

1

Introduction

JOHN W. CROWLEY

WINESBURG, *Ohio*, it is sometimes said, appeals most directly to young readers. Its author, however was a literary late bloomer whose first book appeared only after he had turned forty. Sherwood Anderson, like the old writer in “The Book of the Grotesque,” nurtured something inside him that was “altogether young.”¹ As he wrote to the critic Van Wyck Brooks in 1919, “when in speaking of *Winesburg* you use the word ‘adolescence,’ you struck more nearly than you know on the whole note of me. I am immature, will live and die immature. A quite terrible confession that would be if I did not represent so much.”²

The conditional phrasing of this “terrible confession” has been overlooked by those who would use it against Anderson,³ for he was claiming in his “immaturity” to be nothing less than “representative” in the Emersonian sense, a Whitmanian seer and sayer of heartland America in its cultural adolescence. “My head is filled with fancies that cannot get expressed,” he complained to a confidante at the time he was writing the *Winesburg* stories. “A thousand beautiful children are unborn to me. Sustained flights of thoughts break up and pass away into nothingness because I am full of the spirit of my times.” His sharing “the very blood and spirit of all this aimlessness,” however, was precisely what made him representative: “My struggle, my ignorance, my years of futile work to meaningless ends – all these are American traits. If I fail to get at anything approaching real beauty so have my times and the men of my times failed.”⁴ Anderson read his own writing, insofar as it did capture real beauty, as a representative triumph over the failures of his times.

Once, when asked by a Chicago newspaperman to summarize

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-38723-1 - New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio
 Edited by John W. Crowley
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio

his background, he reduced it to a narrative that was formulaic but potentially archetypal as well:

About the biography matter. It is simple enough. Born at a place called Camden, Ohio, September 13, 1876 – I nearly wrote 1776 – spent most of my youth in the village of Clyde, Ohio, near Cleveland. Town poor family, village news-boy peddling papers, cheating people out of change etc. – all that stuff.

Came to Chicago at eighteen – no work – common laborer until Spanish War broke out. Went into that.

Stumbled into advertising writing and have been there ever since except for five years when I got the great American idea of getting rich. Started a factory – got all my friends to put money in – bright young businessman, etc.

Scheme didn't work. Went nutty – had nervous breakdown – slight suspicion have been nutty ever since.

Started writing for the sake of the salvation of my soul and except for one or two slips – when I fancied I might by some chance hit on a popular note – have been writing for that end ever since.⁵

This outline, in a staccato style that points ironically to the triteness of its details (“all that stuff,” etc.), recalls the opening chapter of W. D. Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), in which the slick reporter Bartley Hubbard, exemplar of a new school of vulgar journalism, is pumping Lapham for the details of his emergence from poverty and obscurity to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world. This self-made man, the putative king of the paint industry, knows what is expected of him for this interview, which will lead to Hubbard's fulsomely flattering profile for the “Solid Men of Boston” series in a newspaper pitched to popular curiosity about the newly rich:

“[S]o you want my life, death and Christian sufferings, do you, young man?”

“That's what I'm after,” said Bartley. “Your money or your life.”

“I guess you wouldn't want my life without the money,” said Lapham.⁶

Certainly not, for as the reporter's satirical promptings show, he has already cast the life in terms of the traditional success story, extending from Ben Franklin through Abe Lincoln and Horatio Alger to the Great Gatsby and beyond, that is the most enduring in American culture:

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[More information](#)

Introduction

“Worked in the fields summers and went to school winters: regulation thing?” Bartley cut in.

“Regulation thing,” said Lapham, accepting this irreverent version of his history somewhat dryly.

