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Epic on an American Scale: Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio

Cover Page Footnote

Cover Letter Attached

Epic on an American Scale: Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*

Tiffany Messick

While some scholars have remarked upon Sherwood Anderson's American mythopoeia in *Winesburg, Ohio*, and others, such as Forrest L. Ingram, note the narrative structure of the short-story cycle's indebtedness to the Homeric and Virgilian epics, none have yet connected its patriotism, nationalism, and agrarian values with those of Homer, Virgil, and the epic tradition in general. Though Anderson desired to achieve a quality of nativism rooted in the American soil and progress past the country's European heritage, not even Anderson's lyricism enabled him to entirely dispense with epic elements. Adapting epic convention allows for a juxtaposition that accentuates the disparity between societies for which myth was sufficient and Anderson's disillusioned America, still searching for a myth which could become its new truth. To communicate the deterioration of the myth of American independence, heroism, and individualism, Anderson returns to the epic genre while adapting it and scaling it down to become distinctly American. Anderson employs many of the conventions of epic poetry such as frame tales, cataloguing, ritual, epithets, and pastoralism to elevate the short story to a more spacious realm, giving life to an American literary tradition, as yet unrealized, reproachful and tragic enough to be rooted in the native soil like Greece and Rome.

The genre of the short-story cycle traces back to epic poetic works such as Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The tales dramatized in epic form in these works arise uniquely independent out of the collective imagination as local folklore, and are then collected, subsumed, and epically synthesized. The whole becomes infinitely greater than its parts in breadth, scope, and grandeur. Alfred Bendixen cites the "formal looseness" of structure and "combined distinctive narrative units" in these epic works as foundational to the short-story genre, which later formalized both conventions (363). Out of this ancestry the American short-story cycle grows. The traditional epic tension between warfare and pastoral communal values becomes a tension between the individualistic willpower of capitalist industrialism and communal values of the agrarian American South. The exhaustion succeeding World War I in America, the inadequacy of the persistent "Lost Cause" myth—an American pseudo-historical, negationist, apologetic ideology that defends the cause of the Confederacy during the American Civil War as a just and heroic one—and the nascent myths of grandeur surrounding capitalism comprise Anderson's central focus. As such, Anderson's plain speech stands in stark contrast to elaborate epic verse, while simultaneously communicating Americanized universal mythic themes.

Published in 1919, *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson's compilation of twenty-two short stories that take place in a small Midwestern town, distinguishes itself as one of the

earliest modernist works. Among the defining characteristics of the modernist movement is a resurgence and evolution of the Homeric and Virgilian epics. Modernist authors also returned to the form of the short story and its structure as a locus for modernist innovation, characterized by disunity, ambiguity, and a fractured sensibility. As a result, the modernists' innovation resulted in a moderation and minimization of the epic scale. Epic sentiments and conventions are scaled down to suit modernism's localized pursuits. Because modernism concerns itself with authenticity, its response to the present environment conveys immediacy and brevity. Disparaging this downsizing and limited vision, attributing it to the proliferation of syndicates and magazines, Bertram Brooker laments,

characters do not tower into types. Rather they dwindle to the proportions of rats or rabbits on the dissecting table. The method is analytical, and it is only synthesis that creates a great space peopled with giant figures like Lear and Lucifer, Oedipus and Faust, Agamemnon and Myshkin. (266-67)

To Brooker, "literature on the grand scale is never contemporary" (267). While George Willard, the character most closely embodying the function of protagonist, dwindles in comparison to Aeneas, Anderson's mythos extends beyond the conceptual into the cosmic. In direct contrast to Brooker, Benjamin Spencer asserts that to Walt Whitman (whom Anderson believed to be an American prophet) and Anderson himself, "only the local thing is universal" (4). Anderson elevates the agrarian Midwestern American experience beyond its own limited locale and scope partly, though not exclusively, through an adaptation of traditional epic machinery.

