

THE SHORT STORY COMPOSITE
AND THE ROOTS OF
MODERNIST NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

While the story cycle form has been popular for centuries, as seen in works like *The Decameron* and *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, it is especially important to modern Anglo-American literature. Twentieth century short story composites by James Joyce, Sherwood Anderson, and Ernest Hemingway represent high points not simply for the genre, but also for modernist literature. Despite the centrality of these texts to the genre and to the period, the connection between time and form has often gone unexplored. Indeed, short story composite theory is still a bit unfocused, defining itself in reaction to the genres with which the composite is often confused, especially the novel. While it is important to disentangle the short story composite from these other genres, paradoxically, it is counterproductive, even harmful, to do so without acknowledging the ways in which they do undeniably overlap. Particularly, a refusal to draw comparisons between modernist novels and short story composites represents a missed opportunity to consider the field of modernist narrative holistically.

Clearly, a more nuanced articulation of short story composite theory is necessary. It would provide clarity for composite works and help articulate the structural properties of composite narrative more generally, a concern central to understanding modernist narrative practice. Through examining works that range from high to low to popular, I argue that the short story composite encompasses a variety of forms and modes of writing

but displays similar central characteristics organic to the period. The first two chapters work to situate the debate within various dovetailing contexts, including the history of the short story genre in the nineteenth century as well as the twentieth century shift of literary and critical production to the academy. Another chapter will also identify the concept of 'textual autonomy' as an especially problematic aspect of composite narrative theory, determined as it is by those contexts that shaped the genre and its criticism. Finally, a final chapter interrogates the relationship between modernity and narrative through the lens of WWI fiction. Writers discussed include Joyce and George Moore; Anderson and Hemingway; Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder; Sarah Orne Jewett, John Steinbeck, and Willa Cather; and John Dos Passos, William March, and e. e. cummings.

DEDICATION

For Kathy Koenen, Alissa Matheny, and Roger Matheny—who never made me believe this was foolish or impossible.

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Introduction

The narrative form known as the short story cycle or short story composite¹ occupies a shadowy position in contemporary criticism. When the term is invoked to describe a narrative tendency, that is, to serve as an adjective indicating a text's formal or narrative idiosyncrasies, it passes without objection and interrogation—and without contributing anything particularly helpful to our understanding of the work. For example, James Nagel uses the term rather loosely in his introduction to *The Contemporary American Short-story Cycle*: "It is a convention that needs to be recognized and understood as not simply ancillary to the more significant 'novel' but as integral to literary history, with an ancient origin and a set of narrational and structural principles quite distinct from other fictional modes."² As admirable as this defense is, Nagel is describing a "convention" and a "fictional mode," one which stretches back thousands of years; the term is merely an adjective useful for classification. When discussion turns to the short story composite as a full-fledged genre, however, it quickly becomes clear that there is a reason for the term's typically broad use: a widely applicable and theoretically rigorous theory of the short story

¹ While critical consensus seems to favor the use of *short story cycle*, I will employ the accepted but less popular label *short story composite*, as it better reflects the multifaceted nature of the genre's narrative structure, which cannot be boiled down to cyclicity or sequentiality.

² James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short-story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 10.

composite has yet to be fleshed out. There are many reasons for this, not least of all the nature of the genre itself. Encompassing numerous formal strategies and narrative approaches, it does not lend itself to easy explanation, not even in a critical environment that all but dogmatizes multiplicity and ambiguity. Still, J. Gerald Kennedy finds the critical neglect of the genre "inexplicable," conjecturing, "Perhaps the very ambiguities that complicate formal definition have likewise deterred theoretical reflection."³

A good illustration of the scope of the genre—and the scope of the problem—can be found in the works of William Faulkner. *The Unvanquished*, published in 1938, has sometimes been described as a "story novel." Arguably, it shadows a central protagonist and focuses on the exploits of a single family in Mississippi during the Civil War. Its stories are arranged chronologically, and they sometimes follow each other in time so closely that they might be chapters in a book; yet each story is an independent, fully rounded whole. Taken together, they resonate in a way they otherwise might not. The work originated in serial publication, with stories presented singly, and in a slightly different order. Only one story, "An Odor of Verbena," was especially written for the collected version, ostensibly to provide closure, although several stories were revised so as to create more connections between them.⁴ *Go Down, Moses*, on the other hand, is a disparate collection of short stories, perhaps an incongruous accumulation of story clusters. Published just four years after *The Unvanquished*, it follows several protagonists, most but not all of which form branches on one sprawling family tree, despite their widely dissimilar races and socioeconomic

³ J. Gerald Kennedy, introduction to *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities*, ed. Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), xi.

⁴ Forrest Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 106.

positions. Their narratives place them in settings from the country to the town to the backwoods, and though the stories are arranged in roughly chronological order, the tendency of the narrator to at any point range associatively over the expanse of the family mythology creates a sense of dislocation in time and even setting. Like its earlier counterpart, *Go Down, Moses* was published serially, with the exception of two stories, "Was" and "The Fire in the Hearth," which provide the rest of the stories with a contextual introduction. *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses* represent different aesthetics, the one friendly to the general periodical reader⁵ and the other more inaccessibly modernist, and while one is progressive where the other operates on a principle of juxtaposition, both can be called short story composites. These texts each trace the development of a family, and they were produced in the same way, by combining pre-existing pieces with new framing stories which help tie them together.⁶

The way these stories are joined—the way they cohere as works of art and the degree of structural tension involved—is the root of the genre question. There is not much tension to speak of in *The Unvanquished*, echoing the beleaguered but mostly unified nature of the book's featured clan, the Sartoris family, from Bayard to his independent cousin Drusilla to ex-slave Ringo, his brother figure. In comparing *The Unvanquished* with Faulkner's novel about the family, *Sartoris*, Forrest Ingram argues, "Each story develops its own central action, but the significance of *The Unvanquished* accumulates from story to

⁵ The stories (save "An Odor of Verbena") were written in a simpler style, prompting critic Daniel Singal to exclaim, "How, the reader is left to wonder, could the same author who had just risen to the heights of Modernist insight [in *Absalom, Absalom!*] be responsible for such a vintage Civil War potboiler?" (*William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* [Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997] 121.)

⁶ For an account of the complicated composition history of *Go Down Moses*, see Singal, 261-6.

story through the achievement of successively higher viewpoints embodied in the gradually maturing reflections and actions of Bayard Satoris."⁷ He also claims "the connection is not one of the strands of action, but of strands of significance, of myth, overlaying the discrete actions."⁸ *Go Down Moses*, on the other hand, provides nothing but tension, perhaps fitting for an account of the contentious, multiracial McCaslin dynasty. The stories are so divergent that Daniel Singal ascribes this to artistic failure: "Part of the time brilliant, but in places conspicuously flawed, it almost seems to consist of two books, written by the same author at different stages of his career."⁹ It has been easy to relegate these works to other genres, *Go Down, Moses* serving as an excellent collection of modernist short stories and *The Unvanquished* read as a novel, specifically as a bildungsroman. Readers are especially eager to read short story composites as fragmented novels, including those as fractured as *Go Down, Moses*. In fact, Faulkner himself called that work a novel, perhaps because he was bereft of any other way to indicate that it should be taken seriously as a whole, not merely as the sum of its parts.¹⁰

This kind of whole, however, is of a different type than that of the novel, which is the crux of the problem for short story composite theory. John Gerlach describes the contrast thus:

In a story cycle. . .character begins to dissolve into theme; people are not as important as the forces which move them. Time begins to become cyclical, not linear, no longer under the sway of the strong force of sequential plot and individual

⁷ Ingram, 134

⁸ Ingram, 134

⁹ Singal, 262

¹⁰ For a convincing reading of the work as a novel, see Sandra Lee Kleppe, "Faulkner, Welty, and the Short Story Composite," in *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*, ed. Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans H. Skei. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 172-80.

character, aspects that are so important to our sense of a novel. The novel would seem to stem from the Romantic and post-Romantic conception of the individual, while the story cycle harks back to those older conceptions of man as actor in a cosmic drama.¹¹

The short story composite's de-emphasis, dispersal, or lack of developmental focus allows for other, more holistic structuring devices. Despite the critical consensus that conflating the short story composite and the novel is inaccurate and damaging, there are still those who make theoretical arguments in support of such a reading. Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris suggest referring to the short story composite as the *composite novel*, which would allow for easier comparative analysis with works traditionally assigned to the novel genre. They argue that the use of *short story* in the genre descriptor "not only implies inferior status in the generic hierarchy, but also prescribes or at least suggests generic limitation."¹² Thus, the lower position of the short story genre is allowed to dictate their view of the short story composite rather than take it as all the more reason to come to the genre's aid, to elevate it on its own terms. Other post-structuralist criticism tends to follow Kennedy in treating the short story composite like an unusual species of short story collection; he uses the genre term *short story sequence* to describe "collections of three or more stories written and arranged by a single author."¹³ Admittedly, the lines between collections and composites are blurred, but they need not be disingenuously sharpened in order to be useful. A refusal to demarcate the short story composite from its less unified brethren relieves these texts of any formal responsibility and the critic of any intellectual precision. Indeed, Kennedy sometimes seems to distinguish between the *sequence* and the

¹¹ John Gerlach, "Faulkner's *Unvanquished* and Welty's *Golden Apples*: The Boundaries of Story, Cycle, and Novel," *Short Story* 2.2 (1992): 58.

¹² Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (New York: Twayne, 1995), 5.

¹³ Kennedy, ix.

collection—essentially merely shifting the dividing line on the very continuum he questions.¹⁴

In reality the short story composite genre is necessarily neither a poor attempt at the novel or an eccentric short story collection. However, it is sometimes very much like one or both of these genres, making it all too easy to nudge individual works in those ways. Ostensibly, this demonstrates the illusory nature of the genre, but in reality it simply makes establishing its particular features difficult. The short story composite often shares traits typically identified with the novel or the short story collection, which has led Kennedy, for one, to define it only in relationship to them: "A literary form at once ancient and avant-garde, the story sequence resists precise definition and occupies an odd, ambiguous place between the short story and the novel."¹⁵ Peter Donahue seems to concur, arguing, "While postmodernist critical approaches recognize that all literary works at least implicitly undo (or erase) their own tendencies toward unity of form, the short story cycle, in part because of its wavering between novel and short story collection, frustrates these tendencies more than most genres."¹⁶ This kind of rhetoric limits the genre's scope and reinforces a binary concept of longform narrative. Dunn and Morris use more helpful language when they characterize the genre as "a literary form that combines the complexities of a miscellany with the integrative qualities of a novel."¹⁷ Here, the short story composite is a melding of traits usually seen in but not exclusive to the novel and short story collection. The short story composite does not occupy the median between the two categories but instead an

¹⁴ Kennedy, vii.

¹⁵ Kennedy, vii.

¹⁶ Peter Donahue, "The Genre Which Is Not One: Hemingway's *In Our Time*, Difference, and the Short Story Cycle," in *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*, ed. Farhat Iftekharrudin et al. (Westport CT: Praeger, 2003), 165.

¹⁷ Dunn and Morris, 1.

entirely different third position, distinguished by its protean sensibility, its tendency toward being characterized only with tendencies, some which happen to be those of other genres.

Both the novel and the short story collection have their own forms of diversity and heterogeneity, but neither is in essence defined by its chameleon-like nature, its ability to both absorb different narratives and make of them a new artistic whole. Novels referred to as fragmented or composite could for many reasons be classed with the short story composite. As it stands, though, the inter-generic magnetism pulls in the other direction. Nagel, for one, finds this to be the determining factor in the genre's uncertain status:

The lack of understanding of the story cycle throughout the profession of literary study may result from its subordination to the concept of 'novel,' the implicit assumption being that the novel is the highest form of expression in fiction, and the attribution of 'novel' to a work of fiction is thus perceived as a compliment.¹⁸ Alternatively, failing this clear (even if artificial) pattern of coherence, the short story composite is often also allowed to collapse into the short story collection, a publishing format we erroneously label a genre.¹⁹

Misreading these works as novels or short story collections tends to harm both the works themselves and the genres for which they are being mistaken. Asked to admit the whole range of short story composites, the novel is devalued, its boundaries distended so as to threaten the central concept. Ferguson declares, "Trying to assimilate short story sequences. . . into 'novels' seems to me to be almost perverse, since it opens the term 'novel' to encompass virtually any fiction between its own hard (or soft) covers, and thus

¹⁸ Nagel, 15.

¹⁹ This is not to say short story collections are put together haphazardly or without their own set of legitimate conventions, just that those conventions are governed more by the exigencies of short fiction publishing than the deliberate creation of artistic wholes.

cancel any assistance the generic categories can give to the reader as an interpreter."²⁰ Consigning the short story composite to the status of collection also creates false expectations—by limiting them. And, as Ferguson points out, "The only reason for caring about whether a particular group of stories is a sequence or a cycle is the same reason as for caring what genre anything is: so that the reader can bring to bear appropriate strategies for understanding the work, for 'getting the most out of it.'"²¹ A misunderstanding of the short story composite forces us to read these works within a context and a set of reader expectations they have not sought to conform to or adopt. Judged on fidelity to incorrect conventions, how could they be seen as anything but artistically flawed or even broken? Admittedly, this does not seem to be a concern for most critics, but it is likely because we have developed successful ways of reading individual short story composites (at least those that cannot be ignored), precluding the need for other frameworks of understanding. For example, Joyce's *Dubliners* (1904) is often saddled with thematic unity readings based on the concepts of paralysis or epiphany, relatively cogent observations about the text which distract from a simple fact: these readings describe content-level continuity rather than part-to-whole narrative construction. In a community, in a land of "dead" Dubliners who struggle to understand one another, discovering the ways in which the text's short stories carry on a dialogue is surely vital to a reading of the book. To be able to do this, we are in need of a more nuanced understanding of the short story composite genre.

²⁰ Suzanne Ferguson, "Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles, and Composite Novels: The Short Story in the Genre Criticism," *Journal of the Short Story in English* 41 (2003): 113-14.

²¹ Ferguson, 104

Much is to be gained by a clearer articulation of short story composite theory. Informing this project is the observation that the short story composite was instrumental to the transformation of narrative during early modernism, or, as Kennedy puts it, the short story composite's "sheer proliferation since 1900 suggests an inherent consonance with certain pervasive modes of modernist expression."²² In addition to Joyce's seminal short story composite, works like *Three Lives* (1909) and *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) brought modernist forms to narrative prose before the novel succeeded in divining its own new forms of expression, rooted in subjectivity, fragmentation, and ambiguity. Our ability to adequately read those experimental novels, as well as the short story composites that preceded them, does not imply we have found the only way to do so, or even the best way. In fact, as the process of understanding the short story composite genre has typically meant simply understanding various members of the genre, there is still a need for an account of the more general principles that inform this turn of modern narrative. Even an acknowledgement that the genre is determined by and tends toward the integration or accumulation of different parts—to whatever degree they are complete in themselves or potentially independent of the whole—demands some attempt at characterizing different logics of coherence, not simply various work-specific forms. This process will create a useful vocabulary and set of concepts not just for the short story composite but also for a broader range of writing during the period which brings it to its pinnacle even as it ushers in its obsolescence. Much of modern and postmodern narrative is composite in nature. Better expressing short story composite theory, as a first step in elucidating the more general concept of composite narrative, would go a long way toward characterizing the

²² Kennedy, xi

more pervasive changes that came with the modernist revolution in literature, changes that eventually trickled down to traditional and popular forms.

II.

Given the broad implications of this project, I must engage with several theoretical fields in an attempt to create what is essentially a literary historical account of the rise and fall of the short story composite and its legacy to modern narrative forms. Though I draw from many short story composite theorists, my view of the genre is best articulated by Swedish critic Rolf Lundén, whose *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite* focuses on the often misunderstood or disregarded centrifugal forces at work in the short story composite. He is especially concerned with the way novel-focused readers and unity-focused critics tend to smooth over "rebellious" stories which don't fit the interpretive mold they've created for a particular work. Lundén argues that the inclusion of such disruptive pieces, which he calls "fringe stories," helps create a unique sense of a whole and defines the genre as a tension of rending and mending forces.²³ This kind of tension, at least in the context of the short story, has already been explored by Austin M. Wright:

If a form comes into view too easily and ceases to evolve as we reflect on it, we find it banal; if the process is stalled and our quest for a form is too stubbornly frustrated, we find the work chaotic. The life of a form—its power to interest us actively, to give us that immediacy and involvement which belong to all fiction we enjoy—depends upon our encounter with the resistance of the materials, the recalcitrance that seems constantly to be yielding to the shaping form.²⁴

²³ Rolf Lundén, *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 125.

²⁴ Austin M. Wright, "Recalcitrance in the Short Story," in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 117.

This critical concept of "recalcitrance" which Wright finds across the fictional genres has the ability to "rescue formal unity from some of its disadvantages."²⁵ As a force of productive tension, it informs my view of the short story composite as carrying out just the sort of balancing act Lundén describes.

Beyond the theory of the short story composite, genre theory is obviously important to my study, and it has come a long way in the past 25 years. It is now best understood as a descriptive enterprise, a collection of tendencies that allow a work to partake of a generic context. I am indebted to David Fishelov's *Metaphors of Genre*, which posits that multiple common metaphors of genre can be useful, but only if one knows what aspect of genre to which to apply them. In particular, Fishelov's discussion of family resemblance theory sits in the deep background of this project, informing my efforts to characterize a group of works that often appear more like distant relatives than immediate family. As Fishelov argues, "One might draw an analogy between the process of change that the modern family is undergoing and the process of change in the 'literary family,' the genre"²⁶: this is perhaps as good a sign as any that the short story composite, pushing the boundaries of genre theory, is the quintessential modern form. In this "flexible and elusive" system, genre cannot and should not create hierarchies, draw unambiguous lines, or expect to cover all the bases, so to speak. As Adena Rosmarin argues in her seminal revision of the field, "a genre is chosen or defined to fit neither a historical nor a theoretical reality but to serve a

²⁵ Wright, 115

²⁶ David Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre: The Role of Analogies in Genre Theory* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 81.

pragmatic end. It is meant to solve a critical problem, a problem that typically involves justifying the literary text's acknowledged but seemingly inexplicable value."²⁷

Genre is only useful inasmuch as it contributes to our understand of the works it proposes to describe, and a "new genre is correct not inherently but pragmatically: because it explains sufficiently well, the power to explain being identical with the power to correct the old genre, to remedy its deficiencies, to make it workable."²⁸ Here, I view the notion of "old genre" a bit differently than Rosmarin conceived it, not in terms of existence but application: the misreading of the short story composite as a novel. Rosmarin also argues that "generic explanation best persuades. . .by pushing itself to its explanatory limits."²⁹ The precarious business of chronicling Proteus is just this sort of challenge to genre; I hope to prove it is worth doing, because it is helpful to the work of criticism. Throughout this study genre is interrogated for its own sake, to establish the short story composite and confront its challenges. It is also seen in conjunction with narrative, as all too often one serves as a way of shorthanding the other, creating a tautological system that ceases to aid the critic. Like genre theory, narrative theory has come to see itself not as a rigid system but as a set of tools, subjective and qualified where it was once ostensibly objective, certain. Post-structuralist narratology does not only strive to be useful but also to recognize the ways in which literary or fictional narratives are embedded in a whole culture of story. Therefore, Mieke Bal gives this account of narrative theory: "Endorsing the view that interpretation is both subjective, and susceptible to cultural constraints—framings—that make the process of interpretation of more general interest, turns narrative analysis into an activity of

²⁷ Adena Rosmarin, *The Power of Genre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 49-50.

²⁸ Rosmarin, 50.

²⁹ Rosmarin, 48.

cultural analysis."³⁰ The culture in question here, that of early twentieth century America and Europe, is one in flux, making the narratives it creates sometimes messy and malleable.

As critical discourse, including my own, demonstrates, the concepts that we use to discuss modern³¹ narrative structure, especially its compositing, are not all that clear. In addition, we have recourse to few established terms, and those that we do employ are used for radically different, often unexamined, purposes. Three sets of concept labels in particular are used in ways that render them ambiguous or else strip them of their multivalency. The concept of *closure*, so central to the novel and therefore dominant over prose narrative, obscures the larger category of which it is a subset: narrative *coherence*. On the other hand, the description of a narrative being *open* or *closed*, in addition to becoming muddled with concepts of coherence, refers to at least two compatible but different aspects of the narrative text, one formal and one philosophical. Finally, the terms *lyric* and *epic*, especially the former, are the most used but least solidified conceptual apparatus for any discussion of the modernization of narrative—likely because, without conscious examination, they stand in for and communicate a variety of concepts, often at once.

Closure is the most loaded term that this study must parse. It is suitable for various modes of writing but operates in entirely different ways for each, inviting careless application. For my purposes, closure is a measure of how well a narrative is resolved at its end, the ways in which that ending draws together the narrative's threads in contributing to a sense of its wholeness. One might analyze many facets of closure, all contributing to the

³⁰ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 11.

³¹ Throughout this book, I will be using the term *modern* to denote a wide range of early twentieth century forms, of which the *modernist* movement was a significant part.

degree to which we find a work to be closed. For example, Marianna Torgovnik divides types of endings into structural functions: circular, parallel, incomplete, tangential, linking.³² Similar types of closure and the endings which determine them are found in the short story, as discussed by John Gerlach: solution of a central problem, natural termination (death, marriage, etc), completion of antithesis, manifestation of a moral, and encapsulation (such as seen in epilogue).³³

We must also look for other ways of conceptualizing closure. Alan Friedman, for example, discusses modern narrative openness, as seen in the novel, as a function of experience, not form. At the base structure of fiction, deeper than plot, is a process of forward motion Friedman calls the "flux of experience," and this process has ethical implications.³⁴ Rather than allow characters' experiences to be checked at the resolution (as they had in the literature of previous centuries), modern novelists often left them open, while still bringing the narrative to an end. In an examination of novels that are built upon a rhetorical rather than narrative structure, David H. Richter points out that novels resolve themselves in ways that are based on their own internal tensions. Because this is so, no matter how open they leave experience, they can't get around the necessity of completeness and shaping of form.³⁵ Closure is an important part of most narratives and can and should be studied. However, because of the dominance of the novel form, dependant to a high degree on narrative resolution, concepts of closure, especially

³² Marianna Torgovnik, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1981), 13-6.

³³ John Gerlach, *Toward the End: Closure and Structure in the American Short Story* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 8.

³⁴ Alan Friedman, *The Turn of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), xiii.

³⁵ David H. Richter, *Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 4.

narrative closure, have often become the only recognized mark of a work's wholeness. Lost along the way is the more general view of artistic wholeness, generally labeled *unity* or *coherence*, our sense of a meaningful relationship between a work's parts as they create a whole. Coherence and closure are not synonymous; coherence can operate in various ways upon a piece of prose fiction and can take forms that are not aimed at closure or even at narrative unity.

Closure, even of the open-ended sort, is not the only form of coherence, but a simple recognition of the complexities implied in this claim is not enough. We need more conceptual labels for the procedural structuration of a story, ones that expand the world of non-closural narrative and reveal it to be more than simply a single strategy defined solely in opposition to closure. Gerlach uses many helpful descriptors to elucidate short fiction technique, including the guiding dichotomy of his study: *direct* versus *indirect* presentation. Gerlach's research focuses on endings, but he acknowledges that narrative structure is seen in tensions that operate throughout a work, not merely at its conclusion. In a direct form, the story moves as unswervingly as possible toward its end, immediately tackling (though not necessarily removing) any stumbling blocks that arise. Indirect form, on the other hand, does its best to avoid reaching or even pursuing an ending. In practice these are tendencies more than absolutes, and they appear to a certain degree in any plotted narrative, forming its central tension of desire and delay. The propensity toward direct or indirect movement may dovetail with concepts of narrative as open or closed, but the direct/indirect dichotomy represents narrative structure as a process, not as a moment of closure. This notion of a story's directness or indirectness is not exclusively a province of

its structure, but inasmuch as it is, it can be a useful way of talking about narrative works that aren't dependent for their coherence upon the expedient movement of plot.

These are, of course, broad categories collapsing several aspects of prose narrative—content, form, and style—so they are instructive more as tendencies than categories. In practical use, they stand in for the metonymic and metaphoric poles in written art. *Metaphoric* might be the most honest conceptual label to employ in discussions of modernist narrative; however, as *lyric* predominates, I want to clarify what it usually signifies, especially as it encompasses many of the above concepts. Lyric, as the opposite of epic, has taken on a connotation of anti-narrative. Obviously, however, since a narrative form can't negate itself entirely, lyric becomes an adjective, a stubborn impulse within a plotted story to resist the forward movement of plot. This isn't entirely a misreading of the classic notion of lyric: a very common fallback from a focus on plot is a focus on one of the elements of plot, character. Therefore, one use of the adjective *lyric* is as shorthand for *character-driven*, which is typically an indirect form. A related and concomitant use of *lyric* is to indicate an anti-closural form of coherence—tricky, though, as closure is variously a question of experience and a matter of form. Lyric technique is best described as a structural strategy that deemphasizes the importance of the forward movement of plot as well as the role of narrative or experiential closure to that plot, in favor of non-developmental narrative or even non-narrative coherence. Lyric technique is exemplified by David Hayman's concept of *nodal* narrative, which is, importantly, not new to modernism but refined in the art of the period, to which it was extremely congenial. I argue

that this sense of the lyric—narrative subordinated to emotion and reaction, character presented in metaphoric language³⁶—is most clearly seen in the short story composite.

As should be clear from the above list of resources, a good understanding of the short story composite involves not only being able to disentangle it from the novel where it is possible to do so, but also engaging with the theory of the types of short fiction of which composites are formed. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel is essential, as he details the multiform nature of that genre; however, it is one that is predicated more upon a chorus of voices than an array of stories. In this way, he cannot elucidate the short story composite genre, but his work provides a helpful point of contrast between the genres while also modeling how to draw attention to and fill in a gap in genre theory. The most enlightening outside contribution to my conceptualization of the short story composite, however, comes from the work of short story theorists, from the seminal voices³⁷ chronicling the development of the genre and its modern form to newer voices³⁸ bringing the current scope of the field, including its intersection with the short story composite, into focus. Additionally, Dominic Head's interrogation of the modernist short story,³⁹ which cannot avoid the epiphany question or the role of Joyce in modernizing Anglo-American literature, proved critical, especially alongside Hayman's work.

³⁶ David Hayman, *Re-forming the Narrative: Toward a Mechanics of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 80-1.

³⁷ For example, Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, eds., *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); and Charles E. May, ed., *Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976).

³⁸ Such as the following: Farhat Iftekharuddin, ed., *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story* (Westport Conn.: Praeger, 2003); and Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans H Skei, eds., *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004).

³⁹ Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Finally, my understanding of the character of modern and modernist literature flows from the observation of Virginia Woolf that a new kind of realism was required for a changed world. Obviously, not every writer comprehended modernism this way; neither has every critic. At the very least, modernism must be understood as having a share in the changing culture within which it lived and breathed. I follow Adorno in recognizing that literary modernists were uniquely informed by their time, not merely echoing the world around them but instead producing works that bear its stamp in their form. Seen through this lens, the field we know as experimental modernism appears internally dynamic and complex, and it is set against traditional forms that continued to evolve throughout the period, also interacting with the modern world. Modern literature, as I use the term, is not a dichotomy but a whole range of approaches, any of which might've used composite narrative to translate worldview into art.

III.

This project proposes to highlight various contexts for and origins of the composite narrative problem, and to gesture at methodology for more nuanced readings of various composite texts. Chapter one lays the foundation for such an examination, surveying the short story's two lines of development in the nineteenth century which produced forms—the sketch and the modern short story—that by modernism had become encoded with divergent meanings and enduring values. As the modern short story form, instrumental to the development of modern narrative strategies, supersedes the looser sketch form, it also disenfranchised forms and works predicated upon a looser or narrative-based overall structure. Such a sea change in the literary world accounts for the disparity in canonical

status between *Dubliners* and *The Untilled Field*, the work of Joyce's Irish contemporary, George Moore. The anxiety accompanying this shift in aesthetics is illustrated in the mixed form of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, especially when compared with Hemingway's *In Our Time*, a new model of composite narrative for the post-war world.

Chapter two delves deeper into the nature of the changing critical-academic complex, which occasioned a new vision of the role of the artist and, correspondingly, the task of the reader-reviewer. It also called into question the very purpose of art. In particular, the chapter discusses the concepts of narrative framing and authorial control or guidance—arenas in which modernist shibboleths are so easily formed. The surprising friendship between avant-garde forbear Gertrude Stein and modern traditionalist Thornton Wilder, built as it was upon mutual aid as well as collaboration, serves as a clear illustration of the complexities of a period of transition, when aesthetics and criticism were still in flux. The forming divide between high and low art, as well as the legacy of that partition can be seen in the short story composites of the two writers, Stein's loosely connected *Three Lives*, devoid of any extratextual intervention on the part of its compiler, and Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which is overtly framed by a narrator. Cubist insistence on flattened perspective and, later, techniques of collage speak to the new attitudes about representation that are intimately connected with the way a piece of art is presented and/or glossed for its audience.

Chapter three explores one area that has been only shallowly explored in the wake of the shift to modern aesthetics: the concept of textual autonomy. A failure to recognize the dual nature of autonomy, as something both formal and narrative, obscures the modern temperament of many narrative composites and episodic narratives. For example, Sarah

Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* have been either critically neglected or understood only in thematic terms, due to their complication of the notion of autonomy. Despite the text's similarities, however, they display differences that speak to the fifty years of change that happened in the interim between the works' dates of publication, a period that roughly overlaps with modernism. Also spanning that period is the oeuvre of Willa Cather, and a categorization and structural analysis of her works highlights and hopes to mitigate the deficiencies in our current conceptualization of and vocabulary for compositing strategies both formal and narrative.

Chapter four addresses a potential hub of modernist techniques, including composite, fragmented, and paratactic narrative: modern total war. The fiction of WWI, most of it written during the course of the high modernist 1920s, shows the point at which the novel and short story composite reach equilibrium. Though they are two approaches that deal with the same modern problems, they do so in different ways. These ways are either derived from or determinate of the works' thematic ends, as seen in a comparison of canonical modernist Dos Passos's 1920 novel *Three Soldiers* with *Company K*, a 1933 short story composite of little-known novelist and war veteran William March. These composite narratives fit into the greater context of WWI fiction, yet they are able to reach more complex ends than traditional single-protagonist works, ends that also keep them firmly within the context of developing modern and modernist aesthetics. In fact, the use of compositing techniques by writers high and low signals the extent to which these aesthetics were organic to the period.

Through such explorations, this study illustrates the need for a better understanding of modern narrative strategies, specifically the use of composite forms, by

drawing attention to the root causes of the change and modeling a comparative analysis that neither forces the short story composite to act in reaction to the novel nor allows it to continue to be subjugated by or conflated with it. The two genres sometimes share narrative strategies, nowhere more than at modernism, and a willingness to see the complexity in this relationship will liberate them both—in their embattled genre definitions as well as the parameters of their narrative strategies. Through problematizing the intersection of genre and narrative theory, I will make a case for the role of and importance of the short story composite in modern narrative development. Tracing the development of composite forms shows that the short story composite is worth examining in depth, as it is the carrier of that narrative technique as well as its best cautionary tale.

1. The Divided Consciousness and the Legacy of the Short Story in Modernist Narrative

I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character...that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved.

—Virginia Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown"

In speech-turned-essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," Virginia Woolf famously takes some of her literary contemporaries to task for using old "tools" of fiction, for continuing the Victorian approach to the novel when she believed the worldview upon which it depended had become a thing of nostalgic illusion rather than reality. Here, she has the advantage of hindsight; for though she identifies 1910 as the locus of change, she does so in 1923, when landmark works like *Ulysses* and "The Waste Land" were already part of a new literary zeitgeist. However, this position was paradoxically a poor one from which to attempt to identify what modernism was or what its legacy would be. She was speaking *in medias res*, which on a different occasion she readily admits does not put her in the position to see the whole scope of things:

It is for the historian of literature to . . . say if we are now beginning or ending or standing in the middle of a great period of prose fiction, for down in the plain little is visible. We only know that certain gritudes and hostilities inspire us; that certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert. . .⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2., ed. Rachel Bowlby (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1966), 103.

Through her figurative Mrs. Brown, Woolf's audience becomes acquainted with some of those "gratitudes and hostilities" as Woolf playfully illustrates the fundamental problem with old novelistic techniques and opines for a better approach, one focused on character rather than plot or theme. Understandably yet conspicuously absent from her discussion, however, is any clear idea of how one might recognize this "fertile land" once one gets there.

As Woolf sharply divided contemporary English writers into two camps, *Edwardians* like Arnold Bennett (belated Victorians) and her fellow forward-thinking *Georgians*, she knew, there "[o]n the flat, in the crowd, half blind with dust," that it was not that simple.⁴¹ Later, she acknowledges that the shift in society "was not so sudden and definite like that" and admits that the date she pinpoints—December 1910—is "arbitrary,"⁴² perhaps just as much an imaginative embodiment of a concept as her theoretical Mrs. Brown. Even within the essay itself, her binary breaks down with two writers: E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence.⁴³ Unlike Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H. G. Wells, for whom she evinces dismissive disdain, her language shows her to be actively frustrated with Lawrence and Forster, as if she believes they should know better. Arguably, they do: she wouldn't identify with them and display such dissatisfaction if they weren't attempting to approach fiction in

⁴¹ Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 103

⁴² Virginia Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," in *A Woman's Essays: Selected Essays: Volume One*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1992), 70.

⁴³ As Woolf saw it, Lawrence and Forster "spoil their early work because, instead of throwing away those tools, they tried to use them. They tried to compromise. They tried to combine their own direct sense of the oddity and significance of some character with Mr Galsworthy's knowledge of the Factory Acts, and Mr Bennett's knowledge of the Five Towns. They tried it, but they had too keen, too overpowering a sense of Mrs Brown and her peculiarities to go on trying it much longer" (Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," 83-4).

new, modern ways.⁴⁴ Though Lawrence and Forster are the only transitional writers listed in Woolf's essay, they are not anomalies. Many artists of the period fall into this category, blithely straddling the cultural century mark or crossing back and forth over it, if not in their writing itself at least in their reading habits and relationships with other writers. In fact, Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid argue that though connections between modern writers commonly distinguished as "high" or "low" (or even "popular") now go unnoticed or at least unexamined, they were nonetheless important. This is surely what occasioned polemics like Woolf's; as DiBattista and McDiarmid put it, "such disputes appear now more like family or intergenerational quarrels in which the contending parties seem to be putting up a spirited defense against the lurking threat of codependency."⁴⁵ Despite whatever simplified tale we have traditionally told about the period, we are all too aware that modern modes of prose and verse did not come to prominence overnight or unequivocally, dependent as they were on a complex of cultural factors, including the work of "low" modernist and "popular" writers.

The modern short story, the earliest developmental step of modernist narrative, marks 1914 as a milestone, but the publication of Joyce's *Dubliners* did not, at the time, seem to usher in the end of an era. As Heather Ingman points out, the work was not a radical breaking of Irish literary tradition but more of a momentary glitch in a realism that

⁴⁴ Incidentally, Woolf labels as Georgians both Joyce and Eliot, whose works she saw as largely provisional, aesthetically – and just as frustrating. (Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 84-6).

⁴⁵ Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid, introduction to *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889-1939*, ed. DiBattista and McDiarmid (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

would continue for decades to come.⁴⁶ In fact, even within the realm of what we now label *modernism* not everyone adopted the new short story form, nor would they, as in *Dubliners*, adapt a comparably extra-narrative structure for composite works. Take, for example, Sherwood Anderson, whose 1919 composite *Winesburg, Ohio* chronicles the lives of several frustrated, isolated townspeople. Ironically, the common problems of the town's citizenry create a thematic similarity which draws the various protagonists together, lending a cohesion to the collected stories which goes beyond their shared setting—not unlike that seen in *Dubliners*. However, Anderson also employs a traditional protagonist figure, George Willard, whose presence as listener-observer brings the Winesburgers together in the field of narrative, too, overlaying one kind of coherence—the collective portrait of a place and time—with another—the *bildungsroman*. A comparably thorny text is *The Untilled Field*, a short story composite by George Moore, a writer a generation ahead of Joyce.⁴⁷ Like *Dubliners*, it focuses on a variety of unconnected characters that have been failed by the same socio-political system, but, formally, Ingman describes the work as "a transitional volume, employing some traditional techniques while at the same time developing the sophistication of the Irish short story form through psychological insight, concision, allusiveness and understatement."⁴⁸ Though *Dubliners* arguably serves as the model text for both the modern short story and short story composite, the somewhat eccentric approaches of Moore and Anderson are just as important as specimens of the new, modern

⁴⁶ Heather Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 97.

⁴⁷ Born in 1852, Moore was thirty years Joyce's senior, but his long career made him a publishing contemporary of the younger writer. Moore produced perhaps his best-known work, *Esther Waters*, in 1894, and *The Untilled Field* first appeared in 1903, around the time Joyce was composing *Dubliners*.

⁴⁸ Ingman, 93.

model of composite prose narrative—more useful, in fact, because their simultaneous use of a variety of "tools," old and new, makes clearer how that model came into being.

Unfortunately, there is rarely a focus on this kind of literary historical work. Evaluations of the relationship between these works are typically exercises in inventive close reading or historical/biographical work, and neither route has provided a satisfactory account of how much, if at all, and in what way Joyce could have been following Moore's lead in matters of narrative and composite form, or, alternatively, whose lead both might have been following. Perhaps these critics are asking the wrong questions. Textual comparison convinces us that the works resemble each other, but it stops short of being able to turn that parity into a tale of influence.⁴⁹ Biographical approaches are frustrated by the contrary and contradictory nature of both writers, who were equally likely to either admire the other's work or refuse to admit to such an admiration.⁵⁰ These explorations are interesting, but they don't reveal much about the context of this passive-aggressive literary feud: the genre conversation that outlines the changing status and aesthetic(s) of the short story around the turn of the twentieth century. Literary history asks a broader question about influence, one that speaks to posterity and canon formation: Why isn't anyone outside of Irish studies or short story criticism and theory familiar with the writings of George Moore? More specifically, why has *The Untilled Field* all but disappeared from a

⁴⁹ In forty years of scholarship, this hasn't changed much; compare Karl Beckson's arguments in "Moore's *The Untilled Field* and Joyce's *Dubliners*: The Short Story's Intricate Maze" (*English Literature in Transition* 15 [1972]: 291–304), with Ingman's in 2009. If there is a clear tale of influence, it is about subject—Ireland—rather than genre.

⁵⁰ For a more detailed account of the love-hate relationship between the two writers, see James F. Carens, "In Quest of a New Impulse: George Moore's *The Untilled Field* and James Joyce's *Dubliners*," in *The Irish Short Story: A Critical History*, ed. James Kilroy (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1984) 66; and Patrick A. McCarthy, "The Moore-Joyce Nexus: An Irish Literary Comedy," in *George Moore in Perspective*, ed. Janet Egleson Dunleavy (Naas, County Kildare: Malton Press, 1984), 100-01.

critical radar trained on *Dubliners*, a book uncomfortably similar in scope, content, and structure?

The easy but tautological answer is that Joyce himself survived as a major figure, so we read his works, while Moore and his works did not. An answer that gets at the reasons for their contrasting legacies is not quite as immediate or simple, but it certainly involves more than just an examination of the works for relational clues, whether personal, political, or philosophical. The difference is in the forms of short fiction each writer makes use of, the types of stories he tells. Joyce is considered one of the fathers of the twentieth century short story, an intricately structured piece of art that demands reader participation. Moore's short fiction, on the other hand, veers more often toward forms we now label traditional, including the orally derived folktale and the periodical-friendly sketch. Despite its modern concerns and style, *The Untilled Field* was written by a man arguably past his prime—a former disciple of Zola who wrote of country people in admittedly simple fashion—and, thus tainted by the nineteenth century, the text has been relegated to that period. *Dubliners*, on the other hand, written during the same period but published around the time of the turbulent Great War, didn't just participate in but helped legitimize the aesthetic with which we have historically associated modern literary art. It is not only a tighter, more poetic form; it is also a form built, as Woolf would have it, around character rather than story.

This chapter explores how this lyrical modern form became the very apotheosis of the short story genre, as well as the implications of this shift for the short story composite and, eventually, other longform prose genres like the novel. First, it is necessary to ground the discussion in an overview of short story history, the divergent narrative strategies that

developed in tandem during the nineteenth century, divided largely between the Anglo-American periodical tradition and the innovations of the French and Russians, among others. Looking at the short story in transition, through an examination of *Dubliners* and *The Untilled Field*, we see how the short fiction forms of the Victorian period, descriptive and externally focused, are not eradicated and replaced so much as transformed, focusing that description inward, to the self, just at the time the concept of a unified self was becoming unsustainable. This signals not just to a shift to a character-centered vision of narrative but a new understanding of character, rendered in the short story's "consideration of the fragmented, dehumanized self."⁵¹ Because the short story's revolution of form also affected the compositing of stories, the chapter will then turn to *Winesburg, Ohio*, to read its mixed structure as an illustration of the anxiety that attended such a transformation. Anderson's text and the protagonist (rein)forced upon it during the late stages of composition as a second level, and indeed a second pattern, of coherence might easily have served as a cautionary tale for a text like Hemingway's *In Our Time*. Published just six years later, Hemingway's short story composite became a new model of modern narrative, something which wouldn't have happened if it hadn't narrowly escaped collapsing under the weight of a correspondingly mixed structure falsely unified through the consciousness of Nick Adams.

II.

Our twenty-first century conceptualization of *short story* is markedly different from that of our predecessors, all the way down to the term itself. We sometimes view the

⁵¹ Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7-8.

modern form as the fully realized version of the genre, but, historically, the machine-like precision, elliptical structure, and self-conscious ambiguity and indirection that made those stories the darlings of the New Critical school⁵² have been far from requisite. Other forms of short fiction existed before the second half of the nineteenth century, but, as Romantics scholar Tim Killick points out, they were often carelessly and interchangeably labeled, seeming to confirm an inherent looseness in the conventions of a genre called a *tale* or *sketch* or simply a *story*.⁵³ In the nineteenth century, when short story theory began its modern development, narrative prose was a nascent form of art. The novel was less than two hundred years old and still defending itself on the often-conflicting grounds of verisimilitude and morality. Responding to the demands of the market rather than learned criticism, the novel was, according to Ian Watt, represented by myriad forms, many of which derived from other genres, modes, and rhetorical situations.⁵⁴ The short story was likewise a multiform concept, especially when it took the label *sketch*. In an examination of early American short fiction, Kristie Hamilton observes that what started as a relatively straightforward figurative use of an artistic term—"a verbal rendering of visualized scenes and characters"—had, by the time of Washington Irving, come to include short works of all fictional and essayistic varieties.⁵⁵ The genre's malleability wasn't particularly

⁵² Susan Lohafer, *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 4-6.

⁵³ Tim Killick, *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century the Rise of the Tale* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2008), 17-9.

⁵⁴ For example, Daniel Defoe excelled at episodic narratives like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, Samuel Richardson wrote in the epistolary form in *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* was in the vein of epic satire (Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957], 13-15).

⁵⁵ Kristie Hamilton, *America's Sketchbook: The Cultural Life of a Nineteenth-Century Literary Genre* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1998), 15. Killick, likewise, notes that the short fiction of the day included many "ephemeral and elastic modes of writing" (19-21, 22).

disconcerting until the modernist aesthetic of art ushered in a preoccupation with form.⁵⁶ For example, late nineteenth century realist Mark Twain preferred the short story to the novel, in part because he believed the genre was closer to older, oral forms, which "determined the loose, spontaneous, immediate character of the short story."⁵⁷ While the novel necessitated "construction and architecture," the short tale might, to paraphrase Twain, be free to meander wherever it pleases, even if it doesn't end up anywhere (Perosa 77). Through the influence of Poe and others, the short story, like the novel, became largely a private, written art, requiring more formal rigidity; then, generic definitions, those tools of writers and literary critics, became necessary.⁵⁸

According to short fiction scholar Harold Orel, as the nineteenth century went on the novel ascended and the short story, though popular, was seen as a "by-product" of novel writing and began to be treated as simply "filler" for the exploding periodical industry.⁵⁹ Because narratives both long and short were largely composed for magazines,

⁵⁶ As modernist contemporary critic Edmund Wilson saw it, this lack of concern is an accurate description of only the Anglo-American tradition of letters, pre-modernism. According to Wilson, the continental tradition had always been more rigorous in theorizing its written art, which is perhaps part of why there was such a sharp division in the approach and style of short stories in the nineteenth century (Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* [New York: Scribner's, 1931], 17-18).

⁵⁷ Sergio Perosa, *American Theories of the Novel, 1793-1903* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 77.

⁵⁸ By way of defending the modern form, Thomas A. Gullason gives a good description of the shift: "Many readers still have, however, an old-fashioned picture of the short story: a rambling, simple, balladlike narrative, a public, oral art, the property of the storyteller and his community. The present-day short story is mainly a private art, between writer and reader, and it is as sophisticated as the novel, with as great a concern for craft, for technique and style, and for complexity of emotion and ideas—all presented, of course, on a miniature scale" (Gullason, "The Short Story: An Underrated Art," in *Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May [Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976], 14).

⁵⁹ Harold Orel, *The Victorian Short Story: Development and Triumph of a Literary Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2.

they were shaped by the realities of the publication process or the tastes of the audience, rather than some notion of artistic form, a situation which did not foster clearly drawn lines between narrative types and forms. Orel reminds us that novel writers like Dickens and Trollope composed to fit the column inches allowed them, and in detachable increments which had their own dramatic structure. Conversely, short story writers had to be cognizant of devices with which to tie together their individual magazine contributions.⁶⁰ When one considers that many of these writers worked in both forms, and others such as Dickens were editors, too, it is not surprising that the concept and structure of the story, long or short, much less the terminology for it, was imprecise. Rare was a writer like Poe who objected to the floppy use of genre terms in nineteenth century practice, as noted by Killick and others. In his famous 1842 review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe quibbles with the label *tales* because some of the works are actually essays, identified as such given their "discrepancy with that marked precision and finish by which the body of the work is distinguished."⁶¹ By Poe's standards, a short story should be readable in one sitting because its identity is bound up in its "singleness of effect."⁶² This sense of unity or totality could be achieved by ensuring that all the parts of a story contribute to its coherence. It is here with Poe in the early 1840s that our concept of a formally unified short story began to take shape.⁶³

⁶⁰ Thomas Hardy, for example, often changed his work between periodical and book publication, editing stories' content or adding prefaces and transitions so as to make the collection more cohesive (Orel 101).

⁶¹ Edgar Allen Poe, "Review of 'Twice-Told Tales,'" in *Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 47.

⁶² Poe, 47.

