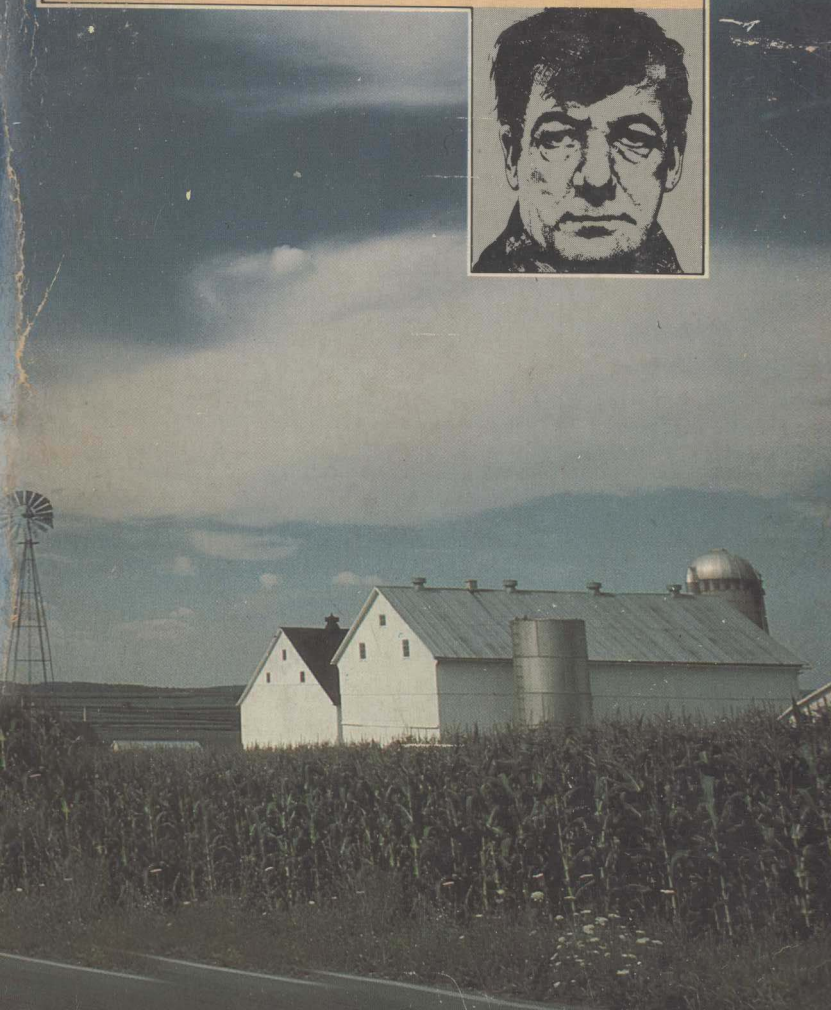


THE PORTABLE SHERWOOD ANDERSON



Revised Edition
Edited by HORACE GREGORY



The Portable

SHERWOOD
ANDERSON

Revised Edition

Edited, and with an introduction, by
HORACE GREGORY



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THE PORTABLE
SHERWOOD ANDERSON

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Horace Gregory, a major poet and literary critic, is the author of many books, including *A History of American Poetry, 1900-1940*, written with his wife, Marya Zaturenska, and *The House on Jefferson Street*.

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The Portable Sherwood Anderson

Editor's Note

So as to satisfy several points I have made concerning Sherwood Anderson, I have slightly changed the Introduction. At the suggestion of Malcolm Cowley, this edition of the *Portable* differs from the first by the inclusion of the entire text of *Winesburg, Ohio*, and an editorial abridgment of *Poor White*.

Editor's Introduction: A Historical Interpretation

When Sherwood Anderson died in 1941 the moment was not unlike that at the death of D. H. Lawrence eleven years earlier: a pause was felt, even though neither writer was then at the widest span of his reputation. Today Sherwood Anderson's reputation is more secure than it was in 1941, and his short novels, tales and stories, like the writings of D. H. Lawrence, have lived well beyond their day of being in or out of fashion. Like the legend of his life which he created in his autobiographies and memoirs, his tales and stories have independent life of their own, an existence no longer sustained and modified by that of a widely known figure on a lecture platform. The decade following a writer's death provides, often enough, the severest test of his true vitality. Even in his lifetime, his popularity, his "fame" may suffer (as Anderson's did) polar extremes of critical approval and indifference, but the years following his death are a test of his survival in the world that he has left behind him. Of American writers of the 1920s who were also "poets" (in the same sense that some European writers of prose are given that distinction), Sherwood Anderson has achieved his promise of "immortality", and it is not surprising that his place in the literature of the twentieth century is close to that of two

writers for whom he felt particular kinship, Gertrude Stein and D. H. Lawrence.

