against the reader's more profound knowledge of, on the one hand, life in Winesburg and, on the other, the artistic ideal outlined by the narrator.

I. Art and the Artist

> All men lead their lives behind a wall of misunderstanding they themselves have built, and most men die in silence and unnoticed behind the walls. Now and then a man, cut off from his fellows by the peculiarities of his nature, becomes absorbed in doing something that is impersonal, useful, and beautiful. Word of his activities is carried over the walls. (*Poor White*)[5]

The inventor's artefact, like the artistic work of art, makes possible the communication between isolated individuals, and it does so by means of the word, which is carried across the walls. Fussell has argued that this passage is self-contradictory, since it first puts the

[4] See Nancy L. Bunge, "Women in Sherwood Anderson's Fiction," in *Critical Essays on Sherwood Anderson*, ed. David D. Anderson (Boston: C.K. Hall, 1981), pp. 242–49, and Sally Adair Rigsbee, "The Feminine in *Winesburg, Ohio*," *Studies in American Fiction*, 9:2 (1981), 233–44.

[5] Sherwood Anderson, *Poor White* (New York: Viking, 1971), p. 221.

artist on a par with other men and then mysteriously allows him to transform his situation of isolation into one of creative activity.[6]

This is no doubt correct. For one, the artist emerges as different from his fellow townsmen because he is less absorbed with himself:

> His [the exceptional man's] name is shouted and is carried by the wind into the tiny inclosure in which other men live and in which they are for the most part absorbed in doing some petty task for the furtherance of their own comfort.[7]

Secondly, the artist, we learn, is able to break out of his isolation and to establish contact with his fellow beings. The word of the artist, his name, is carried across the walls by the wind–like seed.[8] We can conclude from this parable in *Poor White* that the artist, as a precondition for the creative act, has to recognize his own isolation (that is, his grotesqueness) as well as that of his fellow citizens. In a complementary way, he needs to discover the beauty and dignity of these other men and women in their isolation and grotesqueness in order to describe them faithfully in his art. Thus in creation the artist himself must be able to transcend his own personality.[9] Having then created an object of an "impersonal, beautiful, or useful nature," that object is transferable beyond the walls of people's prison of loneliness and thus succeeds in establishing contact between individuals who would otherwise remain isolated.

The parallel with *Winesburg, Ohio* is patent. The picture of isolated individuals behind their walls vividly suggests the situation of the Winesburgers, whose grotesqueness seems to derive from their (social) alienation.[10] As I have argued elsewhere,[11] the condition of grotesqueness in *Winesburg, Ohio* emerges as one of common humanity, and it is pictured in terms of the contrast between an unlikable exterior that envelops and encloses (cp. the image of the wall) a precious, beautiful core. The artist not only should overcome his own grotesqueness by expressing himself; he is also called upon by the grotesques to express *their* inner selves, their 'truths,' as in the case of George, who is sought out by his fellow townsmen. George's mother, too, hopes that her son will be able to express "something half forgotten that had once been a part of herself re-created" (40), "the thing [she] let be killed' in herself. The artist's empathy and love for his fellow beings is thus shown to be a first condition for his art. George seems to meet this standard at the end of the book, when he feels his own insignificance (that is, he recognizes his own grotesqueness) and when he comes to love life intensely (240–41).

Such a view of grotesqueness and the artistic function in relation to it is endorsed by the text of *Winesburg, Ohio*, but it does not correspond with the old writer's definition of the grotesque, which haunts *Winesburg.* The old writer defines the grotesques as people who are eager to snatch up truths for themselves (25). This explanation of the term gro-

---

[6] Fussell, "Art and Isolation," p. 385.

[7] Anderson, *Poor White*, p. 221.

[8] The artist's inspiration is frequently described by the wind metaphor in *Winesburg.* Compare also the "seeds of something very fine" (35) in Dr. Reefy. For further resonances of these metaphors see my "Divine Accident."

[9] Cf. David D. Anderson, "Sherwood Anderson in Retrospect," in *Critical Essays on Sherwood Anderson*, pp. 172–80.

[10] This definition of grotesqueness is taken from Gerhard Hoffmann, "The Absurd and its Forms of Reduction in Postmodern American Fiction," in *Approaching Postmodernism: Papers Presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism, 21–23 September 1984, University of Utrecht*, ed. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens, Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature, 21 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publ. Co., 1986), p. 195.

[11] "Divine Accident."

esque has a number of affinities with the characters of *Winesburg*, and it helps the reader o understand some of the figures. Dr. Reefy, for instance, is continually building up truths nd destroying them again (35), a fact which would suggest that he has escaped grotesqueess from the old writer's point of view. One can also argue that a great number of Winesurgers think that they own the Truth, or particular truths, a good example of such a charcter being Joe Welling. Indeed, the Winesburgers' urge to communicate could be seen as consequence of their conviction that they have something essential, if only very personal o tell. While the old writer's grotesques appropriate truths, others are intent on finding he truth. Among these is Elizabeth Willard, who vainly yearns for "what would for her e the true word" (224). Dr. Reefy wisely counters that "You must not try to make love efinite" (223). Elizabeth's true word quite clearly is a word of love, and Dr. Reefy's nderstanding of love as a divine accident (223), a natural force that cannot be contained, iscloses the futility of Elizabeth's undertaking. Her idea of the true word is as elusive as noch Robinson's truth represented by the hidden woman in his painting. Another intersting reference to truth occurs in connection with Curtis Hartman, who ironically believes ate Swift to be "an instrument of God bearing the message of truth" (155, 165), whereas er "true"[12] message is the one she unsuccessfully tries to impart to George. The implicaions of truth reverberate also in the story of Ray Pearson, who, in spite of his general efficiency, is wise enough to realize that what he was going to tell as his truth "would ave been a lie" (209).

The old writer's definition of truth can thus be seen to shed some light on passages in hich the word 'truth' recurs. His definition is perceptive in another respect, too. It defines rotesqueness as, essentially, acquisitiveness. People's greed for money and goods in *Winesurg* transpires as one of their major failings. A key story in this respect is "Godliness," ince it provides a socio-economic as well as socio-cultural background for the individual tories. Jesse Bentley appears as a crass example of what, in a minor scale, can be glimpsed various Winesburgers' attempts to become rich (Alice Hindman's lover, Elmer Cowley, Vash Williams' stepmother), powerful (Joe Welling, Elmer, Dr. Parcival, Seth), or famous George Willard, Elmer, Joe Welling, Seth). Jesse's religious 'truth,' for instance, subtly ubverts actual Christian truth, as when he believes that the building of temples and the laying of infidels would be appropriate religious tasks for him. In practice, Jesse has to ontent himself with acquisition on a more profane level. Desire for material profit, power, r fame is in fact a socially sanctioned—sublimated—form of the Winesburgers' craving for ove and understanding. Jesse Bentley, whose fanaticism is in reality a manifestation of his resistible greed (cf. "greedy" 81, 102) for possession, wealth, and power, finds himself the grip of an "indefinable hunger" (68) to surpass his neighbors in productivity. The bjects of Jesse's craving appear to be twofold (80), on the one hand material (Jesse is xplicitly described as exemplifying America's "headlong rush ... toward the acquiring of ossessions" [81]), and, on the other, spiritual (Jesse's desire to be allowed to "[glorify] od's name on earth" [80]). This second aim, however, backfires on him, as he admits imself: "I was too greedy for glory" (102). Jesse's greed for wealth which "was *growing p* in the minds of others" as well (81; my emphasis)—an image which links the process to he pregnancy motif in the book[13] and reveals this to be a perversion of natural processes f growth—is also referred to as a "will to power," which has replaced "the will to serve nd beauty ..." (81), a remark that implicitly contrasts Jesse with the humility of Wing

[12] Cf. Kate's attempt to make George understand the "import of life, to learn to interpret it *truly*" 63–64; my emphasis).
[13] Cf. my "Divine Accident."