⁶³ This has long been a critical given; it was recognized, for example, by Edmund Wilson, who traced the Modernism of writers like Joyce and Proust back to the mid-nineteenth century Symbolist movement on the continent. According to Wilson, Poe was an "important

Though the literary short story in its modern incarnation traces its roots back to Poe's theory, it also reaches beyond it. Characterized by its refusal to close the reader's experience with the text, to delimit interpretation with explanation, the modern short story is in another sense decisively closed, as everything in it, as Poe would have it, is integral to its meaning. As such, its endings are formally decisive but often narratively or rhetorically inconclusive, implying the story's meaning but resisting a moral or else serving as the last but not necessarily most important piece of the interpretive puzzle. Modernist short story critic Dominic Head explains that, rather than being predicated upon progressive narrative and a strong closural structure, modern short fiction, in its "self-conscious foregrounding of form," often displays a "reliance on pattern—paradigmatic devices—to express that which is absent from the surface, or syntagmatic level of narrative."⁶⁴ This results in stories that resemble Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," in which characters and situations are presented rather than explained, or Anderson's "Hands," in which explanations tend to make the narrative (the story or its rendering as text) less clear, sometimes as a way to shed light on the character in question. The texts, then, are often structured by other means and toward other goals. A sketch, on the other hand, has no such illusions. By modern standards, the genre seems almost inartistically open, in part because it is more defined by content and worldview than by form. As Hamilton explains,

sketches might be identified by their subject matter, which was deemed appropriate if it could be communicated "desultorily" (via Irving), allowing for digression, and

prophet" and his critical writing proved to be the "first scripture" of the movement: "he had formulated what amounted to a new literary programme" (Wilson, 12). Eugene Current-García concurs, finding that even though most no longer entirely agree with Poe's theories, they still form the backbone of contemporary short story criticism (*The American Short Story Before 1850: A Critical History* [Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1985], 59-60).

⁶⁴ Head, 8.

without requirement of an elaborate plot; sketches captured "scenes," "characters," "incidents," "sights," "recollections," and "reveries" on the page.⁶⁵

Sketches, then, were devoted to subjects of restricted scope, which might be explored in an unrestricted way. The sketch's less conscientious adherence to unity of form gives it a particular freedom; unlike the modern short story, which makes interpretation challenging, the sketch does not "foreclose on interpretive possibilities."⁶⁶ A sketch often meanders like Twain's "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," one of the best examples of the southwest humor tradition, or trails off like Charles W. Chesnutt's reinterpretation of the plantation folktale in "The Goophered Grapevine." And, as in Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," a sketch may be more memorable as a striking and involving scenario than as a thrilling progression of plot.

Taking such a digressive, indecisive, or open-ended forms, the sketch is sometimes characterized as lesser art, not because it is without structure but because it is without the right kind of structure, that which strives to be a written art rather than the kind of tale that might've been shared by any inventive and loquacious speaker. Indeed, the above examples from Twain and Chesnutt are just that, their third-person narration used as a frame for a second storyteller and his tale. However, beginning in the forties, for a generation of zealous formalists and New Critics, attention to "well-wrought" form, rather than impressive style, involving plot, or edifying theme, was the identifying marker of art. This was especially true for the burgeoning field of short story criticism. Susan Lohafer argues that the earliest short story critics in academia "viewed narrative as an elliptical, spatially designed network of references, and all but prescribed a certain kind of reader for

⁶⁵ Hamilton, 2-3.

⁶⁶ Hamilton, 4.

the modern text—or any text that mattered."⁶⁷ Logically, a gulf opened up between the two approaches to prose narrative, and this tension is still present, seen now in the separation of the lowbrow from the "literary," a distinction that, before modernism, would not have been made upon the same grounds or perhaps at all. As Perosa's comprehensive *American Theories of the Novel* demonstrates, the more important debate considered a novel's relationship to reality and history: realism, where life is pictured as it is or was, was set against romance, where it is depicted as it could or even should have been. These are content-based distinctions, and in 1884 Henry James was eager to put them to rest: "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression."⁶⁸ Where there was once simply good or bad fiction—for instance, James identifies novels as successful only insofar as they are "sincere" and "interesting"⁶⁹—now we separate high art and low, the artistic from the merely "interesting" or clever. We divide the modernist short story in all its coquettish exactitude from its unfashionable ancestor, the loose and baggy sketch. We divide so well that some theorists—beginning as early as the turn of the century with Poe disciple Brander Matthews,⁷⁰ and continuing to the end of the century and beyond with Mary Rohrberger⁷¹ and others—conceive of the modern short story as an entirely different genre.

⁶⁷ Lohafer, 4.

⁶⁸ Henry James, *The Art of Fiction, and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1948), 8.

⁶⁹ James, 8, 22.

⁷⁰ Matthews was so intent upon this distinction that he employed two different terms: *short story* simply referred to any short narrative, while *short-story* denoted the modern form, specifically ("The Philosophy of the Short-Story," in *May*, 52-9).

⁷¹ Like Matthews, Rohrberger is prone to making this distinction explicit through labeling: *short story* versus *simple narrative*. See Rohrberger's discussion of the genre in her personal essay "Origins, Development, Substance, and Design of the Short Story," *The Art of*

In many ways that matter, however, the looser, sketch-style form is not so different from the esoteric forms of high modernism in that both—and, arguably, the genre as a whole—can be puzzling for the uninitiated. In my experience teaching undergraduates the above mentioned pieces by Twain, Chesnutt, Anderson, and Hemingway, all four stories tend to prompt the same question: What is the point? The point, generally, is to put something on display for the reader—for instance, the art of the country storyteller or the effect of violence on a man's psyche. Whether subject or object is directly, didactically explained or merely evoked, the formal goal of presentation can be confusing for novel-oriented readers expecting to be carried away by a plot, improved by an argument, or transported by extended experience with a character—that is, confronted with an insistently developmental structure. Written short stories tend to operate upon the assumption that plot development or action is not the only or necessarily the most important part of storytelling. Short Story writer Eudora Welty has a particularly helpful way of conceptualizing this difference: "In outward semblance, many stories have plots in common—which is of no more account than that many people have blue eyes. Plots are, indeed, what we see with. What's seen is what we're interested in."⁷²

This concept of "seeing" is behind our problematic reading of the modern short story as grounded in epiphany. In some ways, this is a reasonable approach, as it reflects the modern short story's recentering of narrative focus, from development of plot to exploration of character. However, in our common usage of the term *epiphany*, we assume that such short stories will depict a character's moment of personal illumination; but even

Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis, ed. Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans H Skei (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 1-13.

⁷² Eudora Welty, "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories," in *May*, 170.

in *Dubliners*, arguably the heart of the epiphany theory of modernist fiction, most characters decidedly do not experience revelations about themselves.⁷³ The revelation happens for the reader, who finds the character on the page suddenly made clear—his or her history, motivations, or even fate. This type of epiphany can and does happen in novels, but there it is a part of a larger narrative fabric. In short stories, it can be the very point of the piece. In addition to the epiphany concept, the short story genre is described in various other competing claims of mode or content, from writer Frank O'Connor's insistence that short fiction deals with human loneliness and "submerged population groups" to writer and critic Charles E. May's alignment of the genre with myth and romantic-metaphoric storytelling forms rather than metonymic, realistic discourse.⁷⁴ Notable early short story theorist and critic Norman Friedman rightly argues that as helpful and pertinent as these accounts of the short story can be, they are narrow and historically focused, mixing aspects of content and form in such a way that the genre definitions they posit are really accounts of a mode (like Romance) or a period-based aesthetic (such as modernism), one that cuts across genres.⁷⁵ In other words, they are definitions that don't define genre at all. A broader, diachronic concept of the short story, then, is not only more widely useful but also more accurate.

This is not to say a focus on the modern short story is unwarranted, or a reading that comprehends it as something quite new is unreasonable. Consider Hamilton's account of the nineteenth century sketch:

⁷³ Head, 48-9.

⁷⁴ Norman Friedman, "Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition," in Lohafer and Clarey, 13-31.

⁷⁵ N. Friedman, 18-24.

By definition the genre combined the claim to visual representation with a generic license to discursive informality, thereby making the sketch a primary location of the struggle for dominance of two ways of seeing: one, the detached, "sauntering gaze" and the other, an involved, proximate form of perception and depiction.⁷⁶

If Hamilton is right and the competition between detached and involved perception was a central tension in the sketch genre, there is probably a good reason the short story seems to come alive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After all, the tension Hamilton describes is not dissimilar to a paradox being worked out in modernism: the conflict between a commitment to the objective, unmediated rendering of reality and the notion that reality exists only as a product of one's subjective experience. For example, in 1931 Edmund Wilson describes modernism (in his terms, a kind of latter-day or second-wave French Symbolism), especially as exemplified by Joyce, as juggling and thus helpfully synthesizing two competing aesthetic concerns: the ultimately impenetrable subjectivity of Symbolism and the dry classical detachment of Naturalism. According to Wilson,

In order to understand what Joyce is doing [in *Ulysses*], one must conceive a set of Symbolist poems, themselves involving characters whose minds are represented Symbolistically, depending not from the sensibility of the poet speaking in his own person, but from the poet's imagination playing a role absolutely impersonal and always imposing upon itself all the Naturalistic restrictions in regard to the story it is telling at the same time that it allows itself to exercise all the Symbolistic privileges in regard to the way it tells it.⁷⁷

Our account of this tension as handed down from the Symbolists hasn't changed much in 75 years. In a discussion of Baudelaire's indictment of the romantic pose in the poem "To a Red-headed Beggar Girl," Peter Nicholls views the author's detachment as contributing to the central irony in modern literature, as passed down from the Romantics:

while the poet claims to abolish the social distance between himself and the girl, he actually replaces it with another which is primarily aesthetic. . . It is as if there are

⁷⁶ Hamilton, 133.

⁷⁷ Wilson, 206.

two voices at work in the poem: one which sympathizes with the girl and expresses admiration for her 'natural' charms and another which simply takes her as an occasion for a poem.⁷⁸

Though Wilson and Nicholls put different valuations on this paradox of the modern worldview, they recognize the same problem presented by the dual impulses of sympathy and detachment. This is a conflict Baudelaire was interrogating in the 1840s, around the same time that Poe was articulating his unity theory—likely because of such an articulation, given the influence Poe had on the Symbolists. Perhaps, then, the modern short story form was not sculpted in response to modernism so much as that period came to respond to it, to take up a form it found to be well-suited to exploring ambiguity, multiplicity, and instability. As Head argues,

This coincidence between the modernist preoccupation with form and the capacity of the story is significant, and is only one of several such correspondences. The modernists' compression of time and dependence on symbolism are the two most obvious parallels: the short form often implies the typicality of a specific episode, while narrative limitation demands oblique expression through image and symbol.⁷⁹

The modern form of the short story, seen as a product of the reciprocal relationship between an established genre and a changing philosophy of art, does indeed appear to take precedence—but as a culmination, perhaps a high water mark of a genre already in existence, intrinsically attuned to the tensions that would come to preoccupy modernist fiction.

Though acknowledging the real differences between the traditional and the modern, the sketch and the unified short story, I assert that they are aspects of one genre. And, like Friedman, I must, at least provisionally, adhere to a broad view of that genre, based on its

⁷⁸ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 49.

⁷⁹ Head, 7.

name: a *short story* is simply a story (i.e., a narrative in prose) that is not long. If this sounds simplistic, it is, but no more so than the broad term *novel*, spanning narratives superficially similar but fundamentally diverse. For example, consider the range of forms used in three novels all centered on a "fallen woman": Defoe's picaresque *Moll Flanders* (1722), Crane's deterministic *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), and Faulkner's nearly expressionist *Sanctuary* (1931). More problematic are questions of structure and content, which are difficult to disentangle from ever-changing period-driven notions of what is accepted as a story and how one measures shortness.

III.

An understanding of the short story genre in its modern incarnation must begin in the nineteenth century, with an examination of the two strands of short fiction's formal development, viewed separately and in interrelationship. Much criticism has focused on the emergence of the Poe-style unified short story, especially as it brings a particular school of American short fiction into line with the symbolism and expressionism of the influential French and Russian traditions. This stands in stark contrast to the dominant Anglo-American Victorian/realist tradition of looser forms like the sketch. For my purposes, however, two particular writers are the most interesting, because of their importance to the genre as a whole but also because of their resistance to easy categorization within this necessarily crude dichotomy. American writer Washington Irving, who began publishing a few years before Poe's remarks on the "single effect" of the short story, did not limit himself to local subjects in *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon*, but he employed a single narrative perspective which allowed his sketches—and the sketch form in general—to

bridge continents and cultures. Some years after Poe's theory, Francophile Russian Ivan Turgenev put forth *A Sportsman's Sketches*, a work whose style and narrative structuring were influential to writers on both sides of the eventual formal divide, including all four writers whose works are to be analyzed in depth in this chapter. These two sketchbooks provide a glimpse of the eighteenth century from which the short story emerged as well as the ways in which this debate was carried into the twentieth century and beyond, and they will serve as bookends for a much broader discussion.

Irving's literary output represents many realities of nineteenth century Anglo-American short fiction, especially its transatlantic nature. Born in 1783, Irving grew up in an America that was politically independent but culturally still very much tied to the motherland. Irving's first book-length work, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1819-20), a collection of magazine pieces, had extraordinary transnational appeal. For the British, it was of exotic origin, coming from the former colonies, and, according to short story historian Eugene Current-García, its deference to English scenes and subjects won over a wary British reading public; Americans, for their part, were encouraged to see a fellow countryman succeed.⁸⁰ The book's popularity likely had little to do with the particularly American character with which we've now mythically endowed popular stories like "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," for they were two of the mere three works of fiction in the volume. And these tales, derived from oral storytelling, are not originally American stories at all or even original to Irving; they are European folktales have been

⁸⁰ Current-García, 26.

thrust into an American setting.⁸¹ The rest of the work, reflecting current periodical trends, was a blend of fiction and non-fiction, with sketches described by Killick as ranging from "scenic descriptions" and "anecdotal character portrayals" to "musings on art, nationality, and customs" and "treatises on historical figures."⁸² Remarkably, despite this variety, Irving's *Sketchbook* still attains a sense of overall coherence. Many critics argue that Crayon, as Irving's pseudonymous author-narrator, provides a unifying voice.⁸³ It is one which helps establish American literary tradition as a functional patchwork of forms and influences, echoing our political model, a federation of states.

American short stories, then, especially as they began to take on a particularly American tone, display a variety of subjects and modes. Poe and Hawthorne, who, according to Current-García, were the fathers of the American short story tradition, were themselves wildly different men, given their origins, education, and personalities.⁸⁴ Poe's gothic tales are a product of their times, reflecting audience tastes; however, his detective fiction, more rational than romantic, represented something quite new. Little of Poe's fiction was particularly American in setting or character. His earliest tales, for example, were satirical responses to other writers, both American and British.⁸⁵ Hawthorne, on the other hand, writing at the same time, produced distinctly American stories, traversing New England's long history, largely in dark modes ranging from the gothic to what he termed

⁸¹ The stories are German or Dutch in origin. Note that "The Spectre Bridegroom" was not transplanted to an American setting, which perhaps explains why it doesn't share the same privileged place in the canon of American short fiction.

⁸² Killick, 46

⁸³ Current-García, 28; Killick, 46.

⁸⁴ Current-García, 60.

⁸⁵ Current-García, 62-3.

the "psychological romance."⁸⁶ Hawthorne in the 1830s-1840s and Melville in the 1840s onward saw themselves as authors of *tales*, as the their titles *Twice-told Tales* and *Piazza Tales* assert. But where Hawthorne was romantic and psychological, Melville represented, according to Current-García, the shape of things to come: "His mimetic characterizations and uncanny manipulation of factual details as a means of probing beneath the surface of everyday reality marked a further shifting toward modern realism in the art of fiction."⁸⁷ In the second half of the century, romance, adventure, and horror gave way to realist forms such as local color and regionalism, which brought remote parts of the country like the South and the frontier to an urban audience through the observation of outsider narrators as well as natives. Not unlike Irving's sketches, regionalist short fiction was descriptive as much as narrative; when narrative, it was often just as interested in storytelling styles, as evidenced by Twain's southwest humor and Bret Harte's tall tales of California pioneers and miners. Given the voyeuristic and documentary nature of much of this writing, even at its most fantastical, the line was blurred between fiction and non-fiction,⁸⁸ especially since much of the popular journalism of the day was also narrative and just as likely to record scenes and customs, and to target the same urban, largely eastern audience.

Story, for the British, was a comparable concept. There are, of course, differences between the Victorian and American strains of realism, but many of those are tied to content rather than form. For instance, American Sarah Orne Jewett's episodic novels of country life, *Deephaven* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, are not unlike Mary Russell

⁸⁶ Current-García, 50-1.

⁸⁷ Current-García, 125.

⁸⁸ Karen Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-century American Newspapers and Fiction* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2005).

Mitford's *Our Village* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*. These works all seek to depict life in a small village, especially the feminine homosocial. However, the social upheaval in Britain at mid-century spawned socially conscious or even radically political creative works such as not seen in America. Semi-documentary *blue book* shed light on the social issues of the times, inspiring sentimental *silver fork* narratives designed to retreat from that reality. The scope of the short story form in England can be seen in Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, a mixture of narrative and descriptive pieces, somewhere on the line between fiction and fact. In the section "Scenes," Dickens's narrator visits prisons and other unsavory parts of town, modeling realism as both a rhetorical mode and an attitude toward subject matter. However, his narrator also spends a good deal of time exploring "Our parish," in narrative sketches concerning minutiae of village life, domestic description, and genteel social custom—the other typical use of realism in fiction.

By the turn of the century, the chasm between writers who wrote for their audience (i.e., for money) and those who as much as possible strove to follow their artistic impulse wherever it went was fairly wide. Writers like Stevenson, Kipling, and Wells often explicitly set out to write what would sell, which led them toward the entertaining and the outrageous, largely gothic tales or early forays into fantasy and science fiction. Writers like Hardy and Conrad, however, struggled with and resented the strictures placed upon them. Hardy was still able to create in response to the market, publishing Victorian naturalist novels both popular and well received, as well as selling a good deal of short fiction.⁸⁹ Conrad, on the other hand, wasn't particularly good at meeting publishers' expectations; even with the advent of modernism, when he found his impressionistic approach in vogue

⁸⁹ For an account of Hardy's love-hate relationship with the late nineteenth century periodical press, see Orel 96-114.

with the intellectual elite, his works suffered the same fate as theirs, misunderstood by the popular readership. The voracious appetites of the British and American reading public invited the periodical industry to accept a little bit of everything as a "story," which is essentially what most sketchbooks (and periodicals) were, a hodgepodge of mode and genre, with fiction and non-fiction resting ambiguously under the same cover. The concept of shortness was also vaguely expansive, given its contingency not upon a set of understood literary standards but upon the practical needs of the magazine. Restrictions of space, while shaping narrative structure and limiting the size of the work as a prose unit, led to a greater freedom of content and style, as sketches could (and sometimes must) move as slowly and aimlessly over their territory as their authors desired.

With the turn of the century, Anglo-American concepts of both story and shortness, as well as their relationship, were changing, which is readily apparent in the narrative idiosyncrasies of proto-modernists James and Conrad. Short story theorists commonly point to works like "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as generic outliers, judging by scope more than length. One rarely labels *Heart of Darkness* a short story. At approximately 40,000 words it is sometimes given as an example of a work just over the upper limit of length for the genre but is usually called a short novel or novella. However, an analysis of the work as a novel of any sort must admit that its philosophical scope is profound but its narrative scope is rather limited. Verisimilitude requires us to view Marlow's tale in its storytelling context, prompting us recall one of Poe's requirements for the short story genre: it must be consumable in one sitting. Since Marlow's story (and the frame which contains it) is not, it is typically not called a short story; however, its identity as a novel is tenuous, as the style holds a line somewhere

between oral storytelling and writerly modernist narrative. At the other extreme, James's "The Beast in the Jungle" doesn't create the cognitive dissonance of a first person narrator telling a long oral story in unrealistic prose, but it displays a similar problem of scope, as it covers most of its protagonist's adult life in a few dozen pages. A story illustrating serious character development demands a novel, but even at its sub-novella length, the narrative is already a bit wearying. However, one might argue that the work's dearth of incident is not an artistic failure, for John Marcher's pathetic story could be told in no other way.⁹⁰ In these two works, readers are left with a disconnect between two values that either bring about or are contingent upon shortness: breadth of incident and depth of development.

The field of narratology provides a helpful set of concepts for discussing these different and apparently competing layers of text. Normally, Mieke Bal's expansion of the typical *fabula/sujet* dichotomy into three levels⁹¹—*story*, *narrative* (story as ordered by the teller), and *text* (narrative as rendered by the artist)—seems needlessly complicated; in fact, those layers become difficult to keep separated. But such ambiguity is appropriate for a discussion of the intersection between narrative form and narrative content. In both of the above stories, the scope of the story and the scope of the text do not correspond in the way they always had, as witnessed in the pacing of each narrative. Conrad uses frequent

⁹⁰ It is more problematic that a work of such length can be identified only as a short story, entirely because of its length. Admittedly, many sources refer to the work as a novella, but the fact that convention allows for choice of either quotation marks or italics for novella titles is telling. The practical aspects of publishing further muddy the waters. "The Beast in the Jungle" is too short to be published on its own, so it is often included in collections like the Dover Thrift Edition *The Beast in the Jungle and Other Stories*, its title assigning the work a genre. *Heart of Darkness*, conversely, was originally published in the volume *Youth, and Two Other Stories*, but now almost always stands alone in its own volume or as the lead work in a compilation.

⁹¹ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 5.

periods of slow-down, lulls in the text that sometimes encompass description and meditation, to expand a basic story into a developed philosophical narrative; and James uses sweeping descriptive summary mode with occasional bursts of representative scene to condense John Marcher's life story into a narrative manageable in just under 20,000 words.

The other branch of the nineteenth century short story tradition, the unified form perfected by French and Russian writers, put breadth and depth together more quickly, so that, as with James and Conrad, one can't discuss length and subject separately because they are not separable. This is important but ultimately inconclusive, as there are multiple ways of conceptualizing "unified" narrative. Some writers worked to the logical conclusion of Poe's aesthetic, turning out stories with tightly constructed plots. Maupassant was the master of this form, using twist endings and cruel ironies to push his stories beyond entertainment. Eventually, this was distilled to a formula, as exemplified by the works of twentieth century American writer O. Henry, beloved by students and sneered at by academics. It's tempting to draw a clear line between the O. Henrys of the world and the modernists, but the fact is modernist short stories could be just as tightly constructed, the whole turning on the ending. Anyone who has ever read "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" can attest to that: "short" and "happy" are terms we don't fully understand until the story's conclusion. There are, of course, crucial differences. Where Maupassant's "The Necklace" twists upon its ending, which causes the reader to reinterpret or at least re-envision what had seemed like a straightforward story, a piece from Hemingway often begins as an enigma and comes into focus. Nevertheless, it requires the same process of reinterpretation, of re-seeing the details of the story at its conclusion. That the proffered

revision is about the plot rather than about things like character psychology or abstract ideology is part of what enabled the writers of literary short stories to create the false dichotomy that would make it much easier to pit the artistic against the popular, the high against the low.

While many continental and Russian writers were significant precursors of the modernist short story aesthetic, Russian writer Ivan Turgenev had the greatest impact on the four writers to be discussed in depth in this chapter. His *Sportsman's Sketches*,⁹² like other early-to-mid-nineteenth century sketchbooks, offers a rich variety of narrative modes, and it influenced later writers' views on style, narrative, and composite construction. Its restraint of language and tendency to present rather than explain or overtly moralize is echoed by the modernists, and it has a naturalist bent that would be of especial influence to Joyce. However, it also uses an open, non-dramatic sketch form united by setting, theme, and narrator, a way of rendering a community that is more akin to Irving than Anderson. In this book of sketches, a single narrator travels the countryside and encounters various eccentric personalities and intriguing scenes, communicating them to the reader from an objective, distanced position, but with sympathy not evinced by other characters of his class.

Critics are especially aware of the ways in which this particular sketchbook structure served as a pattern for works like *Dubliners* and *The Untilled Field*. In reality, such influence is difficult to detect: Turgenev's sketchbook balances looser and tighter story forms, but while it is well-paced, it does not appear to be meticulously ordered for a

⁹² The work's Russian title, *Записки охотника*, is translated in a variety of ways. While I have chosen a relatively dominant form, the sketchbook is sometimes also called *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, *Sketches from a Hunter's Notebook*, or simply *A Hunter's Sketches*.

particular effect. The influence of this text on future writers obviously went deeper than structure. Myler Wilkinson, in examining Hemingway's connection to Turgenev's legacy, argues,

On both a stylistic and thematic level the stories in *A Sportsman's Sketches* foreshadow much of what Hemingway would do in his own short fiction seventy years further on -- one witnesses the same concern for, and love of, landscape and terrain; the same exactness and subtlety of natural description to evoke complex emotional states; the same empathy for simple people who have not yet entirely lost connection with place; and, finally, the same pathos connected with a simpler, more integrated past.⁹³

The influence of the book is most clearly seen, however, in Moore's *The Untilled Field*, which aspires to its stylistic moderation and adopts its wandering narrator and its sketchbook form.⁹⁴ Joyce's *Dubliners*, though more tightly constructed, was also inspired by Turgenev's *Sketchbook*, as a composite and as an approach to narrative.⁹⁵ The different uses these writers make of their model, both on the local and global level, determine where they are placed within the hierarchy of modern aesthetics and, thus, the canon.

IV.

Seen in broad overview, the narratives of *Dubliners* and *The Untilled Field*, both the short stories and the composites they create, are not entirely dissimilar, but they are often relegated to distinct narrative traditions. The same critics who discuss the works' similarities—especially with regard to their themes of economic, political, and religious stagnation—sometimes nevertheless draw an evaluative line between the books as objects

⁹³ Myler Wilkinson, *Hemingway and Turgenev: The Nature of Literary Influence* (Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press, 1986), 27-8.

⁹⁴ McCarthy, 104, and Carens, 47-50; see also Richard Allen Cave, "Turgenev and Moore: *A Sportsman's Sketches* and *The Untilled Field*," in *The Way Back: George Moore's The Untilled Field & The Lake*, ed. Robert Welch (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1982), 45-63.

⁹⁵ McCarthy, 104.

of art. As Richard J. Thompson sees it, Moore is a strong example of the sketch tradition, with stories derived from oral storytelling and loosely accumulated in a collection; Joyce, on the other hand, is pursuing narrative as literary art.⁹⁶ While other critics are not so dogmatic, there is a tendency in hindsight to situate the two writers in separate contexts, Moore with the past (especially given his earlier writings), no matter how progressive he attempted to be, and Joyce with the present—largely because the present eventually followed his lead. It's a reasonable enough dichotomy even if it has only a modicum of truth in this particular case, but it's important to consider what such categories are often used to shorthand, and how the association of each work with the high or low formal stereotype has repercussions for the reception of each artist and our understanding of his work as a composite.

Though critics have extensively compared the *Dubliners* and *The Untilled Field* on thematic grounds, they merely generalize about the writers' styles, perhaps because in reality the prose of Joyce and Moore in that era—influenced by continental writers like Flaubert, a fusion of symbolism and naturalism—is not so different as Thompson implies. Patrick A. McCarthy claims that Moore is just as capable of "lean" prose but is perhaps less prone to irony, that most modernist of stances. For McCarthy, the similarities in the composites are less about influence than about worldview, a common vision of Ireland. In this way, he seems to deny that the two writers represent some developmental pattern in Irish literature or the history of the short story; yet he admits that Joyce's work has a "tighter" structure, because he was "simply more successful at achieving an effect that

⁹⁶ Richard J. Thompson, *Everlasting Voices: Aspects of the Modern Irish Short Story* (Troy, N.Y: Whitston, 1989), 2-3.

Moore had previously sought."⁹⁷ This "effect" seems to be a more intimate relationship between form and content. After noting that both works are made cyclical by the echoing between their first and last stories, McCarthy argues, "Unlike Moore, Joyce develops this image of circularity into a recurrent emblem of the characters' entrapment; in *The Untilled Field*, on the other hand, the frame device suggests the possibility of escape."⁹⁸

Is Moore a direct influence on Joyce's innovations, is he merely an earlier and less skilled practitioner of those particular narrative and stylistic strategies, or does his work just coincidentally foreshadow modernist developments? It's hard to gather a consensus from the critical discourse surrounding the novel. Thompson, following his theory that the two writers came from distinct lines of artistic development, declares that Joyce was influenced not only by Moore but also by Chekhov and Flaubert. Beckson, on the other hand, finds Moore to be an important influence on Joyce; however, he spends a whole essay extolling the hidden genius of *The Untilled Field* only to declare, in the end, that Joyce's was the "greater achievement."⁹⁹ Though Jane Roberts ascribes some of the comparative devaluation of Moore's composite to poor editing through the years, complicated by Moore's continual tinkering with the stories as well as their order,¹⁰⁰ Ingman finds Moore's work inherently weaker, because of its greater dependence on its model. Ingman argues that the text's unevenness "reflects the uncertainties of Turgenev's *Sketches*, which, as the title indicates, vary from sketch to anecdote to fully rounded short stories but which also include the much longer and loosely structured 'The End of Chertopkhanov,' as well as a

⁹⁷ McCarthy, 104.

⁹⁸ McCarthy, 104-5.

⁹⁹ Beckson, 302.

¹⁰⁰ Jane Roberts, "George Moore: A Wild Goose's Portrait of His Country," *Irish University Review: A Journal of Irish Studies* 22.2 (1992): 305-318.

concluding essay on the joys of hunting."¹⁰¹ Unlike Thompson, Ingman traces both Joyce and Moore back to writers like Chekhov and Flaubert, an observation which perhaps indicates that for *The Untilled Field*, there is a disconnect between the shape of the whole—sketch form—and the shape of many of the individual stories—unified form.

In her reading of Joyce, on the other hand, Ingman argues that "*Dubliners* extends Moore's method of operating through suggestion and implication, using ellipses, hiatuses and silences in a way that obliges the reader to become an essential part of the equation in order to complete the story's meaning."¹⁰² She claims, "Joyce's artistry in the short story form is such that his vision, like Chekhov's, arises organically from an often sordid and grim reality."¹⁰³ She further asserts that "never before had there been such an artistically unified collection, nor one that in matters of style so clearly broke with the Gaelic tradition of storytelling."¹⁰⁴ What accounts for this kind of reception, especially as against her valuation of Moore? Given the tenor of Ingman's praise for individual stories in *Dubliners* as well as the composite, one infers that the harmony between the aesthetic of the parts and of the whole, the accord of organic storytelling and unified global structure, makes for a stronger text, despite argument from critics like Beckson that Moore's stories were often just as strong and modern as Joyce's. Even Thompson has to admit that *The Untilled Field* is "as subversive in treating *fin-de-siecle* [sic] Irish life as Joyce's."¹⁰⁵ A comparative analysis of the texts should bear out the notion that modernity is judged much more by form than by style or content.

¹⁰¹ Ingman, 88-9.

¹⁰² Ingman, 96.

¹⁰³ Ingman, 107.

¹⁰⁴ Ingman, 94.

¹⁰⁵ Thompson, 3.

The stories of *Dubliners* vary in structure and approach, encompassing direct and indirect as well as open and closed modes. "After the Race" and "Counterparts," for example, aren't just indirectly presented but are left open, hinging as they do on inconclusive though vivid experiences: the loss of money and the loss of a job. Most of the stories, however, are closed, from conclusive, direct presentations of paralysis like that of "A Painful Case" and "Eveline" to perhaps the most indirect story of the composite, "Two Gallants," which is literally about the wanderings of its protagonist. The common interpretation of the composite views "The Dead" as a strong closural piece used to achieve overall coherence. In reality, however, the story is the nucleus of a nodal structure, made all the more powerful by its placement at the conclusion of the work. As Hayman defines them, nodal narratives

are frequently informed by systems of interrelated passages (scenes, images, visions, treatments of topics, and so forth) that do not contribute to a coherent and generalized narrative development but rather break the narrative surface, standing out against or being readily isolable before blending into the verbal context. The passages in question can best be regarded as nodes or clusters of signifiers in 'open works.'¹⁰⁶

Hayman emphasizes a single narrative surface, seeming to imply novelistic narrative, but he applies this concept to complex texts by Robbe-Grillet and Beckett, among others. While "some sort of nodal underpinning is available even in more conventional texts," experimental narratives simply prove to be more interesting to examine in this way, including Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, Hayman's exemplar.¹⁰⁷ This reading of nodality as a tendency seems to allow for its application to the short story composite: it is by its nature already a broken or at least fractured narrative structure, built on the interplay of

¹⁰⁶ Hayman, 73.

¹⁰⁷ Hayman, 74, 78.

foreground and background, with no one identifiable "surface." As an important node, "The Dead" discovers "enriching echoes in other parts of the book" which "need resolve nothing on the level of plot or argument" but "gradually contribute to the formation of nodal systems."¹⁰⁸

The ambiguous role of this undeniably dominant story probably accounts for the often metaphysical way the composite's coherence has been described. Mann, for instance, articulates a common reading of the text when she calls it the growth narrative of "the archetypal Dubliner."¹⁰⁹ The notion that the work functions as a growth narrative of any sort was prompted by Joyce's own account of the text as representing a movement from childhood through adolescence to middle age, culminating in stories of "public life." To render this structural sensible despite the presence of multiple protagonists, we tend to proffer a reading of "The Dead" as chronicling an epiphany which, through protagonist Gabriel Conroy, must somehow reach back and gather up the whole sweep of the developmental narrative, from the vain boy of "Araby" to the middle aged alcoholic in "Grace." As Mann describes the work's unity, she argues that "the reader may almost sense that *Dubliners* contains a single protagonist who develops in the process of the book," made possible because the characters "bear a family resemblance: they are products of middle-class Catholic Ireland and trapped by limitations in the environment and in their own personalities."¹¹⁰ That these personalities are wildly different and belong to characters with different specific origins and life experiences does not seem to factor into Mann's hermeneutics.

¹⁰⁸ Hayman, 73.

¹⁰⁹ Susan Garland Mann, *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 30.

¹¹⁰ Mann, 31.

The fact that criticism has spent the last two or three decades devising alternate interpretive frameworks for the text points to our discomfort with the old hypothesis as well as our enduring need to find something, anything which explains how "The Dead," such a definitively closural story, can close the entire text. Though the term *paralysis* generally figures prominently in discussions of the work, Joseph C. Voelker identifies a contradictory impulse, arguing that Dublin's paralysis is often a reaction to death and/or passion, but it isn't the only response. Granted, characters' responses are not always good—drinking, quarreling, meditating, withdrawing, obsessing over the past—but they tend to involve the act of wandering.¹¹¹ His reading of the text as enacting the "vagrancy" of art, a kind of rebellion without confrontation, culminates in an interesting interpretation of the "epiphany" at the end of "The Dead": "Joyce ends *Dubliners* with a pronounced shift to the higher dimensions of vagrancy, where wisdom lies in refusing self-confinement and drifting in the unfrightened knowledge of a dark affinity between love and death."¹¹² Edward Duffy, on the other hand, rather than proffer a new thematic keystone, points to a particular piece of the text as a clue to its structure. In this reading, the first story, "The Sisters," and not "The Dead" (in retrospect), indicates the shape of the whole. Joyce's revisions of this story between periodical publication and its use in the composite reveal its power to introduce the priest figure and the notion of confession as something beyond the merely naturalistic:

The additions to "The Sisters" articulate what the story has discovered itself to be about, what is embryonically already there. What is already there in the original *Homestead* version is the narrative climax, the priest "in the confession-box in the dark, wide awake, and laughing-like softly to himself." This confused gesture toward

¹¹¹ Joseph C. Voelker, "Chronicles of Disorder': Reading the Margins of Joyce's *Dubliners*," *Colby Library Quarterly* 18.2 (1982): 126-7.

¹¹² Voelker, 143.

confession accounts for such additions as the boy's dream of an unfinished confession and the elliptical pointing, present in the original but with nothing like the frequency of the final version.¹¹³

This notion of confession, then, becomes a governing concept in the work.

I have already alluded to the most convincing re-vision of the composite: David G. Wright examines "The Sisters" not simply as an introduction to the text, as Duffy does, but as a necessary counterpart to "The Dead," the two acting as a frame. The echoes between the stories

shape the whole collection into the circular configuration that, throughout the individual stories, has served as a symbol for Dublin paralysis and entrapment. The more associations with "The Sisters" we find in "The Dead," the more we're likely to feel that the last story assesses Dublin paralysis from a new angle but doesn't, finally, achieve a way out of it.¹¹⁴

It is telling that most readings of *Dubliners* turn on "The Dead," whether they are narrative or thematic. As the above readings illustrate, "The Dead" is an important moment of epiphany, but it is one that does not pretend to bring some kind of composite protagonist to closure. Rather than simply funnel the book's previous focalizers into one emblematic man, Gabriel Conroy, through which to experience an important realization about mature, public life, "The Dead" works through a more abstract kind of retrospective patterning, a closure which is not narrative. The work's nodal structure centers on "The Dead" and subordinates the more epical unifier of the work, its titular setting, especially in the absence of overlapping characters. Our focus on theme allows us to disregard the perpetual shift in protagonists and recognize a larger narrative at work, one which is perhaps less about personal growth than the revelation to the reader of a universal vision.

¹¹³ Edward Duffy, "'The Sisters' as an Introduction to *Dubliners*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 22.4 (1986): 425.

¹¹⁴ David G. Wright, "Interactive Stories in *Dubliners*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 32.3 (1995): 285–293.

This account of the text need not exclude the basic outline of the maturity narrative. Mann, for example, points out that Joyce made several changes in the ordering of the text, but always within the four groupings of childhood, youth, middle age, and public life. It's reasonable to see the text less as a progression of individual stories than a widening of the lens, governed not by focus on a central character but through a developing narrative voice. Joseph M. Garrison argues just this: "the stories are studies in the growth of Joyce's developing and maturing consciousness and that his exploration of this growth--imagining also his formal interest in narrative art--gives the book coherence."¹¹⁵ Like Mann, Garrison interrogates Joyce's reordering of the stories before book publication, positing that it signals the writer's awareness of a developing narrative consciousness, one which can be seen, for example, in the fact that "Clay," a story of middle age, is a mature re-imagining or re-visiting of young adulthood story "Eveline."¹¹⁶ Within the stories of mature adulthood, Garrison argues, "Having secured the hard-earned liberation of his narrator from the bondages of subjectivity, Joyce apparently directs his attention to the reader and tries to foster a similar development."¹¹⁷ The culmination of this is the virtuoso ending of "The Dead."

As the stories progress, so does the worldview that provides our lens for the book's protagonists, and by the time we reach the final story, the lens has focused itself on the very workings of human society. That this society comes down to one man and his misapprehensions about his wife seems to reinforce some notion of the personal development of a meta-protagonist, but Gabriel Conroy's realizations are far-reaching,

¹¹⁵ Garrison, Joseph M, "Dubliners: Portraits of the Artist as a Narrator," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 8.3 (1975): 226.

¹¹⁶ Garrison 237.

¹¹⁷ Garrison 237.

encompassing "all the living and the dead."¹¹⁸ They give us a lens on humanity that reverberates through "The Dead," from its pair of spinsters all the way back to the different pair who preside over Father Flynn's wake. Through a developmental thematic structure, organized nodally (arguably also cyclically), *Dubliners* reaches a decisive closure—one that follows a relatively logical trajectory of character growth but is ultimately not narrative.

The Untilled Field, patterned more closely on *A Sportsman's Sketches*, contains a wider variety of story types, from the near-gothic folk tale ("Julia Cahill's Curse") to the love story ("Home Sickness") to the realist/naturalist interrogation of society ("So on He Fares"); therefore, it employs a less consistent tone and rhetoric. Like *Dubliners*, it is composed of both open and closed stories using direct and indirect approaches. For example, "In the Clay," the story frequently set at the composite's head, is direct and closed, as it has a rather didactic purpose. On the other hand, a story like "A Playhouse in the Waste" merely presents a local legend, in indirect fashion, and does not pause at the end to interrogate it. *The Untilled Field* shares with *Dubliners* a thematically oriented structure, and it is similarly nodal. However, its coherence is non-closural, depending on reiteration of character type and theme, and an almost didactic cyclicity.

In its initial version, the composite was framed by stories that acquainted the reader with an artist figure (that exemplary alienated modern) and with the problems of Ireland, derived largely from its Catholicism. The second story, "Some Parishoners," could be *The Untilled Field* in miniature, a long, loosely connected composite narrative addressing a host of issues—marriage, morality, money—all which somehow lead back to the local priests. Following this long story are two that deal with exiles from Ireland and three that focus on

¹¹⁸ James Joyce, *James Joyce's Dubliners: An Annotated Edition*, ed. John Wyse Jackson and Bernard McGinley (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993), 198.

the plight of the priests themselves. The last two of the priest stories also serve roles in a set of supernatural stories that play out in romantic terms the hardships of women, especially as they are subject to the control of men and/or the church. The next two stories, set in the city, are commonly acknowledged to be weaker than the rest and to disrupt the work's unity of setting. Following these and before the final, framing tale are two long stories (perhaps creating a symmetry of pace, balanced against "Some Parishoners") that display the condition of Ireland, through an exile from his home and exile from his country. While the characters in the composite do not typically carry over from story to story, there are so many who are interchangeably similar—the frustrated priest, the man fleeing Ireland for America, the woman considering marriage—that it has nearly the same effect. The narrative point of view is also a unifying factor. Moore's narrators, like Joyce's and Turgenev's, keep an objective distance from the characters. However, Moore focalizes his narration through particular figures that, however shadowy, participate enough to allow Moore to render characters with more sympathy, not unlike the way Turgenev employs his character-narrator. The focal character is usually an outsider, either to Ireland or simply to a particular community, so he becomes another facet of the repetition and reinforcement building resonance through the various narratives. As in Turgenev's sketchbook, *The Untilled Field* creates a clear picture of a country's national character, as seen in example after example, all transmitted through the eyes of the work's wandering witnesses.

What, then, makes Joyce's text more "modern" than Moore's? One might argue that Moore's work shows a more sophisticated range of narrative modes, combining sketch forms with modern short stories, but this variety contributes to our sense that the text is absolutely nuclear—like Turgenev's, carefully arranged, to be sure, but less for

development than for the kind of pacing and balance that benefits an accumulative structure. If *The Untilled Field* creates coherence through thematic, or, just as accurately, situational resonance, it is formally open, like Turgenev's sketchbook; Joyce's text, however, is formally closed. With the book's conclusion, which retrospectively patterns the rest of the work, we are left with the sense that we have risen above the level of the individual story to see the larger human story and the work as a whole. This is a move that short story writer and theorist Frank O'Connor sees as endemic to Joyce's future work. O'Connor posits that Joyce stopped writing short stories because they were too circumscribed for his purposes, which moved toward universals.¹¹⁹ "The Dead" is a good case in point: it is not entirely Gabriel Conroy's narrative, for many other Dubliners, in reality or in echo, make an appearance. "The Dead" is not simply about its ending, just as *Dubliners* as a whole is not; it is about all that came before. Without the events of the party—the interpersonal awkwardness, the veneration of the past, the anticipation of the future—there is no reverberation in Gabriel's recognition that "[h]is soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead."¹²⁰ He had also seen the faces of some of the living, including maybe himself: "His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling."¹²¹ The narrator registers Gabriel's recollection that "snow was general all over Ireland,"¹²² falling on everyone. Beyond thematics, then, the book ends with a symbolic gesture that not only brings together all the partygoers, draws them into

¹¹⁹ Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice, a Study of the Short Story*, 1st ed. (Cleveland: World Pub. Co, 1963), 56.

¹²⁰ Joyce, 197.

¹²¹ Joyce, 197.

¹²² Joyce, 197.

Gabriel's realizations about life, but it also casts our minds back over the emotionally stunted and circumstantially circumscribed protagonists of the fourteen other stories. This is a bleak ending and a bleak overall effect, one that captures the *Dubliners* and keeps them close, as opposed to the openness of Moore's text, where the bold might rebel against or even escape the decaying country, if they are willing to accept the consequences. For all the two writers' shared view of Ireland, perhaps their *worldview* isn't exactly the same. Both approach Ireland's problems in a fairly deterministic way, but Moore ultimately gives his characters agency. Joyce brings them to the brink of realization only to show them that that ship has sailed, or, for characters like Eveline, it is sailing away before their eyes.

Does this make Joyce's text stronger than Moore's? Perhaps, although a share of that discrepancy can be attributed to his greater skill as a writer, especially as one compares individual stories. Overall, though, Moore's text is clearly too much a sketchbook, no matter what proficiency he shows for modern themes and modern short story form, to compete with *Dubliners* for a place within the canon of modernist short story composites. Despite this understanding, we have only deficient language with which to describe such a difference. Rather, these texts create a sense of coherence without making the narrative itself coherent, or at least without depending on narrative to create coherence. As Hayman explains the dynamic of reading of nodal narratives,

Precisely because they are deprived of the usual narrative focus, which can in other texts carry the occulted systems of symbolic significance, these novels seem on the one hand hostile to the idea of such a structure and on the other curiously hospitable. That is, they seem to present an opaque surface before they reveal satisfying relationships, unstillable but palpable patternings or internal rhythms--materials that, if noted in more conventional settings, would be left for a later re-reading are attended to during the first reading as a prime means of organizing the reader's response.¹²³

¹²³ Hayman, 79.

The short story composite's "opaque surface" might be many things, including an easy but not entirely satisfying novelistic reading or an unreflective consideration of each story as a separate entity.

While the label *lyric* is often applied to such narratives, a more accurate term for the predominate form of short stories in either book is symbolist. This more faithfully adapted poetic term also carries a connotation that makes it not uncongenial to nodality. According to Edmund Wilson's reading of mid-eighteenth century French poets like Baudelaire and Mallarmé, "Symbolism may be defined as an attempt by carefully studied means—a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors—to communicate unique personal feelings."¹²⁴ Unfortunately, Symbolism could be an extremely private art, one that proved "incommunicable to the reader."¹²⁵ As Wilson argues, in Joyce, naturalism and symbolism find a productive synthesis, the former a force of detachment and objectivity, the latter a personal response rendered in a subjective symbol system.¹²⁶ This combination encapsulates the major tension within modernism. There is no reason, then, to think that *The Untilled Field* is less than modern. Ingman, for one, argues, "The tension between modernity and the past, the local and the foreign in this period is exemplified by the remarkable genesis of George Moore's groundbreaking collection."¹²⁷ If we rid ourselves of the term *lyric* as applied to narrative structure that is experientially open but formally closed, the focus can return to the modernist balance of subjective symbolism and scientific objectivity, either realistic or naturalistic. These texts reach a balance in different

¹²⁴ Wilson, 21-22.

¹²⁵ Wilson, 20.

¹²⁶ Wilson, 204.

¹²⁷ Ingman, 86.

ways, but it is roughly the same balance. We must conclude, then, that the method matters: so Joyce's symbolist method of composite coherence seems to trump Moore's more restricted use of symbolism as a local narrative strategy. The need to balance the global and local also troubled Anderson, as seen in the dual structuring principles of *Winesburg, Ohio*, this time broken down not at open and closed but at narrative and thematic.

V.