The reservation of a place in the company of Gertrude Stein and D. H. Lawrence scarcely defines the singular impression that Sherwood Anderson makes upon the imagination of the reader, yet for all the particular qualities that have set him apart from other writers of the day, it is not inappropriate to think of *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Horses and Men* as placed in the same climate in which *Sons and Lovers* and *The Prussian Officer* and Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* exist. In each, one finds something of the same temperature, the same charm, the same authentic presence of a personality.

All three writers joined in the large, and for them victorious, cause of liberating prose from a multitude of literary clichés, and thereby saving their own works from the dust that falls so thickly upon library shelves. Each gives the reader (and beyond this their kinship ends) a vision usually reserved for readers of poetry alone, a view of life, familiar to be sure in "realistic" detail, but far more "alive" than the resources of prose and of fiction commonly permit.

European readers who come to Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* for the first time feel the proximity of a new speech, a "new country," a fresh view of the Main Street that Sinclair Lewis had opened for them. The interrelated stories of *Winesburg, Ohio* offer something that is less foreign to them than the restless, half-satirical observant eye that guides the reader so faithfully through the pages of Lewis's realistic novel. What is felt in *Winesburg, Ohio*, felt rather than read, overheard rather than stressed, is a memory of youth, of early "joys and sorrows," and this is conveyed with the simplicity of a folk tale, a style known in all languages. / To the American reader another level of almost subterranean feeling is contained in Sherwood Anderson's novels and stories. The streets and landscapes here depicted are close to the roots of an American heritage which takes its definition from the writings of Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, and Mark Twain, Critics with as diverse opinions of Anderson as those expressed by Lionel Trilling on one hand and Van

Wyck Brooks on the other have agreed in recognizing these particular features of Anderson's "Americanism," his almost instinctive and acknowledged debt to writers who represent the Emersonian aspect of the Great Tradition in American literature. It is clear enough that Anderson's writings are of that heritage and not in the Great Tradition of Hawthorne and Henry James. But why were they "instinctively" so, why were they ranged so conclusively on the side of Thoreau and Whitman? As one reads Anderson's autobiographies and memoirs, it is absurd to think of him reading Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman in the spirit of one determined to follow a "party line" in choosing the sources of his inspiration; it is absurd to think of him surrounded by books in order to draw "ideas" and intellectual convictions from them. He drew upon the life he saw about him, the very air he breathed on memories of a roving, outdoor childhood, on the few books loaned to him by friendly schoolteachers, and on the talk of middle-aged men in small Middle Western towns who had taken a fancy to the brilliant, sensitive, imaginative son of a Southern drifter and tall-tale teller. These were the essentials of Sherwood Anderson's early impressions; they are the actual sources of whatever Anderson thought and saw and felt; and all other experiences, whether of reading or of sensitively overhearing conversation which flowed around him, were superimposed upon them.

The impact on Anderson's imagination of Thoreau and Whitman came in later life, but the important impressions of his boyhood were the associations of what is now called a "democratic" heritage: the diluted forms of oratory at Fourth of July celebrations, the speeches made at county fairs, the talk overheard at race tracks, and through the swinging doors of the nineteenth-century, Middle Western, small-town saloon. In these surroundings, legends of Abraham Lincoln flourished, floating upward into Ohio from Illinois and Kentucky—stories pertinent to Anderson's own half-Southern, log-cabin origins. He, too, came from a "shiftless, drifting" family, and so he was particularly sympathetic to the picture of Lincoln reading books by the flickering, red glare thrown from a

log-cabin hearth, to the figure of "the man of sorrows" and unrequited love, the shrewd country lawyer who told tall stories in the back rooms of general stores, the gaunt, distracted figure, clad in a nightshirt, pacing the floor of his bedroom in the White House, reading jokes aloud from an open book or periodical, and finally, the martyred President, who loved the North and South alike, the author of the Gettysburg Address—these pictures hung as icons in the mind of the impressionable boy.

