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SHERWOOD ANDERSON

Winesburg, Ohio



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Winesburg, Ohio

Introduction by Malcolm Cowley



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PENGUIN BOOKS

WINESBURG, OHIO

Born in 1876, Sherwood Anderson grew up in a small town in Ohio—an experience that was the basis of his greatest achievements as a writer. He served in the Spanish-American War, worked as an advertising man, and managed an Ohio paint factory before abandoning both job and family to embark on a literary career in Chicago. His first novel, *Windy McPherson's Son*, was published in 1916; his second, *Marching Men*, a characteristic study of the individual in conflict with industrial society, appeared in 1917. But it is *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), with its disillusioned view of small-town lives, that is generally considered his masterpiece. Later novels—*Poor White*, *Many Marriages*, and *Dark Laughter*—continued to depict the spiritual poverty of the machine age. Anderson died in 1941.

To the memory of my mother,

EMMA SMITH ANDERSON,

*whose keen observations on the life about her first
awoke in me the hunger to see beneath the surface of
lives, this book is dedicated.*

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INTRODUCTION

Rereading Sherwood Anderson after many years, one feels again that his work is desperately uneven, but one is gratified to find that the best of it is as new and springlike as ever. There are many authors younger in years—he was born in 1876—who made a great noise in their time, but whose books already belong among the horseless carriages in Henry Ford's museum at Greenfield Village. Anderson made a great noise too, when he published *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919. The older critics scolded him, the younger ones praised him, as a man of the changing hour, yet he managed in that early work and others to be relatively timeless. There are moments in American life to which he gave not only the first but the final expression.

He soon became a writer's writer, the only story teller of his generation who left his mark on the style and vision of the generation that followed. Hemingway, Faulkner, Wolfe, Steinbeck, Caldwell, Saroyan, Henry Miller . . . each of these owes an unmistakable debt to Anderson, and their names might stand for dozens of others. Hemingway was regarded as his disciple in 1920, when both men were living on the Near North Side of Chicago. Faulkner says that he had written very little, "poems and just amateur things," before meeting Anderson in 1925 and becoming, for a time, his inseparable companion. Looking at Anderson he thought to himself, "Being a writer must be a wonderful life." He set to work on his first novel, *Soldier's Pay*, for

which Anderson found a publisher after the two men had ceased to be friends. Thomas Wolfe proclaimed in 1936 that Anderson was "the only man in America who ever taught me anything"; but they quarreled a year later, and Wolfe shouted that Anderson had shot his bolt, that he was done as a writer. All the disciples left him sooner or later, so that his influence was chiefly on their early work; but still it was decisive. He opened doors for all of them and gave them faith in themselves. With Whitman he might have said:

*I am the teacher of athletes,
He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own
proves the width of my own,
He most honors my style who learns under it to
destroy the teacher.*

As the disciples were doing, most of Anderson's readers deserted him during the 1930s. He had been a fairly popular writer for a few years after *Dark Laughter* (1925), but his last stories and sketches, including some of his very best, had to appear in a strange collection of second-line magazines, pamphlets, and Sunday supplements. One marvelous story called "Daughters" remained in manuscript until six years after his death in 1941. I suspect that the public would have liked him better if he had been primarily a novelist, like Dreiser and Lewis. He did publish seven novels, from *Windy McPherson's Son* in 1916 to *Kit Brandon* in 1936, not to mention the others he started and laid aside. Among the seven *Dark Laughter* was his only best-seller, and *Poor White* (1920), the best of the lot, is studied in colleges as a picture of the industrial revolution in a small Midwestern town. There is, however, not one of the seven that is truly effective as a novel; not one that has balance and sustained force; not one that doesn't

break apart into episodes or nebulize into a vague emotion.

His three personal narratives—*A Story-Teller's Story* (1924), *Tar: A Midwest Childhood* (1926), and *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs* (1942)—are entertainingly inaccurate; indeed, they are almost as fictional as the novels, and quite as deficient in structure. They reveal that an element was missing in his mature life, rich as this was in other respects. It does not give us, and I doubt that Anderson himself possessed, the sense of moving ahead in a definite direction. All the drama of growth was confined to his early years. After finding his proper voice at the age of forty, Anderson didn't change as much as other serious writers; perhaps his steadfastness should make us thankful, considering that most American writers change for the worse. He had achieved a quality of emotional rather than factual truth and he preserved it to the end of his career, while doing little to refine, transform, or even understand it. Some of his last stories—by no means all of them—are richer and subtler than the early ones, but they are otherwise not much different or much better.

He was a writer who depended on inspiration, which is to say that he depended on feelings so deeply embedded in his personality that he was unable to direct them. He couldn't say to himself, "I shall produce such and such an effect in a book of such and such a length"; the book had to write or rather speak itself while Anderson listened as if to an inner voice. In his business life he showed a surprising talent for planning and manipulation. "One thing I've known always, instinctively," he told Floyd Dell, "—that's how to handle people, make them do as I please, be what I wanted them to be. I was in business for a long time and the truth is I was a smooth son of a bitch." He never

learned to handle words in that smooth fashion. Writing was an activity he assigned to a different level of himself, the one on which he was emotional and impractical. To reach that level sometimes required a sustained effort of the will. He might start a story like a man running hard to catch a train, but once it was caught he could settle back and let himself be carried—often to the wrong destination.