Biddlebaum. It also alerts the reader to the fact that Jesse has succumbed to the sin of pride, an assumption that is confirmed by other indications of Jesse's 'satanic' nature.[14] It is Jesse's primordial hunger for recognition and love that seems to have degenerated into his possessiveness and greed.

The old writer's definition of the grotesque as acquisitiveness of truths–which, as we have seen, helps to explain a vital strand in the argument of *Winesburg, Ohio*–nevertheless makes it difficult to relate his pet theory to the characters of the book. The truths the narrator enumerates as typical of the old man's figures do not really characterize the people of *Winesburg, Ohio*, and a great number of the stories do not have a single 'truth' to offer. The old man's theory works well with the drunkard's vision of womanhood as Tandy, or with Dr. Parcival's theory of mankind as enduring crucifixion. But in the stories of Enoch Robinson, Seth Richmond, or Tom Foster, there does not seem to be any single overpowering *idée fixe* one could point to. For all its usefulness, the old writer's definition of grotesqueness is not the whole truth and has caused more problems than it has helped to solve, once critics tried to apply it to the stories in detail and to reduce each tale to this common denominator. These problems of definition can, however, be resolved if, on the contrary, we regard the grotesques as an assembly of odd people, all of whom are lovable in some respects and all of whom want to express themselves.

The latter view of the grotesque corresponds with the narrator's definition of the term when he describes the figures of the old man's imagination:

> You see the interest in all this lies in the figures that went before the eyes of the writer. They were all grotesques. All the men and women the writer had ever known had become grotesques.
> The grotesques were not all horrible. Some were amusing, some almost beautiful, and one, a woman all drawn out of shape, hurt the old man by her grotesqueness. (24–25)

This definition of the term *grotesque* differs from the old writer's, for whom grotesqueness is a consequence of people's appropriation of truths (25). Indeed, it is this pet theory which makes the old man "almost" (25) into a grotesque according to his own definiton of the term. The narrator, who makes this observation, repeatedly dissociates himself from the old man.[15] Thus, after describing the writer's conviction of his superior knowledge of the people he had come to know, the narrator adds that "[a]t least that is what the writer thought ... why quarrel with an old man concerning his thoughts" (24). When the old man dreams his "dream that was not a dream," the narrator again intervenes to interpret for us, saying that the figures, the men and women the writer has known, are grotesques, and he characterizes them as "not all horrible," some of them being "amusing, some almost beautiful" (24–25; full quotation above). It is thus *the narrator* who introduces the term 'grotesque' in his description of the old man's 'figures' and who identifies them with the writer's acquaintance.

The narrator's 'definition' of grotesqueness–as one can see–is much more general than the old writer's. It seems to reside in oddity, though not necessarily of the terrifying sort. The narrator does not really define this kind of oddity, although some deviation from the norm is implied, as in the description of the woman "all drawn out of shape." This seems to establish a connection with Dr. Reefy's twisted knuckles and hence with the leitmotif of the gnarled apples. The awkward appearance and behavior of the grotesques, in that framework, points towards their very precious internal qualities.[16] Such a connection

[14] Cf. for instance the detail of his twitching left eye-lid (81, 86). This feature is shared by Dr. Parcival, who has further satanic characteristics (cf. below).

[15] Cf. David Stouck, "*Winesburg, Ohio* and the Failure of Art," in *The Merrill Studies in 'Winesburg, Ohio,'* ed. Ray Lewis White (Columbus, OH: Merrill Publ. Co., 1971), p. 96.

[16] Cf. my "Divine Accident."

seems to be confirmed by the narrator's final remark, which introduces the grotesques' lovability: "I only mentioned [the old carpenter] because he, like many of what are called very common people, became the nearest thing to what is understandable and lovable of all the grotesques in the writer's book" (26). The carpenter is called one of "the common people" by such as the old writer, but for the narrator he symbolizes those lovable qualities of the grotesques with whom he can sympathize. The old writer, this implies, has not fully understood the common people, because he has reduced them to being grotesques and, as the narrator indicated earlier, on account of his *manque d'amour*, he barely escaped becoming a grotesque in his own right; the old writer is "filled with words" (24)—an ominous remark, as we shall see in section III—rather than with understanding and love. In addition this last sentence of "The Book of the Grotesque" suggests that *Winesburg, Ohio*—in contrast to the old writer's "Book of the Grotesque"—is NOT a description of people's truths and their obsession with owning them, but is a description of the understandable and lovable qualities in common people such as the carpenter. Contrary to opinions voiced by many critics, *Winesburg, Ohio* is neither the old writer's "Book of the Grotesque," which made an "indelible impression" on the narrator's mind, nor is it the narrator's version of the Winesburg grotesque. Although the stories describe 'grotesques' similar to those of the old writer, it is, however, *not* their aim to illustrate the writer's pet theory which the narrator questions. *Winesburg, Ohio*, quite on the contrary, does not reduce people to grotesques but propounds an insight into the human mind and sets out to recreate the lovable qualities of common people by means of understanding and sympathy.

What we have distilled from the introductory story as the narrator's objective, easily emerges as *Winesburg*'s aesthetic, a fact confirmed by other statements in the book. For the subject of artistic vocation we now need to turn to the text's references to poetry and the poet, to inspiration, and to dreaming.

The ideal attitudes of the writer, according to *Winesburg, Ohio*, emerge from various statements spaced through the whole book. Society's greed and mania for efficiency, for instance, are explicitly contrasted with the artist's penchant for ineffective dreaming. Thus Tom Willard's injunction to George to be "sharp" (246), and his wish for him to become 'smart and successful'—both symptomatic of society's values—prove to be a counterpoint to Wing Biddlebaum's exhortations to George, whom he enjoins to have the courage to dream. Anderson subverts the societal norms epitomized by Tom Willard when exposing George's father to be an unreliable, despicable person. Tom Willard's political career reveals him to be a failure, as does his inability to become inspired at his wife's death. He is, at that point, compared to a dog, a comparison which indicates the narrator's contempt for him.[17] Tom's attitudes are contrasted also with those of his wife, who significantly hated his original attempts to *smart*en up the hotel (227). Elizabeth wisely endorses her son's penchant for reflection and dreaming because she recognizes in it the precondition for artistic inspiration and expression. When George leaves on the train, he has clearly

[17] The use of dog imagery in *Winesburg, Ohio* seems to connote victimization and contempt. When Tom Willard is described as "a little dog which has been out a long time in bitter weather" (230), this can be compared to Hal's rough treatment of Ray Pearson, whom he shakes like a dog who has misbehaved (208), presumably paralleling Mrs. Pearson's verbal treatment of her husband later that evening. George Willard's immaturity as a writer is revealed in his random search for news, in which he resembles an excited dog (134). The image of the dog also recurs in the description of the old writer's dreams (25), another belittling detail in the narrator's description of the old man, and in Enoch Robinson's procession of the figures of his brain, in which a dog follows an old man with a white beard, a detail which is perhaps meant to establish a connection between Enoch and the old writer (173).

heeded his mother's and Wing's advice since he indulges in daydreaming and looks "not ... particularly sharp" (247).