“Parents poor, of course,” suggested the journalist. “Any barefoot business? Early deprivations of any kind that would encourage the youthful reader to go and do likewise?”⁷

Hubbard and Lapham are agreed in their tailoring the biographical facts to the rags-to-riches formula, which begins, in Hubbard’s retelling, with the hero’s devoted parents (especially his self-sacrificing mother), simple people of “sterling morality” who live for their children’s advancement and instill in them “the simple virtues of the Old Testament and Poor Richard’s Almanac.”⁸ But the men differ in their attitudes toward this account. Whereas the cynical reporter yawns over his notebook, the paint king warms to the tale of his own success, revealing his reverence for what strikes Hubbard as ridiculous.

For Sherwood Anderson, whose early life in Ohio bore uncanny resemblances to Howells’s experience two generations earlier,⁹ the rise of Silas Lapham foretold his own success just as Bartley Hubbard’s mockery anticipated his own disillusionment with that success. The autobiographical letter quoted earlier may be understood as a self-interview in which – as if he were playing the roles both of Hubbard and of Lapham – Anderson parodies, even as he takes seriously, the familiar story he has inherited from the nineteenth century. But he is also transvaluing, and thereby recuperating, the nineteenth-century idea of success.

In Howells’s novel, Lapham’s rise turns out, ironically, to be what he gains morally from financial and social *failure*. Alarmed by the corrosive effects of industrial capitalism on the human spirit, Howells faced the possibility that morality and success were incompatible, indeed mutually exclusive. Anderson, who shared Howells’s abhorrence of industrialism, sought to write a narrative of moral rejuvenation in which success could be rewedded to morality. In his numerous and variant retellings of the rise of Sherwood Anderson, the literary artist supplanted the entrepreneur as hero; or, in Howells’s terms, the man of letters redeemed the man of business.¹⁰

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio*

The “simple” facts of Anderson’s biography, then, expressed a myth that was at once personal and cultural: not the nineteenth-century myth of success, but a modern reimagining of its terms. In his own eyes and in those of his admirers, his career became “the symbol of an epoch.”¹¹ In a sense, Anderson became most truly himself when he was completely dissolved into symbol, when his life became indistinguishable from the myth of the artist-hero into which he wrote himself. As his biographer has remarked, “other writers draw on their experience, compose, so as to recreate, illuminate their lives, but always, apart from the perfection, or imperfection, of the work, there is the life. In the case of Sherwood Anderson one is never sure, one never knows which is which, or rather one knows that Anderson was never sure himself.”¹²

Born in the centennial year of the American Revolution, Anderson was the child rather of the Industrial Revolution that transformed, during the very years of his youth, the agricultural, small-town Midwest. The second son in a family of five boys and one girl (another died in infancy), young Sherwood grew up in Clyde, Ohio, a town of about 2,500 that was to serve as the model for his fictional Winesburg. The family was among the poorest in town, largely because of the improvidence of Irwin Anderson, a sometime harness-maker and housepainter, a jack-of-no-trade, whose penchant for idleness and alcohol made him a thin provider. Enamored of military posturing and spinning tall tales – in Irwin’s imagination, the Civil War, in which he had fought, was never ending – he, like Tom Willard in *Winesburg*, “swaggered and began to dramatize himself as one of the chief men of the town” (p. 44). In truth, he was a windbag who mortified his son and tormented his wife, the stoical Emma Anderson, for whom Sherwood, like George Willard for his mother, felt a largely unarticulated sympathy.

This sympathy, however, was copiously expressed – as if in compensation for childhood silence – in Anderson’s later writings, where he sainted Emma by exaggerating her martyrdom to Irwin’s vagaries. This mother-ideal, firmly established in Anderson’s youth, governed his later relationships with women, including his four wives. He would never be entirely at ease with his own sexuality. Like some of Sigmund Freud’s male patients during that same

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

period, he tended to dissociate the “affectionate” current from the “sensual” current of erotic feeling and to divide womankind into madonnas and whores. “Where such men love they have no desire,” Freud observed, “and where they desire they cannot love.”¹³

In boyish rivalry with his father, Sherwood tried to distance and distinguish himself from Irwin not only by his sensitivity to Emma’s misery but also by his attempts to relieve it through his own hustle and enterprise. In his desire to serve as the family provider, his zeal for odd jobs was indefatigable, his prowess as a newsboy unsurpassed. The villagers dubbed him “Jobby.” Like Silas Lapham, Anderson imbibed the Franklinesque saws that passed for folk wisdom in nineteenth-century America: “Get on. Make money. Get to the top. A penny saved is a penny earned. Money makes the mare go.”¹⁴ These were the values that Anderson the writer would spend his creative life disavowing, but only after Anderson the businessman had pursued them to the edge of his sanity.