Beneath the seeming contradictions of Anderson's discussions in his memoirs, novels, and topical essays of socialism, democracy, and the twentieth century "machine age," there lies a singular loyalty to the heritage of a Middle Western boyhood. It is in this connection that the year of his birth, 1876, and the place where he was born, Camden, Ohio, are of relevant meaning. Anderson grew up in a place that was permeated by that "religion of humanity" of which Emerson was the transcendental fountainhead, showering forth his concepts of the "oversoul" like rain from the clouds: across the prairies of the Middle West his name and Thoreau's represented New England "culture," and when their writings were read at all, which was only in small circles, they were tolerated with more respect than understanding. Those who lived through the post-bellum years of the Civil War in the Middle West demanded both more and less of their own priests of "humanity" than they did of the memory of Emerson.

The new priests were champions of reason and of Herbert Spencer's *First Principles*, of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*; of Robert Ingersoll's lectures on the Gods ("An Honest God Is the Noblest Work of Man") and on Individuality ("Every human being should take a road of his own. . . . Every mind. . . . should think, investigate and conclude for itself"). These new priests spoke in the names of "democracy," "science," "progress," and "liberty"; most of them were in revolt against the older Protestant sects and denominations of New England, against Puritan restraints and moralities, and yet the shadows

of older taboos were among their obsessions. Sherwood Anderson's generation in Ohio and Illinois felt in boyhood the presence of Ingersoll's "individuality" and his faith in "science" with greater intimacy, and, perhaps, greater clarity, than Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience."

Compared with Ingersoll's rhetoric, a flamboyant language of evangelical threats and promises ("Science took a tear from the cheek of unpaid labor, converted it into steam, created a giant that turns with tireless arm, the countless wheels of toil"), Thoreau's writings seem austere, and his serene appreciation of solitude at Walden almost classic in feeling and Puritanical. But to Anderson's generation the voice of Ingersoll was the voice of "progress"; it promised the arrival of a "new day" for those who had been attracted to The Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, and yet it shouted down with equal vehemence of the totalitarian Utopia of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. "We are believers in individual independence," said Ingersoll. "We invent . . . we enslave the winds and waves." It was through the invention of machines and the tools to control, improve, and mend them, that the "religion of humanity" offered its rewards on earth to members of its congregation; and to Sherwood Anderson the delight of invention for its own sake never lost its spell. To invent became part of his pleasure in telling a story, and the very inventions of the machine age, an age whose virtues he came to distrust and to criticize, never lost their fascination.

Although Ingersoll's attacks on Christianity had crippled his political career and had left him, scarcely content, with the office of Attorney-General for the State of Illinois, his influence on those who read him or heard him talk grew to enormous proportions. Anderson had little concern for merely rational arguments in favor of science, and no respect whatever for inflated rhetoric, yet the sentiments of Ingersoll, overheard or half-heard from the lips of talkers in small-town newspaper offices and saloons, are of the same character as those that filled the young and speculative mind of George Willard in *Winesburg, Ohio*. The sentiments of Ingersoll prepared Willard for the story of the Reverend Curtis Hartman

in "The Strength of God," and the same source of inspiration provides a logic of its own for the arrival of Hugh McVey, the inventor, the central figure, if not the "hero," of Anderson's *Poor White*.

As we speak of Anderson's heritage and his place in American letters, it is never appropriate to name too loudly other writers who directly influenced his writings; like D. H. Lawrence, Anderson is a singularly unbookish figure, an "original," a "maker" in his own right. He is also the self-educated writer, whose brief stay at college (the college was Wittenberg at Springfield, Ohio. "Later they called me back. They gave me a degree," he wrote in his *Memoirs*) was the least memorable of his experiences. Yet like many self-taught writers, what he read for pleasure held a place more deeply rooted in his imagination than the place held by required reading in the minds of those who are "educated" by the thousands in colleges and universities. As one reads Anderson's stories and autobiographies, three older writers come to mind: one is Herman Melville, another Mark Twain, and the third George Borrow. In writing tributes to older writers for whom he felt a particular affinity, Anderson always remembered Borrow, and in doing so he showed a more profound depth of self-knowledge than many of his critics have attributed to him. Superficially, his choice of Borrow seems very far from the area of his distinctly American heritage. In the oceanic stream of nineteenth-century British prose, Borrow, the author of *The Bible in Spain*, *Lavengro*, and *The Romany Rye*, was a distant figure to his contemporaries. But that distance, and the failure of critics to classify Borrow's books as fiction or autobiography, as stories or novels, have their relevance to the attraction that Anderson felt to Borrow. The people about whom Borrow wrote, companions of the road and alehouse, pugilists, "bruisers," tinkers, "the Flaming Tinman," boys who loved horses and ponies, gypsies, fortune-tellers, the poverty-stricken Welsh and Irish nomadic figures, are not unlike the people that Anderson knew in the American Middle West. All of Borrow's people are tellers of stories, and whether Borrow retold these stories with respect for literal