The central opposition between, on the one hand, dreams attaining to the very core and 'essence of things,' and the 'realities' of life on the other is thematized explicitly in the story of Enoch Robinson. Enoch is unable to reconcile these two spheres, as appears for instance from his vain attempt to "dismiss the essence of things and [play] with realities" (171–72). As with the image of the gnarled apples, which hide their sweetness behind an unappetizing exterior, 'reality' in *Winesburg, Ohio* frequently emerges as mere outward trappings of a more essential reality of dreams, of the imagination. In this connection it is quite noticeable that the 'young thing within' people in *Winesburg* articulates itself in daydreams, but does not attain adequate expression in action or words. Louise Bentley, or Alice Hindman dream of love, yet their dreams do not come true. Conversely, Wing's dreams, when proclaimed as "facts" (34) distort his true intentions, exposing the unreliability of manifest reality. Hence the implied criticism of George Willard's method of reporting when he is described as running about like an "excited dog,"[18] collecting "little facts" (134). In the figure of the old writer day-dreams are also linked to the 'young thing within' motif–it is this young thing within that keeps him from becoming a grotesque–and they are additionally connected with the motif of pregnancy and artistic inspiration, since the writer, "like a pregnant woman" gives birth (i.e., expression) to his dreams in writing. Hence George's "growing passion for dreams" and his "recollection of little things" (which are not facts but snapshots of Winesburg life) when departing from Winesburg seem to shed some hopeful light on his development as a writer. Thus the narrator's statement that George's life in Winesburg had for him become "but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood" (all 247) establishes George's potential to give expression to these dreams in artistic creation.

Dreaming and inspiration are also linked in the book's two utopian visions. Both deal with thoughts and dreams, and both mention the writer and poet as possible purveyors of insights attained in the process of dreaming:

> That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful. (25)

This is an aesthetic and platonic reformulation of the beginning of the first chapter of St. John, echoing also Genesis, so that–by implication–we are referred to the Garden of Eden. Thoughts, or platonic 'ideas,' are here created by man in a manner usurping God's creation. While the result of God's creation was 'good,' the ideas created by man in this parable turn out to be "beautiful."

Wing's utopia is even more closely related to the word, the poet's and writer's medium of expression:

> In the picture men lived again in a kind of pastoral golden age. Across a green open country came clean-limbed young men, some afoot, some mounted upon horses. In crowds the young men came to gather about the feet of an old man who sat beneath a tree in a tiny garden and who talked to them. (30)[19]

This time it is Buddha who has been the model for a utopia of wisdom and love bestowed on youth through the words of inspiration. Since Wing goes on to exhort George

---

[18] Cf. note 17.

[19] Anderson himself also pictured himself as a "teacher," "standing up before youth and saying words of wisdom" (Sherwood Anderson, "Being a Writer," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 23 (1977), 1–16; pp. 1–2). In this passage Wing's utopia is echoed almost verbatim.

to dream, we can infer that it is such dream-like inspired discourse which flows from the mouth of the old man in the garden. Dreaming is here portrayed to be a prerequisite of art. Hence Tom Willard's exhortation to George to "wake up" (44), while he is at the same time endorsing his aim to become a writer, ironically turns out to be a contradiction in terms.

We have noted the prominent place of dreams in the book's aesthetic. The highest praise in *Winesburg, Ohio* is, however, reserved for poetry, the production of which is never really achieved, yet–like the essence of things, the truth which the artist glimpses but does not wholly reach (and, indeed, by reaching or appropriating it, destroys)–remains an avowed goal for many Winesburgers. There are several statements on poetry in the book, yet only a few of the Winesburgers turn out to qualify for the epithet of the poet. Wing Biddlebaum, who most clearly represents the poet of divine inspiration, is nowhere directly called a poet. However, the narrator's claim that the story of Wing's hands (which he then proceeds to tell) would require a poet in order to express "the hidden wonder of their influence" (29, 31) comes very near to conceding just that. Furthermore, there exists an "obscure poet of the town" who had given Wing his name by comparing his hands to the wings of an imprisoned bird (28). The word 'poet' also recurs in connection with Dr. Reefy, who "was almost a poet in his old age" (221), as is soon after instanced in his effusion on love as the "divine accident of life" (223). Paradoxically it is Wash Williams who is named a poet (122, 125), but he is described as a poet of hatred, the only acceptable kind of poetry in Winesburg, or so it seems. Like the monkey that in its ugliness "achieved a kind of perverted beauty" (121), Wash Williams' enraptured discourse of hatred contains "moments of beauty" and transforms his voice into "something almost beautiful" (125). One is reminded of Louise Hardy's transfigured voice that was "like rain falling on trees" (77). Interestingly, it is Wash Williams who sets out to destroy George's dreams (125), dreams which he correctly recognizes as being indulgent and romantic, inspired by excessive reading. Wash tries to save George from the disillusionment with romantic love which he himself has suffered. However, it was Wash Williams' own excessive indulging in high-minded romantic dreaming that led to his own tragedy.[20] At the point when he rebukes George for dreaming, George's dreams cannot yet compare with the insightfulness of those expressed by Wing Biddlebaum or Kate Swift, so that Wash is right in his criticism of George, if for the wrong reasons.

From the above, a set of ideal properties of art emerges. Poetry which is worthy of its name is linked with dreaming and with a preference for the essence of those dreams over the realities of life. Art transforms the essence of the dream into a communicable form. Through its collocation with inspiration of the kind vouchsafed to Wing Biddlebaum, art becomes symbolically identified with Wing's "love of man," a love of man expressible only in divine inspiration or art. The book's many allusions to divinity and the miraculous underline this correspondence. The drunkard's "vision" (146) of woman as Tandy is, for instance, proffered by a "true dreamer" (145). If dreaming paves the way for inspired visions and poetic expression, it can also be seen as a complement to the Winesburgers' yearnings and 'hunger,' their longing to reach out, which produces precisely the dreams of escape, of liberation into freedom and love, that also find expression in poetry and art.

---

[20] Bredahl (see note 4) believes this to be symptomatic of many more Winesburgers, including George Willard.

II. Winesburgers

The story of Elizabeth Willard combines a number of key motifs and images in the book. Like Wing Biddlebaum, Elizabeth realizes the importance of dreams and the nefariousness of Tom Willard's advice to George, whom he enjoins to "wake up" (44). By inference, Tom Willard's foolish remarks reinforce the positive evaluation of women in *Winesburg*. Anderson consistently subverts the male code of behavior, praising the caress of fingers and voice, and associating manly fists and the violence they wreak with lack of sensitivity and obtuseness (44). Women are shown to provide men with dreams (cf. Wing's "finer sort of women in their love of men" [31]) and expected to welcome and answer men's cravings for the expression of their love ("Tandy"). When Tom Willard claims that George is neither a fool nor a woman (44), the reader has already learned that the narrator of *Winesburg, Ohio* is endorsing dumbness–for which read: passivity, non-aggression–and sensitivity as positive human values against the superficiality of glib talkers, a type to which Tom Willard would like to belong. When Elizabeth ponders killing her husband, she really means to retaliate against the society he stands for, a society which, she feels, killed her former youthful self, indeed the self she hopes George will preserve and manage to express in his writing (42).

Elizabeth Willard surfaces as a key figure also on account of her relationship with Dr. Reefy and her repeated attempts to give expression to her youthful self. When talking to Dr. Reefy, she rejuvenates herself to such an extent that she turns into an anticipation of Dr. Reefy's later wife even in her outward appearance. In "Paper Pills" Dr. Reefy's late wife is consistently described as "the tall dark girl," a phrase which recurs in the description of Elizabeth in her youth, when she also was a "tall dark girl" (46). Yet Elizabeth's attempts to liberate her youthful self are doomed to failure. She herself is never able to adequately express the 'young thing within' herself. Thus Elizabeth's story, for all its positive aspects, seems a story of disillusionment until her victory in and over death again turns the scales towards a more positive balance of accounts.