While Edmund Wilson describes Joyce's short stories as symbolist, John Gerlach labels some of Anderson's short fiction *imagist*. An imagist story, exemplified by Katherine Ann Porter's "Flowering Judas," is "fashioned by small loops wound around a basically static image" (107). While Gerlach points out that most of the short stories that make up *Winesburg, Ohio* are "conventional," James M. Mellard's contends that they are quite variable, easily classified as centered on symbol, character, theme, or plot—and "the uniformity that critics have seen in narrative type is actually only a uniformity of the lyrical and associational technique and of tone and mood."¹²⁸ The stories range from indirect (such as "Paper Pills") to direct pieces (like "The Strength of God"); and from the formally closed (as seen in "The Philosopher") to the formally open (exemplified by "The Teacher"). Those open forms, however, are rare. Anderson is clearly a stylistic precursor to Hemingway, but structurally most of his stories are quite traditional, ending with a statement of theme. Experientially, though, they are open; they close with a sense of finality

¹²⁸ James M. Mellard, "Narrative Forms in *Winesburg, Ohio*," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 83.5 (1968): 1304.

which does not always bring clarity.¹²⁹ Some stories, like "Hands," gesture toward something more modernist, more indicative of Anderson's subsequent short story output. In particular, Gerlach points out the narrator's call for a poet to tell Wing Biddlebaum's story, indicating its affinity with the paradigmatic dimension of poetry rather than merely the syntagmatic nature of prose. The narrative leads with the image of Wing pacing on his veranda, which acts as a frame for the rest of the narrative, closed by another static image, this time of Wing picking up crumbs from the floor.¹³⁰

As we have seen, the patterns of a composite's constituent stories do not always indicate the pattern of the work overall; in fact, they can distract from or belie the work's global structure. In the example of *Winesburg*, this is especially so; there seem to be different expectations for and strictures placed upon part and whole. The pattern of coherence is in many ways non-closural and presented indirectly, felt through thematic correspondence and repetition of narrative elements like character type and scenario.¹³¹ George Willard, as interlocutor or receiver for many of his fellow citizens' tales, contributes to this sense of correspondence, on both the thematic and circumstantial levels. However, George Willard's role was expanded late in the creative process, with four stories added to

¹²⁹ In "Loneliness," for instance, we have come to the conclusion of Enoch Robinson's narrative to George, but it has been toward a revelation of character, not a realization or change on the part of either George or Enoch.

¹³⁰ For a full discussion of "Hands," see John Gerlach, *Toward the End: Closure and Structure in the American Short Story* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 94-100.

¹³¹ Monika Fludernik, for example, acknowledges the thematic dimension of the work's coherence, but she also argues that a focus on that mode hides the "web of imagery, juxtaposition of key motifs, or constellation of characters" that actually bring meaning to the text ("The Divine Accident of Life': Metaphoric Structure and Meaning in *Winesburg, Ohio*," *Style* 22.1 [1988]: 116).

the manuscript that convert George from reader surrogate and one of the many lonely citizens of the town to the most important citizen, the model of loneliness.¹³²

Why should Anderson make this change? On one level, it makes sense to elevate George Willard, already an organic part of the text, to a paradigmatic position, to reinforce the text's thematic ends. However, this is not the experiential role George performs. His trajectory is in some ways contrary to that of the rest of the townspeople, seen perhaps most clearly in his relationship with his mother, Elizabeth Willard, and by comparison with her. In the story "Mother," George tells her, "I'm going to get out of here. . . . I don't know where I shall go or what I shall do but I am going away."¹³³ Elizabeth once felt this same "great restlessness": "there was an uneasy desire for change, for some big definite movement to her life. . . . She dreamed of. . . wandering over the world, seeing always new faces and giving something out of herself to all people."¹³⁴ However, she is now an impotent invalid, aware that she will never escape Winesburg, so George's subsequent words ring true: "I suppose I can't make you understand, but oh, I wish I could."¹³⁵ The narrator tells us that, at George's exclamation, Elizabeth "wanted to cry out with joy because of the words that had come from the lips of her son, but the expression of joy had become impossible to her."¹³⁶

George's installment as protagonist adds a layer of *bildungsroman*, a developmental, progressive narrative mode, over the otherwise accumulative structure of the book. It is a move that seems to indicate a creative uneasiness with the non-narrative structure of the

¹³² These include "The Philosopher," "Death," "Sophistication," and "Departure" (Mann, 50).

¹³³ Sherwood Anderson, *Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg Ohio: With Variant Readings and Annotations*, ed. Ray Lewis White (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997), 26

¹³⁴ Anderson, 24.

¹³⁵ Anderson, 26.

¹³⁶ Anderson, 27.

work, its focus on place and especially character. It is also a move that Anderson, complicit with his editor, downplays. In the table of contents, each story is named and attributed to a character as "concerning" him or her. Only one story, "Departure," is listed as "concerning" George Willard, but arguably several more are focused on his development or his experiences, either alone or alongside others. For example, "Nobody Knows" is not about Louise Trunnion, except in so much as she is the object of George's desire.¹³⁷ When you take into account the Willard family stories, wherein George is occasional focal character or object of the focal character's concern, there is much more of George in the book than it would seem on the surface. Obviously, upon reading the stories one realizes quickly that George is an important character, but the decision to elide his centrality in the book's table of contents (and associated story headings) speaks to affect and appearance more than reality. As much as contents and headings serve as guides to the reader, especially in a text that is narratively disconnected, *Winesburg* asks us to put George in his place, as it were, to focus on his role as listener.

Fortunately, putting George in his place reminds us what George's developmental story is about, and it is tied unnecessarily but definitely to the thematic patterns of the work. George is groping toward purpose and freedom, and part of his growth process involves listening to his fellow citizens, who, like walking cautionary tales, both hinder his exit from town and reinforce his need for escape. This process involves more than his learning not to be a recluse, to waste his life on things that don't matter or, conversely, to

¹³⁷ Likewise, "An Awakening" is just as much about George as the young woman it purports to be "concerning," Belle Carpenter. Other examples include "Sophistication," which develops both Helen White and George, and "The Teacher," which centers on Kate Swift, though her focus in that story – the cause for her realizations about herself and her world – is George Willard.

waste his life not pursuing the things that do. He also learns proper behavior, how not to be a man like Ned Currie, who left behind Alice Hindman (recounted in "Adventure"). Though George is not present in Alice's story, and I am not suggesting he learns from it directly, it cannot be a coincidence that Ned, our negative example, was also employed by the *Winesburg Eagle* and now lives a life in the city which resembles George's future.

Each story in the volume gains from its compositing not just with the others but with the George Willard plot. Many Winesburgers are in desperate need of someone to listen to them or at least receive a share of their burden, whether they know it or not. Doctor Parcival in "The Philosopher" is in the habit of seeking out George's company long before the events of his story, making his confessions to George organic. At the opposite extreme is Elmer Cowley in "Queer," whose meeting with George in the last paragraph of the story seems tacked on, and George's only role is to accept a punch in the face. For many Winesburgers, George's presence seems to catalyze something in them, spurring them to action or simply prompting them to speak aloud the things that are troubling them. In "Drink," Tom Foster's drunken promenade through town is stopped only by George's force, whereupon he opens up about the experience. And in "Respectability," George is the "one person who knew the story of the thing that had made ugly the person and the character of Wash Williams," and he learns this story of love and hate because he happens upon Wash during a lover's stroll with Belle Carpenter.

Admittedly, other characters, such as Louise Trunnion, do not experience this unburdening with George; some, like George's mother, change internally but do not act or speak; and yet others come to their conclusions without crossing paths with George at all, such as Ray Pearson in "The Untold Lie," for whom Hal Winters acts as catalyst. This variety

does not constitute a failure of artistic control; in fact, it shows that the text employs George in this way to serve the thematic resonances in the narrative but does not rely on him. The theme has its own accumulative development, sometimes touched off by George but not necessarily understood by or revealed to him.¹³⁸ The understanding and revelation work across stories as part of his progressive growth plot. The best example is "Hands," where Wing Biddlebaum finds himself drawn to George, to tell him things he needs to hear but that Wing needs even more to say. These ideas for George's edification—"You must try to forget all you have learned. . . . You must begin to dream. From this time on you must shut your ears to the roaring of the voices"¹³⁹—are probably more immediately meaningful for the reader than George, and they are subservient to the character-focused story centered on how Adolph Meyers becomes Wing Biddlebaum. In this story more than the others, too, Anderson adds a metafictional touch, showing that as much as George sends Biddlebaum back to the past, so to speak, that movement is not actually a function of memory but of narrative. We are not given Biddlebaum explaining or even reflecting upon his past (in fact, there is every reason to think he would not, not willingly or in any detail), but instead we find that George has sparked something in the narrative itself. Here, George goes beyond catalyzing the characters to catalyzing an intimate narrator. This move doesn't happen anywhere else in the work, but here at the outset, and after the preface "The Book of the Grotesque," similar in tone, it sets the stage for the rest of the work, helping us keep George's progressive story if not subservient to the thematic narrative, at least in balance with it. Mann argues, then, "Perhaps the most productive approach to *Winesburg* is to think

¹³⁸ In fact, Mann finds that George, as observer/receiver, is perhaps less important a unifying figure than the narrator, who is able to articulate the other characters' hidden longings and is able to evince real sympathy for them (Mann, 59-60).

¹³⁹ Anderson, 8-9

of George Willard as a pivotal character in the cycle. He is an important actor in the lives of other Winesburgers, but not necessarily the most important individual in town."¹⁴⁰

Seen in this light, the two strategies of coherence don't strain against each other in destructive ways, but they do make for a different kind of whole than the narrative otherwise would have constituted. Rather than attempt to argue whether a de-emphasis of the developmental aspects of the plot would've made for a better piece of art, I want to interrogate why such a move was made in the first place. As I've posited above, there is good reason to find many of the George-centric stories and indeed the notion of George as "pivotal character" to be organic to the work, and they were apparently organic to the text's writing process from fall 1915 to spring 1916.¹⁴¹ However, the four stories that were composed separately, just before publication, are clearly an attempt to focus plot, though in the end they only cause damage to the whole. Three of the stories were placed at the end of the earlier block of composition. "Death," about the relationship between George's mother and Dr. Reefy, creates a sense of cyclicity, returning us to the characters featured in stories two and three ("Paper Pills" and "Mother"), in addition to rounding off the familial aspects of George's developmental narrative. After this, a moment of connection between Helen White and George in penultimate story "Sophistication" is followed by George's flight from town in "Departure." Anderson placed the fourth late story, "The Philosopher," directly after stories two and three, which might be merely structurally logical, but it also creates a breach between the Willard family frame, centered on death and his mother, and yet another Willard story, George's sexual awakening in "Nobody Knows," preventing the

¹⁴⁰ Mann, 55.

¹⁴¹ For an account of the book's composition and publication, see Mann 50-51; and Robert Dunne, "The Book of the Grotesque: Textual Theory and the Editing of *Winesburg, Ohio*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 35.3 (1998): 287-296.

work from settling into a novelistic forward momentum in the pages before the disruptive four-part story "Godliness."

Even if this forward momentum is halted, the new stories are not interchangeable, redistributable components of a loose, thematic structure but, rather, totalizing elements of the *bildungsroman*. This suggests Anderson's discomfort, on some level, with the work's structure as it was, whether conceived of as a careful balance of progressive and digressive movement, or simply a static thematic structure. I have been referring to George Willard's story as plot, as progression, as *bildungsroman*, and an important feature of this kind of narrative structure is its orientation to its ending. It is a structure of closure—one that creates an interesting tension within this particular work but was not strictly necessary. George's presence on its own, as a listener and as occasional actor, might've functioned in the same way as did "The Dead" and Gabriel Conroy, contextualizing the work's themes. As it is, with the addition of "Sophistication" and "Departure," it does not. It is not George as enabler of character-driven short stories who presides, but George as protagonist.

The other additions, "The Philosopher" and "Death," however, might have created this structure, as this discussion has indicated. The intertwined stories of our second and third main characters, Doctor Reefy and Elizabeth Willard, in particular, create an internal frame for the text, one that is thematic as well as narrative. As the first half of the frame, "Paper Pills" introduces us to Doctor Reefy, a man with a fondness for "twisted apples," perhaps an echo of the preface's orientation toward grotesques. Reefy's marriage to an unwed pregnant woman and his sharing of his thoughts introduces us to many other concerns of the text: sex, love, propriety, secrets, communication/communion, and death. Following this story is "Mother," which gives us a glimpse of a sick and stifled woman who

harbors unspoken anger and resentment toward her husband. Taken together, these stories prepare us for the major themes of the work. Later, "Death," the final story before the closing portion of the George Willard frame, fuses these characters and their stories together. Reefy is able to be the listening ear Elizabeth needs, hearing of how her marriage was doomed from the start; her flight from his embrace reiterates the passion, fear, and entrapment enacted throughout the text. "Death," however, is not confined to the encounter between Doctor Reefy and Elizabeth Willard. It also returns us to George, and in a way that seems to bring his character sufficient wholeness. He is torn between his family story and his sexual and romantic feelings for Helen White, reflecting the dual dimensions of his growth narrative as well as the overall thematics of the text. Echoing his mother's actions in the first half of the story, George flees from these emotions he doesn't understand. Both Willards are here left in self-denial or avoidance—that is, their narratives are experientially unresolved. This indeterminacy is further strengthened by the ending of the story itself, which reinforces the sense of futility that pervades the text. Elizabeth has told Reefy about money she had hidden which she wants George to have; unfortunately, she never has the chance to tell George, so the money stays hidden, ineffective as a force to help expel George from toxic Winesburg and propel him into the wider world.

The ending at "Death" is a much darker, more inconclusive one than we see as given in the next two stories, where George reaches some maturity about his relationship with Helen and with his town. Halted before this point, the work is not a bildungsroman. With these additions, the text gains an experiential closure that many of the individual stories do not, even to the extent of invalidating the poignant ending of "Death." The loss of the money does not seem to have prevented anything at all; George is still able to leave town, literally

as well as emotionally, relegating its citizens—the bulk of the thematic layer of the narrative—to a static existence in a town which is now simply "a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood."¹⁴² With these two stories, the structure of George's development is painfully clear, but it is a structure with ideological implications. In displaying his discomfort with thematic composites or nodality, the insurgence of the George Willard plot renders it much more traditional, that is, developmental. As such, it supposes a unity of the self; the notion that the self can grow and change implies that it remains intact. An attempt to elevate George from an organic central character, essentially the center of the thematic nodal structure, to a separate, dominate level of the text restores to it a pre-modern sense of continuity and unity against which the rest of the text cannot help but appear as rebels.

Whatever the implications of George's development, his vocation is an important part of the work's unity. George is not named as the author of the stories in the work, but it is not a stretch to draw correspondences between his artistic development and the development of the book's narrative and themes—enough to consider that, in an abstract way, George's writerly consciousness is somehow guiding the book.¹⁴³ If that sounds a little too easy, consider that Hemingway nearly made that very move at the end of his seminal modernist short story composite, *In Our Time*. Though Hemingway's text similarly features the maturity narrative of a dominant character, Nick Adams, this developmental thread isn't directly woven into the rest of the short stories and their characters, settings, and

¹⁴² Anderson, 222.

¹⁴³ Mann, for example, distinguishes between four writerly figures driving the text – the narrator, the old writer from the preface, George, and Anderson himself – and she argues that their "symbolic relationship" (or, to my mind, their ambiguous, suggestive overlap) results in a "subtle unity" (59).

scenarios. The Nick-free stories of *In Our Time* inhabit distinct narrative worlds, separate from each other and from the Nick Adams narrative group. They are held together by only their thematic—that is to say, their non-narrative—correspondences. This is part of what makes the work the quintessential high modernist short story composite and also part of its challenge to and critique of short story composite theory.

Though we do not typically associate Hemingway with experimental high modernism, structurally, this text comes close to employing the kind of mythic structure espoused by T. S. Eliot. However, the work was almost simply another gesture toward narrative coherence. In early drafts of the text's concluding story, "Big Two-Hearted River," Hemingway took a curious metafictional leap: he indicated that Nick Adams was the author of a handful of the stories in the book, and, according to at least one critic, implied that he was author of all of them. In that draft, we read, "Nick in the stories was never himself. He made him up. Of course he'd never seen an Indian woman having a baby. That was what made it good. Nobody knew that. He'd seen a woman have a baby on the road to Karagatch and tried to help her."¹⁴⁴ Upon the advice of his mentor Gertrude Stein, Hemingway cut out this kind of meta-commentary, saying, "all that mental conversation...is the shit," and "I got a hell of a shock when I realized how bad it was and that shocked me back into the river again and I've just finished it the way it ought to have been all along"—that is, with the external focus of the story, "the straight fishing."¹⁴⁵ Hemingway's reason for cutting this "mental conversation" tells us a lot about the continued growth of modernist narrative toward an aesthetic which employs narrative to serve a different and sometimes greater

¹⁴⁴ Ernest Hemingway, *The Nick Adams Stories* (New York: Scribner, 1972), 217-18.

¹⁴⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *Ernest Hemingway, Selected Letters, 1917-1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Scribner, 1981), 133.

end. Most surprisingly, it tells us that Hemingway and his restraint of style had more to contribute to composite narrative development than is usually assumed.

Despite Hemingway's self-editing, there is at least one critic who believes the textual excisions are legitimate and important tools for interpreting the story and thus the collection. Debra A. Modellmog argues that

there are some good reasons for seeing Nick as the implied author of *In Our Time*, and doing so resolves many confusions about the book's unity, structure, vision, and significance. Moreover, such an approach also casts new light on Nick Adams as a character both separate from yet also an extension of Hemingway.¹⁴⁶

For Modellmog, we shouldn't have to ignore the earlier versions of the text "like a jury commanded to disregard a witness's last remark."¹⁴⁷ Modellmog's insistence on retaining the metafictional passages seems to stem from a misunderstanding of the problems they actually pose. Modellmog assumes that the danger for Hemingway was his conflation with Nick, an autobiographical reading of the text; she counters, "Hemingway's letter to McAlmon discloses that he revised his conclusion because was worried about the artistic integrity of his story, not about his artistic persona."¹⁴⁸ Unfortunately, this argument has implications not just for the Nick or Hemingway personas but for, as Modellmog phrases it herself, "the artistic integrity of the story"—and, through the story, the whole of *In Our Time*. The reiteration of her argument highlights the real problem: ". . .we need not assume that Nick lost all of this past when we lost this ending. In fact, a key sentence in the version of 'Big Two-Hearted River' that was finally published implies that this background did not disappear forever but simply moved, so to speak, underground" (595). Clearly, Modellmog

¹⁴⁶ Debra A. Modellmog, "The Unifying Consciousness of a Divided Conscience: Nick Adams as Author of *In Our Time*," *American Literature* 60.4 (1988): 592.

¹⁴⁷ Modellmog, 593.

¹⁴⁸ Modellmog, 593.

understands Hemingway's iceberg theory, how his works are more than what's on the surface, but she misunderstands the point of this way of reading the text: one does not literally go diving to look under the surface to look for the submerged parts of the iceberg. We see of it what is possible, shadowy and dark, and extrapolate or imagine the rest. And the notion that Nick was the author of part or all of the stories of *In Our Time* is something of which one cannot see even the outline from the surface.

In Our Time is a complicated work even without the Nick-Adams-as-author interpretive move. It is in one sense two texts—a series of individual, named short stories and a series of paragraph-length vignettes numbered and titled as "chapters"—arranged in strict alternation. What is more, according to Linda Wagner, each of these series has its own goals as well as patterns of coherence: the stories are close-up views, arranged chronologically, and the vignettes, focused on the big picture, are thematically arranged.¹⁴⁹ The stories embody a type of modern narrative form that Gerlach refers to as *compressed*; in these

[t]he time span is very short, and the problem level (the subject or theme) either develops very slowly or is presented obliquely, symbolically. . . . The compressed form may be regarded as a modernized version of the direct form, depending even more heavily on the original goals of direct form, singleness and compression. The essential innovation of the direct form, starting a story closer to the end, was one step toward this tightness.¹⁵⁰

If this explains the individual stories, can it explain the work as a whole? How the work coheres comes down to the controversy of Nick and his role as frequent protagonist and would-be narrator. If *In Our Time* is a short story composite, does and how does Nick

¹⁴⁹ Linda Wagner, "Juxtaposition in Hemingway's *In Our Time*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 12 (1975): 243-244.

¹⁵⁰ Gerlach, *Toward the End*, 107.

structure the whole? The answer is contingent upon how one interprets the story from which Hemingway made his dramatic cuts: "Big Two-Hearted River."

Robert E. Gajdusek, for instance, sees the story as integral to the book's unity. Like the book, it is divided into two parts, in order to show the necessity of their reintegration: "If there is to be health, if the badly traumatized boy is to be healed of the almost inadmissible wound, connections must be made, connections as vital as the systole and diastole that permit the human heart to function as an organic whole on a dualistic but integrated base."¹⁵¹ Mark Royden Winchell also finds the story instrumental to the work's structure, in a complex way. If the work, through its vignettes and stories, demonstrates "the ravages of war and the tyranny of the home," then "generically and thematically this narrative seems not to fit with the rest of the volume."¹⁵² However, he goes on to argue that "in the 7/8 of the iceberg that lies beneath the surface of 'Big Two-Hearted River,' one finds a resolution to the counterpoint established by the separate movement of the stories and sketches in *In Our Time*."¹⁵³ Paul Smith, on the other hand, sees parallels between "Big Two-Hearted River" and Joyce's "The Dead," to which Hemingway paid "silent homage": "Gabriel Conroy's communion with the falling snow seems distant from Nick Adams's contemplation of the cedared swamp, but the force of Joyce's story was immanent and profound."¹⁵⁴ Though Smith doesn't draw conclusions from this comparison, if he is right, the story is highly closural and also nodal. But what does it close and in what way is it a

¹⁵¹ Robert E. Gajdusek, "Dubliners in Michigan: Joyce's Presence in Hemingway's *In Our Time*," *Hemingway Review* 2.1 (1982): 59.

¹⁵² Mark Royden Winchell, "Fishing the Swamp: 'Big Two-Hearted River' and the Unity of *In Our Time*," *South Carolina Review* 18.2 (1986): 19.

¹⁵³ Winchell, 19-20.

¹⁵⁴ Paul Smith, "Hemingway's Senses of an Ending: *In Our Time* and After," *The Hemingway Review* 12.1 (1992): 15.

node? What does this story do for the two foci of the composite, the Nick Adams narrative and the thematic undercurrents of the collected stories? There are various ways to read "Big Two-Hearted River," all of which facilitate a slightly different understanding of the whole. I will focus here on two general approaches: a reading of the text through Nick only and a reading which looks at Nick as just one among many protagonists struggling with life "in our time."

A Nick-centered interpretation of the whole text sees the rest of the protagonists subsumed. "Big Two-Hearted River" becomes the keystone, bringing us to some sense of closure with the character, inviting Modellmog to call the book "a complete work, unified by the consciousness of Nick Adams as he attempts to come to terms through his fiction with his involvement in World War I and, more recently, with the problems of marriage and his fear of fatherhood."¹⁵⁵ Unfortunately, the story is not capable of serving this purpose. "Big Two-Hearted River" is the kind of story that defies the categories for description that I have been employing. It is almost the opposite of the classic meaning of *lyrical*, yet in its outward focus, it presents a particularly uneventful narrative: Nick goes fishing. Despite the directness and austerity of its prose, the story is extremely indirect, in the meandering of the plot and in the reader's difficulty in extracting anything from the story beyond details of how to camp and fish. But for the story to serve as the *denouement* or even the climax of a strong developmental overall narrative for Nick, it must do more than this. This is likely why the story has sometimes been subjected to all manner of esoteric symbolic interpretations, most of them centering on the moment near the

¹⁵⁵ Modellmog, 608.

conclusion where Nick considers whether to fish in a big swamp which branches out from the stream. The passage bears quoting at length:

Ahead the river narrowed and went into a swamp. The river became smooth and deep and the swamp looked solid with cedar trees, their trunks close together, their branches solid. It would not be possible to walk through a swamp like that. The branches grew so low. You would have to keep almost level with the ground to move at all. You could not crash through the branches. That must be why the animals that lived in swamps were built the way they were, Nick thought. . . .

Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them. In the swamp the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches; in the fast deep water, in the half-light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He didn't want to go up the stream any further today.¹⁵⁶

At the story's conclusion, the narrator confirms Nick's decision: "There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp."¹⁵⁷ If all this reiteration of Nick's resistance to fishing the swamp is meaningful, one meaning is certainly that of avoiding action, risk, involvement—essentially, avoiding plot and thus bolstering the very qualities that make the story unsuitable for any progressive/developmental purpose. As an ending to a Nick-centric reading of *In Our Time*, "Big Two-Hearted River" creates nothing so much as a patently indirect, open, nodal structure. The discussion of Joyce makes clear that a character can be the center of a nodal structure, but, as in the case with George Willard, Hemingway's half-hearted use of the character to make the work cohere is only partially successful. Stephen P. Clifford argues, "Readers who wish to recapture Nick Adams (or, for that matter, the biographical Ernest Hemingway) in order to create a fully developed historical personage must indeed practice abandoning that textual material which doesn't

¹⁵⁶ Ernest Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, The Finca Vigía Edition (New York: Scribner, 2003), 179-80

¹⁵⁷ Hemingway, *Complete Stories*, 180

prove useful and filling in the narrative gaps through a process of rewriting, or writing over, the text."¹⁵⁸ Modellmog's insistence on the legitimacy of superimposing Hemingway's draft onto the edited, published work is a good example of the latter.

Unfortunately, the converse view of the composite, that which pictures Nick as one among the whole group of protagonists who are dealing with the problems of the post-war era, does not make for a very integrated work. This reading is put forward most convincingly by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, who use the term *collective protagonist* to describe a narrative of this sort, going so far as to call *In Our Time* the "archetypal" version. Unfortunately, their explanation of the concept—"a group of central characters who, though different individuals, are generally similar"¹⁵⁹—leaves much to be desired. Their explanation of *In Our Time* in particular is clearer:

These protagonists—named Nick Adams or Harold Krebs (in "Soldier's Home") or Joe Butler (in "My Old Man") or not named at all—can be taken together as a generation that encounters the irrationality and violence of the modern world; finds religion, marriage, and family meaningless; and seeks some way to live, to make it through each day.¹⁶⁰

For Dunn and Morris, "Big Two-Hearted River," in closing the work, "sums all this up."¹⁶¹ In this reading, Nick—and thus all the protagonists—are still a bit fragile, because of the war; perhaps no one is ready to fish the swamp in this time, in the wake of WWI. This reading has several advantages, stemming from the fact that it views the work, structurally, as a portrait, as much about discovery of character as development. There is no need to find a through-line for Nick or to discard the majority of the text, which is not about Nick at all. A

¹⁵⁸ Stephen P. Clifford, "Hemingway's Fragmentary Novel: Readers Writing the Hero in *In Our Time*," *The Hemingway Review* 13.2 (1994): 20.

¹⁵⁹ Dunn and Morris, 64-5.

¹⁶⁰ Dunn and Morris, 65.

¹⁶¹ Dunn and Morris, 65.

composite account of life "in our time" uses Nick as particularly central example, but he is not the only war veteran or the only person unhappy with domestic life. If Nick is just one voice among many, even if he *is* more featured than most, "Big Two-Hearted River" may (or may not) close his story, but it need not provide closure to the work as a whole. This does not mean that any conclusions drawn from the story don't influence the whole. Indeed, positioned as the last story, it invites the reader to view the work retrospectively, to use this last view of Nick as a last view of the period.

The above vision of the work's composite dynamics is apt, but it does not very well address the fact that Nick is not just another character. Nick is obviously the center of the work's focus, whether Hemingway intended him to be or not. He outnumbers the other protagonists, and he appears more than once, something no other protagonist does. In addition, his stories frame the composite at beginning and end. As important as he is, though, he cannot entirely be the everyman of his time. There are many experiences he cannot know, such as what it's like to fight bulls (vignettes) or to see his father die (Joe in "My Old Man"); other experiences are too raw to present through a character who is already exposed for the reader to a degree like no other. For example, Nick served in WWI, but the battlefield and homecoming experiences are rendered through other characters (Krebs in "Soldier's Home," and various vignette focalizers).¹⁶² In the late middle stories of expatriates, we even see other protagonists experiencing things Nick must have, especially with regard to marriage, but which we are not privy to. In this way, the secondary

¹⁶² Admittedly, Modellmog makes a similar point, but in her reading of Nick as author, she reads this as his reluctance to discuss his own experiences, rather than a way for the narrator to render experiences which are outside Nick's purview (601).

protagonists fill multiple roles in explicating "our time," bolstering and complementing in the universal central character.

The shared protagonist role also allows the work to encompass many different locations, more than would be reasonable for one person. One could regard this multiplicity not as simply narrative fragmentation—including experiences Nick doesn't have—but as perceptual scattering, rendering this period from all sides at once, not unlike a cubist painting. While easy comparisons between the visual arts and the written are inadvisable, an account of what Picasso was attempting seems compatible with Hemingway's aims as extrapolated from the effect of his text. According to Elizabeth Dewberry Vaughn, Stein observed that Picasso's work showed a resistance to framing and equalization of detail; in Hemingway, there is a comparable lack of closure and a presentation of details without privileging any of them.¹⁶³ Arguably, there are some problems with the Cubist reading of *In Our Time*, namely, as Lisa Narbeshuber points out, cubism has a particular worldview that Hemingway's text doesn't seem to share. Narbeshuber argues,

To view multiple facets of an object all at once, in Cubist fashion, is to attempt to possess or master it totally. My angle on *In Our Time* finds a positive stress on the unavailable, the absent, and the quality of time before objects become objects at all. While Cubism and other movements, including Futurism, dream of an end to otherness, Hemingway wants to allow the other to remain other: not yet possessed or mastered by the human will to power. But he also wants to preserve some semblance of the self and its own immanent viewpoints.¹⁶⁴

According to Narbeshuber's reading of the text, "Hemingway wants to experience and rethink the post-war cosmos from specific locations, particular points of consciousness,

¹⁶³ Elizabeth Dewberry Vaughn, "In Our Time and Picasso," in *Hemingway Repossessed*, ed. Kenneth Rosen (Westport Conn.: Praeger, 1994), 3-4.

¹⁶⁴ Lisa Narbeshuber, "Hemingway's *In Our Time*: Cubism, Conservation, and the Suspension of Identification," *The Hemingway Review* 25.2 (2006): 23.

unique sensing beings."¹⁶⁵ However, Narbeshuber recognizes a single "post-war" cosmos, which draws our attention to the ways in which both she and Vaughn are correct: they assess the characters as part of a single whole, one which is, to various degrees, intentionally fractured into unique viewpoints. The danger is in keeping these characters separate: "To continue to refer to the protagonists of Hemingway's short stories and novels as manifestations of this Hemingway Hero is to align those characters with the unchanging, fixed form of the epic hero. As Bakhtin defines it, the world of the epic refuses the kind of heteroglossia implicit in the novel as a genre."¹⁶⁶ If the novel represents a fundamental heterogeneity of worldview, how much more does a self-consciously composite story require and represent contrasting voices, appropriate to a world which is not the closed space of the epic, with its dominating metanarratives, but a product of the modern destabilization of hierarchy. In the case of a text like *In Our Time*, a central protagonist is possible, but he or she cannot tell the whole story, especially if he or she isn't a unified self. Perhaps Dunn and Morris were right: everyone is a bit fragile, and no one is ready to fish the swamp. That's what it means to be "in our time."

If the secondary protagonists and other characters are supplementary to Nick in such an intimate way, this changes the status of "Big Two-Hearted River." As an externally focused story, it suggests coherence on the narrative level, but its indirect nature indicates that this is not a closural story, that the work overall is not progressive. Many of Hemingway's stories are tightly closed, but his composite structure here is not, especially given the experiential openness of "Big Two-Hearted River," a story which is, in the end, strikingly different from Joyce's "The Dead." In fact, as the Nick-as-everyman(-but-not-

¹⁶⁵ Narbeshuber, 23.

¹⁶⁶ Clifford, 17.

only-man) hypothesis stands midway between two contradictory readings, we also stand midway between models we've already seen in this discussion. On one end of the spectrum is *Winesburg*, where the non-George stories can uncharitably be read as fodder for his developmental narrative, because of the work's concluding stories. This is a fate from which Hemingway saved his characters. On the other is *Dubliners*, with Gabriel Conroy not a definitive, everyman protagonist, merely the final one, ushering in the closural moment where the developmental consciousness comes into focus. Nick is neither lost in the shuffle or dominant over the text. He becomes the focal point of *In Our Time*, but not because he is literally the creator of the other stories, as Hemingway initially rendered him. Such a hegemony over the text would seem false to a period which saw the fractured perspective of the most experimental work of Woolf, Joyce, and, later, Faulkner. The focus on Nick works because the other stories are able to enrich what could otherwise be only a unilateral account of one man instead of a composite portrait of a time.

Might *In Our Time* have been more like *Dubliners*, more truly composite? Perhaps, but it is not; rather than totalize, the structure compiles. With the presence of Nick Adams and his weight in the text, the structure must be built around him. *In Our Time* was published just three years after Joyce's more experimental work, *Ulysses*, which proved that the novel was already up to the challenge of adopting a composite structure centered on one person but including voices so different from the central protagonist's own. One can no more dispense with the other protagonists around Nick than one could carve away Stephen Dedalus and Molly Bloom from the story of Leopold Bloom. What makes *In Our Time* a short story composite and not a novel is its unwillingness to create a progressive narrative. For all the disorientation of *Ulysses*, it happens on the local level, from section to section,

because of his playfully protean style. Globally, the text literally walks us through every moment of a single day. As Peter Donahue sees it, "Big Two-Hearted River" is not "The Dead" because it is not a culmination of coming of age but a statement of how he's a system of differences.¹⁶⁷ However, in my reading, Nick simply governs a system of differences, the fragmentation seen in the text rather than simply in the man. This bears up the many views of the text as riding the line between unity and disunity—or, in the case of Steven Trout, the notion that the disunity of the work is a kind of unity, the form upholding the content.

According to Trout,

while generations of Hemingway scholars have posited one formalist interpretation of *In Our Time* after another, each attempting to tie the book's disparate elements into a cohesive artistic whole, the volume remains defiantly *uninterpretable*, a seeming mishmash of fragmentary micro-texts that never quite form into a coherent mosaic. This is, it seems to me, precisely the point that Hemingway ultimately makes about *our* time: a universe that accommodates the horrors of a world war simply no longer makes sense; thus, its representation in a conventional narrative form is...an impossibility.¹⁶⁸

Here, we've come quite far from Anderson, despite similar central character structures, because of differences in worldview. While George Willard faced a certain amount of existential angst in Winesburg, his story—the dominant story, ultimately the governing story—shows the possibility of escape through the unity of the self. The Winesburgers, George included, are all potentially masters of their own fates. They live in community, and they choose to isolate themselves. Nick Adams, on the other hand, lives in a world that is isolating, one that has seen total war, fracturing but at the same time creating a

¹⁶⁷ Peter Donahue, "The Genre Which Is Not One: Hemingway's *In Our Time*, Difference, and the Short Story Cycle," *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*, ed. Farhat Iftekharrudin et al. (Westport CT: Praeger, 2003), 168-9.

¹⁶⁸ Steven Trout, "Antithetical Icons? Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, and the First World War," *Cather Studies* 7 (2007): 280.

commonality of experience. This is why David J. Leigh can refer to the other protagonists as "Nick Adamses." One gets the impression that Hemingway might just as easily have latched onto a different nodal character but communicated the same basic observations about post-war society, all because the work is looking at a particular kind of universal—a composite portrait. Clearly, literature had responded to Woolf's insistence on character-driven narratives. It had met many Mrs. Browns; it would now need to coax them into the train car together.

2. Narrative Control, The Modern Artist, and the Curious Collaboration of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder

I cast myself out into the open seas of friendship and hope to be supported and understood. SO: there are long long stretches of the *Four in America* where I don't understand a word.

— Wilder to Stein, September 23, 1935

. . . I think a lot about you, Thornton, sometimes you are a puzzle to me but then I do know what a puzzle is if it is a puzzle. . .

— Stein to Wilder, May 2, 1937

That Gertrude Stein carried on a regular correspondence with American playwright Thornton Wilder is in many ways not particularly surprising. If we are to believe *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein knew nearly everyone who was anyone, and already by the second quarter of the century, Wilder was a Pulitzer Prize-winning someone. Their relationship seems a curious thing largely because of our existing portraits of the two authors, distorted by time and by the mechanisms that settled them into place in the canon and, more importantly, placed them within a hierarchy based on the aesthetic values we perceive them to represent. Stein is the forward-thinking, experimental poet; Wilder is the backward-looking, nostalgic playwright. Stein is a literary novelty, the woman who asked poetry to turn from a philosophic contemplation of Aristotle's law of identity—"A rose / By any other word would smell as sweet"—to the law's bold statement—"A rose is a rose is a

rose." Wilder is the writer of *Our Town*, a play so universal in its themes and so universally popular that it has become something of a cliché. What goes unexamined is how both writers are known for stripping things down: the rose to its name, the stage to its manager and players. Both writers, too, in very different ways challenged convention. Their need to follow their own artistic paths left each swimming upstream against a different concept of the same stylistic norm: mimetic realism.

In her early narrative works, written against a backdrop of traditional realism and naturalism, Stein clearly operated under a different assumption about art, one concerned more with the flow of language and thought than the development of story and plot. As an anonymous 1909 review of *Three Lives* observed, "The style is somewhat unusual; at times it is a little difficult to follow... It is only when one has read the book slowly—not as a story, but as a serious picture of life—that one grasps the author's conception of her humble characters."¹⁶⁹ Marianne DeKoven concurs, describing this plot-deemphasizing strategy as "stylization of the prose surface in order to render directly the essence of a character's identity."¹⁷⁰ Dekoven argues that this obsession with the surface of the prose in *Three Lives* is not a "retreat from meaning into pure form," just a movement toward a different way of making meaning.¹⁷¹ For Jayne L. Walker, this produced "a new standard for colloquial realism."¹⁷² Wilder, too, was seen as an alternative to writers like Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. Rex Burbank, an early Wilder scholar, confirms that Wilder was part of a

¹⁶⁹ "[*Boston Globe* 18 December 1909]," in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein*, ed. Kirk Curnett (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2000), 10-11.

¹⁷⁰ Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 28.

¹⁷¹ Dekoven, 28.

¹⁷² Jayne L. Walker, *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from Three Lives to Tender Buttons* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), xii.

sizeable nonrealist movement in literature, one which was unfortunately not as strong in the United States,¹⁷³ a circumstance which continues to deprive his work of a helpful interpretive context. To this end, Wilder's writing contained "moral and ethical themes that realistic, objective records of external phenomena could not convey and which philosophical naturalism could not justify the validity of."¹⁷⁴ Things would seem to place him within an earlier, more romantic school of American literature, akin to Hawthorne. Stein and Wilder probably would not have considered their tasks as pitting them against the real, just against a particular approach to it, yet both were attacked by the political left as retreating from the social problems of their day.

Stein and Wilder excelled in multiple modes and wrote genre-bending prose that blurred the line between fact and fiction, past and present, particular and universal. Most importantly for this study, they wrote composite narratives: one about the experience of poor women—including one of mixed race—at the turn of the century, and one about the power of love—and perhaps God—to repair the world. Arguably, Stein's *Three Lives* and Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* would have been less controversial had their publication dates been reversed. By 1927, late in the New Negro Renaissance, the story of passionate African-American "Melanctha" in *Three Lives* would've been a bit less scandalous, perhaps even fashionable. In addition, experimental prose and narrative forms would've been more familiar. Conversely, 1909, firmly in the modern century but before the turmoil of WWI, seems an appropriate moment to turn to seventeenth century Peru and the timeless question of deity and design in the course of human lives. Positioned as these texts were, though, they stood out, Stein's stirring the imaginations of a small group

¹⁷³ Rex J. Burbank, *Thornton Wilder* (New York: Twayne, 1961), 34-5.

¹⁷⁴ Burbank, 34.

of restless modernists in the first decade of the century and Wilder's serving as humanist lifeline for modern traditionalists after the Great War.

While the two writers' correspondence, begun shortly after their meeting in 1935, indicates that their relationship encompassed friendship and collaboration, Wilder habitually cast himself in the role of apprentice to the older, more experienced, and ostensibly more talented Stein. Wilder offered two important services to his mentor in particular: easing the publication of her books in the U.S. and explicating her ideas for an American audience of intellectuals. In the 1930s, that which we eventually labeled the New Criticism was still new and the academy clung to historical models of scholarship. Literary critique continued to be an extra-academic industry governed by writers, intellectuals, and the periodical press. Stein was in need of an advocate in both critical circles and academia, and at this time, Wilder, a popular lecturer lodged uncomfortably within academia as a practitioner-instructor, was in a good position to be one.¹⁷⁵ Just as important as his mediation between Stein and the establishment was his willingness to profess the value of her works while confessing to his own unpreparedness to completely understand them. Just a few months after Wilder met Stein, he describes his struggle with reading *Four in America*, something he chalks up to his being a "slow-poke plodder," a reader "still stuck in the literal XIXth Century."¹⁷⁶ His frequent apologies for his difficulties with her work, as well as his eventual comprehension of and praise for those same texts, reveal a willingness

¹⁷⁵ For background on Wilder, including his juggling of public, academic, and private life through the 1930s, see Edward Burns and Ulla E Dydo, introduction to *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder*, ed. Burns and Dydo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), xv-xxvi.

¹⁷⁶ Thornton Wilder to Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, 23 September 1935, in Burns and Dydo, 56.

to accept the new but also an understanding of his own predilections and limitations, those which his readers, including intellectuals both inside and outside academia, likely shared.

While Wilder's own style, an approach that valued universal truth over documentary realism, had roots in the fiction of "the literal XIXth century," Stein's experimental approach in *Three Lives* did not come as second nature to readers of the classic novel tradition. In these early portraits, she placed no great emphasis on working within the formal and generic structures that had come to represent life in the literature of previous centuries. For instance, Donald Sutherland describes nineteenth century literature as "still interested in causes and purposes and explanation"—interested, that is, in the progressive movement of history, beside which modernist works like Stein's appear to halt time.¹⁷⁷ For Stein and the other modernists, verisimilitude was not the only possible goal of art, and new strategies of representation were devised to reflect this change. Stein grew up with the realism of writers like William Dean Howells and Henry James, who sought to depict the world naturally, to extract from it a greater measure of truth than was found in more romantic or idealistic forms of literature. Naturalism, the other major turn-of-the-century form, was often didactic in its determinism, using narrative to usher its characters swiftly toward tragic ends. Modernist art, in contrast, was coolly analytical, picking the world apart and laying the pieces bare for the reader to reassemble. Though some of Stein's contemporaries as well as later critics obviously considered this quality of her work an artistic failing, seen in context and in hindsight the unbalancing or even disorienting effect of most modernist works is not the result of an unbalanced or

¹⁷⁷ Donald Sutherland, "Gertrude Stein and the Twentieth Century," *Gertrude Stein Advanced: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelantz (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 1990), 13.

disoriented artistic process but of superb control, a structured and focused display of indeterminacy or even chaos.¹⁷⁸

The notion of narrative control, in each individual text and as a philosophical pose of modern art and artist, is of central importance to modern composite narrative. In the short story composite, the writer uses the narrator to manipulate meaning on the local level, but, as reining consciousness of the work, the writer is also a shaping force, an arranger or complier. This latter function is of particular interest to this study, especially with regard to a major sub-category within the short story composite genre: the framed narrative. Though the frame tale form is not exclusive to the short story composite, frame-dependent narrative is both the quintessential shape of the genre and the most challenging to the project of defining and delimiting it. While all written art takes advantage of various types of framing—both extrinsic and intrinsic to the text—short story composites are often more dependent upon these strategies, especially composites whose coherence is not created through story but through a shared setting or characters, or a unifying narrative voice. An overt narrative frame, however useful it may be for establishing a work's basis of coherence, creates for short story composite theory as many problems as it solves. It initiates a nuclear form of coherence, the frame connecting the work's text pieces to itself—and thus to the whole—without necessarily connecting those pieces directly to each other, which makes such a text suspect in a literary culture traditionally oriented to linearity and causality. Too, in itself the frame frequently does not constitute a short story or any other kind of independent piece of text, which flies in the face of definitions of the genre which seek to depict it as the diametric opposite of traditional storytelling.

¹⁷⁸ Richter, 89

Stein's *Three Lives*, like the text it was initially modeled upon, Flaubert's *Trois Contes* (1877), uses subtle forms of framing more common to the twentieth century,¹⁷⁹ including its compiling title, the echoing pattern in two of the story titles ("The Good Anna" and "The Gentle Lena"), and the shared setting and general subject of all three. However, without a narrative frame—that is, without an introduction or preface or other meta-narrative component which contextualizes the stories as a group—the work can be easily read as a short story collection. At the opposite extreme, Wilder's framed tale *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* appears perfectly coherent—maybe too coherent, too neatly packaged to qualify as modernist narrative, and precisely because of the intervention of its textual framing. It is different from a text like Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, for which the preface does not govern the work as a coherent narrative but simply provides a stylistic-thematic framework. The narratives of the various protagonists in *Bridge* are rendered as one story, no matter how separate their lives/stories, which resonate through broad thematics more than circumstantial confluence, as in Stein's triptych. Both of these books were from the outset considered coherent works of art which expressed modern concerns; neither, however, was initially conceptualized as the kind of text we now call a short story cycle or composite.

An understanding of these texts within our contemporary generic category can illuminate their textual-narrative structure as well as the period's changing theories about the rendering of reality, exemplified in the visual arts in cubism. The relationship of Stein's prose style to cubist art has been understood as a simple correspondence and taken for

¹⁷⁹ Forrest Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* □: *Studies in a Literary Genre* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 19.

granted or else curtly dismissed as a reductive analogy. In reality, Stein does not naïvely imitate Picasso's approach to painting but is instead informed by the same aesthetic assumptions about the representation of reality which were a dramatic departure from literary convention. Cubism, then, helpfully grounds a discussion of Stein's work, and in addition it will serve here as a helpful structural analogy for literary compositing techniques in general. Viewed through this lens, *Three Lives* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, though very different works, are clearly modern composite constructions. Surely, then, extra-textual forces at least in some part account for the works' and authors' differing contemporary reception and ongoing status in literary studies. Balancing the changing reactions to and evaluations of these works against the particular framing techniques they employ reveals much about the nature of the narrative revolution and its eventual outcome. It also helps place the short story composite within this changing current, perhaps suggesting the rip tide that took it under.

II.

Three Lives occupies a rather liminal position in the study of modernist narrative, and within the study of Stein's work. It has the misfortune to have been written before Stein's major experimental period,¹⁸⁰ and to be a work of narrative prose rather than verse. As such, it garners some attention, but largely as a hint of things to come. Central story "Melanctha," of course, attracts critics interested in its frank portrayal of sexuality and its problematic racial dynamic. This kind of assessment, though it often focuses on the story's

¹⁸⁰ According to DeKoven, this phase began just after the publication of *Three Lives*, continuing through 1932. DeKoven argues that this phase produced "the most substantial and successful body of experimental writing in English" (xiii).

narrative shape and style, is not much concerned with the overall structure of the book, story to story. Nevertheless, as the text is issuing from a canonical modernist, in some critics' estimation a proto-postmodernist,¹⁸¹ it invites at least cursory and obligatory critical examination. Wilder's *Bridge* and the rest of his prose does not, despite his canonical status in drama and acclamations of Pulitzer Prizes (1928, 1938, 1943) and National Book Award (1968) for work in drama as well as fiction.¹⁸² This is a sign of the dramatic change that came to our literary culture over the course of the twentieth century, the investigation of which necessitates an assessment of the current state of work on both writers.