Two years before his most seminal work, *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson tasked himself with the mission of composing an epic poem epitomizing the experience of the American masses, indicating his desire to adapt the epic genre to convey an American mythos (Rideout and Modlin 187). Sherwood Anderson believed Americans' imaginations had "not yet been fired by love of our native soil" (*Story Teller's Story* 79). Anderson initially chose the epic genre to memorialize the American spirit. Spencer notes Anderson's poetical epic propensities, remarking that in Anderson's works, "the preternatural or archetypal evoke a connotative style approaching the idiom of poetry" (3). David Anderson articulates that Sherwood Anderson excels when he utilizes "the Midwestern rhythms and idioms . . . incorporating them in the old oral storytelling tradition, thus elevating that same old subject matter to the realm of American mythology" (165). Spencer also characterizes Anderson's American *pietas*: "It approached, indeed, a mythic assent to what he viewed as a liberating cultural destiny often reiterated from the early days of the Republic, the old largeness and generosity which they felt had marked the ante-bellum national character" (5). Anderson exhibits a stylistic propensity toward the grand mythos of the epic genre and a desire to adapt it to convey America's magnanimity. *Marching Men*, published in 1917 as a novel rather than an epic, was the result of Anderson's ambition. Anderson felt he had failed in this attempt at epic prose and reflected with regret in his memoir, *A Story Teller's Story*, that *Marching Men* should have been published as an epic poem (187). The epic genre frustrated Anderson's ambitions, but in *Winesburg, Ohio* Anderson still makes use of many epic conventions in a continued effort to convey an American tradition.

Anderson admired Presidents Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, who envisioned an agrarian pastoral tradition engrained in the American character much like national leaders

such as Aeneas and Odysseus. Because epic poetry aims to reinstruct a nation's morals, Anderson's inclination toward the genre suits his ambition to promote his nationalistic agrarian vision and values. Citing Jefferson's agrarian vision of western settlement and the entire United States, Anderson, in his memoir, marvels at the industrious manner in which the American people had surpassed Jefferson's dream, expanding westward with an indomitable American spirit (242). Anderson exchanged letters with William Faulkner in which the two create the character Al Jackson, a descendent of Andrew Jackson working as a shepherd (Rideout and Modlin 574). *Notes on the State of Virginia* contains Jefferson's idealistic agrarian vision of the United States. On the walls of Jackson's Hermitage, French wallpaper depicts the adventures of Ulysses and the battle for Troy. Jacksonian democracy remained committed to Jefferson's agrarianism and its ideals. In *Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx traces agrarian values and the resistance against industrialism in ancient Greece and Rome to Jefferson's America:

But Jefferson's formulation of the pastoral ideal affirms a belief which may serve as a guide to social policy. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this distinction in illuminating the obscure borderland where so many of the confusions between art and ideology arise. As every American knows, it has been capable of carrying an immense burden of hope. That hope in turn has been encouraged, from the beginning, by descriptions of the New World as a kind of Virgilian pasture. . . . (74)

To Anderson, Jefferson and Jackson speak as prophets, like Tiresias or Anchises, of America's future. Italian and Grecian dreams travel "across the seas" to an America which, he argues, lacks "old stories and dreams of its own" (*Certain Things* 770). Anderson's perceived lack of American stories and dreams conveys his desire to link the grandiosity of the Greek and Roman empires, as well as the strength of their character and belief, to America, while lamenting the fact that the American tradition had not acquired the same distinction.

One of the epic conventions Anderson employs is the use of a frame tale. The *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* contain many frame tales, stories within stories, subsidiary to the central narrative. Odysseus recounting his deeds to King Alcinoos in Book VII exemplifies Homer's adoption of the frame-tale narrative technique: first, the tragic tale of Orpheus is related; Orpheus then tells the story of Adonis and Venus; and, finally, Venus recounts the story of Atalanta and Hippomenes. Many cycles—the Theban cycle, Perseus cycle, Athenian cycle, and Trojan cycle—comprise *Metamorphoses*, each cycle its own frame. Anderson's collection of tales also begins with a frame narrative, "Book of the Grotesque," in which a writer remembers all those he has known in the past who are now "grotesques." Because of this, the modern short-story cycle, despite its tendency toward regionalism, evinces transnational qualities. John McWilliams asserts that, "As ideas of heroic behavior changed, so did the form of the epic poem" (6); yet ideas of heroic behavior are not the only change that the epic must accommodate. The new American "epic" must also allow for changes in morals and values without merely employing epic machinery.