Elizabeth sets out hopefully and seems to own a great power of expression in love. In "Mother" we learn how she was able to give expression to her own dreams in the act of love, bewitching the men with whom she lay to start dreaming also, and to become boys again. Yet each night of love ends with her "sobbing repentance," in spite of the fact that she had previously achieved peace in her surrencer (46). Her sobs therefore appear less as a sign of repentance than an indication of her disillusionment. After the fact she realizes that her dreams have not actually become true. Marriage to Tom Willard, into which she has tried to escape, turns out to be a more serious imprisonment of her self. It transforms the original Elizabeth into a ghost in a house that is falling into decay. Both states of dereliction are the consequence of Tom Willard's loss of energy and love. Elizabeth's frustration and the unassuaged dullness of her life eventually make her succumb to meaningless and unpremeditated violence, as is illustrated by her grotesque dream of revenge on Tom Willard. (Incidentally, Louise Hardy, whose marriage also ends in disappointment, is equally prone to violent behavior, both verbally and in her buggy-driving.) Abner Groff's,

---

[21] Abner Groff recurs, interestingly, in Seth's section, a fact which seems to point to a further parallel between George and Seth. George's curious non-relationship with his mother strangely resembles that between Seth's mother and her boy.

The parallel between Elizabeth Willard and Louise is further instanced in their attempts to run away in a buggy. Louise does so during her schooldays (95) and resumes the obsession later as a wife (75), and Elizabeth tries to run away from Tom Willard and to make up her mind about giving him the money (227).

the baker's, fits of violence[21] beautifully mirror Elizabeth's own inclinations. There is some similarity here between Elizabeth's epiphany and Oedipa Maas' recognition of her own fate when looking at the Remedio Varo painting in *The Crying of Lot 49.*[22] For Elizabeth, the scene she witnesses again and again suggests a "*rehearsal* of her life, terrible in its vividness" (41; my emphasis). This metaphor reminds one of Elizabeth's love for the theater, which for her was just another vehicle for her dreams. It also anticipates her dramatic vision of revenge, in which her own aggressions, long repressed and accumulated–passion and youth gone sour–, break forth in terrible vividness, too. A further indication of Elizabeth's emotional deterioration emerges in her recurrent gesture of clenching her fists. Thus when wishing God's fist upon herself as a recompense for the privilege she is asking, she clenches her own hand in impotent urgency, and she does so again later when pondering her revenge (40, 45). Clenched fists, as has frequently been noted, are repeatedly contrasted with the caress of fingers and hands (Wing Biddlebaum).[23] Elizabeth's recurrent gesture thus emerges as an additional sign of her apparently hopeless situation.

Elizabeth, who is first compared to a ghost and later turns into a demon, also features as a suffering woman of "long white hands" (41), who, by miracle, regains her strength at the crucial point of utter dejection. George's dream of going away, his realization, only alluded to, that he does not want to become 'smart and successful' and that he intends to refrain from making money–this announcement comes to Elizabeth like the message of the Angel to the Virgin in the Annunciation. The joy she feels at this revelation exceeds her powers of expression (48). Thus, by the miracle of her own love, she is granted the very demand she addressed to God in her prayer (40–41): George actually does fulfill her deepest wish by not thinking like his father. Also, when Elizabeth in her own mind enacts the role of tigress and angel of revenge, she in actual fact seems to come back to life out of her ghostly state. This is precisely what she had demanded of God as a privilege in case George did perhaps develop into a "meaningless and drab figure" like herself (40). Such a reappearance would of course involve her becoming a ghost in actual fact.

We have seen how Elizabeth's story implicitly impinges on the book's message about art and the artist. In contrast to some other Winesburgers, she does not give any advice to George but influences him by the intensity of her wishes and the supernatural aid they apparently attract. Although Elizabeth, like the woman in the old writer's dream, is 'all drawn out of shape' in her grotesqueness, she nevertheless ends up discovering the truth, wishing for the right thing and even making it come to pass. Of the other Winesburgers who take more active influence on George, we will here concentrate particularly on Joe Welling, Dr. Parcival, and Enoch Robinson, since some of the other characters have received extensive attention elsewhere.[24]

Two Winesburgers seek out George Willard to give him bad advice. One of them is Joe Welling, the would-be reporter. Although Joe is a lovable grotesque in most respects, he misuses the gift of speech. Thus in his excitement about a miraculous disaster which would sweep away all plants from the earth, evoking godly punishment on the scale of Egypt's seven plagues, he falls prey to hubris in a manner similar to Jesse Bentley, imagining as he does that man could emerge triumphantly from a crisis of such proportions. This arrogance

[22] Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1967; rpt. New York: Bantam Windstone, 1982), p. 10.

[23] Cf. Rideout, "The Simplicity of *Winesburg, Ohio*," p. 293, as well as Douglas R. Picht, "Anderson's Use of Tactile Imagery in *Winesburg, Ohio*," in *The Merrill Studies in 'Winesburg, Ohio,'* ed. Ray Lewis White (Columbus, OH: Merrill Publ. Co., 1971), pp. 48–51; and Raymond Wilson, "Rhythm in *Winesburg, Ohio*," *Great Lakes Review*, 8 (1982), 31–43.

[24] For Dr. Reefy, Kate Swift, and Wing Biddlebaum see my "Divine Accident." Wash Williams has been discussed in connection with dreaming and poetry in section I above.

is matched by Joe Welling's arrogation of near-godly powers in his management of the Winesburg baseball players, whom he keeps entranced like puppets on a string. In a similar fashion he is seen to transfix those whom he happens upon during his poetic "seizures." His pretentious importunity acquires mock-heroic overtones: Joe becomes a magician of words and gestures. However, viewed critically, Joe Welling's linguistic performance establishes a model of reporting which George Willard should guard against. Joe terrorizes people rather than capturing their imaginations. The truths he proclaims are not really worth attention, since he consistently tends to exaggerate mere trivialities beyond reasonable bounds, and he abuses the power of his words to gain self-importance. If George emerges as a ridiculous hunter after "little facts" (134), the more so does Joe Welling. Since the artist's task is to render essentialities and to beware of the mere outward trappings of things, Joe Welling clearly provides a bad example and singularly bad advice for George.

Another figure who advises and warns George with little justification is Dr. Parcival. His half-truth, which lies at the center of the book he is writing, can also be interpreted as the supreme blasphemy, since it denies the doctrines of divine grace and of mankind's redemption through the death of Christ.[25] The 'truth' that everybody, like Christ, is crucified, and—by implication—remains unredeemed converts Christianity's profoundest symbol into a message the very opposite of received religious doctrine. Parcival as the 'apostle of Satan' may seem too harsh a judgment on somebody, who—with the other grotesques—is after all described in harmless enough fashion. Yet the text provides some clues that justify speculation concerning Dr. Parcival's past, which could well have been that of a criminal, a murderer even (52). Several details in the story support this suspicion.