Ambitious beyond the limits of the small town, Sherwood migrated to Chicago soon after his mother’s early death in 1895. The city had been booming since the Civil War; its population grew exponentially as its boundaries expanded and its industrial economy burgeoned. Hub of the Midwest, gateway to the Far West, Chicago challenged eastern cultural supremacy by erecting the White City of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, a showcase of the artistic and commercial aspirations of the emergent American imperium. Headquarters of the new captains of industry – the millionaires of meat packing (Swift, Armour) and manufacturing (Pullman, McCormick) and retailing (Marshall Field) – Chicago beckoned to immigrants and provincials alike, who, like Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, flocked to a city enchanted by their visions of fabulous wealth. For the dreamers of success the sky was the limit, as it was for the architects of the skyscrapers that soon towered above the new business district, the Loop.

Anderson at nineteen (not eighteen, as he recalled) was understandably bewildered by the sheer magnitude of Chicago, and his upward climb was blocked by his inexperience and haphazard schooling. While he roomed in a boardinghouse owned by former Clyde neighbors, and later in a tenement with his brothers and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio*

sister, Anderson subsisted as a warehouse laborer at two dollars per day. Escape from the grinding ten-hour shifts arrived in 1898 with the Spanish-American War. Anderson eagerly rejoined the Clyde unit of the Ohio National Guard in which he had enlisted before going to Chicago; later he basked in a homecoming hero's welcome, although his unit had served in Cuba only after hostilities had ceased. During 1899–1900, he enrolled in the Wittenberg Academy in Springfield, Ohio; on graduation, with the equivalent of a high school education, he was offered a position as advertising solicitor with the Crowell Publishing Company in Chicago. Within months he moved to the Frank B. White Advertising Agency, later to merge with the Long-Critchfield Agency. Intermittently for the next twenty years, Anderson would retain his affiliation with this firm, even after he had achieved a literary reputation. His first writing, aside from ad copy, appeared in such trade journals as *Agricultural Advertising*, for which he produced a regular column under the titles "Rot and Reason" and "Business Types."

At this stage of his career Anderson was an unabashed booster of the mission of American businessmen, those who "sleep and eat and live with the desire to get on in the world tingling through their whole beings."¹⁵ When, in 1903, he married Cornelia Platt Lane, the refined and attractive daughter of a prosperous Cleveland merchant, young Anderson appeared to have the world before him. Having shown a flair for advertising, he left the Long-Critchfield agency in 1906 to become president of the United Factories Company of Cleveland, a combine of small manufacturers. Anderson's task, less glorious than his title, was to organize direct-mail ad campaigns.

This was merely a step toward becoming head of his own sales operation, the Anderson Manufacturing Company of Elyria, Ohio, which was capitalized by believers in his promise as a bright young businessman. Through the clever promotion of a patent product for leaky roofs – "Roof-Fix" was guaranteed to cure every ill known to shingles – Anderson raked in the profits and ascended the business and social ladders of Elyria, a town with get-up-and-go worthy of Zenith in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922). Sherwood and Cornelia nestled into a comfortable house in a trig neighborhood, joined the golf club, and started a family (two boys and a

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

girl by 1911). Anderson became a notable member of the Elks chapter and also the Round Table Club, a sociable discussion group drawn from the young married set.