In "The Thinker," the narrator wanders into the longest of many digressions, another characteristic of epic narration. George Willard catalogues the roles and actions of all Winesburg's inhabitants. Book II of Homer's *Iliad* is devoted in large part to cataloging the contingents of the Achaean army and their ships that sail to Troy. The *Odyssey* includes a list of

participants in the games (8.115-25) and a catalog of beautiful women of the past (11.241-364). The *Aeneid* presents a list of enemies the Trojans encounter in Etruria in Book VII and a list of ships in Book X. Homer and Virgil wish to ensure that the names of the pious are recorded for posterity and that these men are glorified according to their merit. Cataloging in *Winesburg* achieves a different purpose for Anderson. The list of names Seth Richmond recounts as he wanders the streets to meet Helen White emphasizes the distance which separates these individuals and the distance which separates Seth from others. Each person is simply a name to Seth. More importantly, Anderson's project centers around cataloging the inner world and emotions of each individual.

Anderson's digressive narration is characteristic of epic narration in its cataloging of deeds as well. Anderson idolizes middle class values and small-town living by cataloging each individual experience ritualistically. When Jesse Bentley becomes a landowner in "Godliness pt. I," he excitedly makes a prophetic proclamation:

"I am a new kind of man come into possession of these fields," he declared. "Look upon me, O God, and look Thou also upon my neighbors and all the men who have gone before me here! O God, create in me another Jesse, like that one of old, to rule over men and to be the father of sons who shall be rulers!" (70)

Jesse elevates himself, in God's estimation, to the status of a biblical patriarch in a transformative moment of apotheosis. Similarly, by cataloging the individual inner lives of each of the many characters inhabiting Winesburg, Anderson glorifies authenticity for its own sake. Each character ineffectively searches for validity and a legitimate connection with another. The search, too, achieves ritualistic deification. Each character's devotion towards the sanctity of their own search for understanding pervades each narrative episode. A looming absence of validity, evoked by each character's inability to genuinely connect, elevates authenticity to divine status. For example, in the very first short story, "Book of the Grotesque," a Civil War veteran orally catalogs his experiences to an old writer, who, in turn, notes all the grotesque figures the writer has known. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the word grotesque to the Italian *grottesca*, meaning an unpolished and antique aesthetic style of art like that appropriate for excavated Italian grottoes ("grotesque," n1). Like Aeneas in the underworld, the writer visits the ghosts of those he has known. In this way, Anderson apotheosizes the grotesque, elevating its stature in memory. Part of the search for truth and authenticity entails, as Irving Howe relates, "the search of a ceremony, a social value, a manner of living, a lost ritual that may, by some means, re-establish a flow and exchange of emotion" (103). With the end of World War I (the year *Winesburg, Ohio* was published) and the dawning of a new century, Victorian rituals and ideals began to crumble. A paradigm shift in morals and modes of living as well as a sense of loss descended upon America. Anderson laments this loss like many Americans shell-shocked by the war and memorializes what he perceives as the twisting of morals and the grotesque denaturalizing of a previous idyllic agrarian American lifestyle.

Like the epic poets, Anderson concerns himself with ritual and the cataloging of ritual. The entirety of *Winesburg, Ohio* centers thematically around the degeneration of communal rituals, including both bonds between people (sexual, familial, and friendly) and modes of religion. In "The Thinker," the fair, a communal ritual which should bring togetherness, has the

opposite effect. Seth returns home days later, sick of the company he is keeping, to a worried mother, Virginia Richmond, who has no idea where her son has wandered off to. Seth sleeps on wet straw with “negroes” and has to steal lunch on the train ride home (75). There is no coming together over a meal, and the indifference Seth shows for his mother’s feelings emphasizes the emotional distance between the two. Ideally, the fair should have been a family event for the Richmonds. Virginia pens an emotional rebuke to communicate to her son the alarm and disquiet his disappearance inflicted upon her, which she never sends. Virginia merely welcomes him home, commending her son for enduring the entire journey to its conclusion. This instance underscores the fractured familial and communal bonds alongside the breakdown of the rituals which foster such bonds. Teacher Wing Biddlebaum, in “Hands,” performs his own private ritual, as many other residents of Winesburg do: washing the dishes, setting up a cot near the door to sleep on, undressing, and finally kneeling to eat the last of the crumbs of bread from dinner. Bread and kneeling, of course, evoke the ritual of the Eucharist, but Wing’s ritual is devoid of sacred meaning, and no god looks down favorably upon the sacrifice.