In summing up Stein's position within our current cultural consciousness, which in fact includes a not-insignificant portion of academia, Jo-Anna Isaak argues, "The assumption about her work is that it is boring, repetitious, childish nonsense."¹⁸³ Rather than defend Stein on these charges, she says they are "fairly accurate assessments," which prevents Stein's work from gaining widespread acceptance.¹⁸⁴ Isaak explains that this is because Stein "pushes the signifying practice of writing beyond its limits."¹⁸⁵ Indeed, many critics have argued that Stein's primary importance is as an innovator of language,

¹⁸¹ Ellen E. Berry, for example, evaluates Stein's stance on the relationship between high and low culture during the first half of the twentieth century, and she finds that Stein has much in common with postmodern attitudes about art which attempt to destabilize the high/low hierarchy (Ellen E. Berry, *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering: Gertrude Stein's Postmodernism* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992], 133-4.)

¹⁸² Note that while two of Wilder's Pulitzers are for drama (*Our Town*, 1938, and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, 1943) as opposed to one for prose (*The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, 1928), his National Book Award was for his penultimate novel, *The Eighth Day* (1967), and his Presidential Medal of Freedom (1963) was given for his whole body of literary work.

¹⁸³ Jo-Anna Isaak, "The Revolutionary Power of a Woman's Laughter," in Kostelantz, 24.

¹⁸⁴ Isaak, 24.

¹⁸⁵ Isaak, 25.

including DeKoven, who uses the descriptor *experimental* for exactly this purpose.¹⁸⁶ With regard to *Three Lives* specifically, David Antin goes so far as to argue that it "may superficially resemble the story genre, and she evokes a deliberate comparison with Flaubert; but her three 'stories' are much less stories than the pieces in *Dubliners* and much more language constructions."¹⁸⁷ As a wordsmith, Stein would not seem the most logical figure through which to trace the development of modern narrative structures. However, she very much is—precisely because of her attention to the paradigmatic dimension of language, once the province of poets but increasingly a concern of all writers, leading to a blurring of the lines between verse and prose, and between their the organizational structures and aesthetic standards.

Many Stein critics address her relationship to the breakdown of the poetry/prose dichotomy, typically through the identification of those modes with metaphor and metonymy.¹⁸⁸ David Lodge perhaps sums it up best: "Modern fiction may be characterized by an extreme or mannered drive toward the metonymic pole of language to which the novel naturally inclines, as well as by a drive toward the metaphoric pole from which it is naturally remote."¹⁸⁹ For Lodge, Stein is an excellent example of this tendency. Stein's fusion of modes as well as the propensity of modernist writing to invite such a fusion leads many critics to a comparison of Stein's poetry and prose with the two major styles of cubism in the visual arts. I will discuss these in more in detail later; here, the important thing to note is the general spirit of playful transgression which pervades Stein's work and

¹⁸⁶ DeKoven, xiii-xiv.

¹⁸⁷ David Antin, "Some Questions about Modernism (An Excerpt)," in Kostelantz, 209.

¹⁸⁸ See especially DeKoven xiii-xxv; and Phillip Heldric, "Connecting Surfaces: Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, Cubism, and the Metonymy of the Short Story Cycle," *Studies in Short Fiction* 34 (1997): 427-39.

¹⁸⁹ David Lodge, "The Language of Modern Fiction: Gertrude Stein," in Kostelantz, 101.

discussions of it, including *Three Lives*. Lawren Farber, for example, argues that this work shows "how Stein first tested the limits of narrative," in a text that was "an amalgam of history and language—an art—embodying everything."¹⁹⁰ Berry points out that Stein embraced both high and low culture in a way that other modernists did not, seeing mass culture as instrumental in the kind of societal change that Virginia Woolf and others identified as rendering past forms unsuitable.¹⁹¹

As a sign of these kinds of tensions, critics that engage with *Three Lives* in particular, in examining its rhetorical strategy, frequently find that it is almost inseparable from its structure. Here, Stein's concept of continuous present, derived from her study of William James and Henri Bergson, is fundamental. As described by DeKoven, it is "a continuous process or succession of steadily shifting present moments rather than a linear progress or march from past through present to future."¹⁹² It is one way of flattening or decentralizing the surface of the narrative, by rendering it static. In *Three Lives*, Stein also takes advantage of non-linear storytelling as a means of immobilizing or else altering narrative thrust. As DeKoven points out, impressionistic structure usually begins at important moment and flashes back, but in each of these stories, we start at a short-lived happy moment, with a flashback that appears push us back toward that happy ending, only to move past it toward something darker; "It is this structure which gives the deaths of the heroines the quality of afterthought or postscript, distracting us from their actual thematic quality."¹⁹³ Another destabilizing measure in the structure traces back to her blurring of the lines between

¹⁹⁰ Lawren Farber, "Fading: A Way. Gertrude Stein's Sources for *Three Lives*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 5.3 (1976): 463.

¹⁹¹ Berry, 138.

¹⁹² DeKoven, 27.

¹⁹³ DeKoven, 32-3.

poetry and prose. As Sutherland explains, her work is structured through juxtaposition or parataxis, but in two distinguishable yet complementary ways: "first the juxtaposition of nearly identical though independent units, as in one and one and one and so on, and second, the juxtaposition of things that are very different in kind and quality."¹⁹⁴ While Sutherland argues that these tendencies are attributable to different periods in her writing life, poetry and prose respectively, these actions are two sides of the same coin and, lifted from sentence- to narrative-level, they work ambiguously, in tandem.¹⁹⁵

"Between 1905 and 1912 Stein was engaged in a monumental struggle with the problem of realism," claims Walker, "in which she worked through successive revaluations of the issue of representation that parallel the course of modernist painting from Cezanne to cubist *collage*."¹⁹⁶ Stein's particular brand of realism was especially identifiable by her approach to language, put to use in a new way and echoing new ideas about consciousness and human psychology, ideas she was introduced to early, during her tutelage under William James. According to Isaak,

¹⁹⁴ Sutherland, 11.

¹⁹⁵ Also shaping the text is the influence of Flaubert, although critics argue about the extent of that influence, a debate that seems to involve, implicitly, the difference between the composite and the individual stories. For example, Walker takes at face value the correspondence implicit in Stein's use of an allusive title, although she finds that Flaubert's influence is less a question of thematic echoing and narrative modeling than narrative style and approach to representation (19-21). Janice L. Doane, on the other hand, does not find a discernible Flaubertian influence in Stein's writing; she argues that *Trois Contes* was merely the spark to Stein's creativity, most of the work departing sharply from its initial textual model (*Silence and Narrative: The Early Novels of Gertrude Stein* [Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1986] 57-8). Ulla Haselstein finds the Stein-Flaubert relationship a bit more complex, more useful as a basis of contrast between Flaubert's proto-modern attempts to capture the language of the lower classes, an attempt that only reinforced the social hierarchy, and Stein's more revelatory display of the problem ("A New Kind of Realism: Flaubert's *Trois Contes* and Stein's *Three Lives*," *Comparative Literature* 61.4 [2009]: 388-399).

¹⁹⁶ Walker, xix.

The psychological aspect of language was what motivated Stein to begin her career as a creative writer. She began by listening to the 'sub-texts' of everyday speech. . . In short, she is attending not to what people say, that is, their referential use of language, but to what she calls 'the rhythm of anybody's personality.'¹⁹⁷

Her narrative structures are likewise dependent upon her modern worldview, her search for new ways to reflect the rhythms of experiences and lives. For instance, Margaret M. Dunn makes a persuasive argument that Stein's text enacts the modern female writer's need to take her characters beyond the typical confines of women's stories.¹⁹⁸ Stein's way of skirting traditional plotting was to deemphasize the importance of marriage in each story and to instead emphasize the vital relationships these characters had with other women.¹⁹⁹ In combining these two innovations, Stein created stories—and indeed a whole work—which illustrate the range of poor women's individualities and experiences, as well as the inevitability of their hardships, things contingent not upon their marital state but upon their position in society.

Unlike Stein, who cannot be dispelled from the conversation on modernism, Wilder is regarded as a less important writer, especially where his narrative prose is concerned, and depends for analysis in part on the conversation of non-academics. One can gather the general critical consensus about Wilder's place in twentieth century letters by looking at his position in anthologies—or his lack of position—and by the little most academics seem to know about him.²⁰⁰ When confronted with his fiction, it is easy to conclude that he is a good writer, but of a regressive sort. This attitude likely originates in impressions of *Our*

¹⁹⁷ Isaak, 37.

¹⁹⁸ Margaret M. Dunn, "Altered Patterns and New Endings: Reflections of Change in Stein's *Three Lives* and H. D.'s *Palimpsest*," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 9.2 (1987): 54.

¹⁹⁹ Dunn, 56.

²⁰⁰ None of the following major publishers of American literature anthologies include Wilder: Norton, Heath, Penguin, Bedford/St. Martin's.

Town, but it tends to reverberate back to his early fiction, reducing him to a stubborn universalist voice crying in the modern wilderness. The waxing and waning field of Wilder studies brings a slightly less damaging view, that Wilder might not have been a modernist, given his traditional style, but he was assuredly a modern. As David Castronovo puts it, Wilder was undeniably part of "the literature of isolation and chaos that gave expression to early twentieth-century pressures."²⁰¹ Wilder's tendency toward pre-modern and non-American settings does not make this impossible:

Wilder absorbed the spirit of his age and took his place as a distinguished supporting artist in the struggle to express the disorder and sense of disintegration that also haunted the late James, the young Hemingway, and the Eliot of 'Prufrock' and *The Waste Land*. Despite his use of fabricated historical settings, his first three novels are 'in our time' because they focus on damaged selves and short-circuited relationships.²⁰²

Peter G. Christensen likewise reads Wilder in the context of American modernism, contrasting *Bridge* with linearly plotted novels like Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and comparing it, structurally, to Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.²⁰³

While Christensen's analysis might constitute a bit of an exaggeration, the legitimacy of such proposed comparisons is significant. Unfortunately, Wilder's thematic strategies of coherence often draw attention to content at the expense of interrogating form. Form,

²⁰¹ David Castronovo, *Thornton Wilder* (New York: Ungar, 1986), 31.

²⁰² Castronovo, 31.

²⁰³ Peter G. Christensen, "Human Relatedness and Narrative Technique in the Early Novels of Thornton Wilder and Glenway Westcott," in *Thornton Wilder: New Essays*, ed. Martin Blank, Dalma Hunyadi Brunauer, and David Garrett Izzo (West Cornwall CT: Locust Hill Press, 1999), 203.

especially in *Bridge*, becomes a separate matter, understood as failing to properly integrate the stories' various protagonists into one narrative. It is as if even Wilder studies has too much bought into the novel's ending—the connections created by love—and forgotten that, thematically, the work is just as much about the miseries of love, the loneliness present in the characters even before they fell to their death. The isolation of these stories is reasonable, even more so as the framing apparatus for the work deals with the lack of connection between the event and the victims, a real anxiety about causality and the effects of chance. Without a study of the work's structure, one which goes beyond labeling it a problematic novel, such tensions are less apparent.

This academic account of Wilder's work contrasts sharply with the non-academic appraisal of Wilder's merits and legacy. Fellow dramatists and literary journalists are more likely to devote time to writing about Wilder, and their portrait of the man is by no means blindly obsequious. They are able to bring forth stereotypes and both admit to their origins in reality and dispel their patronizing effects. Take this 2009 introduction by Jeremy McCarter of *Newsweek*:

When Thornton Wilder wore his glasses, which was much of the time, he had a mild, professorial air—like an owl, some said. Catch him without spectacles, though, and the change was extreme. His blue eyes had what one reporter called "a blade-like sharpness." They reminded you that behind his genial demeanor lay "one of the toughest and most complicated minds in contemporary America."

There, in brief, is the Wilder conundrum. When he is remembered today, it is almost always in his owl persona, as the folksy author of a folksy play, *Our Town*. But this gets both play and author almost completely backward. Done right, *Our Town* isn't a nostalgic wallow in small-town life, it's a harrowing story about human limitation—all the beauty and value we fail to recognize in our day-to-day lives.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Jeremy McCarter, "Something Wilder," *Newsweek*, 28 September 2009.

For McCarter, understanding Wilder properly is a matter of re-seeing, of looking past the "persona," which, like Stein's, was just as much ascribed to him as consciously adopted. For C. Benfry writing in *The New Republic* in 2008, the "conundrum" of Wilder is a function of his complex relationship to the aesthetics of the period: "Wilder was evidently a modern, someone to place among the 'lost' generation... and yet he was just as clearly an outsider, or at least an outrigger, of some as-yet-to-be-identified variety."²⁰⁵ While Benfry is less anxious than McCarter to resolve the problem of Wilder's identity, he nonetheless does some re-seeing of his own, especially with regard to one of the very things Wilder is most often taken to task for, his traditional narrative approach:

Wilder loved artifice, the dilapidated machinery of the omniscient narrator and the epistolary novel. ... He sometimes seems to have anticipated the exposed-beam construction of the French nouveau roman of Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet, with its insistent reminders that we are not to mistake the novel at hand for "real life." He sought to inherit the legacy of the most exacting of the modernist masters ... while preserving a comforting decorum reminiscent of the eighteenth century.²⁰⁶

This kind of traditional desire for decorum is, of course, an enduring post-modern academic taboo, but it tends to resonate with popular audiences.

Also problematic is the notion of literature as explicitly comforting or, more generally, created to evoke emotions. As Marxist critic Paul Lauter points out, our contemporary dismissal of the emotional dimension of literature is logical, but it is also undesirable. It represents a blindness in our postmodern critical paradigms, as inherited from or at least influenced by modernism. Lauter asks, "where the ironic stance precedes the emotional response and art works are held up for arm's length scrutiny, what can

²⁰⁵ C. Benfry, "The American Loneliness: The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder," *New Republic*, 8 December 2008, 37.

²⁰⁶ Benfry, 38.

become of *The Bluest Eye*" and other works which have a different agenda?²⁰⁷ That agenda is often a matter of art having a social function. When Tony Blair, elegizing the victims of the September 11 attacks, quoted the ending of *Bridge*—"There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning"²⁰⁸—its sweeping rhetoric was appropriate and, yes, somehow comforting. Lauter argues that much of what has been marginalized in American literature has emerged from communities that use literature for a social purpose, usually to bind groups together.²⁰⁹ Admittedly, Lauter is focused on usually agreed-upon marginalized traditions, such as that of women, African-Americans, and Native Americans. He does not, then, discuss writers who might be from the same background and social class as the establishment. This is reasonable; Wilder, for example, is part of the privileged literal minority. But as the privileged group changed, and it did so during this period, so did the position of writers like Wilder—from part of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment to a member of a discounted literary movement, namely, that which wasn't modernism. I am not attempting to equate traditionalists with repressed classes in any socioeconomic or political way, but as artists these groups are working in a similar position with regard to the mainstream, even if they once *were* the mainstream. My use of Lauter's ideas here likely pushes far beyond his intent, but it is not an unconscionable stretch of his theoretical framework; as he admits, the idea of art as functional seems especially "uncongenial to those of us brought up on formalist paradigms."²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Paul Lauter, *Canons and Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 51.

²⁰⁸ Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 180.

²⁰⁹ Lauter, 60-1.

²¹⁰ Lauter, 61.

For such reasons, *Bridge* is suspicious, alienating to academic audiences, though it need not be. Upon the 10-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks, Danny Heitman of *The Wall Street Journal* looked back at this work which was invoked on the international stage, and he made this observation:

Mr. Wilder concludes *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* with the suggestion that in the face of overwhelming human loss, people should take comfort in the love that binds the living and the dead, regardless of the cold machinations of fate—a lesson that can seem at once profound and prosaic. Perhaps anticipating his critics, he says at one point in his novel that "there are times when it requires a high courage to speak the banal."²¹¹

Arguably, nothing else in the novel reaches the somewhat cloying grandiosity of its "banal" end, but it is all still rather unfashionably decorous. The rest of the novel, however, is not so smooth or easy to swallow. Whether the bulk of the work can be seen as inelegantly belying or usefully complicating its ending, its focus on pain and isolation works against the notion that the novel is truly without substance, tension, or modern skepticism. Wilder's style and worldview eclipse his structural idiosyncrasies, which, properly examined, paint a more complex picture of early texts like *The Cabala* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Though his contemporaries had a different account of his talent and importance, unfortunately they evaluated his work on the same grounds, style and ideology, which distracted his reviewers from the careful and often intricate construction of many of his texts, or at least the modern implications of structure in his episodic or fragmented narrative.

One would think that the ineluctable presence of Stein in academia would prevent her from suffering the same fate, but we have often missed observing the intersection of language, structure, and worldview that would reveal *Three Lives* to be more than simply a

²¹¹ Danny Heitman, "A Novel That Parses the Inexplicable," *Wall Street Journal*, September 10, 2011.

curiosity or a requisite critical starting point. It is much easier to simply interrogate her style. This, unfortunately, is not a new reaction to Stein's work. Like Wilder, Stein was caught up in a period of change that found different reading publics—popular, intellectual, academic—evaluating works on different principles, or upon the same principles with different valuations. This complex of divisions still exists, but it has its roots in the period during which Stein developed her later style(s) and Wilder produced his early fiction. Contemporary discussions of each writer attest to their position within this hierarchy, and the nature of those discussions shows that the hierarchy was far from stable.

III.

The fact that Stein was a generation ahead of Wilder²¹² is not insignificant. While some of her works were new or in progress during the time of their friendship, many of her texts were long behind her, such as *Three Lives*, published in 1909. Even during that pre-war, iconoclastic phase of modernism, Stein could expect a bit of general befuddlement at her style and narrative aims. On the other hand, at the time Wilder published *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, some of the major works of modernism had been and were being published, but they represented not the only or even the dominant aesthetic. Wilder's novels appeared alongside a diverse host of decidedly more traditional and popular novel forms.²¹³ There was much less to criticize about Wilder's more straightforward work,

²¹² Stein was over two decades Wilder's senior – and just a year younger than Wilder's own mother. (The two women died the same year, 1946) When they met in 1935, Wilder was 38 and Stein was 61.

²¹³ Other works published in 1927 include Edgar Rice Burroughs's second novel, *The Outlaw of Torn*; Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*; Doyle's final book of detective fiction, *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*; Agatha Christie's fourth Poirot novel, *The Big*

especially its structure, which, in a literary environment not yet finely tuned to sounding a piece of writing for its resonant formal structure, seemed reasonable and self-evident: it was simply a framed novel. In this environment, each author draws criticism appropriate to his or her most notable feature, style—Stein's inane or choppy, and Wilder's self-consciously sublime. Unfortunately, this critical move often buries a discussion of larger issues. This is relatively easy to do, for the two writers' perceived sin of avoiding reality was inextricably bound up in their styles.

The popular view of Stein as esoteric modernist, as well as its implications for her work, were almost immediately apparent, even as early as the publication of *Three Lives*. Though Stein had her champions in art patrons like Mabel Dodge Luhan and writers like Sherwood Anderson, the response of her friend Edith Sitwell to her work, specifically to "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene" (1922), is a fairly representative sample of attitudes about her early prose:

To sum up the book as far as possible, I find in it an almost insuperable amount of silliness, an irritatingly ceaseless rattle like that of American sightseers talking in a boarding-house (this being, I imagine, a deliberate effect), great bravery, a certain real originality, and a few flashes of exquisite beauty.²¹⁴

Stein's contemporary reception was just this kind of mixed bag, with evaluations that cast her as instigator of "literary anarchy" and compared her writing to "a cold black suet-pudding" set against effusive praise: "In *Three Lives* Miss Stein attained at a bound an amount of literary facility which a writer might strive in vain for years to acquire."²¹⁵ Most

Four; the final part of Proust's *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Sinclair's *Oil!*, and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

²¹⁴ Edith Sitwell, "Miss Stein's Stories," *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, ed. Michael J. Hoffman (Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1986), 46.

²¹⁵ Robert E. Rogers, "Tender Buttons, Curious Experiment of Gertrude Stein in Literary Anarchy," in Hoffman, 31; Wyndham Lewis, "Tests for Counterfeit in the Arts and the

critics, however, were divided, like Sitwell, appreciating some aspects of Stein's writing and disdaining others. Take, for example, this bewildered, backhand compliment from an anonymous contemporary review: "These stories utterly lack construction and focus, but give that sense of urgent life which one gets more commonly in Russian literature than elsewhere."²¹⁶ Almost immediately, readers felt compelled to note her unorthodox ideas about narrative pacing and subject but also found themselves unable to avoid recognizing that this unorthodox method was bringing forth something good.

During her lifetime, critics and fellow writers were already considering her legacy and the nature of her contribution to literature. Perhaps this is because of the cult of personality that developed around her, as Jo-Anna Isaak reminds us, inviting as much criticism of the woman as of her works.²¹⁷ In the late 1950s, B. L. Reid puts the onus on Stein herself: "It would be a great deal easier to measure Gertrude Stein if she would let us alone."²¹⁸ But a focus on Stein's personality was not a deflection but a bedrock question of motivation and purpose, much bigger than a single book or even Stein herself. What readers and reviewers asked was this: Was she serious? If so, was she as clever as people claimed she was? But what they actually wanted to know was something a bit different: Did she mean this to be art? *Was* it art? As both Mike Gold and a reviewer at the *Washington Post* agree, she was neither a genius nor a con man; she believed in her project.²¹⁹ They disagree, however, about whether she was simply less a genius than she thought or crazier

Prose-song of Gertrude Stein," in Hoffman, 55; Carl Van Vechten, "How to Read Gertrude Stein," in Hoffman, 36.

²¹⁶ "[*Three Lives*]," in Hoffman, 27.

²¹⁷ Isaaks, 24.

²¹⁸ B. L. Reid, "An Evaluation," in Hoffman, 107.

²¹⁹ Mike Gold, "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot," in Hoffman, 76; "Gertrude Stein," *The Washington Post*, August 4, 1946.

than we know. A less personality-focused account of Stein's legacy comes from fellow poet William Carlos Williams:

Whatever the value of Miss Stein's work may turn out finally to be, she has at least accomplished her purpose of getting down on paper this much that is decipherable. She has placed writing on a plane where it may deal unhampered with its own affairs, unburdened with scientific and philosophic lumber.²²⁰

Whether regarded as mysterious genius, absurd literary poseur, or well-meaning but flawed liberator of language, after the fact she has been regarded as a quintessential modern artist, one whose art is obscure but whose life is vividly part of pop culture.

As early in her career as the publication of *Three Lives* (1905), critics addressed the difficult and questionable nature of her art, perhaps recognizing the growing gap between those who understood "high" literature and those who did not. Many were in the position of Wilder, disoriented but determined to find their footing. Consider the assessment of one anonymous reviewer, who sees the work's style as a mixed blessing:

The half-articulated phrases follow unrelentingly the blind mental and temperamental gropings of three humble souls wittingly or unwittingly at odds with life. Whoever can adjust himself to the repetitions, false starts, and general circularity of the manner will find himself very near real people. Too near, possibly.²²¹

Her fellow writers were sometimes less indulgently understanding of her stylistic quirks. Vorticist poet and painter Wyndham Lewis's portrait said of her prose, "It is mournful and monstrous, composed of dead and inanimate material. It is all fat, without nerve."²²² On the other hand, Hutchins Hapgood, in a 1906 letter to Stein, interprets her unique style as precisely what rescues the book: ". . . in some way you have done an artistic thing. And yet somehow you have attained your end without any of the ordinary devices of plot, piquancy,

²²⁰ William Carlos Williams, "The Work of Gertrude Stein," in Hoffman, 56.

²²¹ "[Three Lives]," in Hoffman, 27.

²²² Lewis, 55.

conversation, variety, drama, etc. Your stories are not easy reading for that reason. They lack all of the minor qualities of art, — construction, etc., etc."²²³ Apparently, critics were discovering just how "minor" such conventional concerns were, in the face of reaching other goals. In 1909, an anonymous reviewer with the *Kansas City Star* argued, "As character study one can speak of it only in superlatives. The originality of its narrative form is as notable. As these humble human lives are groping in bewilderment so does the storytelling itself."²²⁴ Carl Van Vechten, one of Stein's early champions, views this rhetorical-structural tendency more positively:

Simplicity is a quality one is born with, so far as literary style is concerned, and Miss Stein was born with it. But to it she added, in this work, a vivid note of reiteration, a fascinatingly complete sense of psychology and the working of minds one on the other, which at least in 'Melanctha: Each as She May' reaches a state of perfection which might have satisfied such masters of craft as Turgenev, or Balzac or Henry James. (36)

Here, the repetition and simplicity which others find monotonous are depicted as intentional and clever, a departure from the typical dramatic structure of narrative.

Stein's legacy was in part forged in the long public conversation about her, a conversation as personal as it was polemical. Wilder, on the other hand, became the subject of a single, focused controversy so impassioned that one suspects that, as in the case of Stein's reception, the contest was about much more than one author and his works. In October of 1930, the year Wilder published *The Woman of Andros*, his third novel, Marxist

²²³ Hutchins Hapgood, "[Letter to Gertrude Stein]," in Hoffman, 25.

²²⁴ "Fiction, but Not Novels," in Hoffman, 26. The same year, a reviewer at *The Washington Herald* wrote, "The thing is novel in that it departs of traditional lines, the method of the great masters in this respect being one of summing up, or statement of ultimate and fixed condition, rather than a detailed showing of the repeated thoughts in the brain by which such conditions are arrived at"; unfortunately, as the brains in question in *Three Lives* were uninteresting, this proved to be a problem ("Review of *Three Lives* [*Washington Herald* 12 December 1909]," in Curnutt, 9)

critic Mike Gold, a frequent reviewer for *The New Republic*, struck a nasty blow to Wilder's oeuvre to date and, indeed, his career and abilities in general. As is not surprising given his political reading practices, Gold focused on the distance, both temporal and geographical, between Wilder's stories and life in Depression-era America. Wilder's style, unlike Stein's, became part and parcel of discussions of his worldview. He was, said Gold, a "diluted Henry James"²²⁵ trying to usher in a new literary spirit, one that was a

newly fashioned literary religion that centers around Jesus Christ, the First British Gentleman. It is a pastel, pastiche, dilettante religion, without the true neurotic blood and fire, a daydream of homosexual figures in graceful gowns moving archaically among the lilies. It is Anglo-Catholicism, that last refuge of the American literary snob.²²⁶

Later, Gold asks if Wilder's "neat, tailor-made rhetoric" would "hold all the blood, horror and hope of the world's new empire."²²⁷ This indictment of Wilder rested not just upon his perceived delicacy of language and "dilettante religion" but also on his choice of subject matter. Rather than accuse Wilder's universalism and themes directly, Gold tackles his novels' settings (early twentieth century Rome, seventeenth century Peru, and BCE Greece), saying, "Let Mr. Wilder write a book about modern America. We predict it will reveal all his fundamental silliness and superficiality, now hidden under a Greek chlamys."²²⁸ Essentially, not only was it reprehensible that he didn't bother to address the

²²⁵ Michael Gold, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ," *The New Republic*, 22 October 1930, 266.

²²⁶ Gold, 267; The following paragraph continues his sardonic attack: "The genteel spirit of the new parlor-Christianity pervades every phrase of Mr. Wilder's rhetoric. What gentle theatrical sighs! what lovely, well composed deaths and martyrdoms! what languishings and flutterings of God's sinning doves! what little jewels of Sunday-school wisdom, distributed modestly here and there through the softly flowing narrative like delicate pearls, diamonds and rubies on the costume of a meek, wronged princess gracefully drowning herself for love..." (Gold, 267).

²²⁷ Gold, 267.

²²⁸ Gold, 267.

problems of the day, but his refusal to do so couched his work within a traditional framework which allowed style to pass for substance.

Gold's comments set off an explosion of rebuttal. Aside from deploring the nastiness of Gold's remarks, the earliest ripostes settled on the looming question of whether it was appropriate to write about subjects that were neither American nor modern. Reader Henry Newman put the debate in perspective, arguing, "Mr. Gold is interested chiefly in the frustrations incidental to our present social order. Mr. Wilder is troubled by problems which are likely to persist even after every proletarian reaches the paradise of which Mr. Gold permits himself to dream."²²⁹ As to whether this was the normal approach of great literature, M. R. Konvitz says, "Mr. Gold names with awe Shakespeare, Milton, Emerson, Thoreau"; however, "[i]t might be kind," he says, "if you would inform Mr. Gold that Adam and Eve, and Satan, and Samson were not contemporaries of Milton; and that neither Julius Caesar, nor Romeo and Juliet, John, Henry V—not even Henry VIII—were Elizabethans."²³⁰ Vera Micheles Dean wonders if one should for that sort of reasoning cast aside one's Shakespeare because, like Wilder's novels, his works "fail to raise a social issue"—something she clearly disagrees with as "introduc[ing] a sociological, not a literary, criterion" to criticism of the work.²³¹ According to many letter-writing readers, Gold is transgressing the bounds of proper criticism as they knew it. Charlotte Vaughan puts it succinctly: "Is not [the book reviewer's] concern style and pattern rather than subject matter and the life of the author?"²³²

²²⁹ Henry Newman, letter to the editor, *The New Republic*, 5 November 1930.

²³⁰ M. R. Konvitz, letter to the editor, *The New Republic*, 5 November 1930.

²³¹ Vera Micheles Dean, letter to the editor, *The New Republic*, 5 November 1930.

²³² Charlotte Vaughn, letter to the editor, *The New Republic*, 12 November 1930.

In later letters, the replies began to receive their own criticism, but even some readers indifferent to Wilder interrogated Gold's critical approach, such as Mortimer Smith:

With Mr. Michael Gold's opinion that the novels of Thornton Wilder are not the works of a great artist I do not presume to argue. It is only when Mr. Gold oversteps his function as critic, which is to consider with what success or failure the artist has achieved his purpose, and presumes to tell Mr. Wilder what kind of novels he ought to write and even to formulate a theory as to with what subject matter the novel in general should deal, that I find myself in disagreement with him.²³³

Readers found many reasons to criticize Gold's method or rhetoric without discounting his overall view of Wilder. John Lester Lewine and V. Henry Rothschild, II, for example, write that Gold's deficiencies as a critic have led to misunderstanding; "What Mr. Gold holds against Thornton Wilder is not so much his refusal to deal with the contemporary era as his symptomatic flight from reality."²³⁴ Lewine and Rothschild go on to explain that comparisons with Milton and Shakespeare are not germane, given that "Shakespeare's Romans were Elizabethan Englishmen in all but name" and "Adam and Eve were exemplars of a Puritan morality." In essence (and as Gold failed to articulate), there is a way to employ foreign locales and historical periods to deal with important aspects of reality, but in his opinion Wilder wasn't doing so.

By this point, the debate becomes almost entirely a personal and political one, Gold and Marxist criticism (and politically motivated criticism more generally) coming under attack for being unable to grasp a work's artistic merit²³⁵ and Wilder and his defenders

²³³ Mortimer Smith, letter to the editor, *The New Republic*, 10 December 1930.

²³⁴ John Lester Lewine and V. Henry Rothschild, II, letter to the editor, *The New Republic*, 10 December 1930.

²³⁵ The attacks on Gold are almost as amusing – and telling – as his attacks on Wilder. One reader refuses to accept criticism of a good writer by a "third-rate author," while others insinuate that communists are simply unable to enjoy things, or that Gold is disappointed

labeled as simultaneously aesthetes and traditionalists, unable to recognize the need for art to reflect modern issues. When the flurry of letters refused to subside, the editorial staff of the magazine felt obliged to comment, acknowledging the reasonable claims on both sides but mostly expressing shock: "so far as we know, no article, review, or editorial on a literary subject as ever recently aroused such an uproar."²³⁶ In hindsight, we are less surprised. Gold's criticism of Wilder struck to the heart of two intertwined ideologies that had become unclear during the modernist period: the purpose of literature and the purpose of criticism. This debate echoed not only the political environment of the 1930s and politics' infiltration of the arts but also the tensions within the shifting academy. As Gerald Graff points out in his institutional history of literary studies, there was a productive but unsteady alliance between the new humanists and aestheticists.²³⁷ Sharing a Keatsian notion of the reciprocal relationship between truth and beauty, they joined forces to resist historical scholarship and the use of literature to advance politics. Despite perceived differences, the radical contingent had something in common with the more traditional readers of *The New Republic*, the sense that artistic form—reader Vaughan's "style and pattern"—was the proper focus of criticism, not content or context, Vaughan's "subject matter and the life of the author."

because Wilder is a skilled enough writer that he couldn't find any errors in his grammar. Memorably, one writer simply asserts that, as a Jew, Gold is unable to sympathize with Wilder's Christianity and is therefore unfit to review his work. For a full account of the controversy, see the letters to the editor sections of the following 1930 editions of *The New Republic*: 5 November, 12 November, 3 December, and 10 December.

²³⁶ "The Economic Interpretation," *The New Republic*, 26 November 1930.

²³⁷ Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 126-128.

IV.

It is hard to discuss the narrative changes brought by modernism without contextualizing them within a complex of disciplines, each of which supported its own fluctuating spectrum of value. The innovations in the art world had an impact on the changing atmosphere of academic and non-academic literary study, finally helping to settle formalist critique into a place of honor; just as surely, that shift in academic notions of the purpose of criticism played into the hands of certain writers and rendered others outmoded. While there is obviously a difference between the role of the writer and the role of the critic, the two share a field of vision, one that is never entirely clear but was especially obscure during this period. Implicitly, the culture debate asked, What is the purpose of art? Answers had a tendency to center on the party responsible for determining a text's meaning; unfortunately, one of the debate's questions concerned exactly who was in that position.

There are many sources from which to draw descriptions of the pose of the artist during the early-to-middle phase of modernism, but those that come from the artists themselves are especially illuminating. The period bore witness to several novels one might classify as *künstlerroman*, and the characters and ideas in these texts were often at least partly based on the artists themselves. This is not to say we can read these texts in a straightforwardly autobiographical way, or that an autobiographical account would likely present an objective view; but the process of transmuting one's experiences, or at least one's temperament, into fiction entails a kind of self-presentation akin to manifesto. The boldly titled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for instance, has been used, fairly or not, to account for Joyce's own views—on Ireland, on religion, and on art. Stephen Dedalus

is indeed a young man, with a newly budding sense of himself and his aesthetics; that he is torn between fidelity to his art and responsibility to his country is not surprising. As Joyce's text communicates, the artist must be able to detach from anything that restricts growth, even one's own family and community, but he or she may, in that detached state, find it paradoxically much easier to represent that community. Perhaps this is why Joyce, intentionally rather apolitical, is accounted to be just as much the literary patron saint of Ireland as is the far more polemical W. B. Yeats.

The question of artistic detachment haunts the period, in terms like *objectivity* and *irony* and *autonomy*, especially as they serve as counterpoints to the concepts of sympathy and subjectivity. Astradur Eysteinnsson, in his examination of modernism as a literary historical phenomenon, sees these counterpoints forming one of the period's central tensions.²³⁸ Georg Lukács went so far as to identify a sense of solitariness, even loneliness, as the condition of man, as far as the modernist worldview expressed it; even during his early, self-repudiated treatise *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács recognized a state of "transcendental homelessness" in the modern character, at least as proffered in literature. If humankind was homeless and alone, the modernist artist often consciously exaggerated this state, becoming humanity's apotheosis in texts of artistic development that range from the fairly traditional to the experimental. For example, as Willa Cather's 1915 bildungsroman *The Song of the Lark* traces the development of fictional opera star Thea Kronborg, it brings her to the conclusion, not quite inevitable but certainly irrefutable, that she must be willing to shed herself of romantic entanglements in order to become a true artist. In a work like Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr*, first serialized in 1916, this separation from

²³⁸ Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 43-4.

the normal constraints of society is highlighted even further, not simply in the work's violent plot points, but in the presentation of two artist figures, the coolly detached Tarr and the expressive, emotional Kreisler. Though Tarr does not end the novel in a position of detachment—some would argue he in many ways gives up on his aesthetic views—he does survive, where Kreisler, through his dangerous inability to control his emotions, not only fails as an artist but also becomes a rapist and murderer, and, finally, a suicide. Beyond temperament, another thing that works in Tarr's favor is his higher social class, a position that is not always possible for artist characters in modern novels. Stephen Dedalus, for example, struggles against not just the non-artistic world around him but a financial and social situation denying him entrance into a world beyond the non-artistic.²³⁹

A Portrait also introduces us to the notion that the artist—like God—is a static, impersonal figure. This sense of the author as separate from his or her work is most familiarly articulated by T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), where he asserts, "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry."²⁴⁰ Eliot also explains that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material."²⁴¹ Eventually, the alienated reaction of the experimental modern artist became the detached

²³⁹ This brings to mind another Cather text, short story "Paul's Case" (1905), often seen as the ultimate statement of the despair that can come when an artistic temperament is separated from the artistic world. Where Stephen makes a successful flight from Ireland and all it stands for, Paul's only escape is suicide.

²⁴⁰ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1960), 53.

²⁴¹ Eliot, 54.

approach of the modernist, not simply lamenting biographical criticism but actively striving to render it null and void.²⁴²

This kind of division grew up not just between artists and critics but also between different kinds of artists and different kinds of critics—that is, arguments arose about the proper role of art, as seen in the debate over Gold's comments on Wilder. These disputes were complicated by the expanding role of the academy in literary study. Within English departments, the unformulated appreciation of art had given way after World War I to historical scholarship, as it represented a more standardized, scientific way to approach the subject—thus, easier to bring into a college curriculum and more effective for keeping literary studies in a firm place. However, many in academia were not unaware of the creeping influence of criticism with its valuation of a work based on its intrinsic artistic qualities rather than any notion of its historical or moral importance. This was good for humanists, who favored the traditional appreciation of art, and, as I mentioned above, their goals dovetailed for a time with those of the new generation of formalist critics. Eventually, those shared goals—namely, to rescue literary study from a focus on extra-textual concerns—were not enough to hold them together as a united front. In a world of scientifically structured formal appreciation, of close reading, objective correlatives, and fallacies of intention and affect, the humanist appreciation for impressive style and traditional unity fell by the wayside. Wilder, then, is in a precarious position in the 1930s.

²⁴² What's interesting about this restrained textual pose is its contradiction to the colorful public persona of many modernist artists, especially Lost Generation ex-patriots like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, among others. According to David R. Shumway, this had the effect of recasting the position of the writer: he or she was no longer an intellectual but a celebrity, getting material from life rather than learning (*Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994], 225).

According to Burns and Dydo, he took the academic track for a while in order to escape the lecture circuit, but his position as a teacher of creative writing was "offensive to the professoriat because it implied that a writer could teach as well as a professor and that university credentials were less important than talent."²⁴³ It could not have helped matters that Wilder was not simply teaching creative writing but had been brought in by his old friend, president Robert Maynard Hutchins, to shore up the school's "new course toward liberal education and learning from Great Books."²⁴⁴ Therefore, Wilder was stepping on a lot of toes, despite his own humanist leanings. And despite his more traditional approach to literature, his status as a writer made him a target. Many professors of English held fast to the classics and considered modern art to be an extravagant annoyance at best, and at worst a serious threat to the world of letters. Gerald Graff argues that, despite the divide between high and low culture that grew up during the pre-war period and became more pronounced after the war, the majority of professors "distrusted both kinds—popular entertainment literature for its superficiality, the more serious literature for its immorality, materialism, and pessimism."²⁴⁵

The variety of the critical works being published at the time will attest to the destabilized nature of the field of literary production and criticism, at once firmly experimental, having produced much of what we label *high modernist* works in the 1920s and early 1930s, and staunchly modern traditional. Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* comes to mind, simultaneously capturing the search for a new balance and synthesis in modern artist Lily Briscoe and the pursuit of a enduring audience for old forms, seen in the war

²⁴³ Burns and Dydo, xvii.

²⁴⁴ Burns and Dydo, xvi-xvii.

²⁴⁵ Graff, 125.

poetry of the ageless Mr. Carmichael. One real-world figure attempting to straddle this fence was novelist and critic Ford Madox Ford. A literary impressionist, he is somehow both instrumental to modernism and mostly irrelevant to the modernist canon. As Michael Levenson argues, an examination of Ford is "indispensable" to a discussion of early modernism, of which he was key figure: "At a moment when a distinct literary tradition was being recognized as such, he became its current embodiment."²⁴⁶ He was also a proponent of the old tradition, renovating it as he "carried its standard into the pre-war critical arena."²⁴⁷ Despite his experimentation with modern forms of prose, Ford was always engaged in the task of diagnosing modernity and attempting to rescue it from itself. In his 1930 essay collection *The English Novel from the Earliest Days to the Death of Conrad*, Ford plays upon his absurd position, self-consciously writing from the stance of proto-modernist practitioner and old fashioned non-academic intellectual. He advocates culture and tradition, as he believes novels have a responsibility to open a window on reality, to help improve humankind, but he is by no means unaware of the ways in which reality has changed, necessitating changes in the novel²⁴⁸. He praises three writers in particular for approaching the novel properly—as a moral object, but without moralizing. Of Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Conrad, he says, "All three treated their characters with

²⁴⁶ Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908 - 1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 48-9.

²⁴⁷ Levenson, 48.

²⁴⁸ According to Levenson, the problems Ford saw with modernity – its concomitant over-complications and mediocrities – are just what gave him a definite "literary opportunity" (54).

aloofness; all three kept themselves, their comments and their prejudices out of their works and all three rendered rather than told."²⁴⁹

Ford was not the only writer approaching the novel from a position of Jamesian realism, where *truthful* is not the same as *documentary*. In "The Novel D meubl " (1936), Cather calls for an "unfurnished" novel, finding that detachment is good but one cannot mistake a particularity of detail with depth of truth:

If the novel is a form of imaginative art, it cannot be at the same time a vivid and brilliant form of journalism. Out of the teeming, gleaming stream of the present it must select the eternal material of art. There are hopeful signs that some of the younger writers are trying to break away from mere verisimilitude, and, following the development of modern painting, to interpret imaginatively the material and social investiture of their characters; to present their scene by suggestion rather than by enumeration. The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification. The novelist must learn to write, and then he must unlearn it.²⁵⁰

Cather's ideas here come dangerously close to Hemingway's notion of the story as an iceberg, the majority of submerged below a much less impressive surface. Hemingway, like Cather, not only makes objectivity essential, but he ties it to the author's ability to control not just how much personality leaks onto the page but how much of the story must be expressly told and/or explained to the reader, that is, mediated by the author. This approach to writing was not uncongenial to the New Critical method of reading. New Criticism was gaining a foothold in academia for various reasons but, importantly, it did so on the back of modernist works, especially short stories, which made perfect specimens for detection and excavation.

This institutionalization of New Criticism, however, was still in its earliest stages when Wilder began publishing his fiction, as well as during the bulk of his friendship with

²⁴⁹ Ford Madox Ford, *The English Novel: From Earliest Days to the Death of Joseph Conrad* (London: Constable, 1930), 144.

²⁵⁰ Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (New York: Knopf, 1936), 48.

Stein (1935-1947).²⁵¹ In the 1930s literary study was still multifarious, within academia as well as outside it. For example, Graff reminds us that the last holdouts of literary journalism, men such as Van Wyck Brooks and Malcolm Cowley, were powerful and still staunchly extra-academic.²⁵² However, the 1930s was also the last decade of any "vital criticism outside the university" (Shumway 235-6). The institutionalization of literature was influenced by many debates and opposing views, including those of New York Intellectuals like Lionel Trilling. According to Shumway, this group spent the 1930s fighting a rather Marxist position in an intellectual boycott of the budding New Critical practitioners.²⁵³ As they grew more conservative and less political, they revealed themselves to be, as Shumway puts it, the other side of the New Critical coin. Both movements were hermeneutical in orientation: "they understood themselves as interpreters rather than as enforcers of aesthetic rules or compilers of facts."²⁵⁴ Thus, both groups helped solidify the place of criticism. Even the new humanists had a role in shaping future literary studies. Shumway argues that they "codified much of the ideology of the literature that emerged in the nineteenth century," thus contributing to the formation of the canon as well as New Critical notions of literature as a tradition.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Graff notes that aesthetic formalism hadn't solidified its place in the academy until the late 1930s (153), while Shumway, examining the period in the American university in particular, argues that the "academic revolution" which ushered in the dominance of criticism didn't have a serious impact until after World War II (223). History bears this out. While the Agrarians set forth their ideas in 1930 (in *I'll Take My Stand*), John Crowe Ransom's book of seminal essays *The New Criticism* wasn't published until 1941. By the time Wimsatt and Beardsley wrote about the intentional and affective fallacies, it was the mid 1950s, and New Criticism had already been institutionalized as a slightly exaggerated version of itself.

²⁵² Graff, 147.

²⁵³ Shumway, 262.

²⁵⁴ Shumway, 262.

²⁵⁵ Shumway, 144.

Obviously, criticism did not come to prominence easily, and that fact that it did so through tenuous alliances between opposing groups is telling. It is difficult to parse literary history for the first half of the twentieth century given the number of factions it spawned, the way those factions interacted, and the number of descriptors we have applied after the fact which suggest focused movements where there were only shared tendencies. What is clear, however, is that every group seemed to have different notions about the proper role of the academy and of literary criticism—implicitly, about the purpose of literature—even if it saw the same general ill: the decline of civilization. All were eager to shift the fault, failing to see that they were each working toward a stronger tradition of American letters, one outside the crass materialism of modern life; they simply disagreed about where to turn for inspiration, inward or outward, forward or backward.²⁵⁶ For Graff, this is just one arc in an "oft-repeated cycle," one more iteration of the same critique, couched in new terms.

Graff's scholarship is on the state of the academy and the critical apparatus more generally, but criticism was bound to the production of art—whether the two facets were in agreement or opposition—and art displayed a similar multiplicity. In particular, it highlights the tension between realism as method and realism as attitude, between Woolfian modernism-as-alternative-realism and modernism as intentionally artificial or as above or outside reality. The age-old question about modernism applies to the field of modern letters more broadly: did writers simply reflect the chaos of the period, or did they try to mitigate it through new forms of order? This was a suitable question for both

²⁵⁶ Shumway reports that the literary radicals of the 1920s and 1930s blamed the professoriate for living in the past instead of dealing with the future; but the professors were largely new humanists, and they themselves blamed the scholars for changing the shape of the university education (57-8).

modernists like Joyce and Lewis and moderns like Ford and Cather; and for Wilder, especially as his friend Stein seemed to embody these tensions and contradictions in her art and in her person. The balancing and negotiation of this shift was central to the correspondence between the two, whether each was discerning and articulating his or her own complex point of view or they were trying to bridge the gap between them.

V.

Most people know Wilder as a dramatist, for his Pulitzer Prize-winning plays *Our Town* and *The Skin of Their Teeth*. If they are aware, even peripherally, of his fiction, they probably do not know that this mode was predominate in his early career. By 1935, Wilder had written only one full-length drama and two collections of shorter plays, but he'd published four of his seven novels, including *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927). He did not resume his career in fiction until the publication of *The Ides of March* in 1948. In the interim of a dozen years was his major period as a dramatist; it was also the period of his friendship with Stein, from their meeting during her 1935 "Narration" lectures to Stein's death in 1946. One might reasonably argue this cannot be a coincidence, for Wilder seemed equally as taken with her theories about audience as he was her ideas about narration.²⁵⁷ Stein herself was a dramatist (albeit of a particularly experimental sort), so she could do

²⁵⁷ Burns and Dydo, xvi. In addition, Wilder's letter to Stein in mid-March 1940 (Burns and Dydo, 257) describes a late-night talk with Edmund Wilson about Stein's theories of audience. In a letter to Stein on 3 September 1940 (Burns and Dydo, 268), Wilder describes re-reading her "Narration" lectures as well as reading Flaubert's letters, which make him think about her theories of audience.

more than simply encourage his exploration of that art; she could discuss it with him as a practitioner.