Dr. Parcival's compulsive confession of his biography to George produces the desired effect of charming George into trapped fascination. (Compare, by way of parallel, Joe Welling's effect on his hearers.) Yet what Dr. Parcival tells George puzzles the young man: the doctor's stories seem to him "a pack of lies" and, at the same time, "the very essence of truth" (51). Thus, prevarication seems to be a prominent feature of Dr. Parcival's discourse. Secondly, Dr. Parcival's outward appearance strikes one as distinctly sinister. His waistcoat is dirty, although it used to be white. The color white implicitly provides the doctor with the distinction he claims (51), and also with an aura of respectability and innocence. On the other hand, since he has allowed dirt to accumulate on the coat and indulges in dirty eating habits, this impression is partly reversed. The most uncanny detail in the description of Dr. Parcival, however, is his "strange" left ('sinister') eye-lid. The narrator compares this to a window shade being operated from within. Jesse Bentley's twitching eye-lids emerge as equally ominous (81, 86), and there is a further parallel in Joe Welling's management of the Winesburg baseball team on the basis of a puppetmaster's art—a sign of his arrogation of power. Thirdly, Dr. Parcival's discourse betrays itself in several places. Parcival describes himself as a man whose character has "many strange turns" (5). This phrase re-appears when he suggests to George that he might be the murderer in the story he is telling: "That would be a strange turn of things, now wouldn't it, eh?" (52). Though this, by its professed sincerity and strangeness, puts George off his guard, it should certainly alert the reader.[26]

---

[25] Cf. Ralph Ciancio, "'The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples': Unity of Vision in *Winesburg, Ohio*," *PMLA*, 87 (1972), 995.

[26] All these details can, however, be read in an entirely different fashion if we take Parcival's name to be a literary allusion, a '*nomen est omen*.' Parcival's appearance could then refer to the black and white plumage of the magpie, which symbolizes humanity's intermediary position between God and the Devil, between Good and Evil. Parcival's search for the Grail, in Wolfram's version, is also marked by 'turnings.' I owe these suggestions to my colleague Max Deen Larsen.

These impressions are further confirmed by the paragraph describing Will Henderson's
ily sojourn in the saloon, an absence from his office at the *Winesburg Eagle* which allows
·. Parcival to visit George. This interpolation suggests intentional juxtaposition[27] of Will
nderson's sensualist discourse with that of Dr. Parcival. Will Henderson is standing at
e bar looking at Tom Willy's red hands that look "as though [they] had been dipped in
ood that had dried and faded," talking of women, which at first seems to suggest that
e color red is meant to be associated with sexuality. At the same time, George Willard is
ting in the office, listening to the tales of Dr. Parcival. If we picture Will Henderson as
ing inspired by the red hands before him. Dr. Parcival's talk, which is intended to inspire
d influence George Willard, can be read as a temptation. It is, however, not his criminal
st, if such it was, that George is being tempted with, but Parcival's ethics and his morale
a reporter. Parcival's comportment at his father's deathbed, when he indulges in an
precedented sacrilegious miming of religious ceremony, reveals his general intellectual
shonesty. If we are to believe his childhood story, he stole from his beloved brother for
s own luxury what, he admits himself, should by rights have gone to his mother. Also,
the same tender age, he has already developed a habit of saying prayers–obviously in-
icere manipulations of words, since he steals the money during prayer sessions. Parcival
us emerges as a supreme example of hypocrisy even in his boyhood. In these prayer
ssions Parcival can be seen to subvert the words of prayer. He does not merely speak the
truth (lying is a characteristic trait of the Devil) but he also clothes himself in the lan-
age of God, 'taking His word in vain.' Parcival thus provides George with an example of
w *not* to use language.

Dr. Parcival's theory, his 'truth,' contrasts markedly with the general import of *Wines-
rg, Ohio.* The 'message' of *Winesburg*, in a loose sense, is to engender love for our fellow
ings; it reveals that even the most despicable among them–to whom, on one level, guilt-
den Dr. Parcival belongs–are truly lovable and capable of transcending their isolation.
the contrary, Dr. Parcival's message to George significantly consists in contempt and
tred (55), which virtues, he claims, would make George into a superior being. This of
urse echoes Eve's temptation by the Serpent, who held out the promise of superior
owledge. Dr. Parcival's doctrine is, however, immediately undercut by the example of
admired brother, which he adduces as evidence for his theory of superiority through
ntempt and hatred. This brother shows little love of his family and is a grotesque exam-
of selfishness, a trait Dr. Parcival praises to George. When the brother dies, it is as a
nsequence of his own mindless pleasure-seeking, a circumstance which can hardly be
nstrued as 'crucifixion.' Dr. Parcival's theory of superiority becomes shaky also on the
dence of his own behavior. When he refuses to help the little girl, in contempt of the
th he has taken as a member of the medical profession (unless he is no doctor at all), he
be seen to reject his chances of salvation on several levels at once. He remains a gro-
que, having failed to acquire recognition in the community in his function as a practi-
ner of his ostensible art, and he also loses credibility for George, since his absurd terror
people's possible reaction to his behavior shows him to be much less 'superior' than he
d pretended to be. Dr. Parcival's book and the philosophy behind it therefore turn out
be a serious temptation for George, who is, however, sensible and good-natured enough
resist it. Yet, lacking the necessary moral discrimination, George finds himself unac-
untably fascinated by the man's words.

[27] Cf. George D. Murphy, "The Theme of Sublimation in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*," *MFS*, 13
67), 239.

Enoch Robinson seems to have been conceived as a specific foil to George Willard. Like the old writer in the "Book of the Grotesque"—and like George Willard at the end of the book—Enoch realizes that the particularity and individuality of his Winesburg acquaintance are what he must render in his art. Both the old writer and Dr. Reefy, however, implicitly acknowledge their inability to portray the invisible essence of things and, by doing so, preserve their humanity. Enoch, on the contrary, tries to depict the essence of things, the woman behind the bush who is trembling for revelation (169–70), but this attempt results in failure. Enoch has tried the impossible. Having become discouraged by an undiscerning artistic environment, Enoch gradually falls prey to a belief in his own superiority and self-sufficiency, a love of self that estranges him from his fellow beings and leads to his near-total isolation and insanity. When George Willard evinces compassion for Enoch and is later shown to overcome his adolescent love of self (234–35), he is in fact acquiring the necessary ethical standards of humanity and maturity which Enoch Robinson characteristically lacks.

The importance of Enoch's story becomes apparent also from the narrator's mixing of painterly and writerly imagery in the book and from the abundance of other key motifs in "Loneliness." Thus Enoch, who indulges in novel reading while walking in the middle of the road (a dangerous habit which accords with the generally negative estimation of novels in the book), manages the people of his imagination "like a *writer* busy among the figures of his brain, a kind of tiny blue-eyed king he was, in a six-dollar room facing Washington Square in the city of New York" (171; my emphasis). Recalling Dr. Parcival's twitching left eye-lid and Joe Welling's management of the baseball team, we can conclude that such authoritarian exercise of power is discountenanced in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio.* The desire for such God-like influence echoes the power Jesse Bentley wields on his farm and in his relation to his fellow-villagers.

Whereas Enoch's artistic activities are compared with those of a writer, George, conversely, is going to "paint" the dreams of his manhood on the background of his life in Winesburg (247). Painterly metaphor recurs in "The Untold Lie," when the moment of epiphany in the cornfield is evoked in a painterly vision. The hills are described as "splashed with yellows and reds" (204) and "washed with color" (207). Hal and Ray make a "picture" in the cornfield (205), and at the very end of the story Ray's "form" (209) disappears into darkness.[28] Whereas Enoch's activities in their comparison to a writer's (reading and manipulating fictional people) emerge as nefarious, the painterly metaphors used to describe the act of writing designate the narrator's activity as praiseworthy. This will need to be connected with the other references to books and writing in *Winesburg, Ohio*, a question to which we will turn in the third section.