Outwardly content, Anderson was inwardly restive. He began, in fact, to lead a double life: The gregarious man-about-town was also a recluse in his own home. Anderson installed a spartan workroom in the upstairs back wing, where he retreated to write – not the public musings he had penned for *Agricultural Advertising*, but the private visions of an inchoate artist. Far into the night and sometimes during business hours, Anderson wrote page after page, possessed by the stories quickening in his mind. He worked both on short pieces and on several different novels, two of which would appear in revised form as *Windy McPherson's Son* (1916) and *Marching Men* (1917). Through such autobiographical characters as Sam McPherson and Beaut McGregor, Anderson confronted his past and his profound uncertainties about the success he had so assiduously courted, a success that was being imperiled by the neglect of his business, which was sliding toward ruin.

Anderson's inner crisis had deep roots. Some part of him had always felt compromised by the advertising razzle-dazzle and the sharp business practices. His occasional lapses from marital fidelity – one-night stands with fancy women – were also symptomatic of an urge to be other than a respectable family man. In earlier years he had made fleeting contact with artists and intellectuals through his brother Karl, a painter, and he had been attracted to the openness of their lives and minds. Always a voracious (and indiscriminate) reader, Anderson sometimes flaunted ideas he knew deviated from those of his Elyria friends, who were incomprehending, for instance, of his enthusiasm for the radical philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Through his own writing, Anderson unleashed a self at odds with those conventional values to which he was still tightly bound. He began to write, as he said, for the salvation of his soul.

Wound tighter and tighter by self-doubt and discontent with his career, his marriage, everything, Anderson finally came unsprung in November 1912. He later published several versions of what had happened one day in his Elyria factory: an exit that became as legendary in its way as Nora's slamming the door on her stultifying

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 Excerpt
[More information](#)

New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio

bourgeois marriage in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). In *A Story Teller's Story* (1924), Anderson recalled that he had gone to the office as usual and had begun to dictate business letters to his secretary. Unaccountably, he stopped in mid-sentence:

What I did was to step very close to the woman and, looking directly into her eyes, I laughed gayly. Others besides herself would, I knew, hear the words I was now speaking. I looked at my feet. "I have been wading in a long river, and my feet are wet," I said.

Again I laughed as I walked lightly toward the door and out of a long and tangled phase of my life, out of the door of buying and selling, out of the door of affairs.¹⁶

In his *Memoirs* (1942), Anderson explained that this strange behavior had been a ruse by which he hoped to extricate himself from his accumulated responsibilities: "Again I resorted to slickness, to craftiness. . . . The thought occurred to me that if men thought me a little insane they would forgive me if I lit out."¹⁷ In truth, as the surviving records prove, Anderson was not feigning insanity; he had suffered a nervous breakdown. In a fugue state,¹⁸ he walked out of his factory and, perambulating the countryside for more than twenty miles, arrived in Cleveland four days later, looking bedraggled and professing not to know who or where he was. The amnesia partially lifted during hospital treatment, after which Anderson returned home temporarily. Early in 1913, he liquidated his business in Elyria and, leaving Cornelia and the children behind, returned to his old job at Long-Critchfield. Determined at last to be a writer, he made his way into the literary worlds of Chicago and, later, New York. Shedding the chrysalis of the businessman, Sherwood Anderson the artist took flight.

So the legend goes. But the clean break with his old life that Anderson recounted in his autobiographies had been far more ragged in reality. For one thing, he could not simply or easily walk out on his family. He did undertake a searching reassessment of his marriage, deciding (unfairly, it seems) that his wife had discouraged his writing and smothered him with her genteel inhibitions. But a divorce did not become final until 1916, and only then on Cornelia's initiative, after Sherwood had declared his intention to remarry. For another thing, his progress as a writer was halting at first. The artistic quantum leap to the Winesburg stories, his first

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Edited by John W. Crowley

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

mature work, came only after a period of imaginative struggle.

