He left his factory where he found it—by the side of a stream that flowed under a bridge in a little Ohio town—at a time in his life when most men are saving for a soft berth in old age

Courtesy of The Newberry Library

1 Sherwood Anderson

Looking for the White Spot

T. J. Jackson Lears

It is now almost impossible to find an intellectual who will use the word "reality" without quotation marks. The ideal of authentic self-expression, of faithfulness to some inwardly felt or outwardly observed sense of the real, has fallen on hard times. Current critical perspectives emphasize the constructed, artificial character of all cultural forms; from the poststructuralist (and more broadly postmodern) view, the effort to touch some core of unmediated experience is a relic of simpler times, before writers and artists recognized that the ideal of authentic expression was itself a cultural construction—that reality was always mediated by representation and interpretation.

The discourse of authenticity has been the target of political as well as philosophical criticism. The quest for authentic self-expression, indeed the very sense of unified personhood on which it depended—these have been identified as elements of patriarchy that pervaded not only the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also the modernist attempts to transcend it. According to some critics, the discourse of authenticity has been at the core of what they claim was the central modernist project: the attempt to disengage the autonomous work of high art from the corrupting embrace of mass culture. As Andreas Huyssen observes, that project rested on "the notion which gained ground during the nineteenth century that mass culture is somehow associated with woman while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men." The links between women and mass culture were forged in the overheated atmosphere of fin-de-siècle social thought: "the fear of the masses in this age of declining liberalism [was] always also a fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the mass." Gustave Le Bon was merely articulating the conventional wisdom in *The Crowd* (1895) when he wrote that "Crowds are everywhere distinguished by feminine characteristics." Huyssen notes: "We may want to relate Le Bon's social psychology of the masses back to modernism's own fears of being sphinxed. Thus the nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-option, commodification, and

the 'wrong' kind of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture." Despite the apparently adversary relationship between modernism and modernization the two were intimately linked at the core; mandarin modernist and philistine modernizer shared a belief in progress—though for the modernist (Huyssen cites Clement Greenberg and Theodor Adorno) progress was to be constituted by the evolution of an aesthetic logic rather than by the spread of freeways. The current postmodern critique of modernism, from this view, has much in common with the ecological critique of industrial and postindustrial capitalism and with the feminist critique of bourgeois patriarchy. This is a powerful and important argument.[1]

But one aim of this essay will be to show its limitations, at least with respect to American cultural history. In the United States, the modernist discourse of authenticity was without question rooted in masculine anxieties about the emasculating effects of mass culture, but it had a more complex significance as well. To try to catch that complexity, this essay will look at an American writer, Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941), whose career embodied some of the central tensions between modernism and mass culture. For more than twenty years, from 1900 to 1922, Anderson supported himself by writing advertising copy, yet he was probably among the most tormented and relentless literary critics of advertising during the early twentieth century. Railing against the culture created by the corporations, he was proud of his ability to survive in it. Longing for the vitality of rural life, he was also relieved to be rid of it. Anderson was a modernist in his bohemian rebellion against the prim respectability of the American village and in his flat understated style, a compound of Hemingway and Gertrude Stein that sometimes achieved a certain moving eloquence, at other times slid into bogs of solemnity. Like many of his European predecessors and contemporaries, he was embarrassingly, almost self-parodically obsessed with authentic experience and expression; and he revealed that obsession in flagrantly sexual language. Yet his quest for authenticity was more than the sum of its symptoms; it echoed Anglo-American traditions of social critique and spiritual longing, traditions that encouraged more

1. Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture As Woman: Modernism's Other," in his *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 47, 52–53, 57. For a philosophically acute critique of contemporary historians' use of the discourse of authenticity, see Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer, 1991), 773–797.

significant critiques of mass culture than a masculine cry of pain. Anderson's was a modernism in the American grain; it resonated with ecological and perhaps even (albeit obliquely and ambivalently) with feminist critiques of modernity. This essay is an effort to suggest that, as cultural critics cast about for an honorable standpoint in the late twentieth century, they need not automatically discard the discourse of authenticity.

It is also the beginning of an attempt to grapple with the implications of poststructuralist theory for cultural history. For some time now I have been impatient with historians' tendency to dismiss the epistemological challenge posed by antifoundationalist movements in philosophy and literary criticism; that challenge has pointed the way toward a salutary emphasis on the textual character of all historical evidence, toward an appropriate stress on the interpretive tasks the historian faces, and toward a more fruitful, less postivistic and literal approach to "the sources." Yet I have also been impatient with certain characteristics of poststructuralist sensibility: the sweeping and unsupported critiques of modernism, the reflex dismissal of any concern with authentic experience as little more than vestigial "essentialism," the assumption that any notion of coherent selfhood merely masks an agenda for white male domination. Among historians I have felt like an outré theorist; among literary critics, a plodding empiricist. This essay is a preliminary gesture toward a more genial middle ground.

To begin to understand Anderson and other American modernists, one has to acknowledge that for them the category of the authentic had more than aesthetic significance. Some of its roots can only be called religious. Longings for union with the deity, which may be universal and timeless, were gradually reshaped in the crucible of Anglo-American Protestant culture. The spiritual ancestors of Anderson (as well as of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Ernest Hemingway, Theodore Dreiser, William Carlos Williams, and countless other devotees of the palpable) were the seventeenth-century Protestants who burned to reestablish a core of authentic religious experience beneath the encrustations of ritual. The tendency to equate display and deceit remained a central psychic reflex in many Protestant cultures even after Puritan theology had dissolved into romantic liberalism. Nineteenth-century political thought politicized the discourse of authenticity, locating public virtue in plain speech and plain living, disdaining the "parasitical" vices of commerce, celebrating the leather-aproned "producer" as the ultimate embodiment of republican reality. The producers were invariably male, the parasites effeminate.

Still, the personal dimension of the discourse could not be collapsed into its gender politics. Women as well as men yearned for sincerity and (as the century drew to a close and the emotional ante was raised) for authenticity as well—for unproblematic immediacy in personal as well as artistic expressions. As orthodox Protestantism became more difficult to sustain, writers and artists resorted to romantic, Victorian, and finally modernist idioms to characterize their fascination with intense, unmediated experience: the romantic veneration of the sublime, the Victorian assumption that the spontaneous emotional outburst was the surest guide to wisdom, the modernist preoccupation with primal irrationality. Though the secular idioms sometimes lacked the clarity and conviction of their Calvinist predecessors, they embodied the same persistent search for some reliable ontological bedrock. By the late nineteenth century it is not merely metaphorical to refer to a religion of reality in American culture. Acolytes of authenticity were often God-haunted souls who longed for what Emerson had called "an original relation with the universe," but who lacked a language to express their longings. And their particular historical circumstances deepened their sense that they were surrounded by a pasteboard world of deceptive artifice.