Rituals, a convention of epic poetry, appear ubiquitously throughout the Homeric and Virgilian epics. In Book XI of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus performs a sacrifice to enable himself to visit Erebus. Book XXIV of the *Iliad* features games as part of the funerary ritual for Patroclus. Honoring his father Anchises, Aeneas performs an oblation in Book V of the *Aeneid*, a reversal of Jesse’s failed offering. Aeneas’ killing of Turnus shocks as a ritual of human sacrifice in Book XII. Ritual purification in Virgil’s *Aeneid* follows ritual corruption. Aeneas instantly receives a response as a snake removes his gift to Anchises from the altar. The gods are immediately present unlike the remote god of the American Midwest. The *Odyssey* uniquely denies Odysseus a definitive apotheosis. Odysseus refuses Calypso’s offer of immortality. In Book VI, however, as Odysseus is thrown onto the Phaeacian shore naked, he is ritualistically born again with new knowledge and truth, aware now of his pride as a weakness. Odysseus must be ritually purified before returning home and experiencing his own apotheosis as king of Ithaca again. The only character in *Winesburg, Ohio* who truly achieves this spiritual transformation of divine affirmation is George; by developing into an empathetic soul, he learns “to think of people in the town where he had lived with something like reverence” (“Sophistication” 131). Traveling to new lands and a new life, George achieves apotheosis in “Departure”: “Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood” (153). Leaving his agrarian homeland to accomplish his goal of writing the “book that . . . may never get written,” George embarks on an epic quest (56). Before beginning this journey, he undergoes a transformation to prepare himself to become an epic hero and a man.

George Willard serves as Anderson’s epic hero who carries forth the hopes of the nation and restores ritual. Others, in their imagination, imbue George with their expectations for the future. Embodying their hopes, George becomes the only individual who can travel forward. Their ambitions are dependent upon him, just as Aeneas bears the hopes of those who perished in Troy and as Odysseus bears the hopes of the Greeks. All three heroes represent persistence and renewal. George reports for the *Winesburg Eagle*, and the town views the youth as a purveyor of the truth for which each soul is continuously searching. Effectually, George functions as Winesburg’s Hermes. Residents seek George, and not Preacher Curtis Hartman, to carry out the ritual of confession and penitence over and over again. Book IV of the

Aeneid opens with Dido's confession of her iniquitous love for Aeneas to her sister Anna. Elizabeth Willard foresees that George will "be allowed to express something for us both" (40). Doctor Parcival prophetically tasks George with "writing the book that I may never get written" (56). Parcival derives from Thomas Malory's epic *Le Morte d'Arthur* and exemplifies another instance in which Anderson pays homage to the epic tradition of other countries and the epic genre. The quest for the holy grail equates to the journey of writing the book, identifying George as an American mythic hero on a quest that takes him from his agrarian homeland (56). Jesse Bentley endeavors to restore patriarchal traditions and rituals unsuccessfully. In "Godliness pt. III," Jesse attempts to ritualistically sacrifice a lamb with his grandson David Hardy. David runs away from his grandfather in fear, unable to fulfill the role which Aeneas' son, Ascanius, and Odysseus' son, Telemachus, as well as the biblical David fulfill—that of patriarch to a valiant race of warriors.

Many rituals in epic poetry and in *Winesburg, Ohio* serve to bestow glory upon individuals and nations. Jesse laments that he has lost his grandson because he was "too greedy for glory" in "Godliness pt. IV" after his failed ritual sacrifice (55). The absence of God's divine preference and absolution, after having attempted to perform a ritual sacrifice of a lamb to praise God, profoundly disturbs and mystifies Jesse. Instead of receiving honor, Jesse is abandoned by his prodigal grandson and by God. The diminished town now bears no resemblance to its renowned past. The breakdown of ritual and custom, just as in the Greek and Roman worlds, signifies degradation. The town, Seth's house especially, no longer appears resplendent. Residents no longer accomplish glorious feats which win them honor and valor. The cataloging of endeavors, which Anderson assiduously undertakes, attests to this absence of glory. Acts in Winesburg prove ineffectual. None can act or speak. None wield agency, save George. This scene mirrors the sacrifice of many American sons to World War I and the ensuing shattering of American rituals and beliefs. The belief in peaceful agrarian values gives way to industrial production and violence, shaking America's foundational belief in God and their position as a favored nation. The aftermath of World War I does not see soldiers returning in glory, but traumatized.