Enoch is only one of George's foils in *Winesburg, Ohio.* The text contrasts him repeatedly with other young people in the book, all of whom, in their behavior and ideas, reflect on each other. This emerges quite clearly, for instance, in the many references to childishness and developmental retardation. Enoch is again and again referred to as a child (167–68, 171, 173, 177) and as not yet having grown up (167). He shares this predicament with Seth Richmond, who is referred to as a "boy" twice in the story (133, 141).[29] However,

[28] Cf. Walter B. Rideout, "'The Tale of Perfect Balance': Sherwood Anderson's 'The Untold Lie,'" *The Newberry Library Bulletin*, 6:8 (1971), 249.

[29] "He, like most boys, was deeper than boys are given credit for being, but he was not what the men of the town, and even his mother, thought him to be" (133). "'Mother'll make a fuss, I suppose,' he whispered. 'She hasn't thought at all about what I'm going to do in life. She thinks I'm going to stay on here forever just being a boy" (141). And "Helen White was impressed. ... 'This boy is not a boy at all, but a strong, purposeful man'" (141).

Seth's problem—in contrast to that of Enoch—is that he is no longer a boy, or is a boy only in appearance. For one, he is taken to be a grown-up by his mother, who stands in awe of her own son (cf. "Youth" 130), and by other people who suspect a hidden purpose behind his silent presence—mistakenly as the narrator insists (133). On the other hand, Seth himself believes that he is no longer a boy; he feels himself to be "old beyond his years" (137), and in a quite grown-up manner belittles himself.[30] Whereas Enoch fails as an artist because he shuts himself up with the people of his own imagination and refuses contact with others, Seth is in danger of losing his youthful self, the 'young things within' so valued by Elizabeth Willard. This emerges on the basis of three references to "boyish" in "The Thinker," at least two of which[31] have positive connotations. The first of these occurs in the description of Seth's father, whom his mother remembers as a "sensitive, boyish man whom all had instincitively loved" (119)[32] and it is significant that Seth's mother goes on to "dream" of Seth's becoming "as good a man" as his father. The second appears in Seth's characterization of Turk Smollet, the "old man with his absurdly boyish mind" (137), who delights in balancing the boards on his wheelbarrow and in exchanging comments with the townspeople. By contrast, Seth wants to leave town and "get to work" (138)—a decision designed to impress Helen with Seth's manhood. Seth notices that he himself does not feel as much at ease with his fellow townsmen and thinks of George, who delights in the verbal contest with Turk. This ties in with Seth's aloofness from George earlier in the story when his antagonism against George is nourished both by his jealousy on account of Helen White and by his recognition of George's foolishness and irresponsibility in love. Seth correctly judges George's inflated and adolescent verbal behavior, whether in writing love stories or in his barroom boasting, but at the same time envies him his way with words, which makes him an accepted figure in Winesburg and helps him communicate with his fellow citizens.

Enoch and Seth thus share both positive and negative characteristics. Their juxtaposition with George, on the one hand, exposes George's failings and their comparative superiority: Seth provides a mature estimation of George's emotions for Helen and of his vanity, and Enoch teaches George about the essentiality of art. On the other hand, Elmer and Seth have their own failings, which are revealed by comparison with George. Enoch's egotism reigns supreme and is contrasted with George's intense compassion for him. Conversely, Seth, although gifted with intelligence and a general empathy for his fellow citizens, remains emotionally inhibited through his thinking; indeed, owing to his disapproval of what he sees as foolish behavior in others, his loneliness comes to parallel Enoch's. Seth's failing is his negation of his own healthy youthfulness or boyishness, which he wants to shed as soon as possible. In contrast to his wise mother, he has not yet understood the lesson of his father's life. His boast of going out of town in order to work and make life meaningful contrasts with his father's failure to become "a man of affairs" (129). What Seth wishes to do evokes the ideals of Tom Willard—already exposed as harmful—or Enoch's brief and unsatisfactory interlude as a businessman, a man of "realities," a status he significantly "plays with" rather than assumes (71).

George Willard is also contrasted with Tom Foster and Elmer Cowley. Tom Foster, unlike Seth, manages to eschew loneliness. He attains insights into the human mind which almost equal Dr. Reefy's in their profundity, a fact which is instanced in his poetic effusion when drunk, which in its imagery neatly corresponds with Dr. Reefy's pronouncements on the same subject (216, 223). But Tom is condemned to stand in the "shadow of the

[30] He smiles at the "absurdity of his thoughts and believes that he is "awkward and foolish" (all 137).
[31] The third is Helen's "boyish hand" (138) in which she scribbled her love notes to Seth.
[32] Cf. Tom Foster, who is also loved by everybody and remains a boy all his life (212).

wall of life" (212): he remains oddly untouched by events around him and indeed does not want to become involved. He develops wisdom, but does not express it or use it for any useful end. Indeed, he shrinks from it, fearing victimization through his own as well as others' passion. His insight about love (216) mirrors Dr. Reefy's in that he recognizes love to be a natural irresistible force, yet having understood this, he evokes himself as being swept away and seared, annihilated. George Willard does better. He adumbrates the secret of love in "Sophistication," when he envisages himself as a "leaf blown by the wind," a "thing destined like corn to wilt in the sun" (234). Yet the "boy," who will later be identified with George, "shivers and looks *eagerly* about" (my emphasis). Whereas Tom at this point wanted to evade life and hide, George reaches out towards understanding personified in a woman, just as Helen "hunger[s] to reach into the grace and beauty of womanhood" (235). Tom Foster avoids any kind of physical contact, even with the coffee he smells. A loneliness, of which he is unconscious, encloses him.

Elmer Cowley, another lonely youth, shares his characteristic queerness with a number of other young men in town. Seth bemusedly smiles at his own oddity, Tom does not realize that he is odd, and George, although he experiences the same uncertainties as Elmer, does not enact them. Unaware that "George Willard had also his days of unhappiness," or that "vague hungers and secret unnamable desires visited also [George's] mind" (194), Elmer, like Seth, envies George his accepted position in town. George initially shares Elmer's feeling of not belonging with people in town because he is unable to explain his penchant for dreaming and thinking, rather than for brisk and smart business or money-making (cf. 48). Yet, in contrast to Elmer, George does not act on an impulse. It takes him a whole year to put his plans of departure into effect,[33] whereas Elmer simply jumps on the next train. Elmer's foolishness appears also from the fact that he steals the money for his journey. This is contrasted implicitly with other instances of theft in the book. Whereas Tom Foster, in the city, once stole out of dire necessity and on the basis of bad example, Elmer takes the money on an irresistible impulse and then throws it at George, leaving Winesburg as a stowaway, just like Seth on his boyhood adventure, during which he, in his turn, stole food for his sustenance. Elmer's impulsive behavior and his lack of restraint contrast with George's long-term planning, and their departures from Winesburg in particular symbolize the radical difference in their respective temperaments. Thus George's silent and meditative walk through the town on the morning he leaves argues for a mature estimation on his part of how decisive this step is in his life. As far as self-constraint is concerned, George really occupies an intermediary position between Elmer on the one hand and Seth and Tom on the other. Whereas Elmer is generally unable to contain his seething interior, Tom and Seth deny their own emotions and starve their youthful selves. In this respect George represents something of a golden mean.

As we have seen, George Willard is influenced in his artistic development by a number of people who insist on proffering advice to him, advice which is partly untrustworthy. For the reader, George is furthermore positioned in contrast to the other artist in the book, Enoch Robinson, who by his story supplies some additional 'advice' or inspiration to George. The other young people in the book equally serve as foils to George, representing possible attitudes which we as readers conclude he should either emulate or guard against. The apprenticeship of George at the hands of his Winesburg acquaintance is thus a more complex affair than has generally been acknowledged. In the following we will now turn

[33] Cf. Ray Lewis White, "Of Time and *Winesburg, Ohio*: An Experiment in Chronology," *MFS*, 25:3 (1979), 658–66.

to George's confrontation with the material of art, namely language, discussing the various manifestations of language which George might have encountered in his surroundings.