Among the most prominent of those circumstances was the spread of anonymous economic transactions in the business civilization that matured during the decades after the Civil War. The fear of being cheated out of some fundamental level of experience, the desire to tear away the layers of concealment from the reality beneath them—these emotions flourished in the atmosphere of mistrust that accompanied the shell game of modern market exchange. The manuals advising their readers how to recognize counterfeit notes, and the advice literature explaining how to tell false self-representation from true were the nineteenth-century ancestors of *Consumer Reports*. ("Imagine having a large literary industry called *Consumer Reports*," Lionel Trilling once said, "which has to tell you whether the thing you're buying is authentic.")[2]

During the later decades of the nineteenth century, the rise of national advertising provided critics of fraudulence with an obvious target: here was the virus of inauthenticity institutionalized and made visible. At the same

2. "Sincerity and Authenticity: A Symposium," in Robert Boyers, ed., *The Salmagundi Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 307. For a wide-ranging account of the discourse of authenticity during the post–Civil War decades, see Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

time, the pursuit of reality had accelerated. By 1900 fears of counterfeit experience had acquired a visceral quality: yearnings for unmediated spiritual life took on palpable physical form, as devotees of the real reacted ambivalently to the comforts released by the mass production measures of the major corporations. Advertising agencies were the servants of those corporations; so to Anderson and his cohort they became not only the masters of misrepresentation but also the sponsors of an ever-thickening insulation between the consuming self and the unpredictabilities of the natural world. For critics like H. G. Wells, who overlooked the driven rationality behind much advertising ideology, advertisers could be blamed for "the philosophy of the loose lip and the lax paunch" that was enveloping modern commercial life—or so Wells implied in his satire of a patent medicine empire, *Tono-Bungay* (1908). In a society characterized by slackness and self-indulgence as well as by systematic deceit, Trilling observed more than sixty years after Wells, "we are put under a diminishing pressure of what we can call duty, we are put under a diminishing pressure of what we can call necessity." If one restricts Trilling's characteristically lofty "we" to the comparatively comfortable managerial and professional classes in the United States, the observation acquires some force. As Trilling said, this "relative ease of material life leaves us confronting areas of choice which require us to look for a hardness somewhere, for a kernel of actuality and experience which perhaps we have to find for ourselves."[3]

By the 1920s the desire to locate that "kernel of actuality and experience" led many literary critics of advertising (often themselves veterans of agency work) to resurrect republican and romantic idioms of authenticity. They found alternatives to the inauthenticity of white-collar culture in an imaginary realm of male camaraderie, honest craftsmanship, and pastoral harmony. From George Babbitt's son Ted to Willy Loman's son Biff, refugees from business imagined (as Biff did) that "we don't belong in this nuthouse of a city. We should be mixing cement on some open plain, or—carpenters. A carpenter is allowed to whistle!" This idyll began to pall a little, if only through repetition, by midcentury.[4]

But for Anderson, writing in the years before and immediately after World War I, the romantic and republican idioms were still fresh. Despite his reputation as a bohemian rebel, Anderson was always powerfully drawn

3. H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (New York: Duffield and Co., 1909), p. 324; Boyers, "Sincerity and Authenticity," p. 307.

4. Arthur Miller, *Death of A Salesman* [1949] (New York: Viking, 1958), p. 61.

back to green memories of his boyhood. Like his contemporary Dreiser, he was subject to fits of sophomoric solemnity: he used "human" as an honorific and pondered the pulsating "real life" that seemed just beyond his reach. (Though never as moronically as Eugene Witla, the artist/ad man in Dreiser's *The "Genius"* [1915], who constantly poses questions like: "What was this thing, life?") But unlike Dreiser, Anderson located "life" not in the department store but amid the woods and open fields of his native Midwest.[5]

Still, it would be a mistake to categorize Anderson too neatly. It is difficult to sort out his actual beliefs because he so often and so deliberately cultivated an authorial persona. His favorite was the bumbling but thoughtful hayseed, insisting "I want to know why." Intensifying a strain that had always been present in doctrines of plain speech, he assumed that the voice of truth was always halting and inarticulate: the shy farm boy rather than the confident advertiser. Anderson's primitivist leanings led to the self-conscious literary slumming that provoked Hemingway's parody in *The Torrents of Spring* (1926), but they also underwrote a compelling commentary on advertising, from the inside out.

Anderson was born in Camden, Ohio, in 1876. The family were of pious Presbyterian stock, but by the time young Sherwood was coming of age religion seemed to be less a matter of fervent belief than of social habit. Nor was the Protestant ethic a path to success for them. His father was a harness maker and sign painter; but machines were putting the harness makers out of business and, as Sherwood Anderson later observed, "the day of universal advertising had not come." He remembered his father as a windbag and a failure. His mother took in washing to support the struggling family and died of tuberculosis at forty-two. Out of this bleak background Anderson worked his way. He was a newsboy, a farmhand, a factory laborer, and for a brief period after the Spanish-American war, a soldier. When he returned from Cuba he enrolled for a short time at Wittenberg College and was selected as class orator. He delivered an encomium on "the Jews." "I made quite a speech," he recalled. "We story tellers are also, almost without exception, actors. I have always envied actors. Oh how I would love to strut the boards." An advertising man from Chicago heard him speak and offered him a job. Beginning with the advertising department of the *Woman's Home Companion,* by 1900 Anderson was a copywriter

5. Theodore Dreiser, *The "Genius"* [1915] (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 34.

for the Frank B. White Company, which in 1903 became the Long-Critchfield Company. He worked there, on and off, until 1922.[6]

The men who hired Anderson were no doubt responding to his glib intelligence. "To tell the truth I was pretty slick," he later recalled. "I could bend people to my will. I was plausible, thought faster than most people about me, was always putting others in the wrong." Probably that latter tendency accounted for Anderson's greater success as a copywriter than as a solicitor. Nevertheless he was able to curb his domineering sarcasm sufficiently to attend copy conferences and curry favor with clients—which he astutely recognized was usually more important than currying favor with consumers. ("Many of the most successful advertisements are written, not primarily to sell more of the goods advertised, but rather to flatter, in some subtle way, the maker of the goods.") In the advertisements and trade journal columns he wrote during these years, Anderson allowed his earnest side, and his keen ear for commercial clichés, to work to his advantage. Like many authors in the advertising journal *Printers' Ink,* he celebrated the replacement of the carnivalesque traveling salesman by the "new business man." "Common to the verge of imbecility, dressed as only a fool would dress nowadays, and having as his chief stock of trade a fund of vile and indecent stories," the old-fashioned salesman "went forth with his soap, his cigars, and his ladies' underwear to smear the path of all decent men who must follow him for years to come." But thank God, he's dying out, "and it isn't his fellows who are causing his welcome death. It's the new business man, the new manufacturer, the new buyer—clean, well read clever men who are not going to buy goods of our fellows like our friend above when they can buy of their equals, of men who can be quiet, earnest, and decent, even when away from home and with the eyes of high school girls and waitresses upon them." The last reference gave these progressive platitudes an idiosyncratic twist: Anderson had a lot of trouble resisting "high school girls and waitresses," and his sexual obsessions would play a central role in the commentary on the advertising business. Here, though, in the pages of *Agricultural Advertising* for February 1903, illicit sex was invoked only to be dismissed as a relic of the benighted business past.

6. Sherwood Anderson, *A Story Teller's Story* [1924], (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1968), p. 5; Ray Lewis White, ed., *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs: A Critical Edition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 198. See also Kim Townsend, *Sherwood Anderson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 9–13; Christopher Benfey, "Inconstant Anderson," *New York Review of Books,* 30 January 1986, 16–20; William A. Sutton, *The Road to Winesburg* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1972).