In contrast, Odysseus wins fame by repossessing his domicile, effectively punishing the suitors who disregard the gods' law of hospitality. Before doing so, however, in Book XVII, Odysseus humbles himself before those who have grievously wronged him, disguising himself as a beggar. Indeed, humility characterizes the citizens of Winesburg, but none grasp the truth humble Odysseus does. Rather, the magnificence of truth eludes the small-town hopefuls, warping their souls into grotesque voids. Achilles chooses *kleos*, meaning glory in Greek, over a long life. Anderson alludes to Achilles to convey the meaning of heroism in the Midwest in "Strength of God." Yet in Winesburg, Preacher Hartman withers, exemplifying weakened and increasingly uncertain piety. As a spiritual hero and leader, much like Aeneas, Winesburg's preacher must overcome worldly attachments, most notably to women. However, Hartman deludes himself in believing he has done so, receiving affirmation from God which has not really been imparted. In actuality, the preacher has conquered nothing. Hartman, a voyeur, engages in lustily spying out the belfry stained-glass window. He breaks a small piece of glass to allow himself a better view through Kate Swift's open window. The stained-glass window depicts a boy. The preacher breaks the heel of the boy; lust, his Achilles' heel, weakens the preacher. This moment marks the acceptance of pagan sexuality. Aeneas abandons Dido, faithfully following

the path divined to him. While this affords Aeneas glory, Preacher Hartman's deviant, secretive struggle with lust lacks inertia and causes him to feel immense shame.

Epithets, another epic convention, convey glory as well. Often, these appellations connote political and ethical ideals. Phrases such as "pius Aeneas" occur on twenty separate occasions throughout Virgil's poem. *Pietas* signifies virtuous duty to father and nation, as well as subservience to the gods; it embodies all Roman political, moral, and religious ideology. Homer and Virgil make extensive use of monikers to characterize their players. "Swift footed" appends Achilles' name, and adjectives such as "godlike," "royal," and "famed" distinctively preface Odysseus' name. Anderson, too, uses descriptive titles to convey ideals and characterize certain of *Winesburg's* "grotesques." Wing Biddlebaum's name serves as a sobriquet itself, evoking transcendence and freedom as well as spiritual purity. The narrator refers to Wing as "Hands" because of his metaphysical touch and abilities: "He was one of those men in whom the force that creates life is diffused, not centralized. Under the caress of his hands doubt and disbelief went out of the minds of the boys and they began also to dream" (32). Wing adopts the role of mentor, reminiscent of Plato in ancient Greece instructing his students about culture, citizenship, masculinity, athleticism, and artistry. An epic connection between the regional, national, and universal exists in Wing.

Wing's epithet conveys his function of divine poet, an address by which Virgil refers to Gallus in his Eclogue X. Poet is another epithet which Anderson uses to distinguish Wing (29, 31). Aeneas must become one with the "fiery spirit" which "infuses the mind of all members of the world" (6.95-96) to attain the "heaven-sent perception clear" (6.1003) and selflessness by which he gains the ability to heed the call to found Rome. Anchises tasks his son with this mission in his speech at the end of Book VI. Wing also wields this ability; both his epithets attest to this power. Wing, like Aeneas, must instruct the next generation. The Cowley family's nickname, "queer," reflects societal values as well. Ebenezer Cowley fails as a farmer, selling the family farm to move to Winesburg, where the family opens a general store. Ebenezer also proves to be an unsuccessful businessman. Ebenezer's odd manner of dress and inability to provide for his family by conducting a successful business attest to the Cowley family's turning away from agrarian values. The Cowley family represents the tenets of commercialism (greed and individualism), which threaten to corrupt the pastoral beliefs of the community, causing a spiritual disruption.

The Cowleys turn away from pastoral virtue and communal ritual, thus highlighting the connections between virtue, heroism, piety, and the soil which abound in Anderson and Virgil's works. Anderson's poem "War" combines agriculture, religion, and, of course, battle:

Deep in the cornfields the gods come to life
Gods that have waited, gods that we knew not
Gods come to life
In America Now. (*Mid-American Chants* 57)

Anderson, like Virgil, elevates the soil as virtuous and spiritual—idyllic pastoralism. In Book XII of the *Aeneid*, the Trojans cut down a sacred olive tree (12.766-71). This action opposes the Roman empire's spiritual and political values connected to the preservation and cultivation of

the land. Pastoral spirituality and virtue comprise the subject matter of Virgil's *Georgics*. Georgic II praises the idyllic, peaceful existence of the farmer:

How lucky, if they know their happiness,
Are farmers, more than lucky, they for whom,
Far from the clash of arms, the earth herself,
Most fair in dealing, freely lavishes
An easy livelihood

.....
Peace they have and a life of innocence
Rich in variety; they have for leisure
Their ample acres, caverns, living lakes,
cattle low, and sleep is soft
Under a tree (2.458-70)

To Virgil, like Anderson, the soil imbues the individual with innocence and purity. Anderson draws on this tradition of transcendent pastoralism to describe the agricultural way of life in the American Midwest.