Aside from discussions of their shared artistic interests, the other major writing-related preoccupation of their correspondence and presumably their relationship was Wilder's role as Stein's "translator." As Wilder fought to get her work published in the United States, he found that championing Stein necessitated explaining her genius. Though, as I've already noted, he often struggled at first to understand her work²⁵⁸, once he came to make sense of each piece and of her general theories about narrative, he perpetually tried to help others do the same—informally, in conversation; formally, in lectures and in introductions to her works. His letters reveal several related anxieties regarding this role: that he has mistranslated her to others or unknowingly misunderstood her entirely, sometimes that he is blatantly parroting her.²⁵⁹ Perhaps Wilder's anxiety was so great because Stein was not indifferent to his importance to her career, its legacy as well as its present state, including her ongoing creative process. She appreciated his introductions to her work and was eager to read them, but she always hungered for more. When she heard that he'd re-imagined his introduction to *The Geographical History of America*, she wrote, "the more it partakes of the character of a commentary the more I will be pleased" and

²⁵⁸ Wilder was especially prone to admitting his confusion during the early years of their relationship. See his letters to Stein on 23 September 1935, Burns and Dydo, 56; 7 October 1935, Burns and Dydo, 61; 26 March 1937, during which he claims to have "fallen among the briars" with *Lucy Church Amiably* (Burns and Dydo, 137); 24 June 1937, Burns and Dydo, 150; and 4 November 1937, Burns and Dydo, 192.

²⁵⁹ See his letters to Stein (and Toklas) on 6 April 1935, Burns and Dydo, 21; 24 June 1937, Burns and Dydo, 150; 18 July 1937, Burns and Dydo, 155; and 14 February 1938, Burns and Dydo, 209.

asked him, “couldn’t you commentarize it at intervals all through, I have always wanted it done that way and perhaps you will yet.”²⁶⁰

This process of commentary is about elucidating her ideas for the world but also for herself. In a May 1937 letter she explicitly ties commentary to creation, and she does so during her first mention of *Ida A Novel*, a work she wanted to undertake with Wilder’s help. Critically, her desire to write a novel seems bound up in the process of demystification and discovery—not least of all of Wilder, the traditionalist flirting with the avant-garde, who seemed like a “puzzle” to her:

... listen perhaps I will do a novel about you and call it *Ida* about you or about Mrs Simpson, I think it is time for me to write a novel, now Mrs Simpson is not a puzzle to me, so perhaps I could write that novel, come, Thornton, come, I could do it so much better with you to make commentaries. . .²⁶¹

Though here she invites Wilder’s help as commentator, she refers to the joint effort on *Ida* as “collaboration” in later correspondence, such as in this letter three months after her first mention of the project:

will you but you would never say no to me but will you really will you, ever since my earliest days when i read Erckman Chatrian’s *l’Ami Fritz* in what language I do not know I have loved the word collaborate and I always always wanted to and now will you oh Thornton will you will you collaborate on *Ida the Novel*, we must do it together not now like you did the commentaries the other [fascimile. . . . ?] but really and really and truly just like Erckman and Chatrian, a really truly novel is too much for me all alone we must do it together. . .²⁶²

This kind of “really and truly” collaborative effort apparently intimidated Wilder, who was willing to engage in many conversations about *Ida* but refused to formally enter into the

²⁶⁰ Stein and Toklas to Wilder, 26 April 1936, Burns and Dydo, 100-01.

²⁶¹ Stein and Wilder, 17 May 1937, Burns and Dydo, 144.

²⁶² Stein and Wilder, 18 July 1937, Burns and Dydo, 154.

writing process itself. He put it to her thus: "As to the collaboration, Lord knows there is no length to which I would not go to be beside, to watch and to be stimulated by such a collaborator; but all the time I should be feeling: oh, when will she find out how inadequate I am."²⁶³

Wilder was a friend and fellow artist, but like so many of her acquaintances, he was in some ways always distanced from her, standing in awe of her writing and discursive theory. "Oh, what fun it is to be cudgelled by Gertrude," he wrote in 1938, "to be enlightened, and slapped, and warmed, and crushed, and slain, and brought alive by Gertrude."²⁶⁴ Challenged, one might say. Through her example and exhortation, Stein upended many of his ideas about what a writer should or could be. Though he claimed that she was an important influence on his works, scholars are hard pressed to find any evidence, any traces of Stein in his novels or plays. Instead, the influence was on his vocation. According to Edward Burns and Ulla E. Dydo, the editors of Stein and Wilder's published correspondence, she encouraged him to shed an oppressive sense of responsibility to his reading public and his university job and simply be a writer. Ironically, though Stein herself had this life of retreat, at least from the general American reading public, she sought the very fame that wearied Wilder. After multiple lecture tours in the U.S., Stein was a celebrity, a strange specter of the art world, famous for being famous; however, she still sought the approval of the establishment for her writing. Wilder, having gained a foothold in academia through his literary work and his extensive lecture tours, was in a good position to bring her brand of experimentation into the fold. Conversely, Stein, tucked away in her French *salon*, was poised to inject innovation into the still

²⁶³ Wilder to Stein and Toklas, ?20 July 1937, Burns and Dydo, 158.

²⁶⁴ Wilder to Stein and Toklas, 23 April 1938, Burns and Dydo, 216.

somewhat intransigent academy. In 1934, a reviewer at the *New York Times* makes the case for Stein's significance to the literary community, but he is careful to delimit it: while her innovations of style are meaningful, they are so mainly for their influence on others. Stein's writing was difficult, aimed at a small, advanced audience.²⁶⁵ Schriftgeisser argues that success came from disciples of her style who used her innovations as a means toward an end rather than an end unto themselves. This list includes those who, like Hemingway, did not emulate her style but benefitted from the freedom she brought to the use of the English language. The later career of Wilder, whose style and aims are so different from Stein's but whose art was inspired and unfettered by Stein's spirit of play, is surely one of those important consequences.

This is not to say the two were polar opposites, or that they represent the poles traditionally assigned to them by literary history. Their letters reveal counterintuitive things about their reading habits. For example, Wilder did something joyfully that even modernism scholars approach warily, if at all: he read Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.²⁶⁶ In fact, he poured over it for the better part of six months, "digging out its buried keys and resolving that unbroken chain of erudite puzzles and finally coming on lots of wit, and lots of beautiful things," in the end giving it up "as one would liquor or gambling."²⁶⁷ Though he had only "skimmed the surface," he still claimed to know more about it than any of the

²⁶⁵ Karl Schriftgeisser, "Gibberish Of Gertrude Stein Seen As Attempt To Freshen Language: Importance to Be Found in Influence on Writers of the Day," *The New York Times*, 23 December 1934.

²⁶⁶ For a thorough account of Wilder's reading of, views on, and allusions to Joyce, see Sidney Feshbach, "Deeply Indebted: On Thornton Wilder's Interest in James Joyce," *James Joyce Quarterly* 31.4 (1994): 495-517.

²⁶⁷ Wilder to Stein and Toklas, 28 January 1940, Burns and Dydo, 254.

critics and reviewers who had written about it."²⁶⁸ In fact, he seemed to find them a bit silly, even sycophantic²⁶⁹. While Wilder was capable of appreciating complex modernist (or even proto-postmodernist) prose without deifying its writers, popular Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope wasn't on his radar. Only at Stein's suggestion did he pick up one of the writer's minor works when he stumbled upon it, but he did claim to have enjoyed it²⁷⁰. Stein's recommendation here also runs contrary to expectation. Though Stein's reputation in post-structuralist criticism is as a modernist mentor and model experimentalist, she was widely read in traditional and "genre" fiction, and it affected her attitudes about her own writing: "I like novels bad novels, poor novels, detective novels, sentimental novels, these days I read all the wishy washy novels of the end of the last and the beginning of this century and I long oh how I long to write my novel like that . . ." (276-7). When, during WWII, Stein had to rely on those outside of France to send her reading materials, she asked Wilder,

Could you instead of sending me books well thought of by historians could you go to a railway station or the nearest drug store and send me every few weeks or once a month or once four or five of the mystery stories that the man in charge recommends best, everybody when they send me reading matter consult not my taste but my education.²⁷¹

Here, she juxtaposes two sometimes-conflicting motivations for choosing reading material: one's personal taste versus one's (expected) intellectual taste. But the articulated dichotomy that precedes this plea is just as revealing: "And now Thornton about my literature not that that I write but that I read. . ." ²⁷² Despite a professed desire to write like

²⁶⁸ Wilder to Stein and Toklas, 28 January 1940, Burns and Dydo, 254.

²⁶⁹ Wilder to Stein and Toklas, 20 August 1939, Burns and Dydo, 242.

²⁷⁰ Wilder to Stein and Toklas, 27 March 1938, Burns and Dydo, 212.

²⁷¹ Stein and Toklas to Wilder, 4 December 1941, Burns and Dydo, 301.

²⁷² Stein and Toklas to Wilder, 4 December 1941, Burns and Dydo, 301.

the Victorians and Edwardians, she seems to have been aware of her very different strengths and weaknesses, of her divergent goals. Her art was not for the masses, even though she coveted their attention—which she received, as the slightly ridiculous patron saint of Modern Literature. Wilder, on the other hand, the diligent reader of Joyce, could not get shed of his populist literary past and his everyman image, even with Stein, who referred to him on several occasions as a "Company Man" and "Community Man," as noted by Burns and Dydo.²⁷³

The point here is not simply to point out the situational irony in their relationship or the surprising nature of their reading habits. That they needed guidance from each other—Stein to get a foothold in academia, Wilder to find *avantgardia*—shows them to be squarely in the middle of two intertwined transitions: from intellectual to academe and from artist to *artiste*. Each writer's complex of personal and professional identifications highlights the period's instabilities, ones which fed into our categories of high and low, which separated the popular and the literary in a way it never had before. The positions of both writers within this pitched battle are reflected in their initial reception, Stein's at the twilight of the pre-professional age and Wilder's at the scholars' zenith, as the aestheticists were accomplishing what the humanists never quite could. Neither was dismissed, but the relative importance of each at various points serves as a barometer measuring the pressure of the gathering formalist storm. When the focus is narrowed to their short story composites, *Three Lives* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, this becomes even more apparent. As the short story composite engages more than any other with the new ways of patterning

²⁷³ Burns and Dydo, xix.

narrative or patterning art in general, it represents modernism writ large and is best understood through comparison with other modernist modes of art such as cubism.

VI.

Stein's relationship to Cubism has been well documented.²⁷⁴ She was a patron and the kindred spirit of artists like Cezanne and Matisse in pre- and inter-war Paris, engaging in discussions about art and its developing forms and even sitting for a Picasso portrait. It is reasonable, then, if a little perilous, to discuss Stein in conjunction with Cubism, both personally and professionally. Wilder, however, would seem an incongruous figure to bring into the conversation, especially as, by the time he was beginning his literary career, Cubism in the visual arts had largely given way to Surrealism. Nonetheless, despite Wilder's lack of literal connection to that art movement, we can still delve into the ways in which his writing—and indeed all modern composite forms—manifested qualities of composition easily understood through analogy to the visual arts. Using Cubism as a broad structural concept takes the focus off personal artistic influence and literary historical legacy in order to ground it in the wider impulses of modern art, its new interpretation of the goals of representation. As strange as it might seem, Wilder's *Bridge* is illuminated by Cubism just as well as is *Three Lives*. That we haven't recognized this before is a consequence of the complex issue of narrative framing inherent to the short story composite and, especially in conjunction with the short story composite, made problematic at modernism.

²⁷⁴ For a discussion of Stein's relationship to cubism, both literal and aesthetic, considered from the point of view of the art world, see Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten, *Cubism and Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

A key movement in modern visual art, Cubism represented a step toward abstraction, the use of art to analyze rather than simply depict reality. Often, this meant drawing attention to the artistic process itself, such as to the illusion inherent in perspective.²⁷⁵ It largely abandoned the goal of mirroring reality and began rather to suggest it and then finally to deconstruct or artificially (re)construct it.²⁷⁶ The first phase of cubism, which history labels *analytic*, saw the breakdown of objects into parts, a disruption of verisimilitude which, following from Impressionism, was designed to highlight the relativity/subjectivity of perspective. The later, *synthetic* phase sprang from the same principles but moved Cubism away from its increasing abstractionism and back toward representation, found in assembling individual pieces into new wholes, in mixed-media collage. A similar emphasis was creeping into narrative at this time, coming to fruition in the 1920s and 1930s. Consider the two monumental works of 1922: "The Waste Land," a collage of speakers, places, times, moods, languages; and *Ulysses*, no less an accumulation of approaches to narrative, coupled with a disorienting stream-of-consciousness narrative technique.

The notion of competing subjectivities was not a new thing, but the move toward increased fragmentation as a result represented a new strategy, based on a new ideology. For though epic Victorian novels like Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and Dickens's *Bleak House* took advantage of multiple protagonists, points of view, and plotlines, they were understood to be parts of a single whole, however messy. Moreover, they were mediated so as to create a smooth fabric of narrative, even when the story was far from seamless. Wilder's early composite work, no matter what kind of modern

²⁷⁵ Antliff and Leighton, 9.

²⁷⁶ Antliff and Leighton, 65-70.

problems it brings forward, is in this form. The catastrophe of *Bridge* comes only from piecing together the stories of that tragic handful of lives which intersect but are, in reality, patently lonely and separate. Modernism, on the other hand, understood entirely separable views of a single, multifaceted reality, or separate realities that, when combined, might still remain individual but communicate one complex idea or worldview. In part, this meant drawing attention to the artificiality of traditional art by not mediating the disorder, rhetorically or ethically. Stein's *Three Lives* are analyzed from multiple angles, and their bare juxtaposition brings them into synthesis as a statement about life for the lower classes, for women, for ethnic and racial minorities in fictional Bridgeport.

In 1913, Mabel Dodge (Luhan) claimed, "Gertrude Stein is doing with words what Picasso is doing with paint."²⁷⁷ Most scholars of Stein's work, however, know that the correspondence isn't quite that simple. Doane, for example, is suspicious of cubist readings of Stein, as they seem to imply that she was somehow "created" by cubism, that her works were messy attempts to paint with words.²⁷⁸ Randa K. Dubnick concurs, arguing, "To link Stein with the cubist painters often implies that she lacked originality and perhaps needed someone to lead her."²⁷⁹ Dubnick goes on to contradict this notion, claiming,

It is more likely that she did not find in the cubists a source for her ideas, but rather a group with similar concerns and perception about what art was and should be for the twentieth century. Like Stein, the cubists were interested in the process of direct perception. Stein saw in their work an affinity with some ideas she had been exposed to already, possibly in the pragmatism of William James.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ Mabel Dodge, "Speculations, or Post-Impressionism in Prose," in Hoffman, 27-8.

²⁷⁸ Doane, 56.

²⁷⁹ Randa K. Dubnick, *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 17.

²⁸⁰ Dubnick, 17.

As Jamie Hilder points out, "If we are to take her at her word that she was expressing the same thing in writing that Picasso was in painting, it is necessary to examine what it was, exactly, that she believed Picasso was expressing."²⁸¹ The point here is that Stein herself made these connections, so Stein's own conception of literary cubism should be the most instructive guide for interpretation. According to Hilder, "Her comparison of her work to Picasso's relies not so much on form as it does on effect."²⁸² What, then, was that effect?

According to Dubnick, it is about the focus of narrative: "Stein believed that until Cezanne the composition of a painting had a central figure and a background, but in Cezanne's work all things had equal importance," a "decentralized" approach to composition in which "the positive space or figure explodes and scatters over what is traditionally negative space or ground."²⁸³ Though Stein labeled her works "portraits" and "landscapes," she was not seeking to simply paint with words. Instead, "Stein's statements imply that her portraits paralleled Picasso's in eliminating memory from perception; both wanted to preserve each individual present moment of perception before those moments are synthesized by intellectual knowledge of reality into the concept of the object as it is known (remembered) to be."²⁸⁴ We see this in Stein's use of *continuous present* to deemphasize the traditional movement of narrative, in which particular events are foregrounded, in favor of rendering of psychological experience. Dubnick argues that this style, observed in her prose (including *Three Lives*) is analogous to analytic cubism. Each life in the book is analyzed, broken down, scattered across the page.

²⁸¹ Jamie Hilder, "'After All One Must Know More Than One Sees and One Does Not See a Cube in Its Entirety': Gertrude Stein and Picasso and Cubism," *Critical Survey* 17.3 (2005): 67.

²⁸² Hilder, 68.

²⁸³ Dubnick, 18

²⁸⁴ Dubnick, 20.

For Antin, Stein's cubist approach to narrative had a profound impact on her use of "language as language": "Of all the writers in English only Gertrude Stein seems to have had a thorough understanding of how profoundly Cubism opened up the possibilities of *representation* with this analysis."²⁸⁵ The possibilities stem from Stein's attention to "the problematic double system of language—the self ordering system and the pointing system" (Antin 208). One problem with the cubist reading, argues Marianne DeKoven, when it presents a false comparison to visual art, is the implication that it must be referential or abstract: however, "Meaning in experimental writing need be neither: it often has no anterior, referential, thematic content, yet it has readable meaning—it is not abstract" (28). Writing is able to occupy a position which visual art cannot. This is perhaps why Stein was able to work in both the metaphoric and the metonymic mode, often blurring the lines between the two—creating prose which stacked up words to compound meaning and poetry which played with the notion of syntax in the absence of intelligible content. While these dichotomies do not line up completely, they indicate that Stein's art could process reality in divergent yet dependent ways, ones which had their counterparts in the duality of cubist approaches. As Dubnick characterizes the shift from analytic to synthetic cubism, she argues that, instead of dissecting something to discover the parts that could make up the whole, artists soon began with abstract forms and tried to "endow them with an objective significance," to create art as a new reality instead of a reflection of reality.²⁸⁶ Dubnick and others align this style with her poetry, but I see it working on the global level in *Three Lives*.

Dubnick argues that Stein's narrative works in "non-mimetic relational units," with an emphasis on connective words like pronouns and adverbs and an avoidance of nouns

²⁸⁵ Antin, 208.

²⁸⁶ Dubnick, 32.

and adjectives (22). "Yet," Dubnick goes on to say, "both Stein's early portraits and early cubists portraits remained mimetic, evoking the subject by presenting a few bits of concrete information" (22). A text like *Three Lives* works in just this fashion, creating meaning on a global level in a paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic way, through iteration. While each story dissects the life of its central character, the whole comprehends that life as part of a larger context, one which may not be a single story but is certainly a single complex statement about life in Bridgeport. This tension between the thematic whole and the character-driven pieces (which are wholes in themselves) is plainly seen in the work's title. With no framing preface or introduction, the title—and the very existence of these stories under one cover—provides the reader's only guidance. It indicates three lives held together by the author and presented to the reader as a unit—importantly, a unit of individuals. Even if one divides the work by tone, into the immigrant stories ("The Good Anna" and "The Gentle Lena") and the story of Melanctha Herbert, there remains an essential tension between the individuals and the group, a narrative structure that models the life experience of these women. Each is intimately a part of her community, within various family units (blood relations and/or masters and mistresses) and close female friendships, but all are ultimately alone. At their deaths, Anna and Melanctha are without the friends that sustained them through their lives, and Lena, like Melanctha, has become a shadow of herself. As Maggie Dunn points out, their stories do not stop with or in most cases even reach the supposed climax of women's lives, marriage. Individually, they fill up the canvas and move past the frame. Taken as found objects worked into a different whole, those lives create a new reality, or at least a new reality for literary narrative, one which is not perfectly patterned, one which does not follow the old rules.

A look at the title of Wilder's *Bridge* reveals its very different structural principles. There are no individuals mentioned, simply a location, one which turns out to represent a fixed moment in time. This moment is what the narrator seeks to understand, but it is impossible without a thorough examination of the individuals who were victims of the tragedy. As a composite narrative, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is not overtly puzzling enough to be respectably modern, neatly wrapped up as it is by an omniscient narrator looking back on the events of the story from the eye of a fictionalizing historian. However, it is composite enough. While the individual stories in the work are unintelligible out of the narrative context of the frame, they are independent of each other, aesthetically and narratively. The short story composite can easily be distinguished from Wilder's first novel, *The Cabala*, which was more tightly woven together, narratively and rhetorically, partially because its narrator is one force controlling the compilation and narration of story. In *Bridge*, these are separate functions. A dangerous tension exists between the novel's traditional controlling who has an agenda of healing, and a narrator who proffers an open-ended existential question about fate. The consequences of this tension are perfectly illustrated in the dangerous position of Brother Juniper, the fictional researcher whose materials become the story, the mediator between the story itself and the compiler/narrator complex interpreting and explaining it.

The position of Brother Juniper in the text is precarious. He is the initiator of the investigation into these characters and the divine reason for the accident, and he presumably wrote a report of his findings. The narrator, however, is distilling this report for us, thus interpreting Juniper, preventing him from speaking in his own voice and through his own worldview. The narrator, a figure self-professedly much removed from the

time and actions of the story, also acts as compiler, just as Juniper had, ordering and framing the narrative. In the transformation from Juniper's report to the narrator's composite narrative, the former's definite question and procedure is found lacking, replaced with the more ambiguous, modern approach of the latter. Juniper, unable to answer his own question about causality (not that a modern text would let him), is stuck in between, which means he cannot tell a good story nor can he offer an argument definitive enough to survive the scrutiny of the church. The book, in an analysis of the position of Juniper, can be seen as a transitional work dramatizing the modern crisis of faith, either religious or humanist. Unfortunately, at the end of the book, the narrator/compiler contradicts his own ambiguous reformulation of Juniper's question—Why did these particular people die?—with simply an alternate view of the crisis. At its conclusion, the book is not about the fate of dead but the fate of living, to love and lose. The narrator's initial framing material, as against Juniper's totalizing view, would have us view the work as a portrait of fracture, a disaster divided up and rearranged like an early Picasso face. However, in reality the stories are entities unto themselves, taking their significance from their context but standing alone. This aligns it more with synthetic cubism, which sought to create new wholes from parts (like the framing material) as well as complete objects (like the three central stories). This is perhaps why, apart from the heavyhandedness of the rhetoric, the ending seems forced: it is trying to tell us what to see, to give us a context so that, to put it in simple terms, we know we're looking at a Picasso long face before we encounter an ear where it does not belong.

The lives in *Bridge* and their stories behave as a collage, which in synthetic cubism doesn't require a representational frame, a referential context. Wilder's stories, though

conventionally representational in themselves, resist relating to the framed whole as though they are merely pieces of a larger narrative. At first, the work merely suggests a thematic context for them with bare hints of narrative, largely adapted from Juniper. The stories themselves (at the narrator's behest) resist and focus on not just the dead characters but also the living. However the epilogue, in following the stories' lead and recontextualizing those left behind (notably for the first time in the work) enforces a novelistic reading, or at least a thematics that is totalizing and fate-driven. My point here is not to deconstruct Wilder's text but to indicate how it plays out complex tensions in authorial control and guidance and how its modern concerns and composite approach are submersed in a traditional structure, which at the height of modern composite narrative doomed it to obscurity. Despite the attempt of the ending to declare overt control the victor, the two forces, one gathering and one resisting, were fated to be at odds. To own up to that reality and use it to one's advantage is productive; to fight it is not. This is why though *Three Lives* becomes, at worst, a short story collection, *Bridge* is read as a composite novel, its stories fragments rather than wholes used in collage. This is also why *Bridge* is in many ways a model short story composite.

One can argue that, as a genre, the short story composite is a clear example of Lodge's notion that modern narrative simultaneously moves toward its natural mode, metonymy, and toward its polar opposite, metaphor.²⁸⁷ The short story composite, its paradox-as-balance nature aligning with modernism's, reaches its highest point at precisely the time it begins to wrench itself apart from that innate tension. Of course, such tension need not be destructive. A good example is found in Stein's dual levels of

²⁸⁷ Lodge, 101.

experimentation in *Three Lives*, which I argue create a similar but more productive structuring tension. It's a mistake to discount the work of her metaphoric-poetic sensibility in her prose, specifically in a narrative like *Three Lives*, which is locally metonymic but, globally, is perhaps both metaphoric and metonymic, depending on how one reads the text's juxtapositions.²⁸⁸ The trio of lives may appear to move forward with the same kind of flat parataxis each one exhibits individually, but this metonymic monotony also points to the other view of parataxis, as a leveling force, the stories in a relationship paradigmatic—an echoing, resonating structure wherein, like poetry, every part has its place or role—rather than syntagmatic. *Three Lives* appears to be carefully balanced, but we must admit that our sense of its balance—and Wilder's potential imbalance—is read back into the text through the same lens of critical history which Lauter claims puts us at a disadvantage.

That aesthetic has come down to us from the New Critics, in part from their veneration of T. S. Eliot. Aside from enshrining the figure of the artist as catalyst, involved in composition but not a part of its results, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" also gives us another powerful figure with which to sum up the later, classical phase of modernist aesthetics and worldview: tradition. While it's tempting to focus on the way Eliot ties modernism back into that Victorian/realist institution from which it originally made a break, his aims are broader, and much less unilateral. In trying to determine how one might evaluate an experimental work beyond simply praising its novelty, Eliot does not simply ask that the work conform to the line of literary texts that stretch behind it, back to Beowulf and Homer. He also intimates that the line will reach forward to grasp and accommodate these works: "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens

²⁸⁸ Sutherland, 4-17.

simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it."²⁸⁹ Eliot explains that this notion of orthodoxy is not meant to be a restriction on creation but a sign of value in a thing already created:

To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art. And we do not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value—a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity.²⁹⁰

Plainly, for Eliot, himself holding a line between upstart experimental modernists like Pound and the undeniably important history of classical aesthetics, the integration of a new piece to the canon is a negotiation that privileges the past only so much as the past is already written, already in place. As Eliot argues, "Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know."²⁹¹ If a writer is any good, he or she will have a "historical sense," one that balances the "timeless" and the timely.²⁹² By this we recognize that a writer has a place in tradition, and this proficiency makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. This is all well and good. But when the temporal of modernism becomes the timeless, it seems to settle something that was, at the time, not fixed. What kind of change did modernism make to that body of tradition? Apparently, it was a permanent change, one that did not render traditional narrative approaches inartistic; patronizingly, they were rendered low or popular art. Classical, universal narrative suffers the fate of Wilder's novels, overlooked in academia; or of *Our Town*, not obscurity but the peculiar, distorting fog of ubiquity.

²⁸⁹ Eliot, "Tradition," 49-50.

²⁹⁰ Eliot, "Tradition," 50.

²⁹¹ Eliot, "Tradition," 52.

²⁹² Eliot, "Tradition," 49.

3. The Complex Nature of Textual Autonomy in Modern Narrative

While the short story composite, in all its various historical incarnations, has always elicited frustrated discussions of narrative form and its relationship to genre, some works invite more entrenched debate than others. This sort of dispute, however, represents in many cases a rather modern response to these works. Take, for example, Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). When these interconnected sketches, related by the same character-narrator and confined to a single small New England fishing village, first meandered through serial publication in *The Atlantic Monthly*, neither Jewett's reviewers nor Jewett herself gave much thought to classifying it generically. The exception was perhaps her identification with "local color" or regionalist fiction, which put no restrictions on the length or shape of her narrative. In fact, Cynthia J. Goheen claims that Jewett was not prone to categorizing any of her works all that definitively:

For her, the names of at least three genres—sketch, story, and novel—were interchangeable because the boundaries of those generic categories were not relevant to her practice of writing. Indeed, it is conceivable that the generic categories were hindrances—expectations about the parameters of reality which could not accommodate her artistic vision.²⁹³

Once Jewett gathered the installments for collective publication, producing a new ending to solidify the tale's frame, the resulting volume would have been seen as a sketchbook like

²⁹³ Cynthia J. Goheen, "Editorial Misinterpretation and the Unmaking of a Perfectly Good Story: The Publication History of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *American Literary Realism* 30.2 (1998): 28–42), 32.

Washington Irving's *Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon*, narrated by a single, unifying voice.²⁹⁴ In particular, Jewett's village sketchbook closely resembles a particular sort of mid-century episodic narrative exemplified by Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (serialized 1851), written by women and centered on a particular community; but it also has much in common with contemporaneous American Regionalist short story collections, such as Hamlin Garland's thematically linked *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891). Though *Pointed Firs* clearly partakes of both nineteenth century narrative traditions or perhaps simply straddles the line between them—and therefore models itself on both the novel and the short story collection—much criticism of the book is determined to make this sort of hybridity seem undesirable or even impossible.

Conversely, short story composite theorists have often championed such generic fusion, and, in fact, *Pointed Firs* is often found on lists of late nineteenth century composites. But this identification of the book with the composite form isn't as helpful as it could be, as *composite form* isn't a clearly defined concept, and where it is, it can be internally contradictory. One aspect of form that especially suffers from this lack of clarity is the notion of textual autonomy. Though short story composite theorists and critics often proffer definitions of the genre that require the constituent pieces of a composite be autonomous works, the concept *autonomy* is rarely explained. This prompts two interrelated but not indistinct questions: What types of text pieces belong in a short story composite, and how might we discern and demarcate them? *Pointed Firs*, with its loosely progressive chaptered form used to present an undeniably episodic narrative, is a good

²⁹⁴ As for how Jewett herself would have viewed her work, Goheen stresses that while Jewett was not prone to using generic labels, she certainly believed *Pointed Firs* to be an artistic whole (32).

place to begin asking such questions. It illustrates the challenge presented to our current generalized autonomy concept by a discrepancy between division of the narrative into episodes and division of the text into separate formal units.

Another such genre-bending text, Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, highlights a different facet of the autonomy problem: how and how much (if at all) should the text pieces of a short story composite depend upon each other? *Cannery Row* is a true hybrid, a long narrative at times episodic and at others developmental, interspersed with open-ended sketches and lyric short stories. Though each of those stories and sketches would be intelligible out of context, within the space of the longer narrative they take on added dimension; the longer narrative would likewise be comprehensible well enough on its own, but, as in *Pointed Firs*, its individual chapters would not. The work functions as a composite, but how does it do so, given its variety of structural patterns and text pieces? Perhaps just as importantly, why does current short story composite criticism, historically concerned with creating frameworks of textual coherence both general and specific to a particular text, refuse to inspect this variety or at least take it into account in discussions of the genre's range of works? The answer to both questions lies in the narrative shifts of the nearly 50 years from the publication of Jewett's sketchbook to Steinbeck's composite, chief among them the modernist prioritizing of aesthetic form over narrative.

At modernism, as novelists were rethinking the very foundations of the genre, nothing was safe, including the assumption that a novel didn't just contain but actually constituted one long, ultimately unified story. Modern short story writers and novelists found numerous other ways of structuring narrative prose, some which are more accurately described as a coherence of fragments, narratives that cohere despite or even

because of their disorienting, disunifying forms. When novels and other longform prose works need not create overall coherence narratively (even if they constitute coherent narratives), the concept of autonomy shifts from story to form, from episode to prose unit. For a short story composite, the notion of the *prose unit* is even more important, especially during this period, as the new short story, an intricate machine in which every part was essential, was rendering looser forms like the sketch inferior. Given the eventual primacy of the aesthetically autonomous prose unit, contemporary criticism has a blind spot when it comes to other ways in which prose divides into parts and wholes. A continuum of autonomy concepts is often collapsed into a vague notion of form, one carelessly predicated upon the literal divisions of and labels applied to a work's text pieces.

This reduction is counterproductive, and it can be illustrated by the body of criticism on short story writer and novelist Willa Cather, whose oeuvre spans that eventful half-century between Jewett and Steinbeck. While most of Cather's novels are structured around the narrative episode, she uses different formal patterns to encapsulate and connect them, some closer to Jewett's meandering, nuclear narrative and others closer to Steinbeck's composite story-novel. Like Steinbeck, Cather was well-versed in the compact, lyric aesthetic of the modern short story, especially as it was petrified by the New Critical method, but she was not always obliging enough to create narratives—or organize their parts—in a self-conscious, formally "unified" way. A thorough examination of Cather's various approaches to part-to-whole relationships in narrative reveals the critical silences or confusions surrounding this vital aspect of her work. It will allow me to unpack the term *autonomy*, especially as it has been used to reconcile two entirely different but often overlapping and potentially coincident systems for conceptualizing textual coherence, one

based on form (aesthetic) and one based on both form and content (narrative). My goal is not so much to settle works such as *Pointed Firs* and *Cannery Row* decisively within a particular genre as to complicate the mechanisms we have for making sense of any work's generic status. A model of coherence theory that doesn't depend exclusively on form or narrative, that in fact recognizes the importance of understanding their interrelationship, would help illuminate many unclassified works, especially mixed-genre pieces like Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*. It would also add to our understanding of more traditional novels and short story composites and—as in the case of Jewett and Steinbeck—the gray areas in between.

II.

Before examining Cather's works, it is important to explore the critical conversation surrounding *Pointed Firs* and *Cannery Row*, to more concretely identify what is at stake in clarifying the concept of autonomy, especially as the term often masks other potential discrepancies and ambiguities within current genre and narrative criticism. While it may be argued that neither text fits the current definition of a short story composite—they both depend more on novelistic developmental strategies—they constitute narrative forms that, while not necessarily complex, are nevertheless difficult to discuss. Our poverty of vocabulary and conceptual framework for talking about part-to-whole relationships, not to mention our lack of nuance in defining a "part," is evident in the criticism of these two works as read against their composition history and reception.

Jewett's first-person, single-narrator text is formally divided into chapters, but its more significant (and readily apparent) divisions are narrative. The book contains seven

multiple-chapter clusters of narrative; the first and last are frames that describe the narrator's arrival and departure, leaving five central episodes.²⁹⁵ Chapters are named but do not stand alone; they are rhetorically tied to one another with transitional phrases and explicit references to previous events, or they simply pick up the narrative where it left off. In two cases, chapters contain the end of one episode and beginning of the next, signaling that they are not discrete short stories but pieces of a larger prose unit. Narrative episodes are also rhetorically linked, and while they are presented chronologically, their causal connection is downplayed or even suppressed, their force being accumulative rather than linearly developmental. Their ordering, however, was no accident.

When Jewett set about publishing her magazine sketches in book form, she chose not to depart from the arrangement of the stories as published serially. Goheen reports that, other than collapsing two Bowden Reunion chapters into one and inserting the Elijah Tilley episode,²⁹⁶ Jewett simply added a final chapter that would help shape the initial chapters into part of a frame for the narrative.²⁹⁷ Likely, this would have been the end of the story had she not returned to that same imaginative landscape to write "A Dunnet Shepherdess" and "The Queen's Twin." Though these short stories contained familiar characters, they did not fit the thematic or structural framework of Jewett's long-episode text. Goheen notes that Jewett was not shy in her instructions to her literary executors about re-issues, so it is significant that she did not provide for the inclusion of these

²⁹⁵ These are (1) the rental of the old schoolhouse and story of Captain Littlepage; (2) the trip to Green Island with the narrator's landlady, Mrs. Todd; (3) the story of "Poor Joanna" and Shell Island; (4) the Bowden family reunion; and (5) the visit to Elijah Tilley.

²⁹⁶ The Elijah Tilley episode, the fifth and final, is an especially interesting addition. It originated in material written for the Captain Littlepage narrative, episode one, so it is fitting that the two narratives stand as bookends, just inside the bookends of the frame tale.

²⁹⁷ Goheen, 35-6.

additional Dunnet Landing stories in future editions of *Pointed Firs* (37). Unfortunately, however, after her death, editorship of a new edition was undertaken by Jewett's great admirer and mentee, Willa Cather, who set about "restoring" those stories to the book's canon. She felt that, as sketches, they were open to tinkering. However, Goheen and James P. Elliott argue that this was in reality a move designed to push the narrative toward a more conventional, plotted form.²⁹⁸ Ironically, the decision to pursue a more causal narrative worked against its intended effect of textual coherence, disrupting the book's thematic and character-driven unity and leaving the sketches loose and disconnected. For this reason, claims Goheen, *Pointed Firs* was relegated to the "minor" status that critics had all along assumed for it, based on its use of the sketch story form.²⁹⁹ Seen as a chaptered novel, it fares no better, failing to live up to the standards of the traditional novel, especially in the late nineteenth century, where naturalist determinism cross-pollinated with late Victorian skepticism to privilege cause and effect, the basis of plot.

In the early 1980s Jewett criticism joined in the move to rehabilitate the reputation of neglected female authors, specifically those writing in, alongside, or even against the dominant and ostensibly more literary realist mode around the turn of the twentieth century.³⁰⁰ When read through the lens of Jewett's gender identity, the book's subject matter and structure seem to align with traditionally feminine modes of storytelling. Most important is the non-linear nature of the narrative, described by Elizabeth Ammons as

²⁹⁸ Goheen, 38-9; James P. Elliott, "'Doubling': Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* as Artistic Bildungsroman," *Colby Quarterly* 39.2 (2003): 178.

²⁹⁹ Goheen, 40.

³⁰⁰ For a wide-angle view of the movement of Jewett criticism from her death through the present, including the apologist early feminist period, see Karen L. Kilcup and Thomas S. Edwards, "Confronting Time and Change: Jewett, Her Contemporaries, and Her Critics" (*Jewett and Her Contemporaries: Reshaping the Canon*, ed. Kilcup and Edwards (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 1-27.

"nuclear," with the narrator and Mrs. Todd (and the Green Island episode, with Mrs. Todd's mother) at the center of a web of stories.³⁰¹ Margaret Baker Graham likewise recognizes the work's cyclical, feminine storytelling model, but she argues it is juxtaposed with a linear, masculine approach.³⁰² Elliott ascribes this linearity, our sense of the work's developmental progression, to a specific form: the *küntslerroman*.³⁰³ Placement of the work within the tradition of the artistic maturity narrative sheds light on the way narrative and generic commonplaces act upon the text and react with each other. Lengthy accounts of a protagonist's growth are almost always labeled *novels*, which classification seems, for Elliott, to necessitate finding in it a linear, causal structure. Even Ammons would admit there is growth and change depicted in the work, but does that necessitate discounting the "nuclear" tendencies of its episodic structure? This debate about the novel's form has become so entangled with its generic status that it is difficult to find critics who discuss the nature of the storytelling independent of genre, and, among those critics who do, there is no consensus. For example, Goheen and Sandra A. Zagarell are eager to place the work within the safe world of "unified" narrative, but, recognizing the insufficiency of the label *novel*, they are led to create looser conceptual labels of their own.³⁰⁴ Karen Oakes is equally as determined to prove that *Pointed Firs* deliberately flouts boundaries, so she refuses to

³⁰¹ Elizabeth Ammons, "Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett's Country of the Pointed Firs," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 16.2 (1983): 83–92.

³⁰² Margaret Baker Graham, "Visions of Time in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 32.1 (1995): 29.

³⁰³ Elliott, 175.

³⁰⁴ Goheen adapts the term "sketch" to longform narrative; Zagarell includes it in her discussion "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre," *Signs* 13.3 (1988): 498–527.

label the work at all, and, indeed, attacks the very notion of generic identity.³⁰⁵ This suggests that one can derive a concept of narrative unity and/or textual coherence without recourse to any—or any one—genre in particular, but even among critics who examine narrative structure rather than form, a dependence on generically determined notions of coherence can be limiting. Unfortunately, it is also inevitable, as there is no comprehensive framework in place that addresses this type of narrative outside of genre—namely, outside of the novel genre.

Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* is also a digressive story of an isolated community, and while its narrative is almost as easy to follow as that of *Pointed Firs*, describing how the various pieces of the text function together is not so simple. In part, it is an episodic novel, a bit more causal than the typical picaresque. While jobless loafers Mack and the boys act mostly in passive self-preservation, they are also driven by a notion not at all passive: they feel that Doc, one of the novel's other main characters, is lonely and therefore desperately needs a party in his honor. This idea sets the plot in motion and keeps it moving forward. Doc and other characters float in and out of the novelistic portion of the narrative, but they also feature in discrete stories of their own. A late modernist text, the book itself gives clues about its interpretation, in this case providing an indication of its structure. *Cannery Row* interrogates the ways in which the different individuals (and stories) can possibly occupy the same community (or text), and what their cohabitation and connection means. In the book's oft-quoted introduction, the narrator focuses on the plurality of the community:

Cannery Row in Monterey, California, is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream. Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy

³⁰⁵ For a fuller account of Oakes's argument, see "All That Lay Deepest in Her Heart': Reflections on Jewett, Gender, and Genre," *Colby Quarterly* 26.3 (1990): 152-60.

lots and junk heaps, sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honky tonks, restaurants and whore houses, and little crowded groceries, and laboratories and flophouses. Its inhabitants are, as the man once said, "whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches," by which he meant Everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, "Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men," and he would have meant the same thing.³⁰⁶

Encompassing so many things, Cannery Row is in the eye of the beholder, and its complex nature prompts the narrator later to ask, "How can the poem and the stink and the grating noise—the quality of light, the tone, the habit and the dream—be set down alive?"³⁰⁷ His answer prefigures one of the central and most examined metaphor systems of the novel:

When you collect marine animals there are certain flat worms so delicate that they are almost impossible to capture whole, for they break and tatter under the touch. You must let them ooze and crawl of their own will onto a knife blade and then lift them gently into your bottle of sea water. And perhaps that might be the way to write this book—to open the page and to let the stories crawl in by themselves.³⁰⁸

Where Jewett's text, then, only appears to meander, Steinbeck's fulfills a promise that it will—because it must.

This is the reader's experience of the novel's forward momentum, but it also characterizes the work as seen from above. The composite effect of the text seems to derive precisely from its artfully haphazard arrangement of sketches, chapters, and modern short stories. Along these lines, many critics, indeed, are more interested in a different kind of metaphor taken from the text, from Doc's visit to the ocean, specifically to one of its tide pools. According to Richard Astro, "To Doc and to Steinbeck, the Great Tide Pool represents all that is natural in the world: beauty and ugliness, love and hate, life and death. In short,

³⁰⁶ John Steinbeck, *Cannery Row* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 1

³⁰⁷ Steinbeck, 3.

³⁰⁸ Steinbeck, 3.

the tide pool is an emblem of the entire scheme of universal order. . ."³⁰⁹ It is an apt metaphor, but it represents only the overall ethos of the book, its embrace of paradox and diversity, something which patterns the movement of one story to the next—associatively or haphazardly—but doesn't account for the effect of those stories on one another. I have not yet found a critic willing to look outside Steinbeck's preface to recognize a different structural metaphor, in yet another observation about marine life:

[Doc] was busy removing the starfish from the wet sacks and arranging them on the cool concrete floor. The starfish were twisted and knotted up for a starfish loves to hang onto something and for an hour these had found only each other. Doc arranged them in long lines and very slowly they straightened out until they lay in symmetrical stars on the concrete floor.³¹⁰

I do not suggest that we manipulate a composite's narratives until they stop clinging indiscriminately to one another; on the contrary, this is the job of poor narrative criticism, that which seeks to shape a work into a perfectly acceptable but not entirely natural system. Through the creation of the writer or in the interpretation of the reader, a story in collection will cling to its neighbor, changing the shape of both, just as it will flatten out and become something different when separated from its fellows (as in, say, an anthology). This understanding of the text works in conjunction with the narrator's peephole conceit, its relativism, for who can say what constitutes proximity—plot, characters, setting, theme, symbol? In reality, the proximity of the page is arguably one of the strongest forces, underscoring the concept of true community as a randomly coherent assemblage of individuals.

³⁰⁹ Richard Astro, "Steinbeck's Post-War Trilogy: A Return to Nature and the Natural Man," *Twentieth Century Literature* 16.2 (1970): 111.

³¹⁰ Steinbeck, 51.

The criticism of the novel bears this out, with different scholars in the Steinbeck community adhering to different aspects of the work's content or structure, generally identifying things that reflect the writer's common theoretical and philosophical preoccupations. Many of these are built upon his relationship with a prominent marine biologist, from whom he derived many of his ideas: "the superorganism, the phalanx and 'group-man' and the tide pool metaphor—all ideas discussed with Ed Ricketts—form the fundamental themes of Steinbeck's greatest novels and short stories of the 1930s."³¹¹ Other approaches seek to place Steinbeck's worldview within the framework of Taoism or simply ascribe to it an eastern influence.³¹² But in general the eastern reading is mostly a subset of a more general observation about Steinbeck's work, especially *Cannery Row*: its welcoming of disorder or contradiction, reflected in its characters and stories, and in the structure of the stories and the text as a whole.³¹³ These readings are legitimate, and they usefully marry theme or subject to narrative form, but they are only a part of the puzzle. Without synthesis, their discussions of structure are largely unintegrated individual peephole views of the work,³¹⁴ not especially useful in discussions of genre.³¹⁵

³¹¹ James C. Kelley, "The Global Appeal of Steinbeck's Science: The Animal-Human Connection," *Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck*, ed. Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 255.

³¹² Peter Lisca, "Cannery Row: Escape into the Counterculture," *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 111-8; and Hiroshi Kaname, "Cannery Row and the Japanese Mentality," in Shillinglaw and Hearle, 101-06.

³¹³ Lisca, 113-14; Brian Railsback, "Dreams of an Elegant Universe on *Cannery Row*," in Shillinglaw and Hearle, 278.

³¹⁴ Robert S. Hughes, Jr. is an exception. He examines the novel as the intersection of ecological and moral concerns, which enables him to identify the way the work's worldview creates its central narrative tension ("Some Philosophers in the Sun": Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*," in Benson, 119-31).

³¹⁵ Short story composite theorists are no more likely to engage with the genericity of the text. Unlike Jewett's *Pointed Firs*, this particular work of Steinbeck's rarely shows up on lists of short story composites. Even Dunn and Morris, proponents of the wider genre term

Generic categorization might be seen as a fairly functional hermeneutic circle, with abstract definitions checked against concrete example, but in the case of the short story composite, a difficult and precariously balanced genre, the circuit often breaks. The concept of autonomy is a major point of rupture. Though most short story composite theorists and critics proffer definitions that require the pieces of a composite be autonomous, the idea is variously explained or not explained at all. For example, James Nagel, in his introduction to a book of essays on the genre, argues that "each component work must stand alone (with a beginning, middle, and end) yet be enriched in the context of the interrelated stories."³¹⁶ Mann makes a similar assertion, that the short stories in composites are "both self-sufficient and interrelated."³¹⁷ Forrest Ingram makes less specific claims for the "individuality" of each story,³¹⁸ and neither he nor J. Gerald Kennedy addresses the subject of autonomy directly, a requirement implied by the assumption that short story composites include only modern short stories.³¹⁹ Dunn and Morris, on the other hand, lay out specific strictures that take into account a wide range of generic aspects.³²⁰ However, their

composite novel, do not list it. This is no accident, given their inclusion of a wide range of other Steinbeck texts, from the more purely picaresque novel *Tortilla Flat* to the framed short story collection *The Pastures of Heaven* to the short story composite *The Red Pony*, published the same year as *Cannery Row*.

³¹⁶ James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short-story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 15.

³¹⁷ Susan Garland Mann, *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 15.

³¹⁸ Forrest Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 15.

³¹⁹ J. Gerald Kennedy, "Toward a Poetics of the Short Story Cycle," *Journal of the Short Story in English* 11 (1988): 13-14.