Anderson had quickly mastered the most up-to-date tools in the commercial rhetorician's kit: above all, the connectors that linked cleanliness, decency, and modernity. That was the trinity conventionally evoked by apologists for national advertising when they felt called upon to dignify their calling with some social worth. Anderson's early writings were often indistinguishable from the boilerplate of the trade press.[7]

But even in these early years, there were signs that Anderson was hardly ever at home in the world the advertisers made. Despite his paeans to progress, his vision of life in advertising was distinctly rural rather than suburban or metropolitan. He worked in Chicago, not New York; and his company's clients were men who made plows in southern Illinois or grew tobacco in Kentucky. This was Anderson's account of an advertising man on the road:

> You can imagine a fellow who spends his days in the offices and his nights in all sorts of hotels looking forward with no little pleasure to a day on a country road among the farmers who buy the things he helps to advertise. When that fellow is fortunate enough to have for a companion a man who understands the country and is full of love of it and when these two start off at sunrise down a road that follows the winding course of the Mississippi and [have] no more to carry than a stout stick for the chance of knocking down nuts from the trees along the road; when all these things work out in this manner, I say . . . [a] fellow is rather bound to have a good day ahead of him. If you want to take part in a conversation that reaches every sort of business and life and is in a pleasant and happy vein withal, try this sort of walking on this sort of day with this sort of man. The road leads up hill and down, past farm houses and about sharp turns, over bridges and through marshes and along the road are many old companions of the catalogue and farm papers. Here is a wind mill and there a wire fence, here a cultivator and there a plow and up the road rolls the Studebaker wagon in use by the family going to church, and over all the quiet of Sunday and Indian summer.[8]

The narrator begins in offices and hotels, travels through a Whitmanesque idyll of the open road, and ends in a setting that became as much a talisman of childhood for Anderson as it had been for Mark Twain—a "soft, reposeful" landscape along the Mississippi, where it is always Sunday, and always summer. This was also the backdrop used by agricultural advertisers in their catalogues and other promotional circulars.

7. *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs,* pp. 238, 289; Sherwood Anderson, "The Traveling Man," *Agricultural Advertising,* February, 1903, 15–16; Anderson, "Boost No. 1," *Agricultural Advertising,* June 1903, 56–57. See also William A. Sutton, "Sherwood Anderson: The Advertising Years, 1900–1906," *Northwest Ohio Quarterly* 22 (Summer 1950): 120–57.

8. Sherwood Anderson, "About Country Roads," *Agricultural Advertising,* November 1903, 56.

For Anderson the season was Indian summer; the way of life he longed for was waning. Yet much of his own advertising copy remained rooted in the oral traditions of village entrepreneurship—the world of carnival barkers, itinerant peddlers, and medicine show impresarios. "I want to make you another offer right now," he wrote around 1920 in a piece of mail-order advertising for his friend Pete Moberly, who owned the Green River Tobacco Company of Owensboro, Kentucky. "If you want to win a lady you might as well propose while she's liking you, and while you've got her out in the moonlight, eh?" The bantering question evoked the standard seduction scene of nineteenth-century consumer culture and sought to create a mood of male camaraderie. A similar atmosphere enveloped "A Little Sermon to Smokers," which Anderson wrote for Green River at about the same time.

> I am sending you, free of charge, a fair-sized sample of pure Kentucky tobacco, undoped, unadulterated. Here is a clean, healthy smoke that you will learn to enjoy more and more as you grow away from the doped and doctored smoking tobaccos on the market. . . .
>
> Do you know that the raisers of the finest tobaccos in the world would no more smoke doped and doctored smoking tobacco than they would take a drink out of a half-filled old patent medicine bottle found in a deserted house.
>
> These men are healthy, they haven't nerves, they live to a vigorous old age. They smoke tobacco—lots of it—and they enjoy their smoke. They take it straight and pure . . . [just as "our fathers" took their old Kentucky bourbon]. There was no dope to shred their nerves and ruin their stomachs. . . .
>
> Now look here—don't think that because I'm saving you money I'm putting you in a class with users of cheap tobacco. You ought to see my list of regular smokers, newspaper editors, judges, congressmen, manufacturers.[9]

The earthy idiom, the appeal to the authority of farmers and fathers as well as professional men, the straightforward buttonholing conversational style—all this was a far cry from the tortured folksiness of the Prince Albert ads produced by the N. W. Ayer Agency through the 1910s and 1920s: those were celebrated in the trade press as "smart copy," but they were written in a stilted psuodo-dialect designed to be read rather than spoken. ("Pull the monkey wrench out of your smokegears with a tidy red tin of Prince Albert—*and*—get-down-pat the hang and the happiness of making every puff of a jimmy pipe or home rolled cigarette pay you in smokejoy at the interest rate of ten-per-cent-*per,* Sundays and holidays

9. Follow-up copy to Green River Sample, Moberly Folder, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago; "A Little Sermon to Smokers," copy in Smoker's Health folder, Anderson papers.

included!")[10] The point is not only that Anderson was a better writer than the authors of the Prince Albert copy, or that he had a keener ear for the actual rhythms of speech, but also that he was more attached to an older oral tradition than were the legions of college-educated copywriters at the big metropolitan agencies.

There were signs, even early on, that Anderson felt himself to be an honest bumpkin fallen among thieves. In *Agricultural Advertising,* he told the story of Peter Macveagh, a young Indiana farm boy who "was clean, right down through to his heart . . . like the fields and the woods, sort of kept clean by God and the seasons." Then he went to Chicago, to "stretch his mental muscles," and discovered that "in this world there are many people who are stupid and incompetent, and many more that are unclean pretenders." Disillusioned and toughened, he becomes a successful "man of affairs" by learning how to play on the weaknesses of humanity, "and the blood that hurries through his brain draws warmth from his once big heart." The story could have come from *Godey's Ladies' Book* in the mid-nineteenth century; it suggested not only the tenacity of romantic and Victorian assaults on the amorality of the marketplace, but also Anderson's anxiety about what was happening to him as he grew wise in the ways of deceit. "I was in business for a long time," he told his fellow bohemian Floyd Dell, "and the fact is I was a smooth son of a bitch."[11]

In advertising Anderson learned that "it is always possible, if you have at all a subtle mind, to get around others"—as he concluded toward the end of his life, in an unpublished memoir dated 1941. In Anderson's view, this manipulative skill was what Dale Carnegie had in mind in the "excruciatingly popular" *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936): "it was in me, this faculty." He could convince a client that a campaign strategy had been the client's own "when he had said nothing of the sort." "For a moment a puzzled look in the eye and then, usually, he swallowed the bait. 'Oh yes, I remember.'" This was how Anderson operated: feigning self-effacement, feinting and sparring, "never attacking directly. It was a game. I made flattering little remarks, dropped suggestions, hints. . . ." And he experienced "a nasty feeling of triumph" when he got what he wanted.[12]

10. Advertisement, Prince Albert Pipe Tobacco, 1919, in Book 180, N. W. Ayer Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

11. Sherwood Anderson, "The Man of Affairs," *Agricultural Advertising,* November 1904, 36–37; Anderson to Dell, quoted in Malcolm Cowley, Introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio* [1919] (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 3.

12. "American Money," memoir dated 1941 in Anderson papers, Newberry Library, Chicago.