He knew instinctively whether one of his stories was right or wrong, but he didn't always know why. He could do what writers call "pencil work" on his manuscript, changing a word here and there, but he couldn't tighten the plot, delete weak passages, sharpen the dialogue, give a twist to the ending; if he wanted to improve the story, he had to wait for a return of the mood that had produced it, then write it over from beginning to end. There were stories like "Death in the Woods" that he rewrote a dozen times, at intervals of years, before he found what he thought was the right way of telling them. Sometimes, in different books, he published two or three versions of the same story, so that we can see how it grew in his subconscious mind. One characteristic of the subconscious is a defective sense of time: in dreams the old man sees himself as a boy, and the events of thirty or forty years may be jumbled together. Time as a logical succession of events was Anderson's greatest difficulty in writing novels or even long stories. He got his tenses confused and carried his heroes ten years forward or back in a single paragraph. His instinct was to present everything together, as in a dream.

When giving a lecture on "A Writer's Conception of Realism," he spoke of a half-dream that he had "over

and over." "If I have been working intensely," he said, "I find myself unable to relax when I go to bed. Often I fall into a half-dream state and when I do, the faces of people begin to appear before me. They seem to snap into place before my eyes, stay there, sometimes for a short period, sometimes longer. There are smiling faces, leering ugly faces, tired faces, hopeful faces. . . . I have a kind of illusion about this matter," he continued. "It is, no doubt, due to a story-teller's point of view. I have the feeling that the faces that appear before me thus at night are those of people who want their stories told and whom I have neglected."

He would have liked to tell the stories of all the faces he had ever seen. He was essentially a story teller, as he kept insisting, but his art was of a special type, belonging to an oral rather than a written tradition. It used to be the fashion to compare him with Chekhov and say that he had learned his art from the Russians. Anderson insisted that, except for Turgenev, he hadn't read any Russians when the comparisons were being made. Most of his literary masters were English or American: George Borrow, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain (more than he admitted), and Gertrude Stein. D. H. Lawrence was a less fortunate influence, but only on his later work. His earliest and perhaps his principal teacher was his father, "Irve" Anderson, who used to entertain whole barrooms with tales of his impossible adventures in the Civil War. A great many of the son's best stories, too, were told first in saloons. Later he would become what he called "an almighty scribbler" and would travel about the country with dozens of pencils and reams of paper, the tools of his trade. "I am one," he said, "who loves, like a drunkard his drink, the smell of ink, and the sight of a great pile of white paper that may be scrawled upon always gladdens me"; but his earlier im-

pulse had been to speak, not write, his stories. The best of them retain the language, the pace, and one might even say the gestures of a man talking unhurriedly to his friends.

Within the oral tradition, Anderson had his own picture of what a story should be. He was not interested in telling conventional folk tales, those in which events are more important than emotions. American folk tales usually end with a "snapper"—that is, after starting with the plausible, they progress through the barely possible to the flatly incredible, then wait for a laugh. Magazine fiction used to follow—and much of it still does—a pattern leading to a different sort of snapper, one that calls for a gasp of surprise or relief instead of a guffaw. Anderson broke the pattern by writing stories that not only lacked snappers, in most cases, but even had no plots in the usual sense. The tales he told in his Midwestern drawl were not incidents or episodes, they were *moments*, each complete in itself.

The best of the moments in *Winesburg, Ohio* is called "The Untold Lie." The story, which I have to summarize at the risk of spoiling it, is about two farm hands husking corn in a field at dusk. Ray Pearson is small, serious, and middle-aged, the father of half a dozen thin-legged children; Hal Winters is big and young, with the reputation of being a bad one. Suddenly he says to the older man, "I've got Nell Gunther in trouble. I'm telling you, but keep your mouth shut." He puts his two hands on Ray's shoulders and looks down into his eyes. "Well, old daddy," he says, "come on, advise me. Perhaps you've been in the same fix yourself. I know what everyone would say is the right thing to do, but what do you say?" Then the author steps back to look at his characters. "There they stood," he tells us, "in the big empty field with the quiet corn shocks standing in rows behind them and the red and

yellow hills in the distance, and from being just two indifferent workmen they had become all alive to each other."