³²⁰ Namely, they posit that the genre is open to non-fiction and non-prose forms, but the work must not be exclusively poetry; it must not be a multivolume work (like Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy) or "series hero" collection (e.g., *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*), but it may involve collaborative authorship (Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* [New York: Twayne, 1995], 6-7, 8, 16).

statements on autonomy are a bit confusing: not all pieces must be autonomous, but those that are must have titles to be considered so. In their succinct formal definition, a profusion of explicit parameters falls into vague language: "The composite novel is a literary work composed of shorter texts that—though *individually complete* and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles."³²¹ Dunn and Morris's "complete" and Ingram's having "individuality" is not exactly the same thing as Nagel's "stand alone" or Mann's "self-sufficient"; these concepts apply to related but ultimately separate aspects of the part-to-whole relationship: the status of each piece and the relation of that piece to others. *Pointed Firs*, loosely novelistic in its chaptered form but undeniably episodic in narrative, evinces a discrepancy between narrative episode and formal unit. A similar incongruity can also be seen in the dissimilar types of text pieces of *Cannery Row*, a text which also draws our attention to the second aspect of the autonomy question: in what way can such dissimilar text pieces make for a coherent composite work? The novels of Willa Cather, published throughout the first half of the twentieth century, are an appropriate place to begin an analysis that bears witness to the modern, changing attitudes about narrative form and the narrative forms not always recognized as modern.

III.

Along with Sherwood Anderson, Robert Frost, and Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather was of an odd, in-between generation in American literature.³²² Their personal and artistic

³²¹ Dunn and Morris, 2, emphasis mine.

³²² Cather (b. 1873), Stein (b. 1874), Frost (b. 1874), and Anderson (b. 1876). Other notable writers of Cather's generation include Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser, James Weldon Johnson, Ford Madox Ford, Upton Sinclair, and E. M. Forster. Three other contemporaries –

development came when there was still new output from master realists like W. D. Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain; however, they began to publish, often late in their lives, with modernists like Dos Passos and Faulkner at their heels.³²³ Cather was never quite comfortable with modernist ideas about art, despite her stylistic kinship with minimalists like Hemingway. Nevertheless, unlike near contemporary Edith Wharton and despite her frequent critical dismissal as a relentless nostalgist, she was a modern, engaging in the same debates as her younger, modernist counterparts and writing her major works alongside them.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the protracted span of her career led to a comparable breadth of output. Her novels are as diverse in form as they are subject matter, their structures representing no linear, teleological path of artistic development. Borrowing from hagiography, legend, and history, including that of her own family, she let her subject matter choose her forms, many of them unapologetically non-dramatic. Cather's protean formal sensibilities, unfortunately, have made her a bit of a critical puzzle. Cather scholars themselves have variously labeled her traditionalist, regionalist, realist, naturalist, modernist, and postmodernist, often using the same texts as evidence. Though narrative form is a persistent concern in the voluminous discourse about specific works, critics typically focus broadly on Cather's style or on what occasioned each specific narrative form, related to its content or to her biography. While these are helpful approaches that inform my work, they fall short of explaining exactly how these narratives relate part to

Frank Norris (1870-1902), Stephen Crane (1871-1901), and Jack London (1876-1916) – did not live long enough to compete with the literary output of the "Lost Generation."

³²³ Cather's sardonically titled essay collection *Not Under Forty* gives us a relative endpoint for her generation. By her estimation, those unable to understand her views of life and art, having been born less than forty years before the book's publication in 1936, would include Dos Passos, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Steinbeck.

whole and how one might generalize about her range of narrative strategies. Whether seen as progressive or cyclical, dramatic or non-dramatic, unfurnished or "full-blooded," her works are usually described as meticulously arranged complexes of structural and narrative tensions. An analysis of those arrangements and how they contribute to or even create a work's sense of coherence will reveal the precarious negotiation of balance that characterizes a variety of modern forms, even those normally considered peripheral to high modernism, as well as the unmitigated but not inartistic tensions that may result.

As Cather's choice of forms reveals not a straightforward progression but a path that often doubles back on itself, I do not group the novels chronologically. An account of her growth and maturity is best drawn from a comparison of novels with similar structures, beginning with those that are not particularly innovative but nonetheless point to other trends and provide an important baseline for comparison. Half of Cather's novels are relatively traditional in structure, and I have divided them into two classes. The first class is formed of novels that feature a linear, developmental narrative concerned with the experiences of the main character; the second class, while still linear and progressive, focuses more on revealing the facets of a character already mature or developed. With few exceptions, both classes feature her typically straightforward prose, and in the second class, that simplicity of prose and concentration of subject matter dovetail to form minimal narratives. I class *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *One of Ours* (1922), and *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) as *traditional* mostly for the lack of a less loaded term. While these three novels do reveal a tendency toward the careful selection of episode that is more pronounced in other novels, within those episodes they feature an expansiveness of detail that allows for more development but consequently perhaps less focus. Therefore, and unfortunately, critics

commonly dismiss concerns of structure and focus on content, or, notably in the case of *Lucy Gayheart*, ignore the work entirely.

The Song of the Lark, a *küntslerroman* of budding opera singer Thea Kronborg, is so different in style and structure from Cather's subsequent works that the novel is sometimes lamented as an uneven apprentice effort. Some accuse it of being too personal to allow her to master her material, while more charitable critics comprehend her richness of detail and depth of character exploration as owing to her training as a journalist and reviewer of naturalist novels.³²⁴ However, the structure of the narrative shows that the novel isn't as baggy as it might seem. Each chapter in the first two parts, focused on her childhood, is almost always explicitly situated rhetorically and logically with respect to the previous chapter, making a seamless narrative even when there are gaps in chronology. In later parts, breaches in story time are still smoothly parsed by the narrator, but they happen more often and cover longer periods of time until, finally, the shift from part four to part five sweeps us past ten years of Thea's life. Without a doubt, this period of her training in Europe is vital to her character, but it is not as vital to the growth narrative that is the book's focus. Cather's WWI novel, *One of Ours*, on the other hand, does not display an increasingly selective reporting. Protagonist Claude Wheeler's development in *One of Ours* forms itself into a more traditional narrative. Critics especially focus on the second half of the novel, Claude's experience of World War I in France. Hers is admittedly an idealized trench experience, but it does not leave her main character unscathed, and with his death,

³²⁴ Amy Ahearn, "Full-Blooded Writing and Journalistic Fictions: Naturalism, the Female Artist and Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*," *American Literary Realism* 33.2 (2001): 144-5. For more on the subject, see Ann Moseley, "Editing the Scholarly Edition of *The Song of the Lark*: The Legacy of Cather's Journalism in the Social and Literary History of the Novel," *American Literary Realism* 41 (2009): 133-53.

his narrative, unlike Thea's, never has the chance to settle itself in a mature character and leap forward.

Cather's penultimate novel, *Lucy Gayheart*, follows these familiar paths by usefully combining them. Like Thea, Lucy is a budding artist who leaves home to train, but, because of her untimely death, Lucy has perhaps a greater kinship with Claude. Paradoxically, this is precisely what sets the novel apart from *One of Ours*. At the end of *Lark*, Thea's life continues, so the narrative ends with a distanced perspective on Thea's career, courtesy her Aunt Tilley. Claude's story is, of course, not open-ended; aside from a sentimental coda in which an old family servant seems to feel his spirit float near the family's stove, his novel ends at his death. Lucy's death, however, occurs well before the end of the novel, signaling that the narrative we've been reading isn't simply the story of her maturation, as was Thea's. Passing over forty years, the final section of the novel follows her spurned childhood sweetheart, Harry, whose thoughts—about Lucy's character as well as the novel's theme of growing older—take up a significant portion of the text and, indeed, bring it into focus. We are left not with the knowledge that a triumphant artist is still performing or that a confused young person met a tragic demise; to Harry and to the audience, Lucy is somehow both. She becomes a static memory of an active personality, immortalized in the impress of her footprints in the cement outside her childhood home. Deborah Carlin argues

This disjunctive and deconstructive tension "between a plot that charts development and a plot that unravels it" is what renders *Lucy Gayheart* the novel as enigmatic and undecipherable as the three footsteps, frozen in flight, which stand as the final reduction from language to artifact.³²⁵

³²⁵ Deborah Carlin, *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading* (Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 149. According to Carlin, this sense of "arrested motion" illustrates what happens when a woman's story is written outside of the usual conventions (118, 126).

Lucy's story is primarily one of revealed character, which might account for its more restricted selection of time periods and scenes.

To an even greater degree than *Lucy Gayheart*, novels in the next class are more overtly structured, through symmetry and reverberation of theme. *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), for example, is a detailed and progressive narrative that brings us to its protagonist at a significant narrative moment. However, Bartley Alexander's story, like those told in *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), is predicated upon his character—indeed, even subordinate to it. The greater focus on character in this *minimalist* class of novels allows for stylistic and narrative streamlining which reaches its zenith in *My Mortal Enemy*, a novel hailed, often simultaneously, as a cryptic, partially successful experiment and as a masterpiece of modernist minimalism. These three works straddle the line between novella and full-blown novel, and they employ a somewhat artificial structuration of the characters' worlds and the narratives that seek to make sense of them.

On one end of the spectrum is *Alexander's Bridge*, quite selective in terms of scope but not restrictive of narrative detail.³²⁶ Despite its more elaborately descriptive style, *Bridge* limits its settings and its cast of characters, stripping the story down to a classic choice between physical and spiritual love. Cather uses Alexander's impressive new bridge—and, indeed, his whole career choice—in an overtly symbolic manner to dramatize this choice and the destruction that can come of not choosing. According to Raymond

³²⁶ For example, Raymond Thorberg, in a classic essay on Cather's early style ("Willa Cather: From *Alexander's Bridge* to *My Antonia*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 7.4 [1962]: 147–158), describes the novel as Jamesian. Though I tend to agree with critics like Bernice Slotte and Susan J. Rosowski that the failed-Henry-James thesis has become an unexamined cliché, its persistence in discussions of *Bridge* signals the novel's affinity with certain generalizations about James's prose which connote a density of detail – a reasonable charge. See Susan J. Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 34.

Thorberg, "the 'solution' to Alexander's problem involves a complete shifting of the basis of the novel. A matter developed within the consciousness of the protagonist is settled by forces operating wholly outside it"—that is, the collapse of the bridge which ends Alexander's life.³²⁷ On the other end of the spectrum, *A Lost Lady* employs judicious selection of detail, but it has a much wider scope of characters and time span. Story time, however, is limited to three periods in the life of the novel's focalizer, Niel, with the first and last used only briefly, to frame the novel as a character study of Marian Forrester. The long middle period takes up the bulk of the novel, creating a relatively continuous fabric of narrative. However, in order to present Niel's experiences of Marian more vividly, the narrative often pauses for striking tableaux, switching deftly from summary to scenic presentation of important moments in the story. In addition, Cather relies on character monologue rather than narratorial summary to render key past events, a deft way of providing a vivid snapshot into the characters lives, especially moments outside the bounds of the present story.

This dependence on powerful story moments anticipates the careful power of selection permeating Cather's narrative style throughout her career, but the selective principle at work in these novels reaches beyond minimalism of presentation and affects their very structures. Novels designed to explicate character do not require stringent biographical coverage or chronology but rely on more abstract governing principles, whether they be rendered in disorienting high modernist stream of consciousness or in deceptively straightforward minimalist prose. *My Mortal Enemy*, like the other two novels in this class, features parallels and repetition, but they are used toward an end of

³²⁷ Thorberg, 149.

juxtaposition, to present Myra Henshawe from different, contrasting angles which show her passionate nature to be both charming and destructive. Likewise, Bartley Alexander's dynamism lends him good and bad character traits as much as it draws him to two women, and Marian Forrester's old-fashioned charm is presented as both admirable and pathetic. Alexander's story is one of building a bridge that, in the end, cannot support itself, just as his attempt to live a double life was doomed to fail; the structure of the novel, therefore, highlights the constant move between the two worlds, the whole bookended by scenes of Bartley's wife and old professor meditating on his character. Marian's story is similarly framed in symmetrical scenes at the beginning and end that illustrate her effect on young men. This frame itself also works as juxtaposition, as we witness Niel's shifting perspective, from idealized childhood reactions to the observations of an experienced young adult. Likewise, *My Mortal Enemy* features a focalizer trying to make sense of a complex woman, but the narrow scope of that novel, a mere handful of encounters represented by suggestive scenes, makes the binary structure sometimes painfully obvious, more than in *A Lost Lady*, which presents a much more fluid narrative.

In the first two classes of novels, Cather writes in a traditional style of progressive plotting, using alternation between scene and summary to structure the narrative, as well as echoing and juxtaposition of carefully selected episodes or scenes. The third and fourth classes of novels employ these techniques to a certain extent. They also represent narratives with more discrete story components, some based on episode and some delimited formally, arranged dramatically or non-dramatically, but all involving a relationship of parts more complex than the traditional chaptered novelistic narrative.

IV.

The third class of Cather's novels, those narratives that I label *interpolated*, is small but important. As Cather's consensus modernist novel, *The Professor's House* (1925) garners a lot of attention from poststructuralist critics. Its form—a novel split in two by a short story, or, as Cather puts it, a matter of "inserting the *Nouvelle* into the *Roman*"³²⁸—is relatively straightforward, but what critics make of that bifurcated structure is a rich and contentious critical field of its own. *O Pioneers!* (1913), on the other hand, seems to be a simple, classic American novel, with the implication that it is not structurally interesting enough to warrant much formal analysis. However, its earliest critics had comparable questions about its dual narrative. Given the genesis of these works, it is not surprising that they provoke genre-based formal concerns, for both novels began as two separate pieces of writing. Though in each novel the pieces were combined to make a different meaningful whole, the extent of their integration is in dispute or at least under suspicion.

Many structural concepts are used to describe the shape and narrative logic of *The Professor's House*. For example, my term for this narrative class borrows from the field of music, where interpolation is the reworking of part or all of one piece into the very fabric of another, not unlike synthetic cubism in the visual arts. Cather herself employed a spatial metaphor, likening the work to a particular type of Dutch painting, which she described thus:

³²⁸ Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (New York: Knopf, 1936), 30.

In many of them the scene presented was a living-room warmly furnished, or a kitchen full of food and coppers. But in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of the ships, or a stretch of grey sea.³²⁹

She goes on to say that the "feeling of the sea that one got through those square windows was remarkable," and was akin to the effect she hoped the Tom Outland story would have, like a window letting the fresh air into protagonist Godfrey St. Peter's "overcrowded and stuffy" life. According to Ann Moseley, this concept is as temporal as it is spatial; the characters' stories are not synchronous but are rendered so by the simultaneity of the reading experience.³³⁰ Looking at the layers of the text in a different way, Jean Schwind, in her noted feminist reading of the text through the Cliff City's "Mother Eve" figure, notes that the while Tom and his companions frame Mother Eve's story, so is Tom's story framed by St. Peter.³³¹ This speaks to an unbalanced relationship between the two parts of the text, the short story forced into submission to the novel. Jo Ann Middleton, however, views the contrast between the narratives as simple juxtaposition, which Guy Reynolds terms "disunity," though he argues that this jarring break between stories and story worlds is, paradoxically, the very thing that creates its coherence.³³² Rather than trying to mirror post-war society's fracturing or repair it, the novel does both at once.³³³

³²⁹ Cather, *Not Under Forty*, 31.

³³⁰ Moseley, 198.

³³¹ Jean Schwind, "This Is a Frame-Up: Mother Eve in *The Professor's House*," *Cather Studies* 2 (1993): 72-91.

³³² Jo Ann Middleton, *Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), 105-07; Guy Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 124-5.

³³³ Reynolds, 125.

Almost every critic who works with *The Professor's House* seems to feel the need to confront its structure, but not every critic believes it is a tightly grafted piece of modernist literature. To my knowledge, however, no one has suggested that the novel would be, or even could be, better off without the interposing short story. "Tom Outland's Story," though capable of standing on its own, is integral to the novel's wholeness. Readers seem to have no difficulty piecing together Tom's narrative with St. Peter's; what gave pause to Cather's contemporaries but excites us, post-modernism, is the lack of formal integration between the two parts. For example, a reviewer at the *New York Times* complained, "Here in one volume—and in one novel—are three books," the first "ingeniously invented," the second "amateurish," "mere narrative material," and the third poorly conceived.³³⁴ Clearly, the reviewer judged them as separate works. Cather leaves the reader to discover the connection between those works as pieces of a single whole, a connection that goes deeper than just the circumstances of the plot. Those readers who do not see this connection will find the novel on some level a failure; those who do, if the novel's critical history is any indication, will find creative ways to describe how a short story comes crashing into a novel and finds a narrative crater there waiting for it.

Cather went through a similar process of discovery with *O Pioneers!* In the fall of 1911, Cather wrote "Alexandra," the story of a pioneer woman's connection to her land. A few months later, after she composed "The White Mulberry Tree," a tale of doomed romance, she happened to read the two stories alongside each other and decided they

³³⁴ "Willa Cather's 'Professor's House' Among New Novels," *The New York Times* 6 Dec. 1925: 8. Web. 15 March 2011.

could be usefully combined.³³⁵ Unlike in *The Professor's House*, the two stories ceased to stand on their own, narratively, rhetorically, or thematically. The fact is, they couldn't, not successfully. Whether their consequent combination is any more successful is up for debate. Susan J. Rosowski occupies the critical middle ground, viewing the novel through Cather's statement that it is a pastoral in two parts. That the worldview of this classical model is perhaps not possible anymore might contribute to its discontinuities:

Like the Romantics, Cather makes pastoral moments personal revelations by which the creative imagination transforms the world, with subsequent returns to public reality abrupt and difficult. Like the moderns, Cather places her characters within myths that are inadequate or that disintegrate, leaving them helpless.³³⁶

Rather than assume the novel is an artistic failure, Rosowski takes comfort in the tension between the two stories, as does Reynolds, who ascribes it to the way Cather viewed history as a cycle but "rejected the determinism implied by a recursive historiography."³³⁷ Reynolds argues that this tension in her beliefs leaves many of her works "asymmetrical"—an open form, in the case of *O Pioneers!*, that resulted from allowing the story to develop organically, based not on a deterministic pattern but a "fortuitous juxtaposition."³³⁸ In this case, such juxtaposition brought the two stories into a productive context—one that

³³⁵ David Stouck, "Historical Essay: Composition," *O Pioneers!: The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition*, ed. Charles Mignon, Susan J. Rosowski, and Kathleen Danker (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994. *The Willa Cather Archive*. Ed. Andrew Jewell. U of Nebraska-Lincoln. 11 Nov. 2011. <<http://cather.unl.edu>>. Path: Writings; Scholarly Editions).

³³⁶ Rosowski, 56.

³³⁷ Reynolds, 51.

³³⁸ Reynolds, 51.

reveals the very tensions we see in her worldview, her recognition of or perhaps simply desire for the coexistence of unyielding universality and dynamic free will.

Bruce P. Baker chronicles many more unity readings from the critical history, but just as important is his account of the novel's reception amidst much confusion, reviewers stymied by its structural issues.³³⁹ Many considered it a qualified success or a promising but ultimately flawed piece of art; Baker makes their argument thus:

How could any novel seem unified when the protagonist. . .all but disappears from the pages of a major section of the novel only to reemerge in the final short section. . .in what seems to some to be an artificial and not altogether convincing attempt at unifying the novel's two major stories?³⁴⁰

However, unlike the disruption of form and story found in *The Professor's House*, here only the story itself is a bit fractured. To some extent the novel is still two stories, one an epic rendered in the sweep of summary, the other a drama played out in scene; but these stories are each stronger for being told in one fabric of narrative. While the love story certainly benefits from its contextualization within the Bergson family epic, I argue that Alexandra's tale gains even more by the composition. As protagonist, Alexandra is a striking but static figure presiding over the reader's communion with the land, but as a player on the sidelines in her brother's drama, she takes on dimensionality and gains maturity. Therefore, I agree with Baker's assertion that the story's ending "is not merely an attempt to unify *O Pioneers!* in a mechanical way but rather to complete the portrayal of a heroine

³³⁹ Bruce P. Baker, "O Pioneers!: The Problem of Structure," *Great Plains Quarterly* 2.4 (1982): 219.

³⁴⁰ Baker, 219.

who has become fully human, a real as well as a mythic figure."³⁴¹ What might have been a lovely but sterile portrait of a strong woman becomes a convincing story of a woman who has actually proved how strong she is.

Alexandra's decision to marry Carl Linstrum shows the way the events of the White Mulberry plot have changed her enough to shape her future, in ways both negative and positive. Having faced the harsh fact that she was somewhat unconscious of the very human world around her, she is now perhaps inclined to connect more to other people, including the life partner she's wanted all along. But the dangers of passionate love weigh on her just as heavily. The narrator reveals that she acknowledges her dream of marrying Carl "will never come true now, not in the way [she] thought it might."³⁴² If this is a burden, it is also a necessity; she says, "I think when friends marry, they are safe." This desire for safety she explicitly relates to the deaths of Marie and Emil, as her subsequent dialogue demonstrates: "We do not suffer like—those young ones." For the first time, in the last section of the novel, we see life take a toll on Alexandra, bringing her the bittersweet comfort of a childhood sweetheart who can never be a lover in the sense that Emil was to Marie.

Does Alexandra unify the novel? It is more accurate to say that the events of the novel unify Alexandra, and that makes for a complete aesthetic object, as disparate as its storylines might sometimes seem. The real problem with many readings of the novel is a conflation of fragmented narrative and episodic storytelling. As a descriptive term, *episodic*

³⁴¹ Baker, 222.

³⁴² All quotes from the novel are from *O Pioneers!: The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition*, ed. Charles Mignon, Susan J. Rosowski, and Kathleen Danker (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994. *The Willa Cather Archive*. Ed. Andrew Jewell. U of Nebraska-Lincoln. 11 Nov. 2011. <<http://cather.unl.edu>>. Path: Writings; Scholarly Editions).

is often used quite loosely. While it normally describes the relationship between narrative parts in a long work of fiction, specifically an absence of causality or growth, it is often used merely to emphasize the tendency of a narrative to present a story through a series of isolated moments. These two understandings of the episodic can go hand in hand, but in Cather's case, episodic presentation is usually along the lines of the latter, the selective function of her minimalism. *O Pioneers!* has the misfortune of trying to juggle two stories in this manner, making it all too easy for readers to dismiss it as flittering or chaotic when it is really a minimal composite novel. As such, it is more akin to formal composite *The Professor's House* than its truly episodic cousin, *My Ántonia*, a structurally non-dramatic depiction of pioneer life and an one unchanging woman who embodied it.

V.

My Ántonia is the strongest but also the most precariously balanced of Cather's fourth and final class of novels. These *woven* narratives are the most invested in the storytelling process and the power of story itself; surprisingly, they are also among her least dramatic. Much of this is owing to the tension between their broader overall narratives and the smaller moments of which they are composed. Storytelling is far from merey a structuring device; with a tale comes a teller and a display of the act of storytelling. Many of the stories told in *My Ántonia* (1918), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and the less familiar *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) are of extreme circumstances and heightened passions, providing such dramatic weft for the narrative's fabric that it is surprising how often they are lost in the warp, powerfully non-dramatic and often explicitly anti-

progressive. These works combine the techniques found in Cather's other novels, most importantly the focus on explicating character.

The earliest example of this style, *My Ántonia* (1918), is a character piece about its titular heroine, whose personality is captured by a character-narrator with his own story to tell.³⁴³ Jim's *bildungsroman* doubles as a subjective rendering of his Ántonia, and the growth we see in Jim is a result of these processes, happening on two levels at once. As a character, he learns about storytelling through listening to others; and as a narrator, he retells those stories as well as Ántonia's, which turns out in many ways to be his own. This dual approach is important to understand, not just for this novel but also for many of Cather's works, because it underlines the parallels between experienced episode and told story. In *My Ántonia*, the "told story" can be many things, but first and foremost it is the work itself, which describes Ántonia as an unchanging spirit in a very changed body, enacting the tension between a desire for stasis and a recognition of time's relentless progression,³⁴⁴ something akin to the pull between character description and plot. Jim's discomfort with unavoidable progress becomes palpable as he and Ántonia enter young adulthood and sexuality interposes itself. We see it more subtly in Jim's strategies of narrative selection throughout the novel: rather than discuss his current life, his marriage,

³⁴³ In this way, the text resembles minimalist works *A Lost Lady* and, to a lesser extent, *My Mortal Enemy*.

³⁴⁴ This is a theme Cather would take up with increasing frequency as she grew older. For example, *The Professor's House* comes down to a simple quandary: Should one attempt to stand still against the tide of change or admit that life is ineluctably pushing one forward? Godfrey St. Peter is keenly aware of this conflict within himself and is thus able to reach an important decision about it, but Jim, settling his narrative firmly in a present which is simply an idealized version of the past, regresses.

or even much about his university days, Jim focuses on childhood experiences.³⁴⁵ His idyllic childhood is rendered especially vividly in scenes that, as in *O Pioneers!*, anchor themselves in vast and immutable nature. The story world of Jim's tale is rich and calming; the happenings in that world, however, are often less so, such as Mr. Shimerda's suicide during a grueling winter. Neither are the tales told *to* Jim particularly reassuring; one of the novel's most disturbing involves a wedding party being eaten by wolves, and in Book Two, *Ántonia* tells the grizzly anecdote of a tramp who jumps into a threshing machine. The measured, nostalgic tone of the novel is constantly undercut by the horrific, by a wife chasing her husband with a knife (*Ántonia's* experience, reported to us by Jim) or a man attempting to sexually assault *Ántonia* (Jim's experience, reported to us by himself).

Even *Ántonia*, Jim's one constant, is not without bad experiences in life, and it is her response to them that makes Jim cling to an idealized version of her, and that makes the reader forget the horrifying elements of the narrative. In *Ántonia*, Jim finds a model for arresting time and its ravages, thus neutralizing the effects of progression, that is, of plot. When she becomes the mother of an illegitimate child, she is not ashamed but shows off the child to the whole town, as though the past is not banished but is also not destructive. Critics have different reactions to the novel's ending, many calling it artificial, to the extent that it constitutes an artistic failure of sorts. This ending, however, is Jim's, not Cather's, and it is the logical resolution of the tensions at work within him, seen in his thoughts during this encounter. When he first spots *Ántonia*, it is a "shock," but soon he's telling the reader the story he himself wants to hear: "As I confronted her, the changes grew less

³⁴⁵ Book one takes up almost half of the novel's length, though it encompasses the shortest length of time and, obviously, the fewest number of life experience regarded as major in Western society.

apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished."³⁴⁶ Framed within innately unreliable first person narration, these observations might be anything from wishful thinking to great spiritual truth, but establishing his reliability is less important than examining his reinterpretation of the changes brought by a hard life. He makes those discrepancies the very signs of *Ántonia's* strength:

I was thinking, as I watched her, how little it mattered—about her teeth, for instance. I know so many women who have kept the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, *Ántonia* had not lost the fire of life. Her skin, so brown and hardened, had not that look of flabbiness, as if the sap beneath it had been secretly drawn away.

Even if the whole novel is an idealizing reinterpretation of *Ántonia*, it is important as a portrait of Jim.

Whether relatively objective or self-deceptively subjective (which we cannot definitively know), the nostalgic air of the final scenes of the novel, the regression/return that creates the novel's central tension, derives at least in part from *Ántonia* herself. When *Ántonia* first recognizes Jim, she announces his name to her children as though they are already familiar with him, a high probability, as *Ántonia's* box of photographs and mementos reveals how figures from their childhood have become characters in her stories about her life. Even her children's names—echoing those of the children she helped take care of as a young woman as well as her own siblings—make a place for the past in the present. Incorporated into the patchwork fabric of what Jim calls *Ántonia's* "family legend," their childhood still exists as a reality, as story, long before Jim begins his novel. Whether

³⁴⁶ All quotes from the novel are from *My Ántonia: The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition*, ed. Charles Mignon, Susan J. Rosowski, and Kathleen Danker (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994. *The Willa Cather Archive*. Ed. Andrew Jewell. U of Nebraska-Lincoln. 11 Nov. 2011. <<http://cather.unl.edu>>. Path: Writings; Scholarly Editions.

this is healthy is up for debate, but Jim's need for cyclicity is a learned behavior, derived from his experience with story and storytelling, and from his *Ántonia*, the (interpreted) woman synonymous with the book. Combining a focus on character presentation and development with an episode-oriented structure enables *Ántonia*, like Tom Outland and Lucy Gayheart, to be frozen in time. Rather than serving as evidence of the author's artistic weakness, our inevitable discomfort with this process should highlight the complexities of the text—including the ironic interplay between Jim as narrator and Cather as narrative shaper—as it demonstrates how illusory our self-portraiture can be, not to mention our rendering of "reality."

On the surface, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) has little in common with Jim's depiction of prairie life and the woman who loomed large over it. However, with this novel appearances are deceiving before one even opens the cover. The title suggests plot, a man stalked by death, perhaps as in a murder mystery, but the reader finds that his death is simply the last episode of a long, full life. Such a suggestive title, as Walter Benn Michaels argues, is used to neutralize tension and diminish the importance of endings and their shaping of plot.³⁴⁷ Admittedly, *Archbishop* does not feature storytelling as a theme, nor does it typically present to the reader stories as stories. However, the focus on the character of its protagonist and his world, rather than in a chain of events that leads to narrative climax, as well as its episodic arrangement, presents the novel as a *My Ántonia* devoid of its intervening character narrator, its emotional storyteller. The book is an extended portrait of both the archbishop and his diocese, a narrative which operates through the

³⁴⁷ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 79.

accumulation of experiences, both good and bad, of Latour and fellow priest Joseph Vaillant.

This narrative mode, though modern, intentionally hearkens back to a medieval form, the saint's legend. Because of this, David Stouck notes, it displays the same episodic logic identified by Erich Auerbach, a seminal scholar of mimetic theory, in the medieval French song cycle *Chanson de Roland*.³⁴⁸ In that text, episodes, like the rhetoric of the verse itself, are arranged paratactically, refused an overt logical sequence or causal narrative structure. According to Auerbach, this stems from the worldview that informed the storytelling:

The poet explains nothing; and yet the things which happen are stated with a paratactic bluntness which says that everything must happen as it does happen, it could not be otherwise, and there is no need for explanatory connectives. This, as the reader knows, refers not only to the events but also to the views and principles which form the basis of the actions of the persons concerned.³⁴⁹

Such a static worldview is explicitly a product of a feudal societal structure concerned with family and knightly honor and defending Christianity. One does not need to explain anything in a world in which "[a]ll the categories of this life and the next are unambiguous, immutable, fixed in rigid formulations."³⁵⁰ Auerbach explains that this was a new kind of elevated style, one that wasn't predicated upon clever rhetoric but "the power of

³⁴⁸ David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 129-30.

³⁴⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 101.

³⁵⁰ Auerbach, 110.

juxtaposed and independent verbal blocks."³⁵¹ Displaying "the same restricted and definitely established cosmos" as the *chansons de geste* are concurrent religious texts, many of them the kind of saints' lives Cather chose to model.³⁵² Throughout Cather's text, the development of Latour, seen in plot, takes a backseat to the development of our understanding of him, holistically and eternally.

Where Jim's personal narrative revealed a tension between progressive time and unchanging nature, Cather's narration here, in a cool third person, can deemphasize Latour's growth over chronological time and let story time—a time of isolated episode—pace our understanding of the man and his diocese, perhaps as a reflection of his own slow and piecemeal understanding of life in new Mexico. Though very little of the book is explicitly framed as a story, the unadorned narration, describing but not explaining, works on book, chapter, and section openings to do the familiar work of storytelling. Frequently, openings use simple sentences, with forms of "to be" alone or in progressive constructions. At other times, Cather adds prepositional openings or employs complex sentence structures for a very basic purpose: to situate a narrative moment in time or by location.³⁵³

³⁵¹ Auerbach, 110.

³⁵² Auerbach, 111.

³⁵³ The chapter openings from the first book give a representative sample of these approaches: "One afternoon in the autumn of 1851 a solitary horse-man, followed by a pack-mule, was pushing through an arid stretch of country somewhere in central New Mexico" (Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* [New York: Vintage, 1990], 17); "An hour later, as darkness came over the sand-hills, the young Bishop was seated at supper in the mother-house of this Mexican settlement[...]" (25); "It was the late afternoon of Christmas Day, and the Bishop sat at his desk writing letters" (32); "On the morning after the Bishop's return from Durango, after his first night in his Episcopal residence, he had a pleasant awakening from sleep" (42). The first two passages and the last translate an action (push, sit, awaken) into a state of being or an experience (was pushing, was seated, had an awakening). The third passage features an active verb, but only after the scene has been established.

Everything, from the global choice of scene-setting over action-relating or meditation to the choices in diction that make actions and actors inert, mimics the structure of the most story-like of stories: the fairy tale. By establishing a scene first as tableaux, Cather presents her episodes explicitly as stories. The nature of the presented story, more than any sense of forward movement and progress, governs the overall narrative. As fitting a novel of character, each episode deepens our understanding of Latour. As in *My Ántonia*, these episodes are just as likely to be unpleasant as uplifting, and to be set in juxtaposition.³⁵⁴

Written nine years after *My Ántonia*—on the other side of that dividing line of 1922, when, as Cather put it, "the world broke in two"³⁵⁵—*Archbishop* also takes advantage of modernism's embrace of uncertainty and refusal to disambiguate, presenting the world from sometimes conflicting angles and in shades of gray. In one episode, Latour spends the night in a cave considered sacred to his native guide, an experience spiritual and palpable but also unnerving. He doesn't know what to make of it, and the narrator doesn't interpret it for us. Nevertheless, it is a part of Cather's world building, enriching our notion of the book's layered approach to the spiritual, as multifaceted as the native populace Latour must win over. With an episodic presentation such as this, only superficially progressive, the relationship of those story pieces is still important. Michaels, for one, would not agree, reading the lack of causality as lack of connection:

What this means at the level of the plot is that nothing leads to anything else. So, paradoxically, everything is connected but anything can be disconnected, which is why, for example, Cather thought that it would be easy to select parts of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* to anthologize. Because no part of the narrative was subordinated to any other part of the narrative, every part was equally a part of the

³⁵⁴ Consider the contrast between the pair of episodes that make up Book Two: Latour's pleasant and at times comical visit in the household of Manuel Lujon and his unsettling encounter with the murderer Buck Scales.

³⁵⁵ Cather, *Not Under Forty*, v.

whole. But because every part was equally a part of the whole, any part could be used as a whole.³⁵⁶

What Michaels doesn't take into consideration is other forms of connection or coherence, especially those that may not be aspects of "plot." I agree with his statement that "every part is equally part of the whole," but it does not follow that "any part could be used as a whole." If I read him right, the "whole" here is the entire text; if one part could stand in for the whole, what is the purpose of the other parts? Michaels doesn't argue that the novel should be broken up into pieces or actually trimmed down to one story. It is a more complex text than that, non-narrative and featuring juxtaposition or echoing of character type and theme, as well as moments of crossing and connection between Latour and the novel's secondary focalizer, Vaillant. Sequencing is less vital than the pacing and overall balance that comes from having strong parts that might constitute wholes in themselves.

Cather's next novel, *Shadows on the Rock*, returns her to religious subject matter and episodic style as it fleshes out a portrait of seventeenth century colonial France, in what is now Quebec. This lesser known work stands, structurally, midway between *My Ántonia* and *Archbishop*. Its third person narrative gives it all the advantages of *Archbishop*'s measured, expansive storytelling, but its alignment with young Cecile Auclair gives readers a hook into the story and allows Cather frequently to focus the novel's stories through an impressionable and sympathetic listener. As in *My Ántonia*, *Shadows* gives story and storytelling the spotlight; however, it is not a novel of character, nor is it a *bildungsroman* charting Cecile's growth (although both narrative impulses are palpably present). Cecile is not Jim Burden; ultimately, she takes a back seat to the stories that help shape her, and any growth she experiences is largely internal, creating a lack of surface tension that

³⁵⁶ Michaels, 81-82.

contributes to the static tone of the text. Rather than serving in a merely thematic capacity, story is an integral part of the characters' lives, a mechanism for understanding and building their community of adventurers, misfits, and ascetics, perched at the edge of civilization. Unlike *Archbishop*, *Shadows* presents story and storytelling within the narrative, framed so as to provide it context and allow us to see characters' reactions to it. And unlike *My Ántonia*, it does so without recourse to a personally involved narrator with an entirely different agenda and influence on the novel's form. While some of the novel's story, plot exposition, and character description are seamlessly blended into the narrative, the majority are either described in scene as events in the narrative, with characters speaking in quotation marks to an audience, or signaled rhetorically, with verbs like "tell" that alert the reader to a coming story.

Stories told by characters, in monologue or dialogue, typically involve quick sketches or portraits of a person or event, many times with a clear message. An early, representative example is Reverend Mother Juschereau's story of a legendary local nun, Catherine de Saint-Augustin. While it is intended as a moral tale, Cecile interrupts the Reverend Mother just as she's about to give that moral, saying, "*N'expliquez pas, chère Mère, je vous en supplie!*"³⁵⁷ Cecile's "do not explain" attitude shows her to be more interested in the storytelling itself than the lesson she is supposed to glean from it. Story is so vital to the narrative that Cather describes Cecile reading the tale of Saint Edmund to her young friend Jacques—in French, and with no translation for the reader. Often, storytelling serves a ceremonial function,³⁵⁸ and other times, it works toward thematic ends.³⁵⁹ Story serves as

³⁵⁷ Willa Cather, *Shadows on the Rock* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 32.

³⁵⁸ The story of Bichet, the Auclair family's lodger, along with the Catholic mass they have said for him on the anniversary of his death, keeps him alive in memory, somewhat

gossip as we're first introduced to Montréal recluse Jeanne Le Ber with a report of a recent miracle.³⁶⁰ When we meet Pierre Charron, he is immediately drawn into storytelling, highlighting the fact that, in this culture, story was an important part of communal life, both news and entertainment, the occupation of a visit. Storytelling is also a necessary human behavior. Binker, a family dependent and border, has trouble telling his story, but he does it—although the narrator mostly summarizes it for us—because, as Auclair says, "It will help you."³⁶¹ However, such narrator-related storytelling is typically not used in compensation for a weak teller but simply to relate tales with longer exposition or pertaining to central characters themselves.³⁶² Even dreams become tales, through narration.³⁶³

In *Shadows*, global story is largely subordinated to storytelling acts, as they serve a real purpose in the community. While the tension in Jim Burden between movement and stasis was problematic, by some estimation destructive, *Shadows* finds an interesting balance. Unfortunately, it renders the work globally non-dramatic, too unlike a traditional

mitigating the cruel treatment to which he was subjected at the hands of the law (Cather, *Shadows*, 72-75).

³⁵⁹ For example, the Reverend Mother tells Cecile a story about Catherine de Saint-Augustin grinding up a saint's bone to make a medicine for a sick sailor, but her father contradicts this mythical-romantic tale of healing with the medical reality that human remains are not healthy to ingest, and he does so through a historical illustration. For the reader, the story's force as a rebuttal of the saint's bone miracle reinforces one of the novel's central tensions: the real versus the mysterious.

³⁶⁰ Likewise, when we meet a trapper named Frichette, he brings both a message from Father Hector and a story. Later, when Father Hector makes his own appearance, he tells a story to explain the "irrevocable vow" he has taken, which is more clearly understood in the context of the history of his mentor, Father Chabanal, who made a similar vow.

³⁶¹ Cather, *Shadows*, 129.

³⁶² For instance, the narrator adds to the hazy recollections of Jacques, a poor whore's son, by narrating the long story of his encounter with the Old Bishop Laval on a miserable winter's day.

³⁶³ This is seen in old Count Frontenac's dream of his childhood near the end of the book.

novel to find a wide audience. The novel is highly cyclical, beginning and ending its one year with an annual event, the arrival of the boats from France; however, this event is also a departure, and it comes during the autumn, our yearly marker of the coming winter and unavoidable passage of time. What complicates this balance is that the desire for departure and escape is found in the older characters who cling to the past, whereas Cecile represents a generation of French who feel more at home in the New World than the old, who want to put down roots there, toward the future.

Thus far, I have left one Cather novel uncategorized, to serve as a test case for applying these observations within her canon. Though not her best work—in fact, it is one of the more problematic of her oeuvre—*Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is her last, and it represents a culmination of sorts, an accumulation of the structural strategies and narrative preoccupations this chapter enumerates.

VI.

Rather than attempt to argue that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) is a stronger piece of writing than usually assumed, I will instead point out the reasons—beyond its content—that we find it so unsettling. As in Cather's woven narratives, the novel features narrator- and character-storytelling and episodic set pieces that educate the reader about the story world and the people in it. A portrait of a complex woman, southern matriarch Sapphira Colbert, it is selective of scene and not particularly structured by dramatic tension. As in the interpolated class, a moment of dramatic plot—the story of the mistreatment of Nancy, a young slave girl, at the central character's hands—comes in to rupture an otherwise static, character-driven story. These narratives are intertwined,

circumstantially, in the plot-forming tension between the characters. As structures, however, the narratives operate on entirely different principles: the patient, meandering accumulation of detail versus the swift push of crisis. They are only tenuously joined by the novel's de facto protagonist, Rachel, Sapphira's abolitionist daughter.

This pull between the narrative forms, as well as Rachel's role in reconciling and balancing them, is evident in the narrative's pattern and assemblage into formal units. In the first three books, centered on Sapphira and the slavery question in abstract, the narrative is episodic, with everyday household incidents serving as jumping-off places for meditations and stories peripheral to the movement of the plot. Each of these books is instead focused on a different character cluster, as seen in its title: "Sapphira and her Household," "Nancy and Till," and "Old Jezebel." Books five through seven, highlighting the slavery question through the plight of a single slave girl, present clusters of action, as evidenced by the titles "Sampson Speaks to the Master" and "Nancy's Flight." Book five, "Martin Colbert," holds a character-based title, but this character inaugurates the action of the novel, pushing the progressive plot into a forward motion that must be borne out to a conclusion. Also intervening between the Sapphira/character-focused and Nancy/action-driven narrative blocs is Book Four, "Sapphira's Daughter," which partakes in both narrative modes and outlooks on the unfolding story. Through Rachel, the novel can foreground the slavery question as both a timeless abstract debate (Rachel disagrees with her mother's ideology, a manifestation of her personality) and a temporal concrete problem (Rachel intervenes in Nancy's case). The consequences of Rachel's actions on Nancy's behalf—she is excommunicated from the plantation—seem to irreconcilably part Rachel and her mother as well as the plotted and character stories. However, book eight,

"The Dark Autumn," uses another dramatic story episode, the reconciliation of the two during the sickness of Rachel's daughters, to bring the two structures together again.

Finally, the novel looks back to the traditional class by employing a sentimental coda; however, this coda works in a different way, to undercut the triumph of the character-focused narrative. Unlike the logical (if self-deceptive) ending of Jim's narrative of *Ántonia*, this book's epilogue calls the construction of the whole into question. Nancy's return to the plantation 25 years after the events of the novel resurrects the plotted story. That it is told by Cather herself in the first person, in a moment of metafiction, effectively reinscribes Nancy into the static world of the antebellum south that Sapphira embodies throughout the novel. Thus, the tension between the structures is not entirely resolved or even resolvable. At the epilogue, the story has settled enough to allow the novel to conclude, but this is merely a pause, a temporary moment of equilibrium in the structures' jockeying for dominance. The novel might have closed at the earlier pause constituted by the end of the novel proper, with somewhat different results. Neither ending, however, is particularly satisfying to a modern audience: we are left with either a re-victimized ex-slave or a contented slave-mistress. While ambiguity and tension is reasonable from a novel written at the twilight of modernism, the failure to synthesize the two veins of narrative leaves the entire structure ineffective, either as a character piece (because we use Nancy's flight to develop her mistress's character) or as a plotted narrative (because we spend too much time on Sapphira to pretend the narrative is about the woman's slave).

While it was fairly reasonable and logical to apply concepts derived from an author to other works by that same author, the preceding discussion and classification have a broader purpose. Exploratory readings of episodic and fragmented composite narratives

help us begin to articulate the kind of structural principles that are necessary for more fruitful discussions of narrative and formal compositing techniques. This top-level glance over Cather's works, then, gestures toward a more complex view of part-to-whole relationships, not serving as a set of paradigmatic rules, but instead leading by example. An identification and labeling of the techniques and patterns observed in Cather's work should make it easier to return to the two short story composites in limbo—*The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *Cannery Row*—and describe their structure more conceptually, something which aids in examinations of both the works themselves and the larger genre of which they are a part.

First, though, a look at two other problematic composite texts. A better understanding of form and narrative as separate but interrelated story levels, as well as the implications of those relationships, can give clarity to other types of composites, especially those which mix modes. Take, for example, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, which stretches the definition of what constitutes a story piece. Its dramatic and narrative parts are augmented by poetry, much of it only loosely narrative. However, the poems add depth to a whole very obviously not coherent as a narrative except in the broadest sense, as the story of a society, community, or era, as in Hemingway's *In Our Time*. Critics are well versed in interpreting the stories and sections of this work as parts of a whole, one which is cyclical rather linear. In light of my reading of Cather, I would examine each of the three sections of the book, which may be discrete composites in themselves and have their own internal structures that do not necessarily echo that of the whole. One might look at the work's internal tensions as a complex and multi-level system, operating both between its sundry parts (story to story, section to section) and between its various parts and wholes (story to

section, section to work). The critical commonplace, driven by Toomer himself, that the novel's cycle ends and begins again in the middle of the book, and in the middle of a section, might be more usefully explored with a clearer sense of the relationship between the work's composite pieces.

Another unique composite work is *Requiem for a Nun*, the work that Noel Polk argues has typically been treated like "one of the idiot siblings in the Faulkner canon."³⁶⁴ It is a challenge in many ways but especially for genre critics, given its mix of drama and prose. Polk explains that "most critics conceded some admiration for the novel's unusual structure, in appreciation of Faulkner's continuing efforts to redefine, to reshape, the conception of the novel as art form"; but Even Polk insists on labeling the work a novel,³⁶⁵ so it is difficult to determine exactly what effect the historical prose sections of the work are supposed to have on its dramatic portions (or vice versa). Answering questions of dominance (What is the controlling story? Is there a controlling story?) and sway (What effect does the one story have on the other? on the whole?) requires evaluating each perceived text for its own internal logic, then seeing them in juxtaposition. It would not be necessary to pin down whether or how the work is a "novel," freeing one, even requiring one, to ask a host of other questions. How does the text work as a composite narrative? What is the role of the concept of "story"? Is it the same for the prose and drama portions? What tension exists between them, and are they resolved? The dramatic sections retell *Sanctuary*, and so they insert the events of *Sanctuary* into Temple Drake's later disingenuous life. The faux non-fiction prose, on the other hand, mythologizes the history

³⁶⁴ Noel Polk, preface to *Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun: A Critical Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), x.

³⁶⁵ Polk, xi.

of the town. The whole text can be seen, then, as a tension between reality and fantasy, and the delicate position of truth between them. This is perhaps not a new idea, but such a conclusion will have been reached from outside the text, as read through Faulkner's pet topics, time and the influence of the past on the present. Such a focus on the past, both personal and societal but always Southern, obscures the ways in which this particular town's past is just as much a controlling narrative for Temple as Temple's own misdeeds. Nothing much happens during *Requiem for a Nun*, but the ripples cast by those past happenings spread far and potentially overlap each other, in form and content.