Anderson habitually resorted to words like "nasty" and "unclean" when he characterized his experiences in advertising. He viewed his moral descent as in part a form of sexual corruption. In Anderson's account, the pursuit of success enmeshed the businessman in a web of deception that enveloped his personal life as well as his office affairs. Adultery, for Anderson, became the most prominent and galling form of everyday deceit. He married Cornelia Lane, the attractive and articulate daughter of a Toledo industrialist, in 1904. While he was courting her he was writing *Agricultural Advertising* editorials about the new-model traveling salesman who resisted the wiles of waitresses, and the modern businessman who "loves one woman, and . . . knows that honesty is a solid wall and truth is a shining light." In 1907 he moved his young family to Elyria, Ohio, where he started his own paint-merchandising company. It was only a matter of time before he was mixing business with pleasure in the acceptable ways—chasing golf balls over fields where he had once cut corn, arranging trips to Cleveland as pretexts for picking up a little something on the side, phoning "Ed" to see if he could "manage" some women. "Sure, boys," the generic "Ed" would say when they arrived in town. "Let's have a shot or two. I can see that you boys are several shots to the good." As Anderson recalled the scene in 1933 he wrote: "God, why did we always have to call each other 'boys'?" To Anderson, at least in restrospect, the pose of boyishness epitomized the dirty lie at the heart of American businessmen's social life—the rank hypocrisy, so reflexive it could hardly even be called hyprocrisy, of confidence men feigning earnestness and innocence while they cut crooked deals and consorted with prostitutes.[13]

So what was the alternative? Anderson claimed he saw it one morning from his bedroom window, as he gazed out dazed and bleary after a night of false hilarity and drunken groping. In the yard of the house next door, an Italian man and his wife were laying out a garden with strings and wooden stakes. Their children joined them. "One of the children, a boy of nine or ten, suddenly began to dance. He threw up his arms and began whirling about the pile of dead weeds and vegetable stalks left from another year," while the younger children and eventually the parents stopped their labors, laughed and laughed. "Myself above . . . stale and dry mouthed from my night of so-called 'fun,' American business men's fun." It was this "dance of life," this pastoral celebration of vitality and fecundity, Anderson later claimed, that focused his flight from a life of systematic deceit and

13. Anderson, "Boost No. 1," p. 56; *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs,* pp. 241, 263–64.

self-hate. And in a sense this was true: much of his literary work was animated by a search for what he called a sense of "aliveness"—it seemed present in preindustrial settings (whatever their other limitations) but lacking in the culture promoted by advertising. He began to write in the interstices of a life still dedicated to marketing paint.[14]

By 1912 Anderson had reached a breaking point. He had three children, and he had four novels underway; his paint business, fueled by his clever advertising circulars, was superficially successful but financially overextended; his marriage was a mess of boredom and guilt. He was thirty-six years old. On the afternoon of 27 November 1912 he was dictating a letter in his best promotional idiom: "The goods about which you have inquired are the best of their kind made in the . . ." when suddenly he stopped without completing the phrase. Acting as if in a trance, he stared at his secretary for a long time and finally said: "I have been wading in a river for a long time and my feet are wet." He left the office and trudged toward Cleveland along the railroad tracks.[15]

Anderson retold the story many times, in many forms. In his own mind, his departure from the paint business became an archtypal moment of artistic heroism in the bohemian war on the bourgeoisie. But his actual experience was somewhat more complicated. As Malcolm Cowley observed, "he didn't continue wandering from city to city, trading his tales for bread and preaching against success." Instead Anderson tramped aimlessly around Cleveland for three or four days until some business acquaintances recognized him and took him to a hospital. After recovering from what was diagnosed as "exhaustion and aphasia," he returned to Elyria, tied up the loose ends of his business, then returned to Chicago and managed to get rehired by the Critchfield Agency. He sent for his wife and children, and settled down to writing advertising copy by day and (other forms of) fiction by night. It would be two years before Anderson separated from his wife, and ten before he departed the advertising business.[16]

In many ways the later divorce was harder for him to face. As he recalled in 1933, "only in the advertising place could I make enough to buy a little leisure." The money was easy for a man who was facile with words. "It sometimes amazes me," he wrote his confidante Harriet Finley in 1917, "when I see how I am able to go on here year after year, giving so little for

14. *Memoirs,* pp. 265–66.
15. Cowley, Introduction, p. 9.
16. Ibid., pp. 9–10.

the money I get and each year giving less and less." These were the years when he wrote some of his best work, including *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), in the evenings, on weekends, and sometimes at his agency desk. Yet for a writer who composed as Anderson did, in erratic bouts of inspiration, office routine could be profoundly frustrating. So at any rate he claimed to Finley.[17]

> With me writing has never been in any sense a science. There are days when to save my life I could not write one good sentence. I have really no knowledge of words; no mastery of the art of sentence construction.
>
> And then a mood comes on me. The world is of a sudden alive with meaning. Every gesture, every word of the people about carries significance. . . . If I can get to pencil and paper I write blindly, scarcely seeing the sheets before me. . . .
>
> Now if you can understand what it means at such times to have a man come to my office door and tell me that I am to go into a room with other men and drone for hours over the question of the advisability of advertising a new kind of hose supporters you will understand what I mean by the peculiar difficulties of my position. I go because there are children to be fed, obligations that I have not the courage to face down, but as I go I often feel that I could take a revolver from my pocket and begin shooting the men in the room with the greatest glee. I don't want you to misunderstand me. I don't always feel this way about the hose supporter gentlemen. At times I go with delight and all their words strike on my consciousness as just a part of the inexhaustible drollery of life.[18]

The passage showed the influence of bohemian clichés on Anderson's thought, but also revealed his power to resist them. In the discourse of the avant-garde literati, it was a standard rhetorical move to juxtapose the banality of business conferences against the white-hot ecstasy of artistic inspiration, as Anderson did in this letter. Equally standard was the assumption that it was cowardly to support one's children rather than abandon them to pursue Art; Anderson shared this assumption, too, but he refused to conform to its dictates. He kept at his copywriting until 1922, when the success of *Winesburg* and several lesser books made the break from advertising seem less risky. He announced with characteristic solemnity in a letter to Finley, "The other morning I walked, thought it all out, bowed my head before the gods and took the oath that I would write no more drivel about plows and breakfast foods." Five years later he was considering a return to advertising, thinking it might restore "grace and

17. *Memoirs,* p. 396; Anderson to Marietta D. Finley, 1 February 1917, in William A. Sutton, ed., *Letters to Bab: Sherwood Anderson to Marietta D. Finley, 1916–1933* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), p. 62.
18. Anderson to Finley, 23 November 1916, in *Letters to Bab,* p. 8.

ease" to his writing and reconnect him with "the labor of the world." This apparent reversal demands some explanation.[19]

Edmund Wilson caught the impulse behind Anderson's reconsideration of advertising when he said that Anderson's "ideal of literature seemed partly to have been derived from his training as a composer of advertising copy. . . ."[20] But this was only at moments of discouragement. More often, the basis of Anderson's ideal of literature—and the source of both its strength and weakness—was his determination that his fiction would be as unlike his ad writing as possible. His ad copy is simply a more conversational version of the hail-fellow-well-met bonhomie that dominated much national advertising (especially male-to-male) before the First World War. The jarringly gritty details in "A Little Sermon to Smokers"—like the half-empty patent medicine bottle in the abandoned house—revealed the provincialism of Anderson's audience; they were vestiges of the era when the vernacular tradition of entrepreneurial advertising had not yet succumbed to the homogenizing logic of corporate rationalization. While Anderson scorned both the earlier and later traditions of advertising, in fact the vernacular version of commercial speech had in his early career helped to loosen up the understated intensity of Anderson's fictional prose; it accounted for some of the strength of *Winesburg*. But at the same time, Anderson was learning the tricks of simplification and understatement from Gertrude Stein, and like hers his prose could slide into self-parody. That had begun to happen by the late 1920s, as Anderson strove to ascend into the reaches of high art. His prose became clotted with globules of profundity.

Anderson's brief yearning to return to advertising embodied a flickering recognition of this problem. But in the end he rejected the idea, for reasons that revealed some of the psychic complexities behind Andreas Huyssen's formulation: "Mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project." Anderson assumed that the advertising agency would begin to market his presence as a magnet for clients—"Have your advertising writing done by Sherwood Anderson—the great writer etc. etc." Given the agencies' hostility to copywriters' signing their copy, this was probably a false assumption, an indication of Anderson's inflated self-regard, of his continuing engagement with the world of advertising, and of his continuing

19. Anderson to Finley, August 1922, in *Letters to Bab,* p. 186; and October 1927, in ibid., pp. 297–98.

20. Edmund Wilson, *The American Earthquake* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1958), p. 127.

need to exorcise its appeal with a gesture of heroic renunciation. Advertising, and the culture it was helping to create, played a crucial contrapuntal role in all of Anderson's literary work.[21]

Anderson presented advertising copywriters as men like himself, tormented by self-hate as they subordinated their literary talents to commercial necessity. "Sometimes, at lunch, in some little saloon, we talked it over among ourselves. 'For God's sake let us keep trying. It may be we can hold on.' There would have been two or three of us who dreamed of someday becoming real writers. This fellow was, in secret, working on a play, that fellow on a novel." Some became drunks, others committed suicide. One fat man among them claimed they were all sinners in another life who were being punished: "We are in the advertising department of hell," he said.[22]

It may be that the hellishness of this picture was partly a result of cultural fashion. Anderson told these anecdotes in the version of his memoirs he published in 1933, when many of his literary contemporaries had embraced a communist variant of the producer ethos. Matthew Josephson, who had celebrated advertising during the 1920s, by 1935 was attacking "the gentlemen who spend their days and nights counterfeiting and misrepresenting, the copy-writers, the knights of press-agentry, the Junior Leaguers and the tennis champions who give lying testimonials," juxtaposing their hypocrisy against the "true, simple human dignity" that could be found in "the most threadbare Soviet student or the grimiest of coal miners."[23]

But Anderson's producerist outlook was never simply tied to prevailing political doctrine. He had always cultivated a notion of writing as a preindustrial craft and ad writing as a betrayal of craftsmanship. Words were tools for expressing "the Real" and to use them deceptively was to defile them. "I am soiling my tools," Anderson complained of his copywriting. "Surely nothing in the modern world has been more destructive than the idea that man can live without the joy of hands and mind combined in craftsmanship, that men can live by the accumulation of monies, by trickery," he wrote in 1924. What was destroyed, in Anderson's view, was manhood itself. True to the republican tradition, he linked the construction

21. Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman," p. 47; Anderson to Finley, October 1927, in *Letters to Bab,* pp. 297–98.

22. *Memoirs,* p. 414.

23. Matthew Josephson, "The Consumer Consumed," review of J. B. Matthews and R. E. Shallcross, "*Partners in Plunder,*" *New Masses* 14, 12 March 1935, 22–23.

of masculine identity with productive labor. He told of trying to answer a banker's question about his writing: "'But what do you get out of it?'" What he got, he said, was a feeling understood by "men of the arts" as well as "workmen" and "good farmers"—the feeling of satisfaction that came to a man after he had patiently brought a piece of neglected land back into cultivation.[24] "'You should have seen this field, some five years ago, when I got it.' Just that, man's old inheritance, your own sudden swift love of him, respect for him. 'Here's a man.' Something workmen sometimes know, writers, painters, actors, builders of all sorts sometimes know."[25]

In Anderson's scheme of things, the coming of mass production had undermined and indeed virtually eliminated the possibilities for men to define their identities through craftsmanship. In offices as well as in factories, "the men never having sense of completion of self in work, in these places always, all day long, talk of women." The industrialization of male consciousness, Anderson believed, had brought a new obsession with sex. "Men forever declaring their potency. . . . Why?"

> I thought then and I still think that it is because man has his source of strength, of quiet, of life itself always coming into him through his hands.
>
> He touches. His hands hold tools. They hold the plow handles, the saw, the hammer, the scythe, the painter's brush, the pen, the hoe.
>
> Man is a doer. It is his nature to find strength in doing. It is what he does through things in nature, through tools and materials, that feeds his manhood and it is this manhood that is being lost.[26]

Anderson's reinterpretation of producerist ontology reflected his private sexual obsessions. Women were his delight and his downfall. He wrote about them with far greater sympathy and understanding than his male contemporaries did; the portraits of lonely, thwarted women are among the most powerful in *Winesburg,* and in *Perhaps Women* (1932) he argued that women had preserved the humane traits men had lost in "the grim wrestle of modern industrial life." Yet in "His Chest of Drawers," he wrote of a little chicken-chested advertising man, a Spaniard named, incongruously, "Bill," who was crowded out of his home and ultimately reduced to keeping his belongings in a single drawer—all as a result of the domineering behavior of his wife and daughter. Anderson's view of recent history had misogynistic implications: in robbing men of useful work and making them depend on sex for self-expression, he complained, industrialization had transformed American society into a "matriarchy." Behind his fear of matriarchy was his own panicky incapacity to sustain heterosexual intimacy. "Most women simply frighten me," he confessed to Finley. "I feel hunger within them. It is as though they wished to feed upon me." To keep "clean," he kept leaving them.[27]

24. *Memoirs,* p. 353; Anderson, *Story Teller's Story,* p. 236; *Memoirs,* p. 412.
25. *Memoirs,* p. 412.
26. Ibid., p. 387.

Yet he remained intensely, ambivalently engaged with actual and emblematic women. His conceptions of sexuality shaped his attitudes toward advertising and the literary life. He habitually referred to business in general and advertising in particular as prostitution. "Was there a kind of male whoredom, brought on by a certain kind of civilization, inevitable perhaps?" he wondered. His friend Luther, the small town printer who handled the advertising circulars for his paint company, refused to let Anderson off the moral hook with any talk of "inevitability." Luther knew of Anderson's ambitions to write, saw glimmers of his ability in his promotional brochures, and scolded him for soiling his talents in advertising. "'Suppose you were a woman with some beauty of person and went and threw yourself away, going into any kind of dive, lying with any kind of man. How long would you be thought of as any kind of woman at all? You'd be a slut, a whore, wouldn't you?'" Selling one's literary talent was like selling one's "beauty of person," prostituting one's gifts at the altar of cash. Anderson took the equation seriously. He used to call one of his fellow copywriters (the fat man who spoke of the "advertising department of hell") "Little Eva" and the fat man called him "Mable." "It was a kind of mutual recognition of our common whoredom."[28]

It may also have been a way of exorcising ambivalent homoerotic longings. Anderson idealized but also resisted male intimacy. He never went to a psychoanalyst because he was appalled by "some other man attempting to thrust in and in, to search out your very soul, resentment, all kinds of resistance." He described his relationship with Luther as "a growing thing, my being more and more with the man, sensing things in him. Let us think of it as a kind of lovemaking on his part. And I do not mean physical lovemaking. Luther was no fairy." Repeatedly in his memoirs he evoked the aura of homosexuality around his male friendships, only to dismiss it by denying they were "fairies." He seemed to enjoy playing with the idea. He and "Little Eva" deliberately sought out "tough saloons" where they