Wing's confused and disappointed musings in "Hands" reflect the same ideal of men living simply off the land, communing under the shade of a tree:

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

Anderson continues to uphold epic poetry's pastoralism. In this passage a return to agricultural life is prescribed as the cure to societal ills. No longer using hands to work the soil has warped this pastoral sense of community and cleanliness. Subsequently, Wing's unoccupied hands get him into trouble with young male students. Other berry pickers laugh together in a display of community forged by nature and agricultural labor. Jesse draws on similar themes when he reflects on the corruption of the city and the innocence lost in "Godliness pt. I": "Much of the old brutal ignorance that had in it also a kind of beautiful childlike innocence is gone forever. The farmer by the stove is brother to the men of the cities, and if you listen you will find him talking as glibly and as senselessly as the best city man of us all" (71). The farmer Jesse remembers is innocent and the men of the cities who have abandoned agriculturalism have also abandoned truth and morals.

Jesse also prophetically connects his progeny with a noble race springing from his loins and ruling the land:

The land that lay stretched out before him became of vast significance, a place peopled by his fancy with a new *race of men* sprung from himself. It seemed to him that in his day as in those other and older days, kingdoms might be created and new impulses

given to the lives of men by the power of God speaking through a chosen servant. (70; my emphasis)

Jesse continues, linking the soil with soldiery: "Send me a son to be called David who shall help me to pluck at last all of these lands out of the hands of the Philistines and turn them to Thy service and to the building of Thy kingdom on earth" ("Godliness pt. I" 73). The noble lineage of sons arising from the soil is prevalent in epic poetry as well. This passage evokes Anchises' prophecy uttered to his son Aeneas in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, which foretells Aeneas founding the Roman empire and the birth of his son Romulus (756-87). Jesse Bentley's dream of conquering land and building kingdoms very closely parallels another of Anchises' prophecies:

Caesar Augustus, son of the deified,
Who shall bring once again an Age of Gold
To Latium, to the land where Saturn reigned
In early times. He will extend his power
Beyond the Garamants and Indians,
Over far territories north and south
Of the zodiacal stars, the solar way,
Where Atlas, heaven-bearing, on his shoulder
Turns the night-sphere, studded with burning stars.
At that man's coming even now the realms
Of Caspia and Maeotia tremble (*Aeneid* 6.1062-72)

Anchises imagines the renown of his future offspring returning the people and the land to greatness, an idyllic pastoral age which has passed.

Most significantly, Jesse envisions, as part of his idyllic pastoral past and future, the heroism and poeticism of virtuous farmers:

. . . strong lusts of their natures, kept suppressed by the heroic labor of breaking up new ground, were released. A kind of crude and animal-like poetic fervor took possession of them. On the road home, they stood up on the wagon seats and shouted at the stars. Sometimes they fought long and bitterly and at other times they broke forth into *songs*. (Anderson, *Winesburg* 65; my emphasis)

The heroic men in this passage are impelled to sing verses telling of their deeds and magnanimity. Anderson casts Jesse and his companions as epic heroes and poets like those patriarchs in the *Aeneid*, loyal to nation and God. Jesse believes the survival of America depends upon a new race of men sired by his grandson David, who will usher in a return to agrarianism and pastoral virtue. The current generation's impending moral and spiritual failing necessitates reinstruction. America, like Troy, has fallen away from pastoral and spiritual glory. New worlds must be forged by George and Aeneas in new lands. In this way, a new race will atone for the spiritual corruption that has seized their former homelands.