To return to our test cases, *Pointed Firs* seems to benefit the most from the previous discussion of non-dramatic structures. In Cather's novels, those structures were oriented to storytelling, and we find that this is frequently the case in the Jewett text: the episodes centering on Captain Littlepage, Poor Joanna, and Elijah Tilley take the form of character storytelling transcribed by the narrator, and they are woven into the nuclear narrative of her growing relationship with Mrs. Todd. The text is probably best identified as an episodic novel, denoting its arrangement into loosely connected episodes without a concern for imposing corresponding formal divisions. Episodic novels, like the sketch form of the short story, now appear malformed as chaptered narrative, but such a charge cannot be applied to the storytelling itself. The episodic form signals that the progressive-connective force of plot (and the use of form to shape plot) is not as important as the revelatory force of character and community exploration. Even the parts of the narrative explicitly laid out in plot, such as the history of a hermit or a spooky sea yarn, become vehicles for characterizing the tale's tellers. Nevertheless, as in the woven class of Cather's novels, truly terrible things are submerged beneath the town's placid surface. The darker, more plotted

stories keep an interesting tension with the overall portrait, belying the town's perfect peace but simultaneously highlighting the true community formed despite its interpersonal challenges. Subsumed in the flow of a loose sketch structure, sorrow and loneliness remain ghostly and pain is a memory one might banish at any time—not that anyone in Dunnet Landing would interfere with a neighbor's right to choose sadness or isolation over living with others. Even the self-isolated, like the independent Mrs. Blackett and the hermit Joanna, are still a part of the community.

For all the work's nuclear tendencies, its use of episode in the service of character and theme, the progressive aspect of the overall narrative matters in perhaps the same way it does for *Jim Burden*, as a path of development as thematic as it is character-building. Like Jim, the narrator goes through several stages of growth on her way to being able to write this book. First, she gets to know Mrs. Todd, then she struggles to make sense of a new acquaintance's story (the fumbling reminiscences of Captain Littlepage). After she learns more about Mrs. Todd through visiting her mother and brother, she hears the story of Mrs. Todd's cousin (Joanna), then she meets the rest of Mrs. Todd's family, in some ways becoming a part of it. After that, it is possible not only to tell the story of Mrs. Todd and the rest of Dunnet Landing but also to receive another sad story with patience and sympathy, to realize that memories of widower Elijah Tilley are also a necessary part of any portrait of the village, as necessary as his memories of his dead wife are to his home. This developmental structure is deemphasized but not destroyed by the nuclear tendency of episodic narrative.

Cannery Row, another portrait of community, is assuredly a composite, but I hesitate to label it *novel* or *short story composite*. Trying on a genre label of *novel* highlights the fact

that the bulk of the narrative is in its progressive plot, but it also immediately prompts a question: Does the developmental narrative constitute the novel's story, or does it merely anchor a narrative with a broader goal? In other words, can the quasi-picaresque plot be understood without the intervening short fiction, and would it be the same story? The fact that the answer is "no" prompts me to try out another label, *short story composite*. While some of the discrete short stories have an obvious role in fleshing out the novelistic narrative, such that they seem to melt into it, others have a far more complex role. In terms of form, they are unified wholes, but narratively they are quite bound to the novelistic plot and to the work as a whole—not because they are unintelligible without causal connection to other stories, but because their themes and their narrative elements are those of the whole.

The structure and theme of the work seem to be predicated upon keeping a balance between the concepts of the progressive and the composite. As a modernist work overtly but poetically thematizing community, it must show that, like Dunnet Landing (and unlike Winesburg, Ohio), Cannery Row is a neighborhood not in spite of supposed outsiders, but because of them, in fact made up of them. Everyone is essential to the structure. The bonds that tie the characters to the Row are multiple, some circumstantial, based on accidents of proximity, and others essential, based on personal affinity. The party-planning plot is central to the story because it is central to the community; that the first party is a riotous failure and the second is a cathartic blowout says a lot about the nature of this group. It is indeed a cohesive entity, informed by all its players and symbolized by the guest of honor, Doc, who serves as the nucleus of most of the work's stories, novelistic or otherwise, but who is, paradoxically, the loneliest character in the Row. Other unrelated satellite plots as

well as party-related subplots crop up because a community, like a composite narrative, isn't one story but the sum of its stories, places and events but especially characters, even kindhearted prostitutes, creepy vagrants, and forlorn gophers.

The Country of the Pointed Firs and *Cannery Row* demonstrate the multifarious nature of part to whole relationships in composite narrative, and the fact that Steinbeck's text is more modern does not make it more complex. Our unrelenting focus on form hurts Jewett's text. Reading it as a novel asks that we remain attuned to its forward motion, from chapter to chapter or from episode to episode, rather than the cumulative effect of the scenes and stories which make up the whole. Conversely, comprehending the work as a loose series of sketches asks us to ignore the chaptered nature of the narrative, the effect of their overt connection to each other. These readings stem at least in part from our inability to articulate the different parameters and conventions of autonomy in narrative. Chaptered narrative cannot account for multiple-chapter episodes or other ways of parsing a text's part to whole relationships. On the other hand, our disdain for rhetorically connective narrative shows our reliance on those very conventions, our inability to see past them to the other markers of composite narrative structure.

Admittedly, the Steinbeck text proposes a question that does not haunt Jewett: how do such different narrative modes share one cover? Viewing *Cannery Row* as either a confused episodic novel with some oddly structured chapters or an eccentric short story composite that sometimes puts forward a progressive narrative—viewing it, therefore, through the theory of only one of its narrative modes or types of texts pieces—misses the point entirely. The picaresque plot would not happen without the presence of Doc at the fringes of the text, and the presence of Doc in the text at all would not be possible without

his having narrative space of his own, apart. It is not very different from the way Dunnet Landing does not forget its hermits; the narrator needs to render them clearly in order to get a sense of the whole, in part by getting a sense of how even absent friends structure the present community. The difference is simple but requires a re-valuation of our aesthetic concerns: in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the complexity of the relationship, the clever balance of the text, is seen in its character storytelling rather than its formal units.

4. Dismantling the Machine, Reassembling the Parts: WWI Fiction and the Ends of Composite Narrative

It is a truth universally acknowledged that World War I was a catalyst for the growth and spread of literary modernism; what is not entirely agreed upon or even clearly elucidated is exactly how that logic of influence works. Surveying the criticism on the subject, from Bernard Bergonzi's *Heroes' Twilight* (1966) to Vincent Sherry's *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (2003), one finds less evidence of causality than of parallel development. Total war and modernism roiled into being during the same period of exponential technological growth and corresponding philosophical, moral, and social transformation, and they both contribute to our ongoing understanding of the unruly and paradigm-shifting first quarter of the twentieth century. Making a case for the influence of the war on the literature of the day is therefore reasonable and useful. Arguing that it was the contextual brand that burned literature into a unprecedented new pattern, however, is difficult.

While Bergonzi's 1966 book was among the first to examine WWI literature, perhaps the seminal early work on the subject is Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). Looking at the intersection of trench life and the average soldier's English literary background, he discusses the ways in which they shaped each other, such as the reworking of the poetic trope of sunrise: a sublime moment of communion with nature

which, in war, becomes menacing, the day's greatest moment of danger.³⁶⁶ Fussell argues that our modern penchant for binary oppositions was born in the war's "us versus them" environment, whether the "them" be the opposition forces or the out-of-touch officer class. Notably, he posits that war memoir should be classified with fiction, and that WWI narrative be recognized as a mixed approach: traditional form employed with modernist irony. As Sherry points out, Fussell's weakness is his restriction to soldier-poets, which prevents him from making strong claims about a wider movement.³⁶⁷ Sherry also finds the work of another important WWI literature critic, Jay Winter, of limited use because he is not overly concerned with parsing the complex relationship of the modernists to the war, or interrogating the seemingly stable world that the war burst upon.³⁶⁸ In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (1995), Winter reminds us of something that we perhaps don't want to acknowledge, that traditional forms continued in spite of, even because of, the war.

Historian Eric J. Leed provides a different lens of analysis, looking at the minds behind WWI combatant novels and explaining the origins of their feelings of discontinuity of the self. As the title of David Jones's experimental novel *In Parenthesis* suggests, the war was for most soldiers a time out of time, a dividing line between a before and after which were mutually contradictory. Living with such a lack of continuity created feelings of loss and made narrating this parenthetical time difficult. Leed argues, "[A]n adequate rendering of war experience is not a matter of judiciously balancing its undeniably positive and negative features, but of showing how both the positive and negative sides of war are emanations of

³⁶⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 52.

³⁶⁷ Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7-8.

³⁶⁸ Sherry, 7, 8-9.

the same phenomenon."³⁶⁹ The phenomenon was war, but this war was a product of the modern world, and as such it could not serve as the escape from modernity that many desired.

Accounts of the relationship between modernism and the war seem as conflicted and internally paradoxical as modernism itself. For example, Evelyn Cobley points out the discrepancies between war fiction's ideology and its form, arguing that we are not attentive enough to the fact that "apparently antiwar narratives are often complicit with war," and that "critical commentaries overlook such complicities because their thematic approach ignores the ideological implications of formal strategies."³⁷⁰ Leed and Fussell both recognize the power of myth in trench life; it acts as a necessary structuring methodology that, though often fanciful or hyperbolic, is tied directly to the soldiers' reality, and, as such, is ideologically charged.³⁷¹ In these trench myths, according to Leed, "certain facts of the war experience are selected for signification, not because they are unreal but because they are central to the human experience of war."³⁷² A mythic transformation of reality is not uncongenial to the modernist project, and another facet of the front-line experience also reflects a modernist worldview: the feeling of being in a labyrinth. In discussing labyrinth as a reality and as a conceptual metaphor, Leed claims, "In description after description of the major battles of the war one perception always emerges: Modern battle is the fragmentation of spatial and temporal unities. It is the creation of a system with no center

³⁶⁹ Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 25.

³⁷⁰ Evelyn Cobley, *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 5.

³⁷¹ For more on war and myth, see Leed, 116-62.

³⁷² Leed, 121.

and no periphery in which men, both attackers and defenders, are lost."³⁷³ Milton A. Cohen argues that modernism was already engaged in a similar project:

For beyond merely anticipating or even welcoming a new war, avant-garde artists across Europe drew upon war in its multiple meanings--war as metaphor and as actuality, war as language, as visual images, as models of both organizing and destructive power, and, most of all, war as focused energy.³⁷⁴

Cohen goes on to argue that the line of influence was reflexive: "The modernists' relation to war, however, proved symbiotic: as they drew energy from the *constructions* of war, their own energies, in turn, were quickly sucked into the real war's immeasurably larger vortex--with profound consequences for the arts."³⁷⁵ The question of influence is obviously a complex one. Margot Norris formulates it thus: "Was modern war a stimulus to aesthetic revolution, as early twentieth-century artists and critics claimed, or did art become increasingly aghast and defeated by events and spectacles beyond its powers of representation as war became unspeakably immense in scale and unutterably violent in construction?"³⁷⁶ Convincing arguments have been made to support both views.

Rather than reenacting the causality debate, this chapter operates on the premise that the Great War and the growth of the modernist literary ethos happened concurrently because they were both consequences of the modernization of the world. Undoubtedly, the war brought about a kind of conversion of modernism, but the aesthetic we know as modernist—specifically, that of the early, avant-garde phase of the period—was in articulation long before WWI. Modernism predates the war, and modernists went to war;

³⁷³ Leed, 104.

³⁷⁴ Milton A. Cohen, "Fatal Symbiosis: Modernism and the First World War," *The Literature of the Great War Reconsidered: Beyond Modern Memory*, ed. Patrick J. Quinn and Steven Trout (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 160.

³⁷⁵ Cohen, 160.

³⁷⁶ Margot Norris, *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 1.

that so many of them didn't come back makes it likely that the war curbed the avant-garde spirit of modernism, but it didn't obliterate the movement any more than it eradicated the surviving modernists and their works. As Cohen has argued, "modernism itself became a war casualty: it survived, but profoundly changed."³⁷⁷ Post-war modernism was a logical descendant, though chastened, of pre-war movements like Impressionism, Imagism, and Vorticism. The modern consequences of literary rebellion as well as society's political transformation and martial escalation is best seen where writing and combat overlap, in the fiction of World War I. In particular, the work of combatant-writers, from the "literary" to the popular, makes a powerful case for the transformative nature of the twentieth century, guided as it is by the writers' experience with modern reality in both its everyday and its heightened form. I examine the works of writers with direct participation in the theater of war,³⁷⁸ where the reality of life in the combat zone, rather than simply experience with literary models or news reports, produced modern forms. This will demonstrate the Great War's connection to the horrors of modernity, before or alongside modernity's effect on modernism. This study is confined to those writers, not as an argument that their works are more legitimately artful or realistic than that of non-combatants, but as an effort to restrict scope.

³⁷⁷ Cohen, 165.

³⁷⁸ As I perhaps unorthodoxly use the terms, *non-combatant* refers to writers who did not experience the theater of war directly, from homefront authors like Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews to non-deployed military personnel like William Faulkner. *Combatants*, for the purposes of this argument, include all warfront participants, military or not, including figures like John Dos Passos and e. e. cummings, who were a part of a French ambulance corps, and expatriate Edith Wharton, who frequently traveled to and wrote about the French front line. However, at times I will distinguish the soldier-writer from the participant-writer, as their experiences of the warfront could be very different in kind and degree.

Many of the qualities typically ascribed to WWI narrative are illustrative of modern and modernist narrative in general. Of particular interest to this study is twentieth century war narrative's general tendency toward fragmentation of traditional narrative perspective, from the shape and pacing of the story, paradoxically anti-dramatic and paratactic, to nature of its point of view, especially where it is distributed among several characters or lines of plot. Just as combatant writers provide some of the most extreme and therefore enlightening visions of modernity in war, writers of explicitly composite narratives about WWI show modern literary aesthetics at an extreme state—embryonic, unstable—providing a window on the changing nature of literary production as well as the various aesthetics which we call modernist. This shift is in evidence in contemporaneous works unrelated to the war, such as Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), bookends of the time of the conflict. It is also palpable in early narrative works³⁷⁹ of combatant-writers like Henri Barbusse (*Le feu*, 1916, France), Ernst Jünger (*In Stahlgewittern*, 1920, Germany), and Thomas Boyd (*Through the Wheat*, 1923, United States). Later texts, like Erich Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, both published in 1929, reveal a slightly different picture, one of an aesthetic settling into place.

In this chapter, I will look closely at two American WWI texts, one from that early period and one appearing well after Remarque and Hemingway. Canonical modernist John Dos Passos's fragmented novel *Three Soldiers* was published in 1920, not long separated

³⁷⁹ For my purposes in this chapter, *narrative* includes autobiography (such as Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*) and fictionalized autobiography (for example, Siegfried Sassoon's *roman à clef* Sherston trilogy). As my interest is in the shape of WWI storytelling, the extent to which these works are or are not fictional is perhaps not unimportant, but assuredly not exclusionary.

from wartime publications like Ford Madox Ford's impressionist *The Good Soldier*, Joyce's stream-of-consciousness *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Willa Cather's episodic *My Ántonia*. Lesser-known modern traditionalist William March's sketchbook composite, *Company K*, was published a dozen years later, well after high modernist masterpieces like *Ulysses*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*.³⁸⁰ Both novelists would see a decline in their popularity and critical reception—March has only two novels currently in print,³⁸¹ and Dos Passos fell out of favor with both readers and the academy in part due to his radical politics—but both remain important touchstones in the fields of WWI fiction and American war writing. In *Company K*, we see prefigured short story composites like Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*; and *Three Soldiers*, one of the earliest American WWI novels, served as an example for those who wanted to write critically about total war.³⁸² These texts are very different models for how to demonstrate the fracturing, disorienting, dehumanizing experience of life in the modern army and in the trenches.

This chapter examines these two composite works in order to show their affinity with other, less fragmentary pieces of WWI fiction, demonstrating how they use comparable strategies to approach the common goals of war writing. But a comparative

³⁸⁰ Or to mark the time by a more direct comparison, March's work came between the second and third installments of Dos Passos's celebrated *U.S.A. Trilogy*.

³⁸¹ In addition to *Company K*, a much later novel of March's, *The Bad Seed* (1954), enjoys continued interest. It was a National Book Award nominee in 1955, and it was adapted into an Academy-Award nominated film (on the heels of a Broadway play) in 1956.

³⁸² Both Peter G. Jones and Jeffrey Walsh discuss the influence of Dos Passos on future generations of American war writers, Walsh likening it to the influence of Barbusse on continental war novelists (*American War Literature, 1914 to Vietnam* [London: Macmillan Press, 1982], 69) and Jones proclaiming that *Three Soldiers* "exerted massive, sustained influence" (*War and the Novelist: Appraising the American War Novel* [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976], 6).

analysis of this pair of works suggests the complex relationship of war to modernism, as each book supports a different but not altogether incompatible account of that relationship. This difference stems from their generic affiliations, the way genre shapes each writer's narrative choices, just as it had before the war. Instead of a reading in which the Great War becomes the initial impetus for narrative change, I will demonstrate that a paradigm shift was already happening, one which was surely intensified and molded by the war, but not entirely caused by it. The literature of WWI, then, written in the twenties and early thirties, plays out and contributes to the changes at work over the experimental, major period of high modernism, revisions which affected even writers like March, who were not particularly experimental, or, like Boyd, who were not normally fiction writers at all.

II.

In discussions of WWI fiction, two texts are nearly unavoidable: Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues*. As my focus is on more fractured structures, these novels, already well-combed by critics, do not bear extended analysis. However, they will serve as useful touchstones for an overview of the field, especially as they represent very different aesthetic assumptions, in many ways because of their divergent origins. Hemingway was an American expatriate short story and novel writer perfecting a compressed, restrained style in works like *The Sun Also Rises* and *In Our Time*, while Remarque, "a dilettante intellectual and aspiring author," came out of a German tradition of romanticism.³⁸³ Neither, of course, wrote to glorify the war. In fact, Remarque's

³⁸³ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 227.

book was considered so inflammatory that it was for a time banned in Russia as well as Germany.³⁸⁴ While these writers' anti-war stance was not the only artistic response to the war, it was prevalent in the texts that endure—was probably part of the reason why such texts tended to survive while traditionally apologist works, usually by more conventional or popular writers, are rarely studied in depth.

Published in 1929, these texts of Hemingway and Remarque are both accounted to be anti-war, but in very different ways, palpable in their forms as much as their professed themes. In fact, Hemingway's text does not overtly discuss its ideas about war, relying instead on a documentary approach not uncongenial to that of his other work. However, though this novel presents itself more through externals than internal dialogue, it also narrows war down to one man's experience, or at least it settles on one man who happens to be living through a war, making it a remarkably personal story. Cobley separates the method of war writing into two categories: the documentary and the novelistic. *A Farewell to Arms*, despite its fidelity to detail, particularly in the famous passage on retreat from Caporetto, certainly exemplifies the novelistic pole, an approach "based on the assumption that art is capable of reproducing a more complex and more deeply felt reality than is possible through a documentary insistence on factuality."³⁸⁵ On the surface, *Im Westen nichts Neues* is more documentary in style. With this type of approach, "Plot and characters frequently function only as convenient devices to motivate descriptions."³⁸⁶ Remarque's novel features the tendency toward parataxis and attention to detail that comes when the

³⁸⁴ Brian A. Rowley, "Journalism into Fiction: *Im Westen Nichts Neues*," *The First World War in Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Ed. Holger Michael Klein. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1977), 101.

³⁸⁵ Cobley, 12.

³⁸⁶ Cobley, 11.

narrator acts as de facto camera lens, a role that leaves him free of "fundamental doubts about his ability to record what he sees."³⁸⁷ The novel's use of brief prose units and present tense gives it "a realistic effect -- that of a journal entry or a brief conversation."³⁸⁸ On the other hand, Remarque's novel is also strikingly able to view the war in the big picture, to reinforce the past with the knowledge of the present, in a way that earlier novels could not, leading it to balance unflinching realism of description with passionate but more expansive language. As Eksteins understands the text, Remarque was "more interested in explaining away the emotional imbalance of a generation than in a comprehensive or even accurate account of the experience and feelings of men in the trenches."³⁸⁹ The wider an angle a text takes, the more it begins to interrogate the modern world in general, and Remarque's view was perhaps more expansive than Hemingway's, for all its mimetic flourishes. According to Cooperman, *Three Soldiers* shares this angle of vision, as Dos Passos was "[l]ess interested in the physical realities of machine warfare than its psychological effects on young North Americans who were unprepared for it no matter what their backgrounds."³⁹⁰ This leads both writers to romantic but honest descriptions of life at the front, which was also life in their time.

That life did not easily admit a correspondence between truth and beauty, in terms of language, depiction, and even selection of detail. According to Rowley, some people picked up *Im Westen* not despite but because of its transgressions of propriety.³⁹¹ Like

³⁸⁷ Cobley, 11.

³⁸⁸ Rowley, 109.

³⁸⁹ Eksteins, 280.

³⁹⁰ Stanley Cooperman, "John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*: Aesthetics and the Doom of Individualism," *The First World War in Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Holger Michael Klein (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1977), 23.

³⁹¹ Rowley, 104.

Ulysses, the text came under fire for including references to defecation and to sex. In a time that still saw numerous works banned for various indecencies, WWI novels had an unusual amount of latitude, especially those that were produced by combatants, who were seen as having the authority to speak the unspeakable. This was true of combatant novels whatever their political stance. A good example of the pacifist position is *Le feu (Under Fire)*, written by Barbusse based on his diary and published before the war was even over. Like Remarque's text, it is just as likely to present things through description as through overt commentary. Winter labels its tone "apocalyptic," classifying Barbusse as more of a "prophet" than a documentarian, but the tenor of his vision allows for or even requires honesty of detail, in both selection and presentation. At the other extreme, politically, is Jünger, whose "attitude toward war was complex, but bore not a trace of pacifism."³⁹² One would expect, then, that *In Stahlgewittern (Storm of Steel)* might shy away from certain unpleasant aspects of the war experience, but it does not. Jünger simply interperates such detail within a patriotic worldview. Each man was as faithful to reality as was feasible, given the unreliability of true objectivity in discourse; each simply inscribed these details within different systems of value.

Other realist approaches were less expressly political but no less condemning of the war, such as Boyd's portrait of a soldier's numbness and exhaustion in *Through the Wheat*. Comparing the work with Crane's *Red Badge*, Jones argues of *Through the Wheat*, "At first, the nineteenth-century style seems to reveal an author who doesn't really know his subject."³⁹³ But Jones goes on to say that "the ironic clash of style and diction with scenes of

³⁹² J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 109.

³⁹³ Jones, 10.

death and putrefaction is continuous, adding steadily to the final impact of *Through the Wheat*.³⁹⁴ Jones might be talking about a passage such as this: "As the sun rose, the heat growing more intense, the nauseating smell from the corpses in the field seemed to coat all objects in one's line of vision with a sticky green. Even the tops of the wheat, standing stiffly in the field, looked as if they were covered with a fetid substance."³⁹⁵ Boyd excels at such description. At times it is abstractly expressionist in order to fully render concrete detail; at other times, Boyd eschews colorful adjectives and figurative language entirely:

[O]ne morning the body of a red-haired German, an immense fellow with a broad forehead, large wide eyes, and a huge mouth, was found fastened to the strands of barbed wire in front of Hicks's post. There was a hole in his side made by the explosion of a small hand-bomb. Besides that, there was nothing of interest.³⁹⁶

The shocking thing about this passage isn't the dead German soldier; it's the simple, offhand description of his body, which was not "of interest" to the narrator because such a scene was all too common. Where some war texts go into detail of description, Boyd is for the most part almost circumspect, like Hemingway, often showing through dialogue rather than telling in narratorial description. This text is an excellent example of the documentary approach, and, as it uses a third person narrator, it pretends to even more objectivity than the first person accounts of Barbusse and Jünger. According to Cobley, "Where autodiegetic narratives rely on a supposedly 'natural' continuity between the experiencing and the narrating self, heterodiegetic ones either conceal the narrating instance altogether or foreground the narrator's mediating role."³⁹⁷ As these combatant writers attempted to make their experiences vivid for their readers, in part to justify the existence of their

³⁹⁴ Jones, 10.

³⁹⁵ Thomas Boyd, *Through the Wheat: A Novel of the WWI Marines* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 133.

³⁹⁶ Boyd, 29.

³⁹⁷ Cobley, 99.

projects as well as the legitimacy of their voices, they all sought to downplay the artificial. Even those that did so by fidelity to traditional narrative, rather than documentary realism, had the leeway, gifted to them from the recent movements of realism and naturalism, to admit or even draw attention to the vulgar or disturbing. e.e. cummings, for example, who turned his time spent in a French prison into a darkly satiric adventure featuring an ironically Panglossian narrator, employed a good deal of matter-of-fact vulgarity. Upon reaching the prison, for example, the narrator notes, "I noticed beside every pillar(including the one beside which I had innocently thrown down my paillasse the night before)a goodsized pail,overflowing with urine and surrounded by a large irregular puddle. My paillasse was within an inch of the nearest puddle."³⁹⁸ On this occasion he also comments on how the "ponderous reek of sleepy bodies undulated toward [him]" as "[o]ccasional pauses in the minutely crazy din were accurately punctuated by exploding bowels."³⁹⁹ Things such as physical privation and intimacy with others bodies and bodily fluids⁴⁰⁰ were features of this black humor, contributing a grittiness in detail that his narrator was not willing to allow in tone and voice, helping to reinforce the work's ironic effects. In addition, like Boyd's text, *The Enormous Room* often relates detail in figurative language, fanciful and absurd. For example, the narrator describes his bread plainly, as "bluish in color; in taste mouldy, sour," but later he uses fanciful metaphor: "It smelled rather much like an old attic in which kites and other toys gradually are forgotten in a gentle darkness."⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁸ e. e. cummings, *The Enormous Room*, ed. George James Firmage (New York: Liveright, 1978), 45.

³⁹⁹ cummings, 45.

⁴⁰⁰ Memorably, before he is even sent to the titular "enormous room," he is housed in a local jail where the only other object in his cell is a bucket which has already been used as a toilet; he dutifully describes it and its contents, playfully christening it *Ça pue* – "it stinks."

⁴⁰¹ cummings, 68.

Like Cummings, Jaroslav Hašek (of post-war Czechoslovakia) approached war through satire in *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1923), but the lesser degree of graphic detail in his work indicates that there were other ways to bring about ironic effects. On the surface, Hašek's prose and descriptions are cleaner and lighter than those of Cummings, but in the incidents he depicts, his work is somewhat nastier in attack. This is because of the nature of his humor, derived from a protagonist similar in character to that of Cummings, but without the conscious irony. Many of the less explicit WWI narratives, however, come from non-combatant writers, in large part because they have a tendency to stay away from depicting the trench scene itself.⁴⁰² For example, English writer Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, published during the war, focuses on an injured soldier back at home. West's novel employs combat and indeed war itself as a backdrop to a simple human story about love and loyalty; as such, it does not indict the war from a political standpoint, only as something impersonal, as if it were a natural disaster that happens to Major Baldry. Likewise, in Faulkner's *Soldiers' Pay*, the war seems to be simply a jumping off point for interpersonal problems predating the war. In these texts, the war is merely an aspect of the modern, so the novel's detail, including the starkly realistic, is left for the homefront scene.

"How was one to assemble and order the experience of war, even for oneself alone?" Eksteins asks. Combatant writers quickly realized that "[t]raditional modes of expression—

⁴⁰² Consider the reception given Willa Cather and her war novel *One of Ours* (1922). Though it won the Pulitzer Prize, its idealistically rendered battle scenes were lampooned by many male modernists, including Hemingway, who declared that this "Catherized" vision of war had been stolen from filmmaker D. W. Griffiths's *Birth of a Nation*. Among the apologists for Cather's text are Frederick T. Griffiths ("The Woman Warrior: Willa Cather and *One of Ours*," *Women's Studies* 11.3 [1984]: 261-285) and Michael North ("All Nice Wives Are Like That." *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern*. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 173-204).

words, pictures, even music—were clearly inadequate in this situation."⁴⁰³ So too does literary form and structure reflect these writers' attempts to go beyond the traditional in articulating a fragmentary, overwhelming modern experience. True high modernist experimentation was rare, the exception being Jones's *In Parenthesis*, a self-referential, impressionist system of signifiers that rivals anything in Joyce, Woolf, or Faulkner. Were combatant writers leery of such an honest reinforcement of the chaos of war, or did they simply need to submit their experiences to the structuring force of the storytelling process so as to render it as art? According to Cobley, the purpose of war writing was not literary so much as realistic, to "provide an alternative history which was scrupulously accurate in its depiction of everyday events."⁴⁰⁴ However, Cobley argues, "Whether the First World War writers opted for mimetic or more experimental modes of representation, they exhibited considerable ambivalence towards the possibility, if not the actual desirability, of reproducing the war experience."⁴⁰⁵ This paradox, of needing to write but being unwilling or unable to fully engage, colors all WWI literature, but especially the more realistic kind. Unfortunately, this leads to the "temptation of imposing on the nightmare of war a narrative order which is deeply implicated in the liberal-humanist tradition at the very moment when modernity showed itself incapable of living up to its promises."⁴⁰⁶

This contest between liberal-humanist tradition and an event that renders it moot is reflected in the peculiar developmental trajectory of war novel plotting, or the lack thereof. Tradition led writers to a novelistic, progressive patterning of text, exemplified by the *bildungsroman*, indicating "widespread attempts to make sense of [the war] as a personal

⁴⁰³ Eksteins, 215.

⁴⁰⁴ Cobley, 6.

⁴⁰⁵ Cobley, 6.

⁴⁰⁶ Cobley, 76.

and cultural moment of crisis."⁴⁰⁷ However, such plotting is not really possible for the war novel, the context of which communicates the notion that totalizing, teleological narratives are somehow false. Many war novels have recourse to a different plot structure, the episodic, suggesting an entirely different worldview at work, one that undercuts any attempt at the progressive, end-oriented model. Traditional novels are about the growth of the protagonist, but in war novels, the plateau of maturity—the eventual loss of innocence that almost invariably comes to soldier characters—often happens early in the novel if not before the events of the narrative even begin. Cobley notes the effect of this incongruity:

Where the classical narrative tends to come to an end as soon as the hero or heroine has matured or arrived at a vocation, the war accounts have to deal with a protagonist who usually learns everything there is to learn in the first few pages. The end-oriented nature of the traditional *Bildungsroman* paradigm can therefore not adequately encode an experience lacking such teleological clarity.⁴⁰⁸

Thus, combatant-writers find their narratives devolving into parataxis. A tension between forward motion and stasis is representative of modern war writing, and it is present even in traditional or novelistic narratives.⁴⁰⁹ This wandering or inability to engage in the plot may seem passive, and it is. As Cobley points out, no matter how much episodic narrative can be similar to its most famous instantiation, the picaresque, these soldiers are not like picaros, maintaining their sense of self against a harsh world; to survive they must do

⁴⁰⁷ Cobley, 122.

⁴⁰⁸ Cobley, 123.

⁴⁰⁹ For example, Frederic Henry vacillates between flight from the war/military (purposeful movement) and wandering (aimless movement) through a good portion of *A Farewell to Arms*, and the retreat from Caporetto, the most profound statement about war, is enclosed by an ostensibly progressive but stagnant love story. In *The Return of the Soldier*, shell shocked amnesiac Chris Baldry languishes in the past, resisting the forward motion of his life's narrative, but the return to that life, despite our usual cultural encoding about masculinity and battle, seems undesirable and cruel and, until it happens, nearly impossible.

exactly the opposite.⁴¹⁰ Their stories, even when developmental, cannot entirely operate on the normal principle of causal plotting. Plot generally supposes obstacles, but the writer of a realistic war narrative cannot employ obstacles in ways that are useful to the work's structure. Life in the trenches is too random, even as depicted by writers whose knowledge of the battlefield comes from the newspaper, the history book, or the literary tradition.

Life is especially random in works that aren't to any conscious degree attempting to conform to the artificial framework of the *bildungsroman*. Documentary works are still shaped in a conventionally linear manner, but, according to Cobley, "Essentially random occurrences are tied into a 'then. . . and then. . . and then' sequence which gives what is really an episodic structure the illusion of thematic continuity."⁴¹¹ While Hemingway's text is shaped into a proper novel with a tragic plot, Remarque creates tragedy by taking full advantage of the episodic form, which allows him to present scenes in an order that reinforces his ideological goals. The novel begins after a battle, and with two shocking accounts of detachment that are quickly understood as pragmatic rather than insensitive: the soldiers want the rations their fallen comrades were due to get, and one soldier in particular wants a dying comrade's boots. Throughout the book, different tropes of modern war writing come to the fore, such as the resentment of soldiers for a useless and often aimlessly spiteful officer class and the humanizing act of sex which dehumanizes the girls called upon to serve essentially as prostitutes. In the middle of the book, the combat narrative is taken off the rails in order to send Paul home on leave. His visit is as disorienting for the reader as it is for Paul, in terms of pacing, and it illustrates both the jarring difference between the homefront and the warfront and the comparable suffering of

⁴¹⁰ For a comparison of the picaresque and soldiers' episodic narrative see Cobley, 141-3.

⁴¹¹ Cobley, 128.

people in both arenas. In these episodic narratives one gets the impression that the story can and often does start simply anywhere within the grand scheme of the narrative, yet at a point that matters for other reasons. For example, *Through the Wheat* introduces us to Hicks during a break in the action, when he's begun to wonder how he's gotten to be where he is; importantly, he's already a bit numb, signaling that the narrative will simply take him deeper into that state. *Under Fire* actually drops the reader straight into the trenches, but only after an introductory sketch that literally sees the war from an outsider's view, framing the whole of the sketches with the imagistic, thematic metaphor of a storm over Mont Blanc.

The pair of works to be analyzed in this chapter is more or less representative of these dual tendencies of war narrative. March's text has no one central character but dozens, and it tells dozens of stories. Therefore, there is no overwhelming progressive plot, beyond a general predisposition to depict its incidents in roughly the order in which they might have been experienced by a typical soldier. That gives it a sense of linearity that is ultimately undercut by the work's disorderly volume and variety. Dos Passos, not yet in his highest phase of modernism, that of *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.*, is writing a novel, so he depends far more on linearity and causality. However, the plot's forward movement often becomes static, such as during the many downtimes of the war experience—preparation, travel, pauses in combat, injury, peacetime service—especially when centered on Andrews. Curiously, Dos Passos's text begins at a more disenchanting state than March's. *Company K* commences with a post-war frame but then recommences at an early, more innocent time. *Three Soldiers*, on the other hand, immediately immerses us in Fuselli's navigation of army bureaucracy and its depersonalizing effects. Andrews, likewise, is introduced at a symbolic

moment of complete deference to the military: standing naked, waiting for an army physical, being asked if he can spell the word "imbecility."⁴¹² When Andrews and the reader meet Chrisfield, the two men are sweeping up other people's cigarette butts and chewing tobacco. Though none of the three are exactly complaining yet—in fact, they seem willing to deal with the army if only to be able to do their patriotic duty—they are not experiencing the kind of euphoria heard in the voice of private Rowland Geers, who opens *Company K's* narrative proper. Geers showers in bracingly cold war because the hot water is used up, and does so almost as though it's a game.⁴¹³ The characters in the Dos Passos text may not realize the position they're in, but the third person narrator allows us to see things they don't, and what we see isn't a happy ending down the line.

Despite their dissimilar beginnings, this pair of narratives ends up in roughly the same place. March's characters grow in experience as the book goes on, and in the final analysis, both texts indict war, to more or less degrees. Dos Passos is overtly anti-war, given his foregrounding of images of dehumanization and mechanization. March's text vacillates between embittered romantic voices and stark, black realism. Perhaps it was easier for Dos Passos, in 1920, to write a reactionary anti-war piece, as much as it was for Cather and others to write things that were more celebratory of the soldier (if not war). March had the benefit of time, and of seeing the field develop. One might think that time would bring perspective, and it did—the kind that makes unilateral approaches seem suspect. March couldn't hammer quite as pointedly, but he could employ a range of styles, all which point up the tragedies of the war. Neither writer, though, was creating in a

⁴¹² John Dos Passos, *Three Soldiers* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 12.

⁴¹³ In fact, Geers is with a friend, and they playfully wrestle, while naked, a kind of homosocial (and borderline homoerotic) experience common to war narratives, which during WWI still represented something positive, according to Fussell.

vacuum. Their context was modernism, it was WWI writing by others (for March, this includes Dos Passos), and it was an American pool of war novels that was shockingly shallow. Before any examination of these texts, the legacy of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* bears discussion, as does the general context of American war writing, which predicates a different relationship to the Great War than that of its English, French, and German counterparts.

III.

Numerous critics have commented on the unusual circumstances of American WWI narrative. The United States entered the war late, in 1917, so it was much less affected by the conflict, especially in terms of injuries and casualties, and the stasis of trench warfare did not have as much opportunity to undermine American military morale.⁴¹⁴ Despite the country's shorter and lesser degree of involvement, however, Bergonzi notes that American writers "exhibited a degree of protest and disillusion that was more extreme than the attitudes of most British writers."⁴¹⁵ Peter Aichinger explains this was because America did not have the same tradition of military service, nor was there a comparable professional class of soldiers who could look at the war as a job. In Europe, war was a part of life, and the European soldier was part of society.⁴¹⁶ The American soldier, conversely, was an outsider. American war novels, according to Aichinger, are characterized by a "note of

⁴¹⁴ Stanley Cooperman, *World War I and the American Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 64.

⁴¹⁵ Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*, 1st American ed. (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), 186.

⁴¹⁶ Cooperman, *World War I*, 64-5.

personal outrage at the indignities of war and the militarist system."⁴¹⁷ Perhaps we have always had a habit of taking war quite personally. The Civil War, for instance, appears to have had such a profound effect on the country that it was not particularly easy to write about it. Whitman, Melville, and other poets addressed the subject, but the only notable contemporary novels dealing with the war are *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (John William DeForest, 1867) and *Waiting for the Verdict* (Rebecca Harding Davis, 1867). Our other big Civil War epics came much later, like *Gone with the Wind* (1936), which, though a classic, is not great literature, nor does it explore war for its own sake but as a backdrop for the soap opera that is its protagonist's life. Of course, the Civil War-obsessed texts of William Faulkner, too, post-date the Great War.⁴¹⁸

America did produce other war narratives before WWI fiction began to crop up, including Civil War diaries that surfaced during Reconstruction, sometimes fictionalized. A handful of novels in 1860s and '70s paved the way for more realistic texts in the 1890s, like the short stories of Ambrose Bierce. His "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and "Shiloh" make use of the war and the soldier figure to explore the worst of humanity. However, the most influential work is, of course, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Though the novel was about the Civil War, it was published thirty years after the war's conclusion, and it says as much about modern life and pre-modernizing literature as it does the long-gone era it attempts to set in amber. As Jones describes it, the work is Homeric in nature, beginning *in medias res*, featuring animal imagery and the intervention of a *deus ex*

⁴¹⁷ Peter Aichinger, *The American Soldier in Fiction, 1880-1963: A History of Attitudes Toward Warfare and the Military Establishment*, 1st ed (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975), 23.

⁴¹⁸ In fact, one could argue that Faulkner is writing just as much about modern war/modern life, post-WWI, as he is the Civil War and the influence of the past on the present.

machina, and ending at a "null point" in the story.⁴¹⁹ A combination of romantic and naturalistic tendencies, displaying a discrepancy between a naïve, traditional protagonist and a modern combat situation, Crane's work is referred to by Jones as the "first modern war novel."⁴²⁰ But for Cooperman, Crane is a problematic sort of forbear, attacking the war with irony but still underlining the use of war as a proving ground for manhood, "an area where cause is internal rather than external, affected by individual will rather than by political, economic, or (perhaps most important in terms of WWI combat experience) technological determinism" (46-7). It was a text for an age of the unified subject, with a self that maintained its agency. Unfortunately, it was also the only reality of war known to most American young men entering WWI in 1917, including the combatant writers.

Somewhat different from Crane's naturalist detail and exploration of the battlefield as a place to receive one's emblems of courage, *Three Soldiers* represents a combination of documentary and prophetic modes, not unlike Barbusse's *Le feu*.⁴²¹ Realistically, in the two years after the war, Dos Passos had very few other examples of combatant literature to draw from, and certainly no novel as strong as *Le feu*. In structure, though, *Three Soldiers* is quite different. Where Barbusse is loosely causal, episodic in rhythm, Dos Passos falls back on the general framework of the traditional novel. It is a multiple-protagonist construction, with the lives of its titular soldiers drawn together by circumstance but maintained as relatively separate blocks of text, at least in the work's second half. Though these characters face individual plights, they contribute to one expansive story of war service, made all the more powerful for being told through three very different pairs of eyes. Walsh

⁴¹⁹ Jones, 5.

⁴²⁰ Jones, 5.

⁴²¹ Walsh, 71-2; Winter, 184.

argues that the work has a dual focus, "to provide a cross-sectional view of American society and, at the same time, to offer a rendering of three individuated lives."⁴²² Though not as splintered as Dos Passos's later novels, or as fragmented as many modernist narratives, *Three Lives* goes beyond the traditional, playing with the tropes of the conventional multi-plot novel both ironically and unironically to paint a picture of the dehumanizing effects of war.

The lopsided structure of the novel, due to its focus on Andrews, does not appear to maintain its title's equanimity, but even this is a testament to the work's thematic underpinnings, its central metaphor of becoming part of the machine. All three characters are introduced in part one, beginning with Fuselli, whose story will always be a bit detached from the dynamic pair of Andrews and, introduced within Andrews's narrative, Chrisfield. Fuselli's story concerns his position in the army hierarchy, but Andrews and Chrisfield are from the outset also intimately tied to the more abstract concept of war itself. That the two are polar opposites—one an educated artist, the other an uneducated laborer—does not at first present a problem, at least not for the characters themselves. The reader quickly recognizes the absurdity of their companionship; however, they establish a connection because they are both eager to carry out the propagandized mission of defending French civilization from the barbaric Germans. After Fuselli's initial presentation, his story resurfaces several times, but for no especially dynamic purpose. Chrisfield's plot reaches a climax at the end of the first half of the book, making an indelible impression on the reader, before it, too, becomes just a tributary of the more expansive narrative of Andrews. Nearly the entire second half of the text is devoted to Andrews's

⁴²² Walsh, 73.

experience in France after the armistice, signaling that the novel is not, after all, about his concrete war service but instead his struggle to come to terms with serving in the army when he no longer believes in its cause. Even early on, the text presents Andrews's mind in conflict with itself. He knows that he must deemphasize his own needs to be of any use in the war—"At any cost he must forget himself"—and he is relieved to be able to do this: "Ever since his first year at college he seemed to have done nothing but think about himself, talk about himself. At least at the bottom, in the utterest degradation of slavery, he could find forgetfulness and start rebuilding the fabric of his life, out of real things this time. . ."423 Yet in the next paragraph, he thinks, "It was only slavery that he had not foreseen,"424 as if his earlier protestations of relief were only a rationalization, a way to deal with an unconscionable loss of control. Andrews will spend the entire work attempting to bring these forces into resolution, so his greater share of the work's narrative is reasonable.

Though Fuselli is already devoted to army life at the outset of the work, and Chrisfield quickly finds his place, this is not to say they don't apprehend what is happening to them, nor are they always particularly content with it. For example, after Fuselli makes an announcement to his company, the narrator tells us that "the faint sense of importance it gave him did not compensate for the feeling he had of being lost in the machine, of being as helpless as a sheep in a flock."⁴²⁵ Still, that feeling is overruled by his training. Though he shows some interest in the ravings of a liberal soldier in his company, Eisenstein, he is also nervous about the rebellious nature of these comments. Privately, he warns Eisenstein—not that his ideas are morally wrong and/or personally provoking, but simply that he might

⁴²³ Dos Passos, 25.

⁴²⁴ Dos Passos, 25.

⁴²⁵ Dos Passos, 65.

get in trouble for them: "They shoot fellers for less than you said."⁴²⁶ Here, fidelity to the military keeps Fuselli in line. Likewise, Chrisfield is able to suppress his own anger at becoming part of the machine, or at least he is able to sublimate it into violence. During a quiet moment in the French countryside, Chrisfield discusses with Andrews his frustrations:

"God damn it, Ah'd do anything to git out o' this hellish infantry. This ain't no sort of life for a man to be treated lahk he was a nigger."

"No, it's no sort of life for a man."

"If they'd let us git to the front an' do some fightin' an' be done with it. . . . But all we do is drill and have grenade practice an' drill again and then have bayonet practice an' drill again. 'Nough to drive a feller crazy."⁴²⁷

What Chrisfield consciously resents isn't so much military discipline as the poor use of it. The incessant drilling seems to him to serve no purpose. What Chrisfield seems less aware of is how much he's displacing his hatred for army culture onto his superiors, emblematic of a common soldierly struggle that was often nearly as heated as the conflict with their actual enemies. In Chrisfield's case, his hatred comes down to one officer figure, Sergeant Anderson: "Chrisfield felt powerless as an ox under the yoke. All he could do was work and strain and stand at attention, while that white-faced Anderson could lounge about as if he owned the earth and laugh importantly like that."⁴²⁸ Obviously, these lines speak of actually resenting the very idea of being commanded, but he is able to shift that boiling fury to a particular commander. Chrisfield speaks of being a harnessed animal, but Andrews does not give himself so much power. He focuses on his lack of agency, calling army life "slavery"

⁴²⁶ Dos Passos, 87.

⁴²⁷ Dos Passos, 132.

⁴²⁸ Dos Passos, 152.

and saying he had been "tamed."⁴²⁹ At certain points he seems to have actually taken to heart the loss of self he protests elsewhere. He says to Chrisfield, "I belong to a crowd that just fakes learning. I guess the best thing that can happen to us is to get killed in this butchery. We're a tame generation. . . . It's you that it matters to kill."⁴³⁰ At other times, though, he believes he might be able to turn his "slavery" into something good, through art; as the narrator says, "If he could only express these thwarted lives, the miserable dullness of industrialized slaughter, it might have been almost worth while."⁴³¹

The text's focus on Andrews, especially in light of his more conscious internal conflicts about his army service, has many effects on its interpretation. For one, it leads many critics to biographical readings of *Three Soldiers*, positing that Dos Passos was too much like Andrews to fully realize the other two characters, and too emotionally invested to treat Andrews properly.⁴³² In Andrews, the themes of the work come out in stark relief, but he is only one type of soldier. When Leed discusses the forces that shape modern war and its tropes, he claims three fundamental types of soldiers are produced: the idealistic volunteer of 1914, the passive soldier shaped by events, and the "stormtrooper."⁴³³ As much as Andrews represents the former, Fuselli and Chrisfield, molding to the latter, are necessary to creating a rounded picture of the army and the war experience. Fuselli's story is pathetic, revolving around his desire for advancement and his ineptitudes in sexual matters. Walsh argues that Fuselli "tries to play along with the system" but finds his every attempt frustrated; he is "tricked into obedience," which is analogous to his contraction of

⁴²⁹ Dos Passos, 149-51, 161.

⁴³⁰ Dos Passos, 161.

⁴³¹ Dos Passos, 263.

⁴³² Cooperman, "John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*," 24-5.