27. Anderson to Finley, 11 December 1916, in *Letters to Bab,* p. 30; *Memoirs,* pp. 218–22; Benfrey, "Inconstant Anderson," pp. 16–17.
28. *Memoirs,* pp. 285, 289.

ostentatiously called each other by women's names. "There would be down-and-outers hanging about. They leared [*sic*] at us. 'What have we here, a couple of fairies, eh?' All of this a kind of satisfaction to us." Why? because it seemed to capture something essential about their job—the task of catching and holding a client by watching him "as a man might watch some woman for whom his loins ache." In Anderson's mind, advertising was associated obscurely with homosexuality as well as explicitly with prostitution—both forms of illicit sex were signs of decline from an earlier, solider male identity.[29]

Yet there was more than a vestigial producer ethos and a muddle of male anxieties behind Anderson's commentary on advertising. To be sure, his preoccupation with cleanliness was genuinely obsessive: in the Elyria years, he scrubbed himself and his study down every time he started writing. But it was not only the taint of forbidden pleasure that he was seeking to cleanse: it was a much more diffuse disorder, a feeling that with the rise of national advertising "the time of the wise-crackers" had come, that there was a new tone of "brittle hardness" in the popular magazines, a new smart-ass ethos characterized by the "effort to drag down, always to drag down, even life itself."[30] Anderson suspected that the emergent culture was profoundly hostile to "life itself." For him, that elusive phrase seemed to signify a sense of pure being. It was a feeling he associated with the vanishing rural landscape and with the intimate relationships he courted but rarely consummated.

It was as if Anderson spent his whole writing life looking for what "Sally, the quiet one" had seen from their bed in a fleabag hotel room—"the white spot. . . . [T]he thing lost. . . . [T]he thing that eludes us"—some sign that the two of them had, however fleetingly, formed a genuine union, transcended self-absorbed sensuality. The "white spot" may seem a weak rendition of "life itself," but in spite of its pallor the image has powerful religious resonance that can be traced back to the time of the Transcendentalist movement (perhaps the first collective effort to move the discourse of authenticity outside orthodox Christianity.) In 1850 a Transcendentalist author named George Loring wrote: "Between the individual and his God, there remains a spot, larger or smaller, as the soul has been kept unclouded, where no sin can enter, where no mediation can come, where all the discords of . . . life are resolved into the most delicious harmonies, and his

29. *Memoirs,* pp. 284, 285, 290, 414–15.
30. *Memoirs,* p. 387.

whole existence becomes illuminated by a divine intelligence. Sorrow and sin reveal this spot to all men—as, through death, we are born to an immortal life." Anderson was no Transcendentalist; nor is it likely he would have read one as obscure as Loring. But Anderson was a lifelong devotee of Emerson, whose desire to "become a transparent eyeball" was another version of the Transcendental longing for the "spot." According to his best biographer, "Anderson placed himself in the tradition of Emerson and Whitman." Like them, like other romantics influenced by Anglo-American Protestantism, Anderson may have imagined that intense communion with another person might be the way modern people experience authentic spiritual life—now that the question of "immortal life" had become too embarrassing to discuss. The "white spot" was about the closest a self-conscious bohemian could get to admitting he was animated by religious longings.[31]

More commonly Anderson's discourse of authenticity focused on the uses and misuses of language. An unpublished sketch, "Advertising Words," pulled together these preoccupations and their relationship to Anderson's advertising career. Two "word slingers," small-time fellows in advertising, are at a table with some big fellows in a Chicago restaurant. The narrator's mind wanders—sometimes you can get as much as the buyers and sellers, he thinks, just by slinging words. "Oh the word men—the little words with which we make love, greet our friends, worship our gods and our heroes." He pictures a boy with his first girl, walking alone, trying to come up with the words to express his feelings. "This is the sort of thing older men, painters and poets try later to recapture. . . . Oh to tell her. Once I heard a fat advertising man—a bit worse—or God knows perhaps the better! for drink mourning over this matter. 'I was an Illinois farm boy,' he said, 'and I used to go of a Saturday night to an Illinois town. I saw girls there. Oh how I ached. I walked up and down the main street of the town. . . . All of my body ached with desire but I had no words.'" He had become a philandering slob but "he meant I think that there was something in him that remained alive, inspite of the coarseness of suc-

31. *Memoirs,* p. 233; George Bailey Loring, *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* 3 (September 1850): 484–500, as reprinted in Joseph Donald Crowley, ed., *Hawthorne: the Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p. 171; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," [1836], reprinted in Stephen E. Whicher, ed., *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 24; Townsend, *Anderson,* p. 110. For the nearly religious importance placed on friendship by some of Anderson's bohemian contemporaries, see Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America: The Intellectual as a Social Type, 1889–1963* (New York: Knopf, 1965), esp. chaps. 1–4.

cess. . . . White [?] boy running still inside fat man. Give me the sound. I still want it—the word.—The advertising man slinging the word around."[32]

The narrator's mind wanders to an ad man named Big Tom, who was always breaking his pencils—awkwardness was a sign of authenticity for Anderson, who nurtured romantic suspicions of polish and efficiency. He and Big Tom go drinking, pick up two whores who take the men to an apartment and demand five dollars. Tom motions Anderson into a bedroom and the two men lock the door. While the "poor bitches" rage outside, Big Tom tells the narrator of his Tennessee boyhood; he was "an innocent enough mountain boy, far from Chicago, far from advertising, far from a bedroom that belonged to a Moll . . . quite innocent yet." "All of us advertising word slingers are at bottom whores and we know it. We have made a whore of the word, let us lead the lives of whores. Let's get drunk." Tom tells of walking with a girl in the moonlight on a mountain road, imagining her "sweet little body." Then the men leave the apartment, Tom throwing a five at the whores: "Get the hell back into the street and at your trade, you cried to her. And you and me back to our whorish trade, you added, taking my arm." Back at the restaurant, the "big man" enters. The narrator reports the reverential conversation at the table. "'But who is he?' 'Why, he is the man who wrote "eventually, why not now,"' 'No!' And in my own voice too."[33]

This truncated, hastily composed sketch summarized the conflicts and confusions at the heart of Anderson's work. Juxtaposing social lies tossed off at a table of "big fellows" against the words of love spoken on a mountain road in Tennessee, Anderson worked the conventional vein of contrast between urban whorishness and pastoral innocence. From his copywriter's desk he looked backward to an earlier mode of commerce, one that recalled his paean to the open road in *Agricultural Advertising*. "I dream of being a wandering pedlar, a man who lives in a tiny frame house at the edge of a small town," he wrote Finley in September 1919. And sometimes his dreams were more complicated. "The inner thing in me is a clean boy running over the hills," he wrote Finley three months later, evoking his characteristic claim that he (like Big Tom) was "quite innocent yet." Yet the process of self-justification quickly grew more tangled. "I turn to women," he wrote, "because men are too concerned with making money and overfeeding their lusts. I am stupid. I forget that women are as much involved in the tangle as men. So much of the time I do not want hands

32. "Advertising Words," Undated manuscript in Anderson Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago.