In "The Thinker," Anderson continues to extol the virtues of labor and nature in song, specifically the industriousness of bees, in the same fashion as Virgil. The swarm of bees

accompanies Seth Richmond's thoughts as he peacefully ponders life on a bench in a garden. Seth refers to the swarm as an "army" and their buzzing as a "song of labor" (140). Virgil often employs bee similes as a microcosm for the human endeavor, always connecting the hive with industrious, virtuous labor: "Even as bees when summer is fresh over the flowery country ply their task beneath the sun, when they lead forth their nation's grown brood . . ." (*Aeneid* 1.459). This conceit appears earlier in "Georgic IV": "They alone know a fatherland and fixed home, and in summer, mindful of the winter to come, spend toilsome days and garner their gains into a common store. For some watch over the gatherings of food, and under fixed covenant labour in the fields . . ." (152-54). For the modernist and for the ancient epic poet, Anderson and Virgil, bees embody industriousness, patriotism, militarism, and community. Bees sing songs, cataloging deeds, just as men do.

For all the glorification of agrarianism, its prophet Virgil concedes its fragility. More than a concession, Virgil embraces the tradition of linking the pastoral with pain—that is, the land sows virtuous hardship. Brian W. Breed claims that Theocritus's "Idyll I," which dramatizes the misfortune and death of the shepherd Daphnis (afflicted by love) as sung by Thyrsis, "authorizes suffering as the first theme of pastoral poetry." Furthermore, Breed interprets Virgil's "Eclogue I" as a "history of suffering and dialogue in the pastoral" (107). Virgil directly imitates Theocritus's "Idyll I" in his "Eclogue X," recounting the sorrows of the elegiacal poet Gallus. "Eclogue X" occurs in Arcadia, a pastoral utopia. Yet the conclusion of Virgil's ten *Eclogues* conveys the inadequacy of the pastoral to heal and fortify the soul. Anderson conveys the same sadness and insufficiency in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Virgil's "Eclogue IV" employs epic language to adapt the heroic to the pastoral. Rachel Smith remarks upon Anderson's epic language: "He has given a certain Homeric quality to the idiom of the factory, the racecourse, and the pool room" (162). The pastoral is concerned with community. The narrator engages in an extended monologue, characteristic of epics. In this way, the narrator isolates himself. Winesburg, Ohio's remote location signifies the spiritual isolation of its residents. The separateness of pastoral life shelters those who virtuously cultivate the land, reaping their souls from the turbulence of urban centers but not from the inner chaos, which when insulated, intensifies into madness. Arcadia (historically a secluded region of Crete) evokes conflicting emotions without resolution. An apparent tension exists between Arcadia and Virgil's Rome, just as tension exists between Eden (the pre-Civil War agrarian America) and the early nineteenth-century Midwest. Pastoral attempts to communicate solitary suffering.

The impermanence of Virgil's Arcadia confronts the reader. A subversive tension and disruptive peace plagues inhabitants. The shepherd Meliboeus, in "Eclogue I," is exiled by Octavian and must live among Africans in Libya in the sweltering desert, or travel hither to Crete, Scythia, or Britain, while the coarse, impious barbarian soldier—"alien master"—repossesses his fields and flocks (64-68). Donald Rosenberg cites "Eclogue I" as an instance of the "subversive unheroic pastoral" (53). Meliboeus exhibits piety, patriotism, and industriousness (70-72, 216), while his fellow shepherd Tityrus exhibits laziness (27) and excessive fondness (30-31). John C. Shields too, responding to Marx's assertion of Virgil's "ideal reconciliation between nature and art" (19), cites "Eclogue V," in which Daphnis dies, as an example of the pastoral's capacity for subversion (103). Shepherds Menalcas and Mopsus exhibit another trope of pastoral elegy, the desire for worldly fame and recognition. The desire

to promote oneself at the expense of the deceased constitutes subversion, the undermining of piety and morality.

Corruption of the pastoral appears as a central theme in Virgilian epics as well. The fury Alecto assumes the form of Juno's priestess Calybe, a naiad nymph, under Juno's bidding. In a perversion of pastoral ideals, Alecto rages over Latium, inciting strife and ruin. Anderson attempts to impressionistically preserve Winesburg but, ironically, concedes that the American pastoral ideal is a myth and subverts it. Clinging to pastoral idealism perversely warps the souls of Midwestern Ohioans into "grotesques." Thus, *Winesburg's* inhabitants fail to create a mythos for themselves that can sustain them and their community; this failure becomes their truth. Anderson's work should be understood in terms of epic, not in a diminished conceptual capacity, nor as failed epic, but rather as modernist prose fiction self-consciously myopic in geographic scale and subtly imbued with epic vision of a grand American scope. Anderson thereby emerges as a prophet in prose fiction, invoking images of America's imminent moral collapse.

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