III. Language

In a book which almost seems a parable of the writer and of writing, the position of the Word is indeed a significant one, and at times it acquires nearly religious dimensions. Even on a merely thematic level the treatment of language, particularly in print, is worth looking at more closely. One recalls the criticism of newspapers and magazines in "Godliness," where these commodities are contrasted with a lack of interest in words on the part of farmers (71). This state of Adamic innocence has been corrupted by the press, the argument goes, since the consumption of printed news has rendered even farmers capable of talking as "glibly and senselessly as the best city man of us all" (71). (City apartments, we remember, are filled with books [36].) The contrast between the many glib ideas of city men and the "vague half-formed thoughts" of Jesse's contemporaries (71) refers us back to the old writer's theory of the grotesques in search of, and eagerly acquiring, truths. In this theory a present state of corruption is, likewise, contrasted with a former utopian situation of innocence, in which ideas were still "vague." This opposition is further elaborated in the text when the narrator maintains that, through reading, people's ancient "will to serve" has been turned into a "will to power" in men's headlong rush towards the acquisition of wealth (81).

This cluster of ideas centers in the figure of Jesse Bentley. Jesse, the man of God, is driven by a desire for God's Word. Yet he has become corrupted by education and his interest in reading, succumbing to pride, the first and foremost of the seven deadly sins and the one for which Adam incurred banishment from the deadly Garden. Jesse, who is a minister by profession, is "sent word" (66) of his brothers' death. Instead of providing him with the desired opportunity of doing God's work, this changes his life for the worse. It was in the city—a place of evil repute, as we have already noted—that Jesse prepares himself for his office, when "the word [comes] to him" (71). Jesse's world is one of traditional values, we are told, and the only book people of his background knew was the sole Bible, from which they "*heard* of God and his works" on Sundays. Rather than reading the Bible, these country people inscribe God's word in their souls: "The figure of God was big in the hearts of men" (71).[34] Jesse, as a minister, has of course been trained to *read* the Bible, and as a consequence he *mis-reads* the "book of Life" as a manifestation of God, misinterpreting this 'book' by identifying himself with the wrong person in the Text of Texts. Ironically, as we as readers become aware, Jesse's story turns out to the biblical after all, and the Book revenges Itself on Jesse's violation of Its Meaning.

Jesse has equally gone astray in applying his reading abilities to the many words of inflationary currency which the modern world spumes on its citizens. In this "babble of words" (224) true significance can no longer be discriminated, as Elizabeth Willard experiences when she vainly tries to distinguish in it the "true word" (224). As a supreme abuse, poor Louise Bentley is offered books instead of love and understanding by the Hardy girls (90). Novels, in particular, are described as damaging influences on young people's imaginations. We remember Enoch's dangerous reading habits in the middle of the

[34] Anderson's Platonic aesthetics shows even here. Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1953), 276 A (p. 558), as well Derrida's comment on this passage in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. and introd. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 148–49.

road (167) as one instance of addiction. George's romantic ideas seem to derive from the reading of medieval tales (184), and Helen, when she writes love notes to Seth, has "a mind inflamed by novel-reading" (138). Whereas Kate Swift's reading is presented from Reverend Hartman's shocked perspective and thus need not generally be accepted as disreputable, it is certainly contrasted with Hartman's writing of the sermon, which becomes inspired beyond expectation at the sight of Kate's body. One part of the irony in this is that Hartman usually produces his weekly sermons by mechanically rephrasing the Bible, and that this book fails to provide him with the necessary inspiration, whereas Kate's ostensible profligacy seems to supply the emotions and experience Hartman lacks. When Curtis has his miraculous vision of Kate as a symbol of God, he drops his Bible on the ground, the Word of God having become dispensable in the presence of divine intervention.

This highly critical view of books in *Winesburg* needs to be amended, however, by reference to a key passage from "Surrender": "Before such women as Louise can be understood and their lives made livable, much will have to be done. Thoughtful books will have to be written and thoughtful lives lived by people about them" (87). The story "Surrender" consistently mentions learning as a positive achievement and links the Hardy daughters' contempt of knowledge with their insensitivity towards Louise. Although the word 'poet' or 'poetry' does not occur in the passage quoted above, it nevertheless describes what Anderson conceived of as the proper aim of writing, an aim achievable only through poetry, sensitivity and understanding.

Besides written poetry there is also spoken poetry in *Winesburg*. In rare moments words are able to 'connect' between people, to establish essential communication. However, as with books and writing, the majority of Winesburgers indulge in an inflationary use of words, which is also characterized as mechanical, shallow, glib, and smart. This applies to most of the background conversations in *Winesburg* and sometimes constitutes a meaningful contrast with the foreground action. Thus when Wash Williams arrives at the climax of his story of degradation at the hands of his step-mother, we are told that in the background people in the main street of Winesburg "moved about laughing and talking" (127). Though such laughing and talking is a measure of the public's lack of insight and depth, it also represents their 'ordinariness,' a quality envied by outsiders such as Seth (132–33) or Elmer, although they also resent it (141, 197). One exemplary glib talker is the salesman whom Elmer drives away (191), and swaggering males in barrooms also belong to the type.[35] Lovers, too, seem to incline towards verbosity, as Elizabeth Willard finds out when she tries to glean the "true word" "in all the babble of words that fell from the lips of the men with whom she adventured" (224). Yet her own son makes the same error in the presence of Louise Trunnion and Belle Carpenter. Whereas Belle is described as loving Ed Handby—the word *love* recurs three times in the space of two sentences (180)—George, who talks at great length throughout most of the chapter,[36] does not once tell Belle that he loves her and in fact utters 'lust' instead of 'love' when he finally gets round to kissing her (188).[37]

---

[35] Cf. George's effusions (182). And see also 238.

[36] The word *talking* recurs with great frequency in the subsequent five pages.

[37] Other characters stand out through their excessive (compulsive and even obsessive) talking, as witness the carpenter (21), the virginal suitor (37), Tom Willard (40), Dr. Parcival (52–56), Albert Hardy on education (88), Joe Welling, Wash Williams in his tirades against women (124), George "talking continually" of becoming a writer (134), Kate Swift's earnest though uncomprehended expostulations (158, 169), the discussions of the young painters (168–69), Enoch's tirades (171, 176), or Elmer's attempts to impress George (186–87).

What is essential frequently remains unexpressed in *Winesburg* because people are incapable of communicating their thoughts and feelings. Dr. Reefy is aware of these shortcomings and has drawn the consequences, restricting himself to the written expression of his ideas. Exceptionally, he is even able to communicate successfully, both with Elizabeth Willard and with his wife. Elizabeth, on her part, shares the Winesburgers' inability to communicate. Indeed, the list of people who fail to communicate successfully is long. The two Louises dare not express their thoughts in speech and therefore resort to writing, and Louise Trunnion, when faced with George's brash behavior, even denies the love she confessed in writing (59–60). Louise Bentley succeeds with her letter initially (91), but later finds herself incapable of talking with her husband about what most concerns her (96). Ed Handby experiences a similar inability to express his love to the object of his passion, yet manages well enough in action (181, 186). Elmer Cowley, of course, signally fails to make himself understood to anybody, and Ray Pearson is unable to utter the truth of his own failure (208). When George leaves Helen at the door of her father's house, he is for once deserted by his power of speech and can only express himself awkwardly (237). This failure of expression, in George as well as in the other Winesburgers, constitutes a measure of their humanity. Since the text portrays lovable grotesques, their inabilities and frailties become objects of the reader's compassion and sympathy.