33. Ibid.

on me but want to run clean and alone. I can't have that I know but like a silly fellow I keep asking it."[34]

The problem for Anderson was that like many of his contemporaries he distrusted the capacity of language to represent real life. For Wittgenstein and his intellectual heirs that distrust provoked a major move away from positivist and platonic identifications of word and thing. For Anderson it led to frustration. Words of love, he gloomily concluded, were as flat and inadequate as advertising words. The only expression of self that could truly be trusted was the preverbal ache of longing—a longing for emotional as well as sexual intimacy with other human beings. That is why the characters Anderson meant to be admirable are so often tongue-tied, like the fat advertising man who recalls himself as a boy, thrumming with desire on the streets of an Illinois town. Anderson treated facility with words, the key to his own success in advertising, as the sign of mere glibness. Soon after he quit the Critchfield agency for good, he complained that "There is so much to unlearn. One who has spent so many years as I had just saying words to get a quick surface effect, as we advertising writers are always doing, are paid to do, has later got to whip himself with much scorn." This hyperbolic self-hate may itself have been a performance: the creation of the guilt-ridden plain speaker as a part of Anderson's artistic persona.[35]

The sense of theatrical posturing is inescapable in some of Anderson's other stances as well. His equation of fluency and glibness, for example, led him to sentimental primitivism. Perhaps the best known product of that outlook was *Dark Laughter,* which celebrated the vitality of Negro life in the South and provoked Hemingway's mockery in *The Torrents of Spring.* In 1922, from Kentucky (where he was writing *Dark Laughter*), Anderson wrote "I am myself as I was when I was a boy." The trip South was for him "a kind of pilgrimage back into the realities of life."[36]

Still it is too easy to caricature Anderson's quest for "the realities of life" as either sentimental primitivism or guilt-ridden plain speech. His search had led as well to what Anderson described as "my first authentic tale"—the story "Hands," which recounted the pathetic life of Wing Biddlebaum. Wing was an inspired teacher in a small Midwestern town. He was betrayed by his "nervous expressive fingers" and his ever-mobile hands, which seemed to have lives of their own. Fluttering like birds about the young boys in his charge, his hands provoked their parents to accuse him

34. Anderson to Finley, September 1919, in *Letters to Bab,* p. 111; and December 1919, in ibid., p. 113.

35. Anderson, *Story Teller's Story,* p. 296.

36. Anderson to Finley, 14 June 1922, in *Letters to Bab,* p. 183.

of making homosexual advances to them. Dismissed and disgraced, the teacher (whose name had been Adolph Meyer) flees to Winesburg, Ohio, where he becomes known as Wing Biddlebaum and lives as a fearful recluse—except that he tries to teach young George Willard, who writes for the *Winesburg Eagle,* the same lesson he taught his own students: "You must begin to dream. . . . [Y]ou must shut your ears to the roaring of the voices." The source of this story, Anderson said, was "that strange, more real life into which I have so long been trying to penetrate and that is the only real reality." Whatever that may have meant, the springs of memory released more characters and stories; Anderson assembled them into *Winesburg, Ohio.*[37]

The book was permeated by the assumption that unlike advertising copy, serious fiction could not be content with surface effects. Anderson dedicated the book to his mother, who (he said) "first awoke in me the hunger to see beneath the surface of lives. . . ." The school teacher Kate Swift, who believes that young George Willard may be a writer of genius, tells him that "You must not be a mere peddler of words. The thing to learn is what people are thinking about, not what they say." Anderson posed the contrast repeatedly: the job of copywriters, popular journalists, and other makers of the emergent mass culture was to create "surface effects" by manipulating words; the task of the writer was to plumb the depths of being—to capture the catch in the throat, the yawp of authentic experience.[38]

Winesburg was many personal moments that made up a larger historical moment. Anderson aimed to capture the town when it was being swept up into the standardized patterns set by national advertising, when metropolitan elites were repackaging "the folk" into "the masses." By the 1910s, when Anderson was writing the book, the process was nearly complete. Or so he thought:

> In our day a farmer standing by the stove in his village has his mind filled to overflowing with the words of other men. The newspapers and the magazines have pumped him full. Much of the old brutal ignorance that had in it also a kind of beautiful childlike innocence is gone forever. The farmer by the stove is brother to the men of cities, and if you listen you will find him talking as glibly and as senselessly as the best city man of us all.[39]

For Anderson as for many of his contemporaries, the vision of a preindustrial folk culture carried connotations of linguistic transparency—what

37. *Memoirs,* pp. 237–38; Anderson, *Winesburg,* p. 30.
38. Anderson, *Winesburg,* frontispiece, p. 163.
39. Anderson, *Winesburg,* p. 71.

a student of Jurgen Habermas might call an "undistorted speech situation" where people spoke their own words (not "the words of other men") and spoke them truly. Anderson's view of language, perhaps no more naive than that of Habermas (or George Orwell), allowed him to form a coherent critique of developing cultural tendencies. As early as the 1890s, when the action in Winesburg is set, the movement toward a senseless pseudosophistication is well underway. "The time of the wise-crackers" has come. Anderson looked for authentic life in the interstices of these developments, among the people he calls "grotesques"—withered Victorian maidens disappointed in love, country doctors with pockets full of paper pills. These people are obsessed by "vague hungers and secret unnameable desires;" as Anderson said, "they have got hold of a single truth and tried to live their lives by it." This refusal to become "sensible" and "well-rounded," to adjust to the demands of a routinized society, makes them failures in the eyes of the smart and up-to-date. Yet to Anderson it was the crux of their appeal. Shunted aside by the forces of progress, they are like "the few gnarled apples" left in the orchard after the pickers have moved on. "One nibbles at them and they are delicious. Into a little round place at the side of the apple has been gathered all of its sweetness. One runs from tree to tree over the frosted ground picking the gnarled, twisted apples and filling his pockets with them. Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples."[40]

The twisted apples are abandoned by the new civilization, but some try to catch up with it. Anderson detailed their flailings. Enoch Robinson, a sensitive farm boy who goes to New York to study art, tries his hand for a while in advertising illustration; he marries, rides the streetcar to work everyday, wears the same grey wool overcoat the other men did, pays his taxes. But after a while he takes to telling lies about business engagements, lies that allow him some time to walk the streets alone at night. His marriage falls apart and he withdraws into a single room, which he peoples with imaginary characters. He finds it "warm and friendly" in there; outside, among the swarms of people, he feels "alone."[41]

One does not have to be compulsively reclusive to be shunted aside by the developing culture of chatter; mere reticence is enough to brand one as "queer." Seth Richmond, dubbed "the deep one" by the town wits because of his habitual silence, decides to leave town altogether: Everyone

40. Martin Jay, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer Debate" in Dominick LaCapra and Steven Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Directions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 100, 104; Anderson, *Winesburg,* pp. 25, 36.
41. Anderson, *Winesburg,* pp. 167–78.

talks and talks. . . . I'm sick of it. I'll do something, get into some kind of work where talk don't count. Maybe I'll just be a mechanic in a shop." This was an example of Anderson's strongest prose, its energy intensified by simplification and understatement. He had moved far enough from advertising to rid himself of its self-conscious salesman's bonhomie, but not so far that he had lost his ear for colloquial speech. Seth Richmond's words were an uncommon expression of a common sentiment: as in the literary critique of business from *Babbitt* to *Death of a Salesman,* Anderson invoked the producer ethos to envision the possibility of work more substantial than the peddling of words.[42]