truth is of less importance than is the record he created of the essential life within and around them. His writings have the same peripatetic atmosphere that is sometimes felt in Anderson's *Horses and Men* or *A Story-Teller's Story*: his was an art of speech that wanders slightly, that seems to walk, that philosophizes gently in an almost absent-minded fashion. It is important also that Borrow, the accomplished linguist, called himself "the Word-Master," for Anderson, with far greater aesthetic discrimination than Borrow, knew himself to be a "Word-Master" of another, and American, kind.

Anderson's liking for Borrow has an instinctive rightness beyond anything he could have learned through a conventional education. Borrow showed what a writer could do while ignoring the conventional rules for writing autobiographies and novels. This was a valuable lesson that Anderson never forgot; he became, as Thomas Seccombe wrote of Borrow, not a "matter-of-fact," but a "matter-of-fiction" man. He did not allow Borrow to influence him directly, and in matters of style, in which Borrow was notoriously uneven, Anderson greatly improved upon him. The choice of Borrow as one of his models placed Anderson on the side of those who see and feel things from the ground up, from the pavement of a city street, from the grasses of a field, from the threshold of a house. This view is always an independent view that refuses to become housebroken.

Anderson's debt to Mark Twain is less veiled than that to Borrow, for Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is literally close to an American time and place that Anderson knew. In his letters to Van Wyck Brooks, Anderson speaks authoritatively on the subject of Mark Twain, whom he sees as a distinctly American phenomenon, a figure who stands in the company of and between the figures of Lincoln and Whitman: "Twain's way lies somewhere between the roads taken by the other two men"; and in respect to Twain and Borrow, Anderson wrote, "In my own mind I have always coupled Mark Twain with George Borrow. I get the same quality of honesty in them, the same wholesome disregard of literary precedent." Of the "real" Twain, Anderson wrote to Brooks, "Should not

one go to Huck Finn for the real man, working out of a real people?" The people of Anderson's boyhood in the Middle West were but a single generation beyond Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, and there was an unbroken continuity between the two generations. Huckleberry Finn's skepticism concerning the virtues of church-going was of a piece with the world that Anderson knew, a world whose enjoyment was of the earth. Anderson's affinity to Mark Twain was as "natural," as unstudied, as Anderson's memories of growing up and coming of age. Equally natural was the example of perspective taken from Borrow, choosing the life of the out-of-doors as the true center of worldly experience.

With Melville, Anderson's affinities are of a far less conscious order; they belong to the inward-looking, darkened "nocturnal" aspects of Anderson's heritage. The affinities to Twain and Borrow are of daylight character; they are clear and specific and are sharply outlined within the lively scenes that Anderson created, but his kinship with Melville belongs to that diffused and shadowy area of his imagination which Paul Rosenfeld named as mysticism. As they spoke of his mysticism, even Anderson's best friends became confused because Anderson, like Borrow before him, distrusted philosophic generalities; for himself, he would have little or none of them; he would plead ignorance of large thoughts and pretensions, though he would gladly speak of how he came to write a story and, in *A Story-Teller's Story*, tell something very like another story to illustrate his point. He thought in symbols, in metaphors, in images, in turns of phrasing, in terms of a situation, or a scene of action—and in this language whatever is meant by his "mysticism" is half revealed. The friendship of Ishmael, in *Moby Dick*, with the dark-skinned savage Queequeg has a quality akin to the quality of the boy's contact with Negroes in "The Man Who Became a Woman" or the sound of Negro laughter in Anderson's *Dark Laughter*. It was once fashionable to call such "mysticism" Freudian, because it touched upon the emotions of adolescent sexual experience. In Anderson those emotions are transcended in "Death in the Woods," and whatever "mysticism" may