That single moment of aliveness—that epiphany, as Joyce would have called it, that sudden reaching out of two characters through walls of inarticulateness and misunderstanding—is the effect that Anderson is trying to create for his readers or listeners. There is more to the story, of course, but it is chiefly designed to bring the moment into relief. Ray Pearson thinks of his own marriage, to a girl he got into trouble, and turns away from Hal without being able to say the expected words about duty. Later that evening he is seized by a sudden impulse to warn the younger man against being tricked into bondage. He runs awkwardly across the fields, crying out that children are only the accidents of life. Then he meets Hal and stops, unable to repeat the words that he had shouted into the wind. It is Hal who breaks the silence. "I've already made up my mind," he says, taking Ray by the coat and shaking him. "Nell ain't no fool. . . . I want to marry her. I want to settle down and have kids." Both men laugh, as if they had forgotten what happened in the cornfield. Ray walks away into the darkness, thinking pleasantly now of his children and muttering to himself, "It's just as well. Whatever I told him would have been a lie." There has been a moment in the lives of two men. The moment has passed and the briefly established communion has been broken, yet we feel that each man has revealed his essential being. It is as if a gulf had opened in the level Ohio cornfield and as if, for one moment, a light had shone from the depths, illuminating everything that happened or would ever happen to both of them.

That moment of revelation was the story Anderson told over and over, but without exhausting its freshness, for the story had as many variations as there were faces

in his dreams. Behind one face was a moment of defiance; behind another, a moment of resignation (as when Alice Hindman forces herself "to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in Winesburg"); behind a third face was a moment of self-discovery; behind a fourth was a moment of deliberate self-delusion. This fourth might have been the face of the author's sister, as he describes her in a chapter of *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs*. Unlike the other girls she had no beau, and so she went walking with her brother Sherwood, pretending that he was someone else. "It's beautiful, isn't it, James?" she said, looking at the wind ripples that passed in the moonlight over a field of ripening wheat. Then she kissed him and whispered, "Do you love me, James?"—and all her loneliness and flight from reality were summed up in those words. Anderson had that gift for summing up, for pouring a lifetime into a moment.

There must have been many such moments of truth in his own life, and there was one in particular that has become an American legend. After serving as a volunteer in the Spanish-American War; after supplementing his one year in high school with a much later year at Wittenberg Academy; and after becoming a locally famous copywriter in a Chicago advertising agency, Anderson had launched into business for himself; by the age of thirty-six he had been for some years the chief owner and general manager of a paint factory in Elyria, Ohio. The factory had prospered for a time, chiefly because of Anderson's talent for writing persuasive circulars, and he sometimes had visions of becoming a paint baron or a duke of industry. He had other visions too, of being sentenced to serve out his life as a

businessman. At the time he was already writing novels—in fact he had four of them under way—and he began to feel that his advertising circulars were insulting to the dignity of words. “The impression got abroad—I perhaps encouraged it,” Anderson says, “—that I was overworking, was on the point of a nervous breakdown. . . . The thought occurred to me that if men thought me a little insane they would forgive me if I lit out, left the business in which they invested their money on their hands.” Then came the moment to which he would always return in his memoirs and in his fiction. He was dictating a letter: “The goods about which you have inquired are the best of their kind made in the—” when suddenly he stopped without completing the phrase. He looked at his secretary for a long time, and she looked at him until they both grew pale. Then he said with the American laugh that covers all sorts of meanings, “I have been wading in a long river and my feet are wet.” He went out of the office for the last time and started walking eastward toward Cleveland along a railroad track. “There were,” he says, “five or six dollars in my pocket.”

So far I have been paraphrasing Anderson’s account—or two of his many accounts, for he kept changing them—of an incident that his biographers have reconstructed from other sources. Those others give a different picture of what happened at the paint factory on November 27, 1912. Anderson had been struggling under an accumulation of marital, artistic, and business worries. Instead of pretending to be a little crazy so that investors would forgive him for losing their money, he was actually—so the medical records show—on the brink of nervous collapse. Instead of making a conscious decision to abandon his wife, his three children, and his business career, he acted as if in a trance. There

was truly a decision, but it was made by something deeper than his conscious will; one feels that his whole being, psyche and soma together, was rejecting the life of a harried businessman. He had made no plans, however, for leading a different life. After four days of aimless wandering, he was recognized in Cleveland and taken to a hospital, where he was found to be suffering from exhaustion and aphasia.

Much later, in telling the story time after time, Anderson forgot or concealed the painful details of his flight and presented it as a pattern of conduct for others to follow. What we need in America, he liked to say, is a new class of individuals who, "at any physical cost to themselves and others"—Anderson must have been thinking of his first wife—will "agree to quit working, to loaf, to refuse to be hurried or try to get on in the world." In the next generation there would be hundreds of young men, readers of Anderson, who rejected the dream of financial success and tried to live as artists and individuals. For them Anderson's flight from the paint factory became a heroic exploit, as memorable as the choice made by Ibsen's Nora when she walked out of her doll's house and slammed the door. For Anderson himself when writing his memoirs, it was the central moment of his career.

Yet the real effect of the moment on his personal life was less drastic or immediate than one would guess from the compulsive fashion in which he kept writing about it. He didn't continue wandering from city to city, trading his tales for bread and preaching against success. After being released from the hospital, he went back to Elyria, wound up his business affairs, then took the train for Chicago, where he talked himself into a job with the same advertising agency that had employed him before he went into business for himself. As soon as he had the job, he sent for his wife and children. He