Anderson created a romantic modernist's version of the producer ethos by linking the author with carpenters and cultivators. The writer cultivated inner resources, the throb of youthful naïveté and candor that enabled him to "see beneath the surface of lives," to view the world in the fresh light of day, not the dim dusk of copywriters' clichés. Elizabeth Willard seeks to protect that sense of wonder in her son George by subverting his father's plans to turn the boy into a conventional "wide-awake" success. "'He is not a dull clod, all words and smartness,' she thought," neatly upending urban conventional wisdom about the idiocy of rural life: in Anderson the clods come from the city and are full of metropolitan "pep." Then she endows George with the ultimate Anderson accolade: "Within him there is a secret something that is striving to grow. It is a thing I let be killed in myself." She will not let him be thwarted as she has been, tricked by the cunning of conventionality into a loveless marriage and a dead domestic life. She subtly encourages him to sidestep the "brisk and smart" agenda of his dad, to follow his deepest impulse, which is "to go away and look at people and think." The book concludes with George's departure from Winesburg. What is he running away from? Not the pinched, repressive morality of the old producer culture—Anderson knew the narrowness of that village world, but he located a greater danger in the culture created by advertising.[43]

Though Anderson was attracted to the producerist critique of advertising, he leavened it with his own romantic primitivism: a pastoral fondness for vanishing preindustrial life and a positive fascination with the people who had been left behind by the locomotive of progress, the people—in effect—who had somehow not managed to secure tickets on the Twentieth Century Limited. Anderson's affectionate preoccupation with these "grotesques" was not an isolated trait. Some of the masterpieces of twentieth-

42. Ibid., p. 141.
43. Ibid., pp. 39–48.

century literature have been concerned precisely with people who have been disdained (or even exterminated) by modernizing elites. Faulkner's Yoknapatapha County and Garcia Marquez's Macondo, like Anderson's Winesburg, are populated in part by "twisted apples" trampled underfoot in the rush to development. Yet in all cases the authors stress the toughness and resilience of these despised folk. Their resistance is rooted not in morality but in idiosyncrasy. They are "queer," and in queerness there is strength.

The invocation of "masterpieces" is a risky business. Thanks to the work of Huyssen, Jane Tompkins, and other scholars, we are beginning to see how the category of "masterpiece" has been constructed and reconstructed under particular historical circumstances, how it has been enmeshed in the modernist myth of the autonomous work of art, how it has been implicated in a masculine discourse of authenticity.[44] I do not mean to imply that any of these authors (Anderson, Faulkner, or Garcia Marquez) transcended their time and place; on the contrary it was precisely their immersion in a particular historical situation that accounted for their interpretive power—their capacity to make the discourse of authenticity something more than a male complaint.

To be sure, Anderson's own worldview could be dismissed as merely a bohemian version of romantic and republican mythology. Yet even a writer with an oeuvre as uneven as Anderson's could orchestrate the discourse of authenticity with results worth pondering. His pursuit of the real through craftsmanship suggests that the quest for fulfillment through satisfying labor was more than a sign of patriarchal producerism; it could lead to a hedonistic definition of work as play—an attempt to break down the barriers between gainful employment and sensuous enjoyment. His longing to catch sight of "the white spot," though he rarely satisfied it, suggests his determination to break down other barriers as well, the barriers of self-absorption that kept him unconnected to this world or any other. And finally, his fascination with "the dance of life" in his Italian neighbors' garden suggests the centrality of a biological or ecological dimension to that desire for connectedness. As he stared out from his bedroom window, losing himself in contemplation of the yard next door, Anderson may have glimpsed a fundamental insight: all our cultural constructions—our longings for the white spot of eternal harmony, our dances of life and death—are rooted in the earth, the ground of being. That may be one reality that, try as we might, we cannot contain in quotation marks.

44. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

THE IRON THROAT

Tillie Lerner

THE WHISTLES always woke Marie. They pierced into her sleep like some guttural voiced metal beast, tearing at her; the sound meant, in one way, terror. During the day if the whistle blew, she knew it meant death—somebody's poppa or brother, perhaps her own—in that fearsome place below the ground, the mine.

"Goddam that blowhorn," she heard her father mutter. Creak of him getting out of bed. The door closed, with yellow light from the kerosene lamp making a long crack on the floor. Clatter of dishes. Her mother's tired, grimy voice.

"What'll ya have? Coffee and eggs. There ain't no bacon."

"Don't bother with anything. Haven't time. I gotta stop by Kvaternicks and get the kid. He's starting work today."

"What're they going to give him?"

"Little of everything at first, I guess, trap, throw switches, maybe timberin'."

"Well, he'll be starting one punch ahead of the old man. Chris began as a breaker boy." (Behind both stolid faces the claw claw of a buried thought—and maybe finish like him, buried under slaty roof which an economical company had not bothered to timber.)

"He's thirteen, ain't he?" asked Marie.

"I guess. Nearer to fourteen."

"Marie was tellin me, it would break Chris' heart if he only knew. He wanted the kid to be different. Get an edjiccation."

"Yeah? Them foreigners do have funny ideas."

"Oh, I dunno. Then she says that she wants the girls to become nuns, so they won't have to worry where the next meal is comin' from, or have to have kids."

"Well, what other earthly use can a woman have, I'd like to know."

"She says she doesn't want 'em raising a lot of brats to get their heads blowed off in the mine. I guess she takes Chris's . . . passing away pretty hard. It's kinda affected her mind. She keeps talking about the old country, the fields, and what they thought it would be like here. —'all buried in da bowels of earth," she finishes.

First page of Tillie Lerner's "The Iron Mask," *Partisan Review* 1 (April–May 1934): 3.

2 Unlimn'd They Disappear

Recollecting *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*

Christopher P. Wilson

Suppose that we could recover the literary texts that have been lost, censored, and suppressed. Suppose, too, that we could figure out why they have been erased from consciousness while other texts had come down to us as cultural legacies. Our discoveries might add up to a new literary and social history, an analogy to the way in which the concept of the black hole has given astrophysicists the premise for a new cosmology.
—Catharine Stimson, in a review of *Yonnondio*

In an otherwise forgettable episode in the *first* generation voyage of the *Starship Enterprise,* entitled "All Our Yesterdays," Captain Kirk, Spock, and McCoy beam down to a planet named Sarpeidon in order to rescue a civilization whose sun—in what amounts to an intergalactic oxymoron—is about to "go nova." How the Federation would effect such a massive evacuation with a single starship is never made clear; before long, however, the issue is moot, since no one is at home. What Kirk and his crew discover is that the populace of Sarpeidon has escaped destruction by travelling into the past. At a series of transfer stations akin to public libraries, each citizen has arrived, consulted the local librarian named Mr. Atoz (A to Z), scanned a card catalog of videotapes ("Verisims"), and then stepped through a portal called an "Atavachron" into the era illuminated on the catalog screen. Unfortunately, it isn't long before this interesting premise degenerates: Kirk, hearing a woman's scream from beyond the portal, gallantly if rashly leaps through, travelling to a seventeenth-century English village; the others, gallantly if rashly following Kirk, travel instead to a prehistoric ice age, where Spock—that angel of objectivity—regresses into a violent, lovelorn, caveman of the dark Vulcan past. At the end, however, the *Star Trek* crew is able to get back to the future, because (we are told) their chromosomes hadn't originally been properly aligned, or "prepared," by Mr. Atoz—who

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