⁴³³ Leed, 37.

an STD at the end of the story.⁴³⁴ "Passive" is a good adjective with which to describe Fuselli, which makes his story not particularly compelling, yet necessary. Chrisfield, on the other hand, finds that what Walsh calls his "embryonic pathological tendencies" make him quite suited to do well in the army, even though he does not, in contrast to Fuselli, actively seek to make a place for himself within the military hierarchy.⁴³⁵ As the novel's "stormtrooper," Chrisfield is, according to Cooperman, "the most orthodoxly naturalistic" of the novel, but also "the least aesthetically satisfying."⁴³⁶ He has no fully rounded individuality, for

except in terms of external action, which alone gives him—like the traditional protagonist of naturalist fiction—significance, or as a stage-mechanism within the consciousness of Andrews (whose major response to Chrisfield is that he does not 'understand' the latter's violence), Chrisfield, an independent protagonist, hardly exists at all.⁴³⁷

This is not necessarily a failure of Dos Passos's art. If Chrisfield is meant to serve as the remnant of naturalism in the text, he fits the bill, especially in his lack of interiority, which forces his character for the most part to be rendered through another's focalization, if at all. This is likely why he is almost always with Andrews in the first half of the narrative, so as to create an illuminating dialogue between the two types. When Chrisfield is alone, the externalization of his character is striking but no less telling. In fact, though his character is the least accessible of the trio, his story is gripping because it is deeply personal, like that of Crane's Henry Fleming, only more horrifying. For example, in the famous scene where he kills his Anderson, we see that he is not quite in control of his actions, or at least he has so rationalized them as to remove himself from any responsibility. This is plain in the

⁴³⁴ Leed, 37.

⁴³⁵ Walsh, 73.

⁴³⁶ Cooperman, "John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*," 25.

⁴³⁷ Cooperman, "John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*," 25.

narrator's diction: "A cold hand was round the grenade in his pocket. . . . Suddenly he found that he had pressed the spring of the grenade. He struggled to pull it out of his pocket. . . . His arm and his cold fingers that clutched the grenade seemed paralyzed. Then a warm joy went through him. He had thrown it."⁴³⁸ Notice that it is mostly his hands and fingers rather than he himself that initiate the action here, and twice—"he found that he had pressed the spring" and "he had thrown it"—he simply discovers that he's done something rather than doing it with awareness. From this point, he acts with agency, throwing another grenade, and he also feels happily ensconced in the army, having realized the solution to his two problems. Killing his scapegoat and discovering his joy at doing what a soldier is supposed to do makes him feel free. He declares that he did not "feel lonely anymore now that he was marching in the ranks again."⁴³⁹ Now, "he would not have to think," for "he would do what the others did."⁴⁴⁰

A novel that weighs pathetic ineptitude against terrible efficiency begs for a third force to give it balance. Andrews, whatever connection he has to Dos Passos's own temperament or artistic aims, is the only character capable of sustaining our interest as a developing protagonist. Unfortunately, much of this interest has been of the negative kind. As Walsh points out, hindsight has led to a reevaluation of the character, and now we have less sympathy for him. We see that "[w]hat Andrews learns, that to exist in the army means that one must be either a sheep or a deserter, calls for a revolutionary creed that the dilettante composer seems entirely incapable of formulating."⁴⁴¹ Andrews is clearly a mouthpiece for the work's political ends, but Walsh argues that he is a poor mouthpiece:

⁴³⁸ Dos Passos, 182.

⁴³⁹ Dos Passos, 184.

⁴⁴⁰ Dos Passos, 184.

⁴⁴¹ Walsh, 76.

"Because of Andrews's limited political understanding, the radical impetus of *Three Soldiers* remains unrealised, latent only in the sub-text of the novel; thus the intellectual implications of the book, towards political activism, is unhelpfully divorced from its narrative action."⁴⁴² Cooperman, however, argues that the real problem is the rhetoric surrounding the character: "Andrews' protest and emotion alike come framed in a filigree of baroque verbiage."⁴⁴³ Aichinger, like Walsh, identifies many of our problems with Andrews as stemming from his restless but ultimately static protestations in the last books of the novel: for he "sees his desertion and subsequent surrender to the authorities as a meaningful act, a restatement of his significance as an individual; but in the light of his ineffective conduct while he is free it is hard to give very much weight to this interpretation of his action."⁴⁴⁴

Cooperman, despite his vigorous indictment of the way the character was written, does acknowledge that our discomfort with Andrews perhaps says as much about us as it does about him:

Contemporary readers, after all, are likely to lose patience with any protagonist who is overly self-dramatic. . . while the willful destruction of his own music may seem inept rather than morally willed. For Andrews himself, however, and for the literary audience of the twenties, such a gesture of renunciation could be both deeply courageous and moving precisely because of the aesthetic sacrifice involved.⁴⁴⁵

As convincing as this account is, Cooperman misses a crucial aspect of Andrews's renunciation which would be just as likely to rub post-WWII audiences the wrong way: it is not just the particular rhetorical gesture that Andrews makes but the fact that the work is rhetorically determined at all. *Three Soldiers* qualifies as what David H. Richter has labeled

⁴⁴² Walsh, 76-7

⁴⁴³ Cooperman, "John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*," 31.

⁴⁴⁴ Walsh, 13.

⁴⁴⁵ Cooperman, "John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*," 30.

a *rhetorical novel*, "a group of novels whose structure is generated not by plot but by doctrines, themes, attitudes, or theses."⁴⁴⁶ There can be no doubt that Dos Passos has a polemic in *Three Soldiers*, as he has foregrounded it in the work's governing metaphor and image: the machine. The parts of the novel are labeled with descriptors that outline the life of a machine, from creation ("Making the Mould") to falling into disrepair ("Rust"). The army is Dos Passos's machine target, but it is emblematic of a much larger problem. As Cooperman argues, "Dos Passos in *Three Soldiers* is concerned both with cultural naïveté, and the essential mindlessness of mass organization itself. The war, in his novel, is essentially a catalyst rather than a subject."⁴⁴⁷ Andrews is a perfectly suitable rhetorical vehicle; our insistence that he be the lynchpin of a character-driven piece contributes to our annoyance with him.

To be fair, however, Andrews assuredly *is* annoying, in part because of his hypocrisy. This is especially clear when he is compared with other characters he encounters, fellow disgruntled soldiers who suggest forms of escape he is not always willing to take. Upon being released from the hospital, he meets Henslowe, and their initial exchange is telling:

"I'm going to Paris," said Henslowe. "My leave expired three days ago. I'm going to Paris and get taken ill with peritonitis or double pneumonia, or maybe I'll have a cardiac lesion . . . The army's a bore."

"Hospital isn't any better," said Andrews with a sigh. "Though I shall never forget the delight with which I realized I was wounded and out of it. I thought I was bad enough to be sent home."⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁶ David H. Richter, *Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), vii.

⁴⁴⁷ Cooperman, "John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*," 23.

⁴⁴⁸ Dos Passos, 223.

While Henslowe speaks in an informal tone and speaks flippantly about deserting from the army, Andrews, experiencing similar longings, can only articulate his disappointment in *shalls* and *delights*. Henslowe has plans and he will follow them, but Andrews has only desires and dreams. Later, Andrews balks when Henslowe suggests that he join him in going AWOL: "'I don't want to be picked up,' stammered Andrews."⁴⁴⁹ Andrews finds himself swept along in the company of this man who comes to represent something tantalizing but ultimately too risky. They watch a man eat a glass bottle for a franc, and the man proclaims, "M'en fous, c'est mon métier."⁴⁵⁰ Later, Henslowe echoes this statement, applying such lunacy to himself. Andrews, too, can make brash statements, but they are often qualified, romanticism hedging against reality. For example, he says, "I'd almost be willing to be shot at the end of a year if I could live up here all the time with a piano and a million sheets of music paper. . . It would be worth it."⁴⁵¹ Henslowe, by way of contrast, shakes off the comment, saying, "But this is a place to come back to,"⁴⁵² rather than a destination. Even Andrews's unrealized dreams, then, are too small, making him no match for the army.

The army-as-machine concept is not simply a way of dramatizing the plight of Andrews and, to a lesser extent (because they are less resistant), Fuselli and Chrisfield. The metaphor also comments upon the form of the novel itself. Both the army and the traditional novel are totalizing structures, and Dos Passos uses them to point out the absurdity of such attempts at totalization as well as the reality that the same modernity that seems to free us actually holds us in thrall. As Cooperman understands the novel,

⁴⁴⁹ Dos Passos, 224.

⁴⁵⁰ Dos Passos, 225.

⁴⁵¹ Dos Passos, 228.

⁴⁵² Dos Passos, 228.

Dos Passos uses the military situation provided by the Great Crusade as a metaphor for twentieth-century civilisation, and in this respect the book is cultural diagnosis rather than realism: one does not read *Three Soldiers* for data on the specifics of combat (the novel is almost completely without battle scenes), but rather to understand how the mobilisation of an entire civilisation meant the supremacy of what Henry Adams termed 'The Dynamo' over all individual action of reaction.⁴⁵³

Interestingly, this very totalizing of arguments translates into a strange kind of fragmentation, with the two forces at war with one another in structuring the army and the work. In the language of the text, the work of synthesis is frequently already enacted, observed in countless references to uniformity and singleness of action, but at times the relationship between the parts and the whole draws attention to itself. For example, in the first chapter, we see how "[t]he row of men in khaki became a crowd of various individuals with dusty boots and dusty faces."⁴⁵⁴ Here, the soldiers' similarities are emphasized at the same time as their separateness is reaffirmed. A few paragraphs later, they are back in their rows, and the assimilation imagery is taken to another level: "he stood stiffly at attention in a khaki row that was one of hundreds of other khaki rows, identical" (5). As the parts draw attention to themselves, to the nature of society as a patently synthetic conglomeration of individuals, they are also rendered as just that, parts, organic to the machine. They cease to be individual stories that have merely been appropriated into a totalizing structure at the same time that they stand out so obviously as fragments.

As a rhetorical narrative, and as composition that wears its unity uncomfortably on its sleeve in order to interrogate that unity at every step, it asks these three soldiers to fill the roles they must—in Leed's triptych of soldier types and in the traditional novel's progressive storytelling. The novel is self-aware on this point. When the three soldiers are

⁴⁵³ Cooperman, "John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*," 23.

⁴⁵⁴ Dos Passos, 4.

first all together in scene, Chrisfield remarks, that it's "goddam funny" that they're from three different parts of the country, New York, Indiana, and California.⁴⁵⁵ They could not otherwise act as surrogates for a whole country of young men. As Leed argues,

To see the war as an autonomous machine having the power of spontaneous motion within it and dictating proper motions (or motionlessness) to its human members meant that the event was fixed, not in type, but in the character of the participants. The autonomy of the event forced those within it to read its marks in themselves.⁴⁵⁶

The war governs the development of their characters as much as does the rhetorical structure Dos Passos has put in place. Perhaps none of these soldiers is capable of serving as a fully rounded protagonist, but each can assume a role in an essayistic attack on the war and the army upon which it depends. As the work is also a progressive narrative, it requires not simply the characters' development but their development as a unit, however loosely we construe that concept. They must meet. They must be in dialogue literally and figuratively. In particular, Chrisfield and Andrews must serve together so that we can see two contrasting human natures put under the yoke. Chrisfield and Andrews need to share a story until it is no longer possible, when they experience their very different turning points in the woods, in incidents that are cruelly mirrored in negative as well as juxtaposed.⁴⁵⁷

Chrisfield's hand finds his grenade, and Andrews finds himself on the end of a not dissimilar attack; both are detached from what happens through or to them there in a French wood, and in the aftermath they come to life. This sends them down very different paths. In a moment of irony after Andrews returns to his company, the desk sergeant asks

⁴⁵⁵ Dos Passos, 20.

⁴⁵⁶ Leed, 37.

⁴⁵⁷ One chapter comes at the end of part three and the other at the outset of part four, the transition from part to part also serving as an informal dividing line between the two halves of the narrative.

him if his name is Anderson. Though the narrator makes no comment here, it will not escape the reader's notice that Anderson is the name of Chrisfield's enemy. The three soldiers each have their roles to play, and they must exist under one cover in order to render the novel traditional, if only so it can point up the absurdity of totalizing, teleological narrative in a world which is capable of producing such a war.

In contrast to *Three Soldiers*, March's text has faced little analysis. It is occasionally mentioned in works treating the American war novel, but only in passing. Comparatively speaking, even Boyd's *Through the Wheat* receives more attention. *Company K* has no central character to latch onto, no vehicle like Paul Baumer or Frederic Henry through which to understand the text. To know the soldier is to know the story. Dos Passos, apart from his greater skill as a writer, finds a critical reception because he employs only three main characters, and it's very easy to make Fuselli and Chrisfield into window dressing for Andrews's much longer and more involved narrative. March, on the other hand, just as clearly approaches his picture of the war experience as a broad sweep over a typical soldier's progress through the war—several, actually, like Dos Passos, as some of his characters are invalidated out and others die in the fighting. But the assumed naïveté of the book's construction, its appearance of sketchbook haphazardness, has rendered it uninteresting for study for even a narrative critic like Copley who recognizes the vital role of episodic constructions in war narratives. Admittedly, *Company K* is not a strong piece of writing, but this does not preclude the work from a historical survey of the field, an examination of narrative practices [without prejudice]. This text is useful perhaps especially because of March's non-canonical status: it is an instance of a traditional writer taking up a modern form. Its exclusion from major discussions of American war fiction

strikes me as a prejudice against low and popular forms. For example, David Jones's *In Parenthesis* is a different sort of anomaly among WWI texts, one that is far less readable than March's text. However, as it is an experimental high modernist enterprise, it nevertheless finds a critical space. Simply put, there is nothing else like *Company K* in WWI literature, which has precluded its study when it should have suggested it.

The structure of the book perhaps works against it, as, like many less-than-modernist composites, it is explicitly framed. The first sketch in the book purports to represent the voice of the book's writer (or simply its compiler⁴⁵⁸), Private Joseph Delaney, and it is in his discussion with his wife, the manuscript's first reader, that we are introduced to the book's central tension: romantic idealism versus practical realism. As her only piece of criticism, Delaney's wife advises him to leave out the section of the book that deals with the shooting of German prisoners, a deletion we will learn Delaney has not made. This episode, discussed in more detail below, is central to the book, encompassing over half a dozen characters and their individual portions of the company's story. Though the wife is the one who speaks of ridding the text of this episode, she is actually the more practical-realist of the two. For her, an air raid is a more "humane" thing to depict, as it is nameless, faceless violence, unlike looking a victim in the eye before killing him or her. In a different way, Delaney longs for a softening of the harsh memories of battle. He observes that one can always pick out what plot of land had been a battlefield, because the grass seems to grow greener, the poppies redder the next spring: "They take the pits and scars

⁴⁵⁸ The distinction doesn't seem important to March, for all Delaney is a bit coy about the work's genesis if not its editorship. It seems strange for Delaney, a character narrator, to have written first person accounts in others' voices, not to mention it strains credulity, yet he refers to it as "my book," one which he has "just completed," indicating he has composed it rather than edited it (March, 13). Later, he talks of "the things which I have written," in context clearly referring to a range of stories, not simply his own (March, 14).

out of the torn land and make it a sweet, sloping surface again."⁴⁵⁹ His wife's explanation of why this truism might be so is as pragmatic as it is gruesome: the blood and bodies enrich the ground like fertilizer. Delaney's wife seems to approach the realities of war in the same stark way many war novelists do, but Delaney himself, reiterating the stakes of the work's governing tension, explains that he disagrees with her, instead arguing, "To me it has always seemed that God is so sickened with men, and their unending cruelty to each other, that he covers the places where they have been as quickly as possible."⁴⁶⁰ Delaney's romantic notion—God making commentary upon humanity—serves an end much more prosecutory than his wife's bare practicality. Here what might've been idealistic has been converted to sour realization. Delaney is not unaware of this. Though I attach the terms "romantic" and "idealist" to his discourse, he is far less prone to emotional grandiosity than other voices that follow him in the book, as they carry on a dialogue with the book's mercilessly realist voices. What is perhaps romantic about Delaney's efforts here, and potentially March's, is his belief that rendering these stories will lead to something "inescapable and true"⁴⁶¹ This aligns him with Dos Passos's Andrews, and both characters, one a central focalizer and one the ostensible compiler of the work, contribute an important but ultimately unsustainable worldview to their texts.

Delaney's company is not bereft of romantics, men who believe in some kind of ultimate truth or totalizing force, guiding things. Lieutenant Edward Bartelstone, for instance, clings to a picture of actress Lillian Gish because it represents something pure among the filth and stink of trench life. His dependence on the photograph is described as

⁴⁵⁹ William March, *Company K* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 16.

⁴⁶⁰ March, 16.

⁴⁶¹ March, 15.

physically or emotionally salvific: "It took me safely through those terrible months and it brought me out, in the end, calm and undisturbed."⁴⁶² Another soldier in the company, Private Martin Appleton, takes an ironic comfort in the lack of intervention of his God, saying, "I never see flares of Very lights floating over the trenches that I do not think of time and infinity, and the Creator of the universe; and that this war, and my despair, are, in His sight, as meaningless, and, no doubt, as remote as are the ascending and falling rockets to my finite mind."⁴⁶³ Privates Allen Methot and Danny O'Leary share a love of poetry, one which does not prevent them from recognizing the ugliness of the war but does color their memories of it. Unfortunately, there is a startling lack of connection between the two characters, made conspicuous because their stories are placed both literally and tonally in juxtaposition. First, Methot's vignette declares that the almost Byronic "spiritual isolation" he faces is "unbearable," worse than the "drudgery and pain" of training.⁴⁶⁴ We learn that he had attempted to talk to O'Leary, but the man's gaze was "unlit by intelligence."⁴⁶⁵ Methot's passage ends with him walking toward the German lines, "watching the flares and whispering the words of [his] poems,"⁴⁶⁶ as he apparently has no suitable comrade or at least a knowing audience. O'Leary was, however, apparently not too stupid to understand, for his section is an impassioned thank-you to his mentor: "For you did create me more completely than the drunken longshoreman from whose loins I once issued."⁴⁶⁷ O'Leary's story ends with despair: "Where are you, great heart? . . . Why don't you answer me?"⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶² March, 55.

⁴⁶³ March, 97.

⁴⁶⁴ March, 116.

⁴⁶⁵ March, 116.

⁴⁶⁶ March, 117.

⁴⁶⁷ March, 118.

⁴⁶⁸ March, 119.

The pitched battle between romanticism and realism finds its apotheosis in the sketch attributed to the Unknown Soldier. As he is dying out in no man's land, he thinks of the kind of ceremony that will accompany his death, empty and meaningless. He knows because he once bought into such jingoism. He tells a German sentry who is trying to quiet him,

In a few years, when war is over, they'll move my body back home to the Soldiers' Cemetery, just as they moved the bodies of the soldiers killed before I was born. There will be a brass band and speech making and a beautiful marble shaft with my name chiseled on its base. . . . The mayor will be there also, pointing to my name with his thick, trembling forefinger and shouting meaningless words about glorious deaths and fields of honor. . . . And there will be other little boys in that crowd to listen and believe him, just as I listened and believed.⁴⁶⁹

The soldier's dying gesture, to tear off his dog tags and throw them from his body so that he can't be identified and then deified by his hometown, is a moment of intense drama; only in a war narrative could it pretend to be less than melodrama. The ending is no less overblown, as the German soldier cradles his body and shoots him in the head to relieve his suffering. Here we are reminded that the Unknown Soldier is narrating this story from beyond the grave, and with a bit of poetic exaggeration (aside from, of course, the requisite suspension of disbelief). Despite the fact that he has been shot in the head, he is able to whisper at the close of the story, "I have defeated the inherent stupidity of life."⁴⁷⁰ This kind of extremity of rhetoric, which is criminal for the mayor back home, is reasonable for the soldier at the front. Here, romanticism as a mode undercuts any tonal notion of romantic idealism.

Other narratives of the book combat idealism with a frank tone and factual display of events and details. Private Jacob Gellar relates a story of finding bread on a German

⁴⁶⁹ March, 180-1.

⁴⁷⁰ March, 182.

corpse and eating it despite its being soaked with blood. Corporal Lloyd Somerville lies dying in a hospital full of victims of a gas attack, and all he can do is describe the unpleasantness around him from the fat, old nurse (unlike the women of propagandized fantasy) who takes care of him to the sounds of the men around him vomiting and struggling to breathe. Private John Townsend is caught out in a dugout during a raid, and though he pleads with the enemy that he is unarmed, they run a bayonet through him anyway, and club him over the head so that he falls back down into his hole, presumably to die. Private Sylvester Wendell, like the Unknown Soldier, consciously grapples with the difference between trench reality and homefront misinformation when he writes a letter to a fallen soldier's mother: "Your son, Francis, died needlessly in Belleau Wood. You will be interested to hear that at the time of his death he was crawling with vermin and weak from diarrhea. He feet were swollen and rotten and they stank. He lived like a frightened animal, cold and hungry."⁴⁷¹ From there, the letter details how slowly and painfully he died. To the reader, the letter's secondary audience, it little matters that Wendell does not send it, for we have absorbed its truths.

Private Phillip Wadsworth illustrates the nasty side of the typical war narrative trope of the kindly local girl who opportunistically turns whore. He is a virgin, and his friends pay a woman to seduce him, whereupon he catches a sexually transmitted disease and is court-martialed for "failing to report for a prophylactic."⁴⁷² Wadsworth ends his narrative saying that the not-so-kindly prostitute afterward reenacted the exchange for those same friends; he says, "I was very clumsy and funny, I understand."⁴⁷³ This is a

⁴⁷¹ March, 101.

⁴⁷² March, 107.

⁴⁷³ March, 107.

comically pathetic story dividing reality from fantasy; Private Leslie Jourdan's story is actually pathetic—he can no longer work as a musician because most of his left hand has been blown off, a contingency he must explain to an old friend who comes to visit him after he's returned home. Other post-war sketches are even more inflammatory, like the description of the pain of Private Theodore Irvine, slowly rotting away because of a bone infection, and the polemic of Private Colin Urquhart, who declares that "there should be a law, in the name of humanity, making mandatory the execution of every soldier who has served on the front and managed to escape death there."⁴⁷⁴

What follows Delaney's opening sketch is more than just a dialectic of realism and idealism, however. It is a barrage of many other lives, voices, stories, all with different goals. Though each is accorded a heading with the soldier's name, at a certain point the reader cannot differentiate between the characters. This is often a problem in war narratives. If characters do not entirely blend together, they at least are crushed into nameless stereotypes. Here, this difficulty is writ large in the very structure of the book. Characters often recur in other sketches, but simply as background characters with familiar names; importantly, no one is narrator more than once, not even Delaney. Complicating our ability to hold all these characters in our mind is the relative lack of differentiation of their voices, perhaps giving credence to their origins with a single implied author. While the characters' diction is relatively unvarying, contributing to the blurred lines between individuals, the genres represented are myriad. Pieces range from full-blown stories (usually rendering an episode or scene) to sketches (descriptions of character, aspect of war/army) to the essayistic discussion of concepts. These first person accounts have

⁴⁷⁴ March, 254.

various rhetorical contexts, some with no known audience, others addressed to the reader, and still others that are understood to have an intradiegetic audience (such as letters or speeches). Because of this variation, a few sketches stand out, but the sheer number of sketches makes assigning standout episodes to particular characters difficult.

The movement of the book is traceable to its goals. Delaney claims that he doesn't want a record of his company so much as "a record of every company in every army," which he explicitly says entails not just American soldiers or Allies more generally, but all the combatant nations.⁴⁷⁵ The notion that the book is a chronicle leads Delaney (or March) to arrange the tales in a roughly progressive way, along the lines of a typical war experience, although the vagueness of chronology unsettles any lingering sense of causal linearity. Occasionally, an episode will be played out over multiple sketches. In one story, for example, Lieutenant Thomas Jewett orders men to take a foolhardy position, whereupon he watches them get shelled and goes to see their horribly mangled bodies. The next story is of Private Stephen Carroll, who we know will die in the attack. Taken together, these stories provide a wider view of a particular—and particularly common—war trope. It is not the only instance of soldier-officer tension. Lieutenant Archibald Smith is killed by Private Edward Carter because, as Carter understood it, he had been "riding him" too hard. It is a story reminiscent of Chrisfield in *Three Soldiers*, and here it is narrated from both points of view, so as to capture, first, the horror of a man being killed in cold blood, and, second, the behavior that seemed to make such a gesture, if not conscionable, at least explicable.

⁴⁷⁵ March, 13.

Of course, the main area of overlap is the prisoner shooting episode debated by Delaney and his wife. The realism of the entire piece hangs upon this incident, given central place in the frame and its central position in the book. Is this sequence the work in miniature, a composite of points of view fully rendering a situation? Is it the climax of the book? Whatever role it serves in the structure, it is an anomaly, an exception to the flattening and homogenizing force of the whole. Told in eight sketches—six contiguous, describing the act, and two worked in later, showing the long-term effects of the act—the episode is structured chronologically, so we can see the event unfold as point of view passes from the sergeant down through the corporal to several privates, reflecting the chain of command and causality. Initially, Sergeant Pelton suggests that one solution for what to do with the prisoners should be to shoot them; he is joking, but Captain Matlock is not. From the outset, the incident is absurd but terrible, something that WWII writer Joseph Heller might use to grimly comic effect, but here it is no laughing matter. Pelton thinks to himself that after all he's seen, this should not be different, but it is. Soon, though, he's telling himself that soldiers aren't supposed to think, to question orders. The next sketch, from Corporal Foster, reveals a different viewpoint. Foster rationalizes the act by repeating the old trench myth about the use of prisoners as an infiltrating force. He is glad of Matlock's plan, and he shames Private Nugent, a fellow soldier who disagrees: "What do you birds think this is? . . . This is war! . . . Why didn't you bring along your dolls and dishes to play with!"⁴⁷⁶ As the time nears to carry out the act, Private Drury realizes that he has no choice but to obey, which makes him just as much a prisoner as the Germans in front of him. Though Drury runs, Private Gordon stays behind. For a moment, Gordon makes a

⁴⁷⁶ March, 127.

human connection, interpreting one prisoner's smile as saying, "These men are wearing different uniforms and they speak a different language, but they are made out of the same flesh and blood that we are. . . . There's nothing to fear. They aren't going to hurt us."⁴⁷⁷ Still, he participates in the killing, thinking as he does, "Everything I was ever taught to believe about mercy, justice and virtue is a lie," the most egregious being God's love.⁴⁷⁸ Two sketches detail the aftermath of the incident. Private Inabinett rifles through the pockets of the dead men, an act that earns momentary ire from Pelton. In contrast to Inabinett's cold response, Private Mundy feels haunted—enough to go back to the scene, whereupon he has an epiphany and tells himself he will never harm a living thing again.⁴⁷⁹

The juxtaposed viewpoints set the scene, but immediate consequences do not compare to the two later sketches of men whose lives were destroyed as a result of their actions in this episode. Private Nugent has become a killer in his civilian life. The connection between his killing of a police officer and his killing of the prisoners is made explicit in his conversation with the prison chaplain:

Well, anyway, we took a bunch of prisoners one day. It was too much trouble to send 'em back to the rear, so the cop of my outfit made us take 'em into a ditch, line 'em up and shoot 'em. The, a week later when we were back in rest billets, he lined the company up and made us all go to church to listen to a bird like you talk baloney.⁴⁸⁰

So far, we have seen one man seemingly unaffected by his actions (Inabinett), one respond to his actions by becoming a pacifist (Mundy), while another becomes a murderer (Nugent). A fourth option comes with Private Qualls, who leads a normal life until he experiences a serious streak of bad luck. He blames his actions in the shooting for this curse

⁴⁷⁷ March, 131.

⁴⁷⁸ March, 132.

⁴⁷⁹ March, 134.

⁴⁸⁰ March, 210.

on his life, and when his young son dies, despite his prayers to God to spare the innocent, he takes his own life. Like the rest of the work, this prisoner shooting incident displays multiple attitudes about war, multiple human responses to the realities of combat. As structural climax, it brings the work up to a moment of choice, not the choice to go to war but the choice of behavior within the war, and it reveals that this kind of choice is not universal, that there is not, in fact, one way to be in the army. As the work in miniature, a sort of interpretive synecdoche, it would indicate that for all March's desire to relate the story of a company, he cannot but choose to deconstruct that company. This is a reading, however, which is ostensibly precluded by or at least challenged in the work's conclusion.

In addition to structuring by a thematic opening frame and through the presence of emblematic story clusters, *Company K* is convincingly framed by its ending, in the narrative of Private Sam Zeigler, which imparts a compelling retrospective reading to the company's story. At this point in the work, the stories have transitioned to long-term effects of the war as well as the soldiers' acts of memory. In this vignette, Zeigler goes to his former training camp, where he finds a name he remembers on the roster, Michael "Pig Iron" Riggins. The meeting of the two men is about revisiting the past, but it is immediately clear that though Zeigler can remember the physical details of his bunk, he can't remember the events of the war, especially as they are tied to specific people. As they read the names plates on the wall, they struggle to match names to remembered friends, friends to remembered stories. Finally, Zeigler relates, "I stood there thinking, trying to bring up the faces of the men I used to soldier with, but I couldn't do it. I realized, then, that I would not have remembered the face of Riggins, himself, if I hadn't known who he was beforehand."⁴⁸¹ Such an

⁴⁸¹ March, 260.

acknowledgement of the erasure of detail becomes a commentary on the reader's own predicament at the end of the text. The ending signals the dissolution of the story, the molding of such a robustly specific set of memories into one generic impression of war. Like *Three Soldiers*, it is a complex portrait, but this complexity is not assignable to particular characters in retrospect, just to the cumulative effect. If the opening frame asked us to consider an abstract question of purpose and legitimacy—what was proper to tell in a war narrative?—the ending supports a new, fully realized way of understanding the text. Realistic or romantic, idealist or cynical, the war experience is a deeply human experience, one for which erasure is encoded in the very vehicle designed to prevent such a thing. Or is it? Where the multifocal title *Three Soldiers* signaled its desire to differentiate, *Company K* purports to do the opposite. It is a story composed of individuated points of view, but in the end it is one narrative, and it might be assigned to any of them. What are we, then, to make of the fragmenting force of the text's central episode, the prisoner shooting? It is something which, as a whole, will not be flattened by the text, nor will it be, within itself, made homogenous. Does it give the lie to the text's self-erasure, indicating a creative failure? Or is it merely a reminder that some events cannot and should not be erased?

Despite their common goal of presenting a multifaceted, inclusive portrait of war, Dos Passos and March approach their task in somewhat different ways. Do their subjects and ideological ends suggest their forms, or do their forms produce their ideological ends? Clearly, the two are intimately connected, as the works manage to articulate different aspects of the same essential problem: the tension between a homogenizing process that calls for a loss of self and the notion that every totalized structure is in reality merely the sum of very fragmented parts. *Company K* strikes us as having a rather organic form; even

its obvious shaping makes it conform to a natural progression with just enough looseness to appear sincere. The other side of nature, though, is the chaotic, random character of war incidents. In March's text, it is exemplified by the decision to render the text through such a multiplicity of narrators, all demanding our attention, which, eventually lost, creates a feeling of loss in the reader, just as it did in Zeigler in the book's final sketch. Loss of self in this work is due to the disorienting reality of the totalizing structure of the army, combining as it does these very different people; but the loss that penetrates below form to content is about war. In *Company K*, relationships between the men in the company are occasionally adversative, but for the most part the company serves as a positive manifestation of community. This community, despite its occasional infighting, has its real enemy in the concept and experience of war itself. This is clear from the subject of many of the sketches, and from the narrative's willingness to go beyond the company as a united group in the trenches, to follow them into their separate lives after the war. There, we recognize that the self is damaged by the war experience as a whole, not necessarily by army discipline. The army, like the book's common cover, gives the soldiers' lives a sense of structure, but it cannot overcome the arbitrariness of the war or the unpredictability of point of view—not during the war and certainly not afterward. Thus, the self is lost in the shuffle.

While March's text is critical of war, in *Three Soldiers* the real enemy is the military itself, and, through it, the mechanized nature of modern life. This work also tries to push back against the chaotic environment of combat, but neither the characters nor the author find the army to be of help in that regard. In fact, long before Fuselli, Andrews, and Chrisfield encounter the absurdity and stupidity of life at the front, the novel is already

keyed into tropes of totalization and relinquishment of self to a greater whole. If *Company K* displays an organic form, the somewhat structured accumulation of sundry lives to paint a portrait of an everycompany, *Three Soldiers* calls attention to just the opposite, the artificiality of traditional narrative plotting. Dos Passos and Hemingway and others followed the familiar path of traditional developmental narrative, their works serving to highlight the absurdity of such an overdetermined approach to depicting one's life. I call the form artificial, but in this context the better descriptor is *mechanized*. In order to make the novel work, its parts have to function in a particular way, to serve particular ends. In the novel form, Dos Passos's three soldiers take up the roles required of them and attempt to fill the mold created over a hundred years of novelistic narrative. This process, foregrounded in modernist works, especially modernist war narratives, is so patently awkward that it draws attention to the inherent problem with such assumptions about narrative. One might debate whether modernism indicates a change in society and human nature, as Virginia Woolf argues, or highlights the falseness of pretending our world and selves were ever anything but fractured. However, one cannot argue that a novel like *Three Soldiers* simply tries and fails to be a bildungsroman. Andrews, like Fuselli and Chrisfield, is broken at the end of the novel, shaped into something that will work smoothly in a new whole. That we find this shaping to be more destructive than edifying is the point.

IV.

Writing about war seems to press the two genres, short story composite and novel, toward each other. The curious effect of this drawing together renders each form problematic, and the relative success or failure of any of these composite works comes

from the writer's realization of this reality and his or her ability to use that to advantage. *Company K* shows the short story composite unable to function except as a totalizing structure; its very nature as the apotheosis of modern narrative pushes it to extremes. *Three Soldiers* shows the novel threatening to disintegrate, and because of its nature, too—totalization creating a strain that shows its cracks even though the structure remains intact. One piece of American WWI fiction for the most part manages to escape this dichotomy: e. e. cummings's *The Enormous Room*. Cummings, like Dos Passos, was in the ambulance service in France, but, like March, he embraced a form apart from the traditional novel. In fact, he reached back further, to the epic, which perhaps accounts for why the work is normally an aporia in WWI literary criticism.

The Enormous Room seems much like a novel, if only because any long narrative with a central character is typically read this way. Unfortunately, this contributes to the sense that the book is somehow deficient, given its meandering, character- and description-driven narrative. The story's narrator, a fictionalized version of cummings himself, experiences plot as he is thrown into a French jail on charges of treason, but any plot afterward brings not movement or development but simply depth of exploration, and of characters besides the narrator. Chapter titles attest to this. Chapter four proclaims narrator-cummings to be "Le Nouveau" at the prison, after which he describes "A Group of Portraits." Later, "An Approach to The Delectable Mountains" introduces us to characters upon which narrator-cummings will direct his beam of attention. This does not denote a novel at all, certainly not a traditional one. However, the chapters that bookend the work suggest plot. The narrator discusses being "En Route" to the prison, and he titles his final chapter "I Say Good-Bye to La Misère." The telling chapter titles, however, are "I Begin a

Pilgrimage" and "A Pilgrim's Progress."⁴⁸² They invite or even demand our attention to its intertextuality, clueing us in to the work's true form, the epic allegory, specifically Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.⁴⁸³

To be sure, narrator-cummings is an unlikely hero, but he is an excellent everyman; his focus is almost entirely external—understanding his fellow inmates and discovering how to operate within the system. His need to explore and catalogue his surroundings allows the author to present commentary about its subject, but the enterprise also holds an air of quest—in this case, the quest of survival—suggesting the episodic form of the picaresque. The two forms, the one sincere and the other ironic, are in many ways well matched. The fact that the narrator often plays it straight underscores the irony present in the more sardonic passages of the work. Admittedly, these two forms are not at all without ideological encoding, but they do not undercut each other in the way that the literary bildungsroman undercuts the documentary episodic structure. An epic or allegorical protagonist, as an everyman, has no responsibility to grow; unlike Dos Passos's Andrews, he or she is not designed to carry the weight of a thematic structure. And a self-aware picaresque narrator, also static, unlike Delaney as compiler of *Company K*, suffers no conflict in presenting the absurd contradictions of the situation. Rather than indict the war by depicting its homogenizing effects, cummings presents what's at stake with such a loss of individuality. For all the bleakness of the work, it is essentially positive: narrator-cummings, in the midst of a totalizing situation born of war, finds the last holdouts of individuality, the Delectable Mountains, and he spends whole chapters venerating them.

⁴⁸² If the reader knows the Bunyan text, he or she will also be attuned to the references to "The Delectable Mountains," beginning in the table of contents.

⁴⁸³ Walsh, 33.

Walsh concludes, "The book is founded upon a paradox, that freedom in the modern world is gained only through imprisonment, when it is uniquely possible to see things in true perspective."⁴⁸⁴

It is curious to me that this text does not receive more attention, but it probably suffers for the same reason the prose of Gertrude Stein fails to find a critical audience. Cummings was a poet, and his text is self-consciously modeled on verse, from its origins in epic allegory (compare to Dante's *Inferno*) to its grounding in poetic language. Metaphor-rich and paradigmatic, Cummings's peculiar prose voice, much like Stein's, colors the whole of the narrative, seeps down into its local structure, associatively logical. The work is masterful in its way, but, written by and about an American volunteer housed far from the trenches, it is not exactly a combat narrative. It makes sense that the text remains an anomaly, a sideshow in WWI fiction criticism; nevertheless, it has its own merits that have nothing and everything to do with the war. Only WWI could've produced a narrative such as this, so disturbingly cheerful, so smilingly bleak. Only modernism could serve as a home for an experimental work that takes its pattern from an old model but employs an everyman that truly shows how much has changed since the seventeenth century.

Published in 1923, *The Enormous Room* is not unlike its close contemporary *Ulysses*.⁴⁸⁵

These remarks of T. S. Eliot, occasioned by Joyce's text, are then appropriate to Cummings's, too:

No one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before: it has never before been necessary. I am not begging the question in calling *Ulysses* a 'novel'; and if you call it an epic it will not matter. If it is not a novel, that is simply because the novel is a form which will no longer serve; it is because the novel, instead of being a form, was simply the expression of an age which had not sufficiently lost all form to feel

⁴⁸⁴ Walsh, 33.

⁴⁸⁵ Walsh, 43.

the need of something stricter. Mr. Joyce has written one novel — the *Portrait*; Mr. Wyndham Lewis has written one novel *Tarr*. I do not suppose that either of them will ever write another 'novel'. The novel ended with Flaubert and with James. It is, I think, because Mr. Joyce and Mr. Lewis, being 'in advance' of their time, felt a conscious or probably unconscious dissatisfaction with the form, that their novels are more formless than those of a dozen clever writers who are unaware of its obsolescence.⁴⁸⁶

This obsolescence that Eliot speaks of was not discovered by the war writers, but it was those writers, many of them amateur or popular, who were first forced to confront it.

Eliot speaks of *Tarr*, the writing of which predates the war, as does Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. The one depicts a breakdown in art, the other in morals. It is striking that one text is named for an artist and the other for a soldier, both prominent divided selves explored in early twentieth century literature. Lewis's text lays bare a pre-war fracturing of aesthetics, a conflict won by detachment and restraint. Ford's narrating consciousness, Dowell, the friend and rival of the soldier, shows the untenability of that kind of posture, both in his friend, through his suicide, and in his own narration, whirling and contradictory thoughts never before spoken aloud. I do not suggest that these works are in conscious dialogue. However, they both appeared in periodicals during the early years of the war, having been formed before the war began, and as such they call attention to the debates of the time, ones which were no more internal to art than they were confined to politics. These texts were shaped by a world already making traditional art and traditional behavior more difficult, and in their publishing context of WWI they produced this impression all the more sharply. The works that came after the war were surely different, but they were not *sui generis*. High modernists like Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner reached extremes of stylistic innovation foreshadowed in Lewis's cool, condemning

⁴⁸⁶ T. S. Eliot, "'Ulysses,' Order, and Myth," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Centenary Edition, 1888-1988* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988), 177.

worldview and Ford's achronological, impressionistic structure. The innovations of the high modernists were logical extensions of a new tendency toward character-driven writing, such as suggested by Woolf. Coming through the war, writers found the world inhospitable for any other kind of writing. Ford, for example, found the standardization of modern life—resulting from an increase in education and the spread of democracy—to be just as appalling as society's obsession with science, which destroys simplicity.⁴⁸⁷ Against a world of standardization, poetic, subjective, character-focused structures became the norm. And they were indeed complex. The raw materials of *Ulysses* are straightforward: a Homeric epic and a man who walks the city on an ordinary day. What Joyce makes of those materials should not be shocking to a literary milieu which saw poetry strip itself down to images and impressions long before it compiled those simple objects into waste lands of alienating modernist verse.

In 1920 Pound published "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," a poem that might easily have been the result of that dialogue between Lewis and Ford. A composite of shorter poems, it lays out war and art on the same stage, namely, within one man who may or may not be a façade for Pound himself. Modernity held dominion:

The age demanded an image
Of its accelerated grimace,
Something for the modern stage,
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace;

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries
Of the inward gaze;
Better mendacities

⁴⁸⁷ Michael A. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908 – 1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 50-1.

Than the classics in paraphrase!⁴⁸⁸

Later, after the famous attack on conventional patriotism, "Died some pro patria, non dulce non et décor," Pound explicitly equates the war with modern life, but there is no cause-effect, simply a mingling of the positive and negative sides of the same phenomenon. In the speaker's view, the soldiers

walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving
came home, home to a lie,
home to many deceits,
home to old lies and new infamy;

usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places.

Daring as never before, wastage as never before.
Young blood and high blood,
Fair cheeks, and fine bodies;

fortitude as never before

frankness as never before,
disillusions as never told in the old days,
hysterias, trench confessions,
laughter out of dead bellies.

We want to separate the two, the real life of "wastage" and "laughter" and the real "hell" and "dead bellies" of war, but the point of most war fiction is that it's not possible. The lies and deceit are everywhere. The separation is in ourselves, echoed in the fractured world around us; for the moderns and modernists, war was neither merely an isolated place of monstrous modernity nor, conversely, the only escape from it. That is the lesson of post-war modernism. The tangible impact of the war on the tenuously established industry of

⁴⁸⁸ All references to the poem are from Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, *Project Gutenberg* (Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, November 18, 2007, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23538> (accessed on January 12, 2012)).

modernism was not an undoing of what had come before. It was a reiteration and a reinforcing. It was tearing false control out of the grasp of cocksure hands—a control of the double-edged sword of technology and the already divided self, sought through asserting dominion over art. It was a wake-up call that signaled that it was time to continue the rebuilding of a worldview and a literature, this time with eyes wide open.

Conclusion

This project has attempted to bring to light the mechanisms by which the short story—and, through it, the short story composite—helped transform modern narrative practice. Ironically, the legacy of the modern short story composite genre was its own obsolescence. This most modernist of forms, the genre that is defined by its very resistance to categorization, boldly creating collage out of what were often broken pieces, could not sustain itself. It has not disappeared, though. Works such as Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* continue to enjoy a wide audience, popular and literary. The short story composite has already helped shape modern narrative; it does not need to assert its legitimacy and rarity any more than do postmodern novels. In fact, one might argue that it no longer must assert itself as a separate genre. Perhaps this is why Nagel, introducing a book of criticism on postmodern works—referred to the composite as a "convention." Perhaps the short story composite was a distinct genre only at modernism, when such distinctions of form were not only palpable but telling. Whatever the case, composite narrative, especially composites of short fiction, bear analysis as they continue to render the extraordinary tension between part and whole.

So much of that tension is not just formal and narrative but is manifested in the themes and concerns of various works. Most of the composites under examination in the

preceding chapters have been about community. From Jewett's Dunnet Landing to Wilder's San Luis Rey, community has served as the background and at times the foreground of many short story composites and fragmented novels, as the composite form has been used to explore the complex dynamics of community life. A good deal of the transformation we see in the structure of these works is a reflection of our changing sense of community. *The Untilled Field* peoples a broken country with broken characters, but the local communities in the work still have powerful roles in their citizens' lives. In *Dubliners*, though, there is only the semblance of community, insisted upon in the title. The real connection of the characters isn't their interrelationship on the narrative level but their affinity as citizens of the same repressive culture and city—that is, through theme. By the time Hemingway publishes *In Our Time*, there is no attempt to rely on literal community to structure the whole. However, the text marks an important moment during which narrative compositing, the short story composite in particular, could transcend divisions between people, could join characters in a larger, more universal narrative, to create an abstract community of shared experience.

Alternative models of community were clearly necessary, eventually. Between the wars, the fragmentary and the fractured became the new normal, and the lessons of the short story composite were greedily absorbed by the novel. Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1938), for instance, is a composite novel, at least on the narrative level. It has an achronological episodic structure, elliptical and nuclear, ostensibly more concerned with each person's individual relationship to the central character than to each other. Though a novel, it, too, is the child of the modern short story, its menagerie of misfits attempting to make connections, to unite, but finding they simply stand on common ground. It is not

unlike Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, though focused less on individualized voices and narrative styles (in separate formal units) and more on a single storytelling figure who holds together the threads of the subordinate causal plot but does not endow them with causality. *Nightwood* concerns story, our obsession with it but also its ineffectiveness in weaving together a coherent narrative or a sure line of causation. The text collects and discards characters and their stories the same way Robin Vote—central but absent like Faulkner's Caddy Compson—collects lovers, leaving behind apparently similar but ultimately separate broken hearts. *The Sound and the Fury*, on the other hand, is one expansive story in which meaning is accumulated in episodes and patently non-narrative impressions. Not unsurprisingly, it is also about the totalizing effectiveness of the Compson family narrative, destroying everyone who cannot escape it. Dilsey, like Barnes's Dr. Matthew O'Connor, is the reader's surrogate, above the level of the story; but the very different natures of those surrogates make powerful statements about modernist mistrust of Victorian fiction and its tendency toward omniscient narrators and absolute truth. Dilsey, with a clarity of faith that places her within an alternate narrative and raises her above the Compson clan, is also raised above the reader, as silent and inaccessible as God. Matthew, however, is perfectly accessible to the reader but relatively inscrutable. Both novels ask the reader to piece together stories that are not entirely coherent, and out of a confusing abundance of detail. Both texts tell unbalanced, incomplete stories, in order to draw attention to the lack of true coherence in our lives, or the inverse, to make the case that true stories can be told only incoherently.

The period after WWII is a lacuna in literary history, perhaps because the war once and for all destroyed any notion of a united self or community—even as it demanded that

the world, like literature, make sense again. A look at short story composites like Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* and *The Unvanquished* and Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples* suggests the return to narratives of community, but of a new kind. It is a fusion of the literal approach to community of earlier texts, predicated upon setting, and the abstract approach, more about the kinship of shared experience. Like *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner's late short story composites focus on family, which is a multivalent, almost self-contradictory bond: we don't choose our relatives, but they are tied to us by blood, which in Faulkner's texts proves as inescapable as history. Short story composites like these and *The Golden Apples*, enacting the desperation of post-war society, continue to draw attention to how artificial and accidental forces structure our society and our world. But however nonsensical, these bonds are real. This is just as true in genre as in the reality with which it carries on a dialogue. All the narrative and formal fragmentation imaginable cannot prevent blocks of text under the same cover from influencing each other. Rather than highlighting the fragile, simulated nature of community—enacting the boundaries between part and whole, from cracks to chasms—post-modern short story composites have the responsibility of exploring the consequences. One consequence is the surrender of the short story composite to the novel. This is no loss, though. The novel, too, has found itself changed by the composite narrative family of which it is now a part.

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