It is as a foil to the habitually glib talking and the general failure of communication in Winesburg that silence acquires a position of some significance in the book. Elizabeth Willard and Dr. Reefy are able to establish perfect communion in something approaching complete silence: "Now and then, after a period of silence, a word was said or a hint given that strangely illuminated the life of the speaker, a wish became a desire, or a dream, half dead, flared suddenly into life" (222). This silence is broken only by words of inspiration which are born of the 'young thing inside' the two lovers. Silence thus frequently indicates the presence of deep feelings and ideas, and becomes a measure of the characters' intensity of emotion. This can be illustrated also by the silence of lovers, for instance that of Alice Hindman and her reporter, or that of George and Helen (242–43), in their moments of *rapprochement*. Such silence charged with feelings is also experienced by Helen in the company of Seth (139–41). The epiphany in "The Untold Lie," when Ray and Hal "become alive to one another" (204–05), also takes place in silence. Silence is noted approvingly even in Jesse Bentley's brothers, who in the presence of others keep silent on account of their ignorance and diffidence (65). They have not yet become glib city talkers.

Alternatively, silence can also betoken despondency, moroseness, or despair. Witness, for example, Louise Hardy's moody silences, the behavior of Alice in the company of the drug clerk, Kate Swift's silence or that of the drunkard in "Tandy." Some other instances of silence need to be qualified as dangerous, as is best instanced in Jesse Bentley's fanatical silences, which illustrate the brooding of a mind forever scheming to satisfy its indefinable hunger (68, 97). Jesse's silent terror has touched the house he lives in and is only mitigated by the arrival of young David. David has escaped from the tomblike silence of his mother's household, which is intermittently disturbed by the violent eruptions of her temper, and finds refuge on his grandfather's farm, on which he succeeds in converting Jesse's oppressive régime of silence into a joyful atmosphere. His lustful shouts, his banging of doors, dispel the tradition of silence and fear (82–83). Yet Jesse's fanaticism eventually vanquishes even David, who is terrified by Jesse's fits, which alternate between ominous silence and harsh loud outbursts of Jesse's voice (85). Jesse's eruptions from silence are mirrored in Joe Welling's more harmless seizures, which inspire the more fear because of his customary unassuming silence. Ironically it is Joe Welling who succeeds in defusing

the Kings' dangerous silence by his inspired fit of talking, whereas his fellow townsmen remain paralyzed in silent anticipation of impending disaster (109).

When George Willard learns to keep dignified silence in the company of Helen, this is contrasted with their earlier mood of gaiety, when they chased down the hill, laughing hilariously. Laughter of this pleasant, uninhibited sort is singular in *Winesburg*, and it gains in significance for occurring at just this juncture. If one compares this passage with other instances of laughter in *Winesburg*, it immediately becomes apparent that George and Helen manage to laugh in a manner different from that of Winesburgers in general. Laughter in Winesburg usually has sinister aspects, as in the cachination of the elder King, which Joe Welling succeeds in converting into nervous laughter (108, 111); or it betokens foolishness—as witness the uncomprehending laughter of Jesse's neighbors (97), and that of Winesburgers at Joe Welling's love affair (109). The prevailing variety of laughter is, however, of the nervous kind and usually signifies (sexual) inhibition.[38] A third kind of laughter in Winesburg is of the excessive, insane, outré kind, which is an outlet for repressed passions which suddenly break forth in a socially accepted form, and it sometimes can be encountered also as a reaction to such outbursts of emotion. When Enoch Robinson runs away from his adventure with the streetwalker, he elicits her hilarity as well as another customer's (168). Hal's awkward laughter during the moment of epiphany in the cornfield is replaced, at the end of the story, by his self-assured boisterous laugh, which hurts Ray's sensibilities (208). If laughter does not explode, it can go sour, turning inward against the person who, by laughing, should try to rid himself of his inhibition or sorrow. Thus the superintendent laughs "unpleasantly" and tears up the letter of complaint against Wash Williams (123), thinking of his own wife, as Ray Pearson might have done. It is however in "Queer" that the motif of laughter occurs most frequently. Elmer is afraid of people laughing at him (194), resents people's laughing and talking without letting him participate (197), and ends up believing he will succeed in behaving like others, laughing and talking (199). He even laughs at his own foolish behavior towards George Willard. Yet the story ends with everybody, including the reader, laughing at Elmer, who—by going crazy in actual fact—corroborates people's suspicions of his being "queer," suspicions he has come to adopt as his own view of himself.

Viewed against the background of these uses and abuses of laughter, Helen's and George's laughter acquires additional positive status in the stories. Helen, who had laughed "hysterically," unhappy about the insensitive instructor from college (239), is now able to relax into perfectly natural ease. George's and Helen's maturation culminates in this scene. Particularly George's arrival at manhood is indicated by his new desire for understanding (235). This is a significant detail, since understanding had played an important role in the marriages of Louise Bentley and Elizabeth Willard, who had craved for it but whose yearnings had remained unsatisfied. In recognizing his need for understanding and love, George proves his intellectual and emotional growth. We have already noted the reference to George's potentiality for dreaming at the very end of "Departure," an indication that there is some hope for his artistic future. As we have seen, this note of hope seems to be confirmed additionally by an indication, in the wind-imagery, of George's maturation: George has understood the true nature of life and love.[39]

---

[38] Cf. George in "The Thinker" (135), or Seth's reaction to Helen's putting her hand in his (139).

[39] On the morning of George's departure in April—Chaucer's month of love, when even the young birds cannot sleep, "so priketh hem nature in hir corages"—the young tree leaves are budding, and the wind drives the winged maple seeds along the streets, which whirl about "crazily." In the context of *Winesburg, Ohio* this scene can be read in two ways. On the one hand, the maple seeds suggest autumn leaves and

The signs of George's future success are therefore hopeful. George has gone through a distinct process of maturation, and, as we have indicated, he has gained a number of insights from his contact with his fellow citizens. Nevertheless, one should beware of a too enthusiastic estimation of his *artistic* achievement. George has understood little of what he was told, is still ill at ease, and as yet has not written much of artistic merit. He is on his way into the city, the place of corruption, which has destroyed the lives of Jesse Bentley, Enoch Robinson, and Alice Hindman's lover. If there are hopes for George, it is because he has learned to love his town and its people, and because he is a dreamer by inclination. He has not succumbed to society's idols of smartness, money, power, and fame. In the matrix of what the reader learns about the proper nature of art (section I), George's status among the other Winesburgers (section II), and about the uses and abuses of language (section III), George emerges as another grotesque with many personal failings, but as a more lovable one than many others because he does, after all, carry the 'seeds of something very fine' in him. His apprenticeship in his home town having come to an end, he emerges with a love for this town and its inhabitants, a sympathetic understanding of them, and a desire to "paint the dreams of his manhood" on this canvas–the environment of his childhood and adolescence. George has, therefore, acquired all the essential personal properties of the artist. The seed has been sown, and the ground seems to be fertile. This is where Anderson leaves us, and George. The future, after all, is undecidable.

---

can thus be seen to symbolize an anticipation of death. This is appropriate since George is departing into an unknown region, undertaking his "adventure of life" (246). (Adventure and death are linked in *Winesburg* through Elizabeth's death, which is explicitly referred to as an adventure.) On the other hand, the description of the budding leaves and the winged maple seeds establishes distinct connotations of growth, one could argue of artistic growth, and of budding love. ("Winged" of course echoes "Wing" Biddlebaum and his love for dreams, which would be a prerequisite for George's art.)