Anderson's development was undoubtedly fostered by his association with the Chicago Renaissance, as it came to be called. Edgar Lee Masters, whose *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) was one of the inspirations for *Winesburg, Ohio*, recalled the intellectual ferment in "the really glorious year of 1914":

The ideas of Ibsen, of Shaw, of the Irish Theatre, of advancing science, of a re-arisen liberty were blossoming everywhere, and no where more than in Chicago, where vitality and youth, almost abandoned in its assertion of freedom and delight, streamed along Michigan Avenue carrying the new books under their arms, or congregated at Bohemian restaurants to talk poetry and the drama.¹⁹

Through his brother, Anderson met several members of the artists' colony that was forming just at the time he was returning to the city: Floyd Dell, editor, critic, fiction writer, and apostle to the new Bohemia; his wife, Margery Currey, a teacher and reporter; the journalist Ben Hecht; the playwright Susan Glaspell; Carl Sandburg, an aspiring poet; Arthur Davison Ficke, an eccentric lawyer-poet; Tennessee Mitchell, piano tuner and free spirit, who would become Anderson's second wife; Margaret Anderson, bookstore clerk and founding editor of the *Little Review* (1915), which became one of the major organs (along with Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, founded in 1912) of Chicago's literary avant-garde.

Dell especially made an impression on Anderson. Although a considerably younger man, Dell regarded Anderson as a protégé and acted as his mentor. He took it upon himself to get *Windy McPherson's Son* into print by urging it on Dreiser's publisher, John Lane. Dell also introduced Anderson to psychoanalysis, at least in the vague and somewhat distorted form in which Freud's ideas were filtering into America. Another discovery at that time was Gertrude Stein, whose oracular *Tender Buttons* (1914) pointed Anderson toward the narrative complexity and vernacular grace of *Winesburg*.

Throughout 1914 and 1915, Anderson juggled his own work with his ad writing, living sparsely in a midtown boardinghouse at 735 Cass Street. Like the old writer in "The Book of the Grotesque," he had his bed raised to window level so that he might observe the street life below and then ponder his relationship to

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio*

the people espied from this perch or encountered as he roamed the city. The situation of the artist became the theme of the novel he was drafting about the growth of a writer like himself. *Talbot Whittingham*, which was never published, reveals much about Anderson's continuing self-division. His removal from Elyria had not reduced the friction in his daily life caused by his double career as a man of letters and a man of business, by his incongruous allegiances to a liberated artistic circle and to his conservative advertising contacts. Nor had Anderson clarified his conception of himself as a writer.

Walter B. Rideout has argued that *Talbot Whittingham* dramatizes a conflict between two artistic ideals: a severe Nietzschean "master artist" who speaks for a world from which he feels necessarily alienated versus a compassionate Whitmanian bard whose art germinates from his imaginative embrace of the democratic en masse.²⁰ Talbot eventually discovers, in Rideout's words, the principles that "grotesqueness . . . is a universal but outward condition of the world which both defeats men's dreams and separates them as individuals; beauty is a universal but inward condition which exists beyond defeat, binds individuals into a community, and when liberated by the artist's insight, emerges out of defeat in the form of art."²¹

Thus, the artist is empowered to speak for the grotesques only by taking his place among them. As Anderson asked himself rhetorically in a 1917 letter, "Am I to become one who takes himself seriously and talks of his work as though it were the manna of Heaven instead of just the scribbling of one poor twisted human in the midst of a world of twisted ones."²² The latter artistic ethos, which David Stouck (later in this volume) calls Anderson's expressionism, prevailed in *Winesburg*. Here Dr. Reefy's wife learns the saving secret of "the sweetness of the twisted apples" (p. 38), a secret that was revealed to Anderson late in 1915.

Like his exit from Elyria, Anderson's writing of *Winesburg, Ohio* became a legend in his own time – and in his own mind. He never ceased recounting, in ever more fanciful detail, the miraculous moment of inspiration. In his final version, in the *Memoirs*, Anderson recalled a rainy night in late fall when he had gone to bed without pajamas: