CHAPTER 2

The Interpretation of Dreams

Aesthetic Crises in "Hands"

> The schoolmaster is generally a man of some importance in the female circle of a rural neighborhood, being considered a kind of idle gentlemanlike personage, of vastly superior taste and accomplishments to the rough country swains, and, indeed, inferior in learning only to the parson. ("The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" 559)

George Willard's fluid, permutating textual relation to the various selfhoods of the grotesques is a trope for all selfhoods in *Winesburg, Ohio*. "Hands" offers an especially nuanced instance of the textuality of relationships between individuals and between an individual and various interpretive communities. By "textuality of relationships," I mean that relationships express a rich, problematic reciprocity between and among various assertions of self and interpretations of those assertions.

"Hands" focuses on Wing Biddlebaum, the timidly effete dreamer whose dreams—or more accurately, the interpretations of his dreams—got him into big trouble back in Pennsylvania when he was a schoolmaster before his flight to Winesburg, where he has since become a figure of fun and a berry-picking wizard. Thus, he is a version of the dreamer that Anderson imagines walking the uncongenial streets of a small midwestern town, a version also of Ed and Doug, whom the doctor's son worries will get "to thinking they are pretty special" and get into trouble (see chapter 1). The beating of Wing Biddlebaum, an apparently selfless dreamer, by a brutal, hard-fisted man invites a host of sympathetic romantic interpretations foregrounding the sensitive individual, the valorized feminine, up against a repressive society, the nasty,

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brutish masculine. Rather than endorse such a romantic interpretation, the story closely interrogates that romantic structural paradigm of sympathetic individual opposed to oppressive society and, in the process, questions other great American fictions employing similar romantic paradigms in which dreamers, Bartleby for example, contend with their communities. Wing's successive selfhoods represent two distinct romantic narrative modes: the first, acted out in the Pennsylvania town and nostalgically re-created for George Willard, is a romantic pastoralism in which the superior self is adored by a reverential community; the second, implicit in the lesson that Wing urgently imparts to George Willard in the Winesburg present, is a radical romantic text celebrating the self's superior contempt for a worthless community. "Hands" not only wryly examines the relationship between these apparently distinct literary modes but also comically examines a romantic artist's relationship with various audiences.

In this deceptively minimalist story, we find Anderson's characteristic art of wry restraint and clever misdirection, an art that encourages us to indulge in some of the culture's privileged mythologies—romantic pastoralism, romantic individualism, the nurturing feminine, pasts of plenitude and numinous radiance—only to tug us away, bring these oh-so-desired desires into troubled contexts, subverting our responses just before we are about to realize them. As he does throughout the collection, the narrator acts as an agent of Anderson's own doubleness. On the one hand, he represents Anderson's own fascination and democratic interest in the apparently inexhaustible narrative swirl of the tiny village; on the other, he represents the subversive suspicions toward those fictions, the ironic and parodying knowledge born out of intimate repeated experience.

When he introduces characters, the narrator usually gives particulars associated with small-town storytelling: where do they live, where did they come from, what do they do, who were their parents and what did they do, and so on. The narrator "locates" nearly every halfway-significant character in such a manner, if not at first mention, then in a digression. Such habits of presentation are part of the narrator's relationship to his audience, an audience he assumes to have the same needs as himself, the same familiar small-town ways of knowing and identifying a character. Just as Ford Maddox Ford's narrator in *The Good Soldier* imagines his fiction in terms of a discussion with a gentleman

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similar to himself, so too does this narrator talk as if he were telling a story to people from the same small-town background with the same small-town habits.

This narrative habit is the basis for some of Anderson's most careful insinuations. He uses this gossipy formula to convey feelings and ideas way beyond what we would imagine such a spare formula capable of. Not until later in the story are we told some of those other identifying particulars regarding Wing. The story's opening sentence, however, places him in his home: "Upon the half decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio, a fat little old man walked nervously up and down" (5). Neatly packed into this opening sentence are some of the story's principal issues. We note the rhetoric of marginality. The house is "near the edge of a ravine," itself "near the town." Throughout the entire novel, the narrator imagines characters through this peculiar spatial alertness, placing them in relation to various boundaries, configuring them in respect to centers and peripheries; such spatial imagining significantly reflects the characters' own rhetorics of selfhood, the way they imagine themselves. Every character, it seems, lives at the edge or beyond or in back or off or behind in some way or other: Ray Winters and his wife "lived in a tumble-down frame house beside a creek at the back end of the Wills farm" (178); Tandy Hard "lived in an old unpainted house on an unused road that led off Trunion Pike" (120); Joe Welling's house "stood in a little grove of trees beyond where the main street of Winesburg, crossed Wine Creek" (80); and Seth Richmond's house sits in a "little valley far out at the end of Main Street" (105).

These decentering, marginalizing placements effectively create the sense of a centerless town. The narrator's attentiveness to the various decays and failures to maintain dwellings, the general rundown physical condition of Winesburg, makes up the novel's social realism, which reproduces the impermanence and flimsiness of the midwestern towns that Anderson noted so often in his autobiographies. The narrator's manner of talking about place conveys, however, something beyond this realistic detail. The piled-up prepositional phrases stretching characters out, back and beyond and off the beaten track, connect to and support the characters' own estranging rhetorics of self. Like Wing Biddlebaum, who, we will soon learn, does "not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town" (5–6), all citizens of Winesburg

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feel, in one way or another, estranged. While the physical dilapidations are part of the alertness to economic and historical circumstances of the novel's social realism, they are also the way Anderson captures a sense of place inhabited by people who don't have a sense of place, who don't feel they belong to this particular place.

The story's opening sentence initiates a peculiar rhythm that is itself a meaning: a physically violent interruption of a mood, desire, or abstraction. The nervous energy of the "fat little old man" comically interrupts the elongated slow-motion introduction, which stretches out over six prepositional phrases. This pattern of experience—some form of comic dramatic juxtaposition of opposed states—is an essential dramatic rhythm in *Winesburg, Ohio,* whether it is Ed Handby's fist destroying George Willard's expansive reverie of manhood in "An Awakening" or Wash Williams's matter-of-fact revelation of his wife's infidelity after the lyrical and lengthy description of their romantic idyll. This fundamental rhythm of the narrator's imagination expresses at different levels—sentence, paragraph, tale, and entire novel—the principal opposition between appealing abstraction and subverting, contradictory realities. The "half-decayed veranda" is another image of margin, this time between health and decay, between promise of and eagerness for the future on the one hand and dreary certainty and dread of how that future will turn out on the other. The image conveys one of the story's preoccupations, the failure of some sort of ambition, perhaps even a social aspiration, because "veranda" contrasts with and seems grander than the understated "small frame house." "Veranda" comes up again in a more suitable context in the description of Banker White's house (214). The novel is filled with these little social resonances cutting across story and class lines. The second sentence also conveys a particular drama of failure that has occurred in time. A "field that had been seeded for clover" has yielded instead "a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds" (5). Because Wing's dreams are closely connected to romantic pastoral mythologies, this image of failed clover, with its idyllic pastoral associations, stands as a sort of gloss for the collapse of Wing's first selfhood, the pastoral romantic dream that he will later invoke for George.

The old man (Wing) looks out across the field and sees a wagon filled with berry pickers returning from the fields. The berry pickers show up in several stories, one of the repeated references that Anderson uses to create deceptive unities among the tales. Because of their immediate

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associations of happy sensuality and cohesive harmonies, the berry pickers represent precisely the sort of image we need to read carefully. The narrator's deft introduction of the image complicates easy sentimentalist interpretations. In addition to the obvious suggestions of youth and energy conveyed in their boisterous laughter, these berry pickers participate in a narrative pattern that relates a coherent community to a singular individual, a drama that replicates other narrative patterns not only within this story but in other stories as well. Through such narrative imbrication, Anderson checks, complicates, and troubles our response. But before we examine that imbrication, let's take a close look at this image of youthful pastoral joy. The cohesive happiness of the berry pickers' hilarity, their undifferentiated joy, may be slightly at the edge, hinting at a lack of control. The pastoral lads and lasses are boisterous, which seems within accepted boundaries of bucolic joy, but they are also shouting, which may approach the edge of acceptability. They are clearly young—not adult, but close to it. They are described as "youths and maidens," "maidens" suggesting innocence but also nubility, an oxymoronic boundary. "Maiden" lends another dimension to the tone of the story. There's nothing unrealistic about the events, sexual high jinks that we might find going on in any high school. But "maiden" insists on a slightly elevated context and brings a bit of a storybook setting. Whatever innocent pastoral associations that may be connected to "youths and maidens" are qualified, however, by the suggestion of violence conveyed by diction that manages to be a bit excessive (the shouting and shrillness) for the pastoral context. A boy attempts "to drag after him one of the maidens, who screamed and protested shrilly" (5).[1] The violence—the dragging and screaming and the shrillness—surpasses, if only barely, what we expect or want in familiar youthful play. It is play, but it is playful *rape,* aggressively heterosexual, merriment with an edge to it, Sam Peckinpaugh in Winesburg, Ohio. In other words, we can't quite read this scene the way we may have expected to, the way we have been half-invited (by the images suggestive of youthful innocence) to read it and perhaps wanted to read it. The opposition of the isolated, old, physically imperfect, failed individual to the cohesive, collective, heedless energy of youth insinuates familiar romantic narratives either lamenting the failed individual's loss of radiant youth or lamenting the inevitable loss of the cohesive, innocent, thoughtless joy of youth. But we can't quite

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get to those comfortable sorrows because of the shrill screaming, the language that prevents that idyll from being entirely idyllic.

As the boy tries to drag the girl off the wagon, his feet "kicked up a cloud of dust that floated across the face of the departing sun" (5), a crepuscular image that we might casually mistake for wistful nostalgia, a yearning for a bucolic past that has departed, and a foreshadowing of a loss of innocence. But the narrator's image of autumnal wistfulness has a self-dismantling mechanism. The boys' and girls' youthful energy, a metonym for other numinous pasts—Wing's, Winesburg's, and America's—was already in question, the pastoral vision troubled. We feel a sense of loss, but the purity of what is being lost is uncertain. What happens next typifies Anderson's alertness to the textuality of experience. With the sun both departing and obscured, we hear "a thin girlish voice"—perhaps, but only perhaps, the girl just pursued—the anonymity of the speaker itself part of the speech's authority and mystery. "'Oh, you Wing Biddlebaum, comb your hair, it's falling into your eyes,' commanded the voice to the man, who was bald and whose nervous little hands fiddled about the bare white forehead as though arranging a mass of tangled locks" (5). The event is realistic, but the girlish speech is not quite realistic. Because the author is unspecified, the girlish voice seems to speak for the entire sexually energetic, boisterous group. At least we hear no demurs. The author may be feminine, but there is nothing traditionally feminine in respect to nurturing or sympathy in this author. The command (always a sinister word in *Winesburg, Ohio;* see "Nobody Knows" and "Loneliness" for instances of the immorality of commanding) that Wing comb his hair implies a story, a fiction, the meanings or purposes of which, intended or not intended, we can only speculate.

Coming at the climax of the playfully sinister abduction/seduction scene, the origin of this fiction, we might reasonably theorize, connects to the sexual energy of the group itself, expressed in its giddy, slightly out-of-control spirits and its play sexual assault. The little story of Wing's combing his hair may serve a fairly uncomplicated masking function. Full of their sexual selves, the anonymous artist creates a distracting fiction that isolates and focuses on someone outside the group as a way of calling attention away from the group's sexual play. The fiction may, however, be more than merely a distraction. The artist, arguably, has instinctively created a scapegoat and not merely diverted

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attention from his/her group's sexual play but actually exorcized the group's not fully recognized desires. Indeed, the satirical fiction, by acting as a substitute for the action it displaced, seems to have effectively assuaged or at least controlled the group's sexual energy. After the girlish voice calls out its fiction, we hear no more about shrill shrieking and roughhouse sexual play, the implication being that the members of the group have fictively participated in their own sexuality by satirically exposing Wing's futile virility. The fetishistic function of the fiction, substituting for and actually assuaging the desire it displaces, connects this narrative pattern to the novel's theme of fetishistic substitution, indeed comments on the far-reaching implications of the fable of identity/consciousness expressed in "The Book of the Grotesque." Whatever the anonymous author's motivation, conscious or unconscious, the satirical fiction foregrounds one of the novel's principal tensions: the struggle between the generations, a struggle, as we see from this episode, already thoroughly narratized in the mind of the girlishly voiced author. The group's choric representative cruelly celebrates its youthful vitality by gloating over the aged, failed vitality of an outsider, a bunch of kids laughing at an old, fat, bald guy.

This group's relation to this singular individual has several significances. First, the miniature dramatization of a community's textual relationship to an individual is a trope for the larger issue of the textual relationship between the self and larger social configurations. Not only individuals author their selves and assert their meanings; communities do the same thing. A community defines itself through narratives, some of which note singularity and then punish (in this case, laugh at) the peculiarity of the individual, an example of which is the gossip regarding Louise Trunnion's promiscuity. The community, we must remember, is not the entire "other," say the town or society or any of those generalizing terms, but is a smaller interpretive community identified by the very fictions/interpretations to which it subscribes. This group of kids is a narrowly defined community caught at a particular moment of sexual energy and consciousness defined thematically and generically by its satirical excluding fiction. As we will see in this story and other stories, there are lots of communities in the community. The overall large coherent community exists, we will find, only as a fictional construction in the consciousnesses of Winesburg citizens, part of their rhetoric of selfhood. In addition to being a trope for the tex-

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tual relationship of groups to individuals, this early scene contributes to the novel's complex thematic imbrication. This scene, in which one generation narratizes another, alerts us to the issue in other stories: Dr. Parcival's tale about praying over the dead body of his insane father, Jesse Bentley's Abrahamic Old Testament narrative (with his grandson as Isaac), his grandson's narrative of romantic patricide overthrowing oppressive religious authority, Elmer Cowley's story about his father's "queerness," Mrs. White's Jane Austen–like self-congratulatory narrative about Helen's superior "breeding," and many more. Small-town middle America teems with a library of cultural (American and Western) narratives regarding the generations.

There's still another complication to this particular scene. It's not merely the girl's "comb your hair" fiction that needs attention. The narrator's presentation and implicit interpretation of the youthful fiction also deserve comment. The narrator significantly complicates matters when he details the little man's physical actions that led, presumably, to the girl's satirical fancy. The narrator, in effect, explains, interprets, and enlarges the intellectual context of the youthful community's fiction. Through the narrator, we learn that the girl's story is ironic or satirical because the little fat old man is bald or balding (as suggested by his "bare white forehead"). The narrator describes the man's peculiar hand movements that make it appear that he is combing his hair. At one level, the narrator has simply explained the joke, which we might not have gotten otherwise. A man seems to be combing his hair, which is funny because he doesn't really have any hair. But the narrator has not simply reported objectively; he has complicated and transmuted the girl's fiction. For the narrator, it's not "hair" but "locks," diction suggestive of romantic virility. The narrator has effectively interpreted the girl's story in a way that she or the group she represents cannot. For the young people, it's pretty basic: "We're young and full of juice and you're old and dry." But through his choice of diction, the narrator enlarges the context; his version connects the satirical fiction to opposed literary modes and their corresponding dictions—pastoral romanticism (maidens, youths, and locks) and comic realism (little fat old man and bare white forehead). The narrator has done even more. He has not only insinuated the contrast between different literary modes and periods; he has entered into the story by understanding larger implications. His use of "fiddling" has something satirical in it, something just a bit

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snippy, although the snippiness may be an overhearing of the girlish voice's taunting. Also, he imputes a certain femininity, an over-fastideousness and comic futility to the little old man's imagined "arranging" of the tangled locks. The idea of primping, of delicately handling ("arranging") the powerful ("mass") and profusely chaotic and sexually entrapping ("tangled") "locks," anticipates the story's central comic preoccupation, the relationship between expressed or arranged romantic abstractions and physical hungers. Just as the narrator complicated the bucolic innocence of the youths and maidens, he subtly complicates our response to this "victim." He manages to restrain our sympathies.

Although it is impossible to determine the intent behind the fiction uttered by the girlish voice, certain things are clear: First, we have been prevented from making uncomplicated affirmations of either of the opposed parties in this drama, Wing and the group of young people. Any automatic response we might normally feel toward the lonely, alienated individual who has failed to bring about familiar aspirations (clover) is held back by the hint of comic futility and comic contradictions in the narrator's description of Wing. The group of pastoral shepherds and shepherdesses—which we might naturally expect to be at the center of romantic dramas of bucolic innocence, agrarian pasts of plenitude, natural, instinctive life—is compromised as well. These bucolic lads and lasses are not innocent in several senses. Sharp-edged violence occurs just under the surface of the blithe rustic joy. These kids are cruel. They are not flower children dancing around a maypole. They are mean. No matter the uncertain and possibly complex motivation of the girlishly voiced fiction, the anonymously authored little story clearly makes fun of someone who at least appears to be weak, isolated, and defenseless. Second, this narrative pattern in which one group excludes a singular or odd person repeats a pattern of Wing's experience back in Pennsylvania, where, we will learn, another community excluded him, not by a sarcastic jibe but by a beating. These similar narrative patterns are part of the complex imbrication of narrative lines and plots not only within stories but across story lines, an overlapping where differences are as important as similarities. Here, for instance, the fact that the youth's satirical, excluding fiction in Winesburg substitutes for the excluding physical violence that happened in the Pennsylvania town points to the larger issue of the way that fictions can displace action, substitute for

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the physical, to the point where all desire in this small town seems to be a form of fetishism.

The youths and maidens are, then, "fallen" in the sense suggested in the passage already discussed in the introduction from "The Book of the Grotesque." While they may appear the very image of youthful, instinctive life, they have clearly taken a truth to themselves. The youths' fiction, while crude and not literary in any sophisticated sense, certainly and clearly narratizes the group's sexuality into a distinct fable of youthful sexual joy defined against the impotence of the single old man. These seemingly thoughtless youths are, in truth, already trapped in story. "Trapped" may be excessive in that it suggests an outside to be escaped to or even a desire to escape. But not only are these frolicking kids already living in a romantic narrative of youthful virility, they use this fable to define themselves, use the story to relish their own superiority. We will see many instances of this generational drama from different angles, but all will be shot through with the codes and mythologies that make up our lives. All will reveal the written textual nature of "reality." Characteristic of the other Edens we will find in *Winesburg, Ohio,* the little blisses of this playful pastoral suggest past purities that, when scrutinized, reveal all sorts of parodic discourses. All the Edens in Winesburg, Ohio, are fallen or narratized or human, all amounting to the same thing.

The next paragraph, while not nearly as suggestively dense as the first, gives some important background information and yields several important ideas. As we have already mentioned, the timid man does not "think of himself as in any way a part of the town where he had lived for twenty years" (5–6). The common assumption of the grotesques is that they are uncommon. Each of these figures either joyfully or sadly lays claim to a remarkable singularity. These characters construct their special individualism by imagining themselves in relationship to a community that they feel either excluded from or superior to. The community that they imagine as a way of dramatizing their singularity is an essential component of their rhetoric of selfhood.[2] One other qualification needs to be made. The grotesques are not in any way peculiar or radically distinct from the norm. They are the norm, a notion especially suited to the interrelated-tale format, the perfect form for registering the democracy of singularities, and perfect for revealing

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ironies and contradictions connected to this common insistence on uncommonness.

When characters imagine their specialness, they often imagine others at the center of warm communal or conventional life. For a number of the grotesques, George Willard serves as a central character in several of their narratives, representing the normal life to or from which they either aspire or flee. Seth Richmond, for example, sees him as a representative of the silly talkers of the town, one who delights in being at the center of the town's energetic life, which to Seth is empty. Seth knows that he's different from everyone else: "It's different with me. I don't belong" (114). To Wash Williams, George, in danger of being entrapped by an evil woman, is the typical man—unlike Wash, who is the apostle of misogynistic hatred of women. To Louise Trunnion, George Willard stands for all the socially secure citizens of Winesburg, who, she feels, think they are better than she. When we discover that Willard himself feels apart, that he too feels estranged, we understand that the cohesive communities that the grotesques imagine in order to dramatize their singularity are constructions, distinctly different narratives that share an emphasis on the self's imperious isolation. The narrator, the witness to all the claims of the various singularities, embodies the knowledge of this common feeling of specialness, a knowledge that links him to Tom Little ("Tom had seen a thousand George Willards go out of their towns to the city. It was a commonplace enough incident with him" [221]) from the collection's concluding story. Anderson makes a point of telling us in his various comments on *Winesburg, Ohio* that he considered the abnormal citizens to be normal and was a bit nettled that readers felt his characters were not typical: "They are only people going along as I am. What happens to them in the stories happens to everyone" (*Memoirs* 446).

The narrator's careful scrutiny of the relationship between Wing and the young George Willard will trouble several more of the culture's standard privileged romantic mythologies regarding communication and language. In respect to Wing, the narrator tells us that only one of Winesburg's citizens "had come close to him" (6), a slightly wrenched idiomatic phrasing that makes for a curious ambiguity. The "closeness" suggests intimacy, friendship, but to "come close" has a different feel, suggesting near discovery, a near miss, an escape from danger,[3] another example of this narrator's insistent qualifying of a potential sentimental-

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ity.[4] He will not leave us with the uncomplicated companionship, the man who has just the one pal. Instead, he insinuates a sense of danger at the boundary line of that intimacy, a hint of furtiveness on Wing's part. Next, the narrator identifies the friend who "had come close" as George Willard, who is significantly and typically introduced in terms of his father and his father's occupation: "son of Tom Willard, the proprietor of the New Willard House" (6). In that "proprietor," the narrator registers Tom Willard's sense of place in the complicated system of class and social aspirations that is part of the young Willard's background. Class divisions, awareness of class, social status, and social aspirations appear with some significance in nearly every tale in this work, although it is a theme that is craftily hidden deep, hidden by the absence of a class rhetoric, by the nearly omnipresent sense on the part of each individual that he or she is singular, and by the small-town proximities that obscure social differences—in other words, hidden in the very way that it is hidden from the characters themselves.

Wing "had formed something like a friendship" with George Willard. The *Winesburg* narrator craftily uses these seemingly innocuous similes that manage to maintain his flattering, good-mannered relationship to the story and at the same time to insinuate a darker possibility. Saying that they "formed something like a friendship" is a way of saying that while the relationship may look like a friendship, it is not. Uncomplicated similes alert us to the similarity of the terms being compared, but Anderson's similes often manage to alert us to the danger of mistaking the appearance of similarity for actual likeness. Wing's story points to the problematic issue of interpreting what lies under the surface of various kinds of assertions, a large issue expressed again and again in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Does Wing's gentle surface demeanor tell his whole story? Is what he looks like the truth? Or is what he looks like something quite different from what he actually is, what he may be mistaken for? Wing and George Willard's "friendship," like all relationships in Winesburg, is a thicket of questions associated with problematic textuality: intentionality, what Wing wants to mean, what he "really" means, the ostensible reasons that George Willard does not interpret Wing's story too closely, the "real" reasons that he does not look too closely.

At one level, Willard fulfills a fairly simple narrative function similar to that of Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* or Jake Barnes in *The*

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Sun Also Rises. Because he seems to listen, others are drawn to him. In that listening, of course, he cannot help but expose the tortuous process of his own selfhood. George sometimes walks out to Wing's house, and the little old man "anxiously" hopes that George will come that evening. The narrator describes the little man "rubbing his hands together," conveying a gleeful, slightly unwholesome anticipation of George Willard's visit. Right after this Uriah Heep rubbing of the hands, the narrator suggestively mentions that Wing's fear drives him back to his house. In the following paragraph, the narrator steps back from the immediate action to tell us something about the circumstances of the relationship between the two. Although Wing has been a mystery to the town because of his odd behavior, he gains some confidence when around George. The narrator makes this point, however, with an odd amphibious evolutionary metaphor so comic as to once again control any sentimental interpretation. "In the presence of George Willard, Wing Biddlebaum, who for twenty years had been the town mystery, lost something of his timidity, and his shadowy personality, submerged in a sea of doubts, came forth to look at the world" (6). This narrator never allows us to indulge fully our emotional appetites and always thwarts our clichéd expectations. We might have expected to see Wing's injured, wounded, exiled self brought into the healthy, healing communion of companionship, the companionship he has been denied. But again our own sentimentalities are not allowed to emerge. The expected formulaic response is suppressed because there is something not quite right in the language. The narrator presents the emerging brave new self as some primordial amorphousness coming out onto the banks of the new world. This passage contains language belonging to heroic enterprise: "came forth" and "ventured" and "strode." These terms exist, however, in uncongenial contexts. The striding even seems threatening because the "rickety front porch" seems too frail for that violence. Wing's intimacy with George Willard has not made him strong and whole to the point where Wing is now larger and stronger than the life about him. There's something unsettling in this new life that emerges. Wing's voice, which had been low and trembling, no doubt contributing to the mystery, now verges on being out of control. Like the shrillness that had marked the at-edge sexual energy of the youths and maidens, Wing's voice—"shrill and loud" (6)—disturbs any affirmative romantic response we might have wanted to give, the

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over-the-edge unpleasantness acting again as a warning signal. Anderson wryly undermines a host of the culture's prescriptive responses. He doesn't entirely satirize them or expose them as futile, but he doesn't let them take hold. This early example of "communicativeness" should also correct or at least check easy assumptions regarding the value of human communication and the tragedy of the absence of communication. On the verge of expressing himself, of really communicating, Wing is odd and scary.

The narrator's comparisons are peculiar, their unconventionality upending some of the most basic cultural assumptions regarding silence and language. The narrator describes the salutary effect, a qualified salutariness, of Wing's leaving silence behind and entering into language, finally talking with someone. "The voice that had been low and trembling became shrill and loud. The bent figure straightened. With a kind of wriggle, like a fish returned to the brook by the fisherman, Wing the silent began to talk, striving to put into words the ideas that had been accumulated by his mind during long years of silence" (6). It's not just comparing a man to a fish that is odd (although it is), but the logic of the comparison has a convoluted Donnean complexity. The repressed man, the man denied language, is the one out of his "natural" element, a fish out of water. It is the unnaturally bent crooked figure who is without language, who is unnaturally silent. Anderson playfully manipulates and upends traditionally privileged notions. Wing, silent and without language, is out of his little Eden, his little brook of pastoral innocence, held away from the pure, innocent waters, if not gasping, then convulsively eager to return to the lifestream from which he has been pulled. And what does the purity consist of? What is the prelapsarian, "natural," uncorrupted innocence he will be returned to with a "wriggle"? Talking, language, the breaking of silence.

I make something of this because I want to emphasize that Anderson never unthinkingly celebrates silence or the absence of language in the romantic fashion—equating it with the authenticity of nature and opposing it to corrupted language—as he is so often assumed to do (see Glen A. Love's "*Winesburg, Ohio* and the Rhetoric of Silence"). "An Awakening" and an episode in "Paper Pills" focus on the precedence of the "written," a subtle dislocation of a cultural privileging that would gladden the heart of any Derrida disciple. In "Paper Pills," only after the tall dark girl has dreamed of being bitten does she submit to the

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silent big-eared lad who "in the moment of his passion *actually* did bite her shoulder" (16, emphasis added). In "An Awakening," only after George Willard has provided, comically and ironically, the Lawrentian manhood fable can Belle submit to the silent Ed Handby. Silence is never the symbol of nature's potency; rather, it is a rhetorical device used by characters to imply such potencies, part of the ways they dramatize their specialness (see also Seth Richmond's contempt for the volubility of others as opposed to his own silence in "The Thinker"). In this scene, the language describing the return to the brook implies that the natural state for humanity is the unnatural fallen state of language. We are creatures of language. The narrator's clever, sly descriptions refuse to allow the culture's standard formulae to survive intact without some tug in the other direction. The narrator holds us back, manipulates our responses through indirection and misdirection.

The narrator continues to add different values or shadings to his tone. At one point, he describes Wing's hands as "like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird" (7). That biblically flavored "unto" signals another heightening device, another pull away from the realistic, the mundane. The tone of this story in particular and the novel in general is the mixture, the delicately balanced double perspective. On the one hand, there is the affirming, unquestioning witness who seems to embrace a range of what might be called lyrical or positive tones: pastoral, romantic, sympathetic, awed, heroic, biblical, measured and stately, and compassionate. On the other, there is what might best be called the subversive witness, who is responsible for a set of opposed tones: realistic, cynically suspicious, hero-deflating, abrupt, and even cruel. Alongside the "Biddlebaum the silent" and "like unto" and "youths and maidens" and "clover" and "locks" we find "mustard weeds" and uncontrollable shouting and gleeful rubbing of hands and galvanic wriggling and "piston rods" (7) and shrillness and fists beating and pounding on tables and tree stumps and a "giant woodpecker" (8).

These paragraphs also raise the issue of identity as a reciprocal textual relationship between community and individual. "Some obscure poet of the town" (7) had given Wing his name. Wing chose his new last name, Biddlebaum, from "a box of goods seen at a freight station as he hurried through an eastern Ohio town" (11). His name is the product, then, of the community's interpretation of him and of his own interpretation of himself. His identity, his selfhood, is the complex interaction of his own

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several narratives—the nostalgic dream of the past and the radical revision of that dream—and various responsive interpretations, including those of the loose-lipped lad back in Pennsylvania (homosexual lover), the group of men who chase him (sexual predator) from the town, the band of berry pickers (sexless and comic old guy), those who proudly celebrate his berry-picking wizardry, and George Willard. This multilayered fictive process made up of various communities' fictions and the individual construction of self is a trope for all identities in the novel.

Through the connection between the young boy and the old man, the narrator examines three separate relationships, each implicated in and metaphorical of the others: the relation of friend to friend, the relation of artist to audience, and the relation of artist to his subject. Wing's two selves represent two distinct romantic narratives, and the young George Willard is audience to both. Wing's successive romantic narratives of self imply, however, a relationship of artist to audience: an adoring subservient audience defined in Wing's nostalgic dream and an ignorant, howling mob to be ignored and fled defined in his "lesson" to George. In selecting George for his singular audience, Wing, unconsciously perhaps, anticipates the flattering strategy toward audience employed by romantic artists who preach the individual's radical independence from the common herd. The audience for such a message must itself be singular, must be uncommon, to be worthy, and even to understand. The message is not for just everyone. Just by being *the* audience, the audience is saved, separated out from the "roaring voices." We will see more of such rhetoric in other grotesques' relationships with George Willard, especially Enoch Robinson's. At the same time that George is audience to the various romantic narratives of Wing's several selves, the young man is also an artist in training who has taken as his subject Wing's mystery. Willard must confront not just the conventional issues any artist (any individual as well) faces—the past (Wing) preaching to the present (George), "Be like me"—but also the complicated aesthetic/moral questions regarding his relationship to his subject.

George Willard is extraordinarily curious about Wing's hands: "At times an almost overwhelming curiosity had taken hold of him" (7–8). He holds back, however, from penetrating to the heart of Wing's mystery, ostensibly out of human decency: "only a growing respect for Wing Biddlebaum kept him from blurting out the questions that were often in his mind" (8). The young man's hesitation hints at a moral issue for

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both human and aesthetic relationships, a danger at coming too close, to use a version of the phrase that had been used earlier. George has in mind, of course, the danger to Wing, implying that to blurt out such personal questions would be a violation of Wing's privacy and, therefore, disrespectful. Such an ethic runs counter to the aesthetic principles that seem to emerge in the novel (the aesthetic urged on George by Kate Swift, for example) and are represented by George's developing aesthetic creed that culminates in "Loneliness" when he penetrates to the heart of Enoch's story. George's notion that getting to the truth might be a threat to the subject checks our automatic validation of the value of getting to the bottom of things, another of Anderson's complicating mechanisms: presenting contradictory privileged narratives. Anderson complicates the issue even further, however, when he suggests that George's respect for Wing may mask his fear of self-discovery; in other words, getting "too close" to the subject poses a threat to the artist as well as to the artist's subject.

Once, George Willard had "been on the point of asking" about the hands, suggesting he is about to overcome his scruples. The two men "walked in the fields" and sat down on a "grassy bank," another pastoral scene that will soon be interrupted by Wing's decidedly unpastoral behavior. Before George can ask Wing about the hands, the narrator notes Wing's strange violence, comparing him to a giant woodpecker frenetically "beating" its wings (8). Wing, the first of many Winesburg citizens who will rehearse, re-create, and validate their own lives by "teaching" George, has advice for George, reminding us that teaching is one of the novel's hidden away thematic resonances. All *Winesburg*'s teachers—Wing Biddlebaum, Kate Swift, Nell Gunther, Seth Richmond's father's mistress—are connected to sexual trangressions, suggesting that for Anderson, teaching is a way of getting at the tension between high-minded abstractions and the physical realities that may be masked by those abstractions. Wing's narrative that he preaches to George is a distillation of nineteenth-century romantic individualism. Wing condemns the young George's "tendency to be too much influenced by the people about him" (8). Unlike Wing's reminiscent dream that will follow, Wing now preaches radical individualism to his young apprentice, a romanticism compatible with the later stages of romantic selfhood and romantic art. Just as Kurtz was created by all of Europe, so too do all celebrated individualisms—Wordsworth's,

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Browning's, Twain's, Melville's, and even Conrad's—contribute to and explain Wing's romanticism: "You are destroying yourself," he cried. "You have the inclination to be alone and to dream and you are afraid of dreams. You want to be like others in town here. You hear them talk and you try to imitate them" (8). We don't know if Wing has any real evidence for his claim that George wants to be alone and is inclined to dream. Perhaps just the fact that the young man shows an interest in Wing is enough to convince Wing that George is like him, or like what Wing wants to be. At any rate, Wing urges upon his young companion a familiar romantic selfhood defined by its contempt for and superior separation from the community ("others"). To want to be like others is wrong, destructive. While it takes courage to be oneself ("you are afraid of dreams"), only by dreaming, being the precious, privileged individual self, according to Wing, can one avoid destruction, destruction implicitly defined as being common, not individuated. Wing introduces, then, a narrative that privileges dreaming, a narrative that provides rich ironies and by and to which we will measure and connect other characters both in this story (for example, the lad back in Pennsylvania who wasn't afraid to dream homosexual thoughts about Wing) and other stories (most notably Wash Williams, who believes that everyone else *is dreaming* and it is his job to wake them). It is impossible to tell at this point if Wing is actually talking about George or if he's pretending to talk about George while really talking about himself. As we will see, that business about being afraid to dream might be linked to his dreadful experience in the Pennsylvania town that we will learn about later on. His warning about George's wanting to be like others connects back to his own possibly wistful reflection that he is not a part of the town life about him. To have one's own imperious self in command while ostensibly caring for the welfare of another is a repeated pattern of experience in Winesburg, Ohio. The details regarding his former selfhood alert us to several issues: the historical relationship between two literary modes of romantic celebration of the self and the questionable motivation of the radical romantic artist's impassioned message.

Right after his emotional lesson in romantic individualism directed at George, Wing tries "again to drive his point home" (8). Through these pages, the language of softness, feminine delicacy, and gentleness contends with and exists side by side with a contradictory diction of violence and masculine force. Images suggestive of tenderness ("caress,"

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"soft and reminiscent," "sigh of contentment," and "low and trembling") are juxtaposed with images of explosive violence ("piston rods of his machinery," "closed his fists and beat with them," and "his hands pounding busily"). On first or second reading, before we try to determine conceptual frameworks for these juxtapositions, we are likely to read this just experiencing the contradictions rather than fully comprehending them. In other words, we're kept just a bit off balance, unsettled. Sitting on a grassy bank, another pastorally suggestive expression, Wing no longer is crying out his urgent message: "His voice became soft and reminiscent, and with a sigh of contentment he launched into a long rambling talk, speaking as one lost in a dream. Out of the dream Wing Biddlebaum made a picture for George Willard. 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" (8). Because it is reminiscent, we must conclude that this dream is not an imagined scene out of a classical past but a refashioning of the golden days in the Pennsylvania town when he was tousling the lads' heads to his heart's content before he, known then as Adolph Meyers, was expelled from his own psychological garden. We do not directly hear Wing's description but instead get the narrator's reformulation of his discourse, a reformulation that constitutes a critical interpretation of Wing's romantic pastoralism and a subtle criticism of Wing's exhortation to dream presented in that "lost in a dream."

The lightly limned pastoral associations detected earlier in the opening paragraphs of the story are now expressed directly in the narrator's retelling of Wing's reminiscence and, of course, strengthen the previous connections. That the "men lived again" clearly indicates that Wing is not imagining a classical age but rather his own reenactment of that age, presumably in the small Pennsylvania town, since he is reminiscing. The narrator not only states directly the pastoral quality ("pastoral golden age") but conveys it indirectly through images ("green open country"). Wing's reminiscence re-creates the past, eliminating realistic details in his dream of a numinous time. No scruffy, dirty farm boys inhabit his dream of the past, only clean-limbed young men. Quite apart from any disturbing implications of his emphasis on clean-limbedness, the reference to cleanliness lifts the picture out of the grimy realistic

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into the idealized romantic. Wing's evocation of the good old days, in fact, blends the realistic with the romantic pastoral. The young men coming across the green open country might qualify simply as young farmhands, but there is something Greek about them as well, even perhaps a suggestion of centaurs ("mounted on horses"). Also, this is not a normal gathering of school-age children. For one thing, their manhood is emphasized, the word "men" appearing three times in the short paragraph. And while the old man is not specifically identified as an American Socrates, he has that quality about him. These students come to him in spirit (they gather about his feet) and actually (they travel some distance, conveyed by the "open country"). They are reverent, sitting at his feet literally and metaphorically. And there are quite a few ("crowds") of these men.

Wing's little story, containing both classical and Christian pastoralism (the little garden and the tree), enacts a wish-fulfilling romanticism in which the self (the wise teacher, the Wing surrogate) is apart from the community because of the self's superiority to that community (which happily acknowledges its inferiority), a community made up entirely, by the way, of men. Unlike the real classroom back in Pennsylvania, there are no girls in this garden,[5] thus aligning Wing's Eden with other American male protagonists who seek to inhabit purely male gardens. In his nostalgic rewriting, the boys have become young men and the girls are simply not there. That community (the reverential, clean-limbed young men) yearns to join with the singular individual, but they can only sit at his feet, be talked to, and be taught. It is a narrative of selfhood in which the self's singularity is the center point of a tight concentric community, the self apart from but still intimate with the community. This narrative contrasts with the traumatized romantic narrative of self that Wing has since adopted—a self not only conscious of its superiority but contemptuous of the community's commonness. These two romantic narratives that constitute Wing's successive selfhoods are mirror images of each other. The radical individual selfhood Wing now preaches effectively revises his earlier pastoral romance, fracturing the harmonious relationship between self and an adoring audience/community. Whereas before, a community had yearned to be the superior self/teacher, now Wing chastises the superior individual (his surrogate, the young George) for wanting to be a part of the community that is incapable of adoring what deserves to be adored (him),

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and, therefore, one that deserves disdain. Because we have been told that Wing no longer thinks of himself as part of the community and because we know that he once imagined himself being not only a part of the community, but the revered center of that community, the implication is that Wing's revision of his selfhood arises out of personal circumstances (the several rejections and exclusions) rather than being an authoritative evaluation of the community. In other words, he holds communities in contempt because several communities have held him in contempt: the Pennsylvania lynch mob not only call him a beast but beat him up; the group of Winesburg kids laugh at his baldness.

This episode also satirizes the narcissistic romantic artist. Wing's reminiscence revises his pre-trauma Pennsylvania experience so that it contains the essence of his desires, or so we infer because Wing takes such pleasure in his own story, insisting that we see that Wing himself is the primary audience for his own utterance. The narrator describes his voice as reminiscent, suggesting pleasure in the memory. We watch as the pleasure effects an unwholesome transformation in him. His voice becomes "soft" and he emits a "sigh of contentment" (8). His urgent "teaching" of George Willard, his text ostensibly aimed at George, has Wing himself as the principal audience. In fact, it's hard to imagine how George might be construed as a possible audience for this dream that seems to have nothing to do with Wing's ensuing message of radical estranged individualism, the thrust of which is "Don't listen to those clods." Only if we assume that the implied "point" of the dream is a message of worshipful subservience of young men (George) to older and wiser men (Wing) can we see any logic to George as audience. Wing would certainly never admit to any such intent. Regardless of whether such adoration is Wing's unconscious meaning, the narrator suggests that the pastoral dream is directed mainly at Wing himself. He displays a glassy-eyed sensual indulgence "speaking as one lost in a dream"; he sighs contentedly as he caresses himself with his own words. To call these actions self-caressing is not an exaggeration. We frequently will see this kind of masturbatory self-enchantment by means of one's own words ("An Awakening"). Once again, the narrator has insisted on complicating our response to what might have seemed at first an uncomplicated sentimentality. Instead of the nostalgic lyrical reminiscence of a golden past no longer possible in a corrupted present, the narrator's description of how Wing tells his story

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brings into question Wing's relation to that story of a golden garden of the past; thus, we hold back our full emotional assent. The narrator has retold the story, emphasizing the Eden as a self-entrancing fiction and not an especially wholesome one, hinting at the (psychologically speaking) masturbatory origins of all such pasts of numinous radiance.

Not only has the narrator complicated our response to the dream by suggesting that Wing is his own audience, but particulars of Wing's story call the very nature of the dream into question. Even before we learn about the charges of homosexuality brought against Wing earlier in his youth, that "clean-limbed" gives us pause, startles us a bit with its unexpected attentiveness to those physical features. Why, we wonder, does that enter into Wing's consciousness? When we discover the nature of the charges that caused Wing to be run out of town, we may come back to this section and reread this dream, now alert to the homoerotic implications of the passage's suggested classical Greek pastoralism, now sensitive also to the narrative's peculiar emphasis on manliness; we may look more closely at that tiny flesh-filled garden with all those clean male limbs and feet. But even before Wing's homosexual desires are introduced into the story, the narrator has insisted on complicating our response to his purity.

Just as Wing had problems with audiences' interpretations of his utterances in the past, he continues to have difficulties with the young George Willard as audience, even though George is a specially selected audience, meant to be Wing's disciple. The young man interprets Wing's utterance in a completely different way from what we imagine Wing intended. Before we see the boy's response to his mentor's message, the narrator's description provides a critical context for the boy's own uncertainties. After painting the picture of the pastoral landscape, the tiny garden and the wise teacher who calmly talks to the listening students, Wing "became wholly inspired" (8). The narrator wryly notes Wing's inspiration by his own speech. But the transformation wrought by the inspiration is not especially a pleasant one:

> For once he forgot the hands. Slowly they stole forth and lay upon George Willard's shoulders. Something new and bold came into the voice that talked. "You must try to forget all you have learned," said the old man. "You must begin to dream. From this time on you must shut your ears to the roaring of the voices."

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> Pausing in his speech, Wing Biddlebaum looked long and earnestly at George Willard. His eyes glowed. Again he raised the hands to caress the boy and then a look of horror swept over his face. (8–9)

This moment of potential revelation of the "truth" that lies underneath the "false" surface undermines any sentimentalist affirmation of communication. As before, when Wing's voice became shrill and loud, the narrator detects something disquieting at this boundary line. Even more disturbing than the furtiveness suggestive of evil intent in phrases like "they stole forth" is the odd disconnectedness of the hands. They are not "his" hands but "the" hands. It is not Wing's voice but "the voice that talked." At one level, we contrast the furtiveness and the disembodiedness with the pre-traumatized "natural" Wing, the Wing created by himself in his reminiscent dream, and the Wing seen in the narrator's description of the "innocent" touching of the schoolchildren in the Pennsylvania town where Wing lived before being driven out. Such a contrast will lead us to the uncomplicated sympathy already described, one that implicitly celebrates the wounded individual, the natural, instinctive man who has been injured by internalizing the guilt beat into him by a repressive society. But that contrast is a false contrast, or at least an incomplete one. For one thing, as I've already argued, Wing has implicated himself and, consequently, the earlier Eden of the small Pennsylvania town. The narrator has made the languages of abstract purity and physical hunger jostle one another to the point that we as readers are uncertain in our responses. At this moment when Wing's eyes are glowing, we may not be sure if the gleam is angelic or demonic. We can't tell if the horror in Wing's eyes is in response to his memory of a hideous social injustice wreaked on him or whether his look of horror is a measure of self-knowledge—a glimpse, if only briefly, into what lies underneath his own words. The narrator has, in effect, insinuated the uncertainty through his calculated ambivalence. Later, when he is describing Wing's earlier days and how he used to conduct himself with the boys of his school, he will use a variety of words and phrases: "caressing," "touching," "tousle," "playing," and "stroking." "Tousle" and "playing" belong most comfortably to a discourse of innocent, noncarnal love. But "caressing" and "stroking" seem to belong more to the world of erotic appetite. "Touching" can fit with either. "Caress" or some form of the word appears four

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times in the short paragraph devoted to Wing's physical handling of the boys. The narrator carefully emphasizes that this tousling, this caressing, this touching, is only for the boys in the class ("he was much loved by the boys of his school"; "In their feeling for the boys under their charge"; "With the boys of his school, Adolph Meyers had walked"; "doubt and disbelief went out of the minds of the boys"). In fact, there are lots of "boys" and lots of "caresses" packed into this short space, achieving a kind of Steinian poem.

Wing speaks to George in a "new and bold" way. "Bold," by the way, is always associated with masculine sexual aggressiveness in the narrator's vocabulary, but George does not respond as his mentor might have hoped. Just as Wing raises "the hands to caress the boy," he is struck with some horror and says, "I must be getting along home. I can talk no more with you" (9). Earlier, George had refused to pursue the story of the hands out of his respect for the old man. He told himself that he had been "touched by the memory of the terror he had seen in the old man's eyes" (9). That respect, however, may have masked other reasons for not pursuing the full story, the well-mannered restraint being instead fear. Quite contrary to the golden message that Wing intended, or so we assume, George Willard was not just confused but actually scared. "Without looking back, the old man had hurried down the hillside and across a meadow, leaving George Willard perplexed and frightened upon the grassy slope" (9). George, a Winesburg Sir Bedivere bereft of his king (well, more scared than bereft), a representative of the modern condition, remains alone in the garden—marked by familiar pastoral signs, the "meadow," "hillside," and "grassy slope" about him—a garden that no longer pleases him. In fact, "perplexed and frightened," uncertain toward his mentor, he no longer seems to want to be there or belong there. He hasn't exactly abandoned his faith, but he evinces the modernist sign of *angst:* "with a shiver of dread, the boy arose and went along the road toward the town" (9). The young George represents, then, at once the problematic psychological relationship of audience to artist, of artist to subject, of modernity's uncertain relationship to a representative of past certainties. George's complexly fluid aesthetic relationship to the various grotesques is without question a surrogate for Anderson's own complicated inquiry into the nature of the relationship of artist to subject and artist to audience, but then so are all the relationships in the collection. In his troubled, uncertain

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dread, George's response is also a trope of our response as readers, an enactment of our own tenuous modernist relationship to meaning.

Another complication bears on our understanding of Anderson's attitude toward various privileged narratives. This chapter has argued that our responses to these cherished mythologies of purity and plenitude are troubled, that we are not allowed to assent the way we are encouraged to assent, that we are kept off balance. This calculated instability of response stems from the dissonance between the invoked narratives and the subverting language, images, patterns, and the like. But this instance of the narrator's reformulation of another's lyrical discourse creates a significant confusion or ambivalence. The two possible explanations for the origin of this dissonance are the following: (1) The dissonance is purely the product of the narrator's interpretation, representing his own imposition of meaning on a text. Just as we might argue that the idiot boy's dreams of homosexual acts have nothing to do with Wing's noble, innocent tousling, so too can we argue that the narrator's textual reconstitution of that dream in the narrator's own words—words that pack men and boys into tiny paragraphs, that emphasize homoerotic Greek classicism, that make the dictions of abstract nobility and crass physical appetite jostle one another—is the narrator's interpretation, representing either his own masked desires or simply his cynicism toward romantic aspiration. (2) The dissonance is actually there in the fiction fashioned by the grotesque. The narrator's formulation is an accurate interpretation of a parodic discourse present in the character's consciousness, a parody that reveals Wing's subconscious resistance to the more noble, culturally valued discourse and a use of that discourse to cloak the self's imperious hungers. Read the first way, the novel is reduced to (or opened up to, if one is a Lacanian) merely the psychological expression of the narrator, Anderson; read the second way, the way I read it, accepting the authority and the interpretive acuity of the narrator, these reformulations become the narrator's registering of selfhood as the process and necessarily parodic assimilation of other narratives, cultural and individual. Or to put it in terms compatible with Anderson's prologue tale, the narrator's reformulations catch the peculiar falsehood that the "truth" has become. But whichever way we read this process, one thing seems clear. The dissonance prevents the reader from comfortably inhabiting the privileged narratives. When we are kept away, when we experience persistently

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this insinuated doubleness, we must at some level become aware of the very things we want to be. Our desires are exposed in our uncertain purchase on the characters' desires, in that perhaps tiny gap between our desire for plenitude or Eden or pastoral bliss and the nagging sense that we are not there. The stories then begin to read us. The frustration of our expectations, expectations that are invoked and half-assented to, are made into the image of our desires.

Wing Biddlebaum had once gone "by the less euphonic name of Adolph Meyers" (9). Saying that "Adolph Meyers was meant by nature to be a teacher of youth," the narrator uses another of those similes that make us distrust the similarity: "He was one of those rare, little-understood men who rule by a power so gentle that it passes as a loveable weakness" (9–10). To say that something "passes" emphasizes the mistaken identity, even hints at conscious duplicity. Maintaining his polite stance, the narrator intimates an impolite suggestion, that this power that Wing rules by may be neither loveable nor weak. The narrator follows up this ostensible approval by saying, "In their feeling for the boys under their charge such men are not unlike the finer sort of women in their love of men" (10). We may assent to this statement before we quite realize what we've agreed to. What does "finer sort of women" mean? Is it a class distinction? Or does "finer" imply some sort of scale of sexual appetites where "finer" is at one end and "grosser" or "coarser" is at the other? And does "finer" mean the absence of those gross appetites or simply the careful, elegant masking of those hungers? If the narrator means to imply the absence of the grosser physical appetites, why does he choose to have the love be for men? It seems more logical, then, to assume that this love of finer women for men is physical but expressed in some way that is not physical, some way that is fine, masked, as opposed to gross or mean. Again, Anderson has done something remarkable. We think we are assenting to something—the general superiority of the noble (sexless) feminine over its implicit opposite, the base (sexual) masculine—without reading the fine print, so to speak. We have actually affirmed the analogy and deemed proper that a man should have feelings for boys in the same way that a particular type of woman has feelings for men—a good example of the sort of foxiness that Anderson claimed in his autobiographies. This is good example of that duplicitous, well-mannered style that allows the narrator to be politely impolite.

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We've already discussed the competing languages describing Wing's touching of the boys. The events leading up to the crisis that forces Adolph Meyers to leave the Pennsylvania town and come to Winesburg, Ohio, using the name Wing Biddlebaum, provide another example of crisis caused by the interpretation of an individual's assertion of self. Similar to Wing trying to drive his point home to George Willard in Winesburg, back in Pennsylvania, his "stroking of the shoulders and . . . touching of the hair were a part of the schoolmaster's effort to carry a dream into the young minds" (10). And just as there was some confusion over the meaning of Wing's words to George Willard, there had been a disastrous confusion over Adolph Meyers's message to his boys in the Pennsylvania town: "And then the tragedy. A half-witted boy of the school became enamored of the young master. In his bed at night he imagined unspeakable things and in the morning went forth to tell his dreams as facts. Strange, hideous accusations fell from his loose-hung lips. Through the Pennsylvania town went a shiver. Hidden, shadowy doubts that had been in men's minds concerning Adolph Meyers were galvanized into beliefs" (10). This story of intended meaning and interpretations of unintended meanings in Pennsylvania happened before the story about the confusion of meaning between Wing and George Willard in Winesburg. The earlier Pennsylvania aesthetic parable actually might have proved to be instructive for the aspiring artist, George Willard, for it offers several aesthetic instructions as well as another instance of the complex hermeneutics of living. Adolph Meyers, as he will later do with George, put forth a narrative of self, likely a version of the narrative that he reminiscently re-created for George. And perhaps as with his dream that he dreams for George, he was probably his own audience, and likely the dream was aimed at the same enthronement of himself that his dream for George accomplished. We come to these conclusions because he reminisces when he dreamily dreams his dream for George. But whatever unconscious aim of Wing's the story might have satisfied, certainly Wing intended a noble message, some piety aimed at the boys, just as there was the "learn to dream" message expressed in his lesson to George Willard.

He failed with the audience of boys back in Pennsylvania similar to the way he later fails with George Willard. That audience, or one of that audience, did not get either the ostensible noble message or even the possibly unconscious self-glorification centering on Adolph's happy

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dominion; instead, one of the boys derives an entirely different meaning from Adolph's narrative of self. The loose-lipped lad interpreted Adolph Meyers's narrative of self in a radical way. He has found a hidden meaning of sorts, although he is no doubt too simple to use that particular phrase that plagues classroom discussions now. Under all the gentle touching, the boy, in his idiocy, has dreamed something unspeakable, which is a way of saying that he has imagined the schoolmaster and himself engaging in homosexual acts. We know, of course, that no such actual acts have taken place. We are uncertain, however, as to the legitimacy of the idiot boy's (I call him this as a way of invoking Wordsworth's icon of authentic truth) interpretation of Adolph Meyers's text. Possibly the idiot boy has imposed his own desires on Adolph's blameless dream. The boy's imagining of the unspeakable acts might then be considered his wish-fulfillment interpretation of Adolph Meyers's own wish-fulfillment selfhood. Wing (then Adolph) dreamed of something similar to what he now reminisces about to George: being adored by adorable, at least clean-limbed, reverential young men. Then, the loose-lipped lad, affected by Adolph Meyers's dream, hungered sexually for his teacher, dreamed what he himself desired, "unwittingly" imposing his own meaning on his teacher's pure dream; but he was too stupid to know first that it was all a dream and second that it was his, the boy's, own dream.

Just possibly, however, the idiot boy's idiocy made him smarter than the non-idiots. Freer than the normal boys, and, like the classical fool, unencumbered by social restraints and conventions, not blinded by the imprisoning social repressions, the idiot sees reality. Precisely because he was an idiot, he was "truer," closer to the instinctive self not corrupted by society's institutions. The boy, consequently, could see through to the "real" essence underneath the trappings of sentimental abstractions and Mr. Chips's fantasizing. Huck Finn to the other Tom Sawyer students, he saw the Sunday school picnic, not the romantic fictions they were told to see. He saw, so the argument might go, the homosexual desire masked by the high-sounding talk about dreaming or gentle love or whatever it was that was the substance of Adolph Meyers's rhapsodies back in the Pennsylvania town. The narrator has presented this story so that two powerful, romantic, paradigmatic narratives exist side by side with absolutely contradictory claims on our response: the first, pure romantic sufferer/artist victimized by repressive, brutish society;

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the second, uninhibited, true, instinctive child, a Wordsworthian idiot boy seeing through the abstract cloaking pieties of the adult world to the truth underneath.

Regardless of what side we come down on in an interminable and indeterminable debate, one that necessarily invokes the sometimes burdensome terminology of postmodernist literary discourse, we can agree at least on this fact: the idiot boy turns out to be much more successful in conveying his dream into the minds of his audience than was Adolph in conveying his dream (at least his intended dream) into the boys' minds. The idiot boy's artistic success has several implications, comic for the most part, relating to the issue of the artist's relationship to community. For, like George Willard, the loose-lipped lad is not only audience to Wing's artistry of self; he is also an artist of self who incorporates Wing's dream, assimilates it with a vengeance, into his own selfhood. The idiot boy is a popular success—successfully getting his point across in terrific fashion—as opposed to Wing (Adolph), who didn't get his point across at all or, if he did, didn't apparently know it was his point. The idiot boy's success arises out of his instinctive intimacy with his audience. His dream of self does not separate him from his audience, the men in the town, which may be another way of saying that his dreams are their dreams, his appetites are their appetites. He knows them because he is them.

The idiot boy story is a delicious gag, told with wonderful deadpan humor, the same deadpan, expressionless voice that told us that Wing Biddlebaum used to go by the "less euphonic name of Adolph Meyers" (9). The gag manages to be caustic, suggesting that the popular artist is somewhat diminished upstairs, and sympathetic, suggesting real knowledge and intimacy with his audience. The joke manages to make fun of the popular artist and to understand him with some sympathy. In sympathetically understanding the popular artist, the narrator manages to poke fun at the inflated aspirations of the failed artist. The gag is funny, funny in the uncomplicated "ha ha" sense of funny. When somebody from the lower end of the scale, the loose-lipped idiot, succeeds at something that someone from the upper end of the scale—Wing Biddlebaum, the big-time schoolmaster and purveyor of noble, fancy, sexless truths—pretentiously aspired to but failed at, it's funny in a sitcom sort of way. *Winesburg, Ohio* is filled with these jokes tucked away in the parallel narrative structures within individual stories and parallel narrative

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structures between stories. For example, it's funny that Wing dreams of adoration and being revered and is nearly lynched, while Dr. Parcival from "The Philosopher" dreams of being lynched and is ignored.

Wing's beating that follows hard upon the idiot boy's accusations adds a hint of class tensions to the story. As we will see, the town of Winesburg is filled with the subtle pressure of class, class awareness, and fictions based on various class strata, but that pressure is disguised by the absence of a distinct rhetoric of class and by small-town proximities that tend to suppress and veil class distinctions. The description of the near lynching of Wing, then Adolph Meyers, hints at social and cultural dramas. After the boy's charges against Wing have been "verified," Henry Bradford, the saloon keeper, comes to Adolph Meyers's school, calls him into the schoolyard, and proceeds to "beat him with his fists" (10–11). Part of the story's abstract patterning of softness/hardness, Henry Bradford combines both a social and religious masculinity. A no-nonsense man of the saloons, his hard-knuckled hardness configured against the effetely timid schoolteacher enacts a social drama in which an unpretentious man of the people beats the tar out of some intellectual pretender. "As his hard knuckles beat down into the frightened face of the schoolmaster, his wrath became more and more terrible" (11). The sentence documents the social reversal with the saloon keeper punishingly above the (kneeling?) schoolmaster, the word "master" now exposed as a futile pretense, a title conferred by a society completely subverted by bare-knuckled realities, a little revolution. "Knuckles" brings with it toughness and hardness associated with the working class and literary realism and allies against the intellectual class and the literary and European intellectualism/schoolmasterliness of the Germanic Adolph Meyers, no longer master in any sense of the word.

"Hands" updates and interprets Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." The pairing of the comic schoolmaster names, Ichabod Crane and Wing Biddlebaum, against the no-nonsense names of Brom Bones and Henry Bradford, each with claims to historical precedent, seems more than coincidental. The schoolmasters' names—each one syllable with bird associations, coupled with strange/comic three-syllable names—also seem more than coincidental. Also, in both stories, the narrators use "locks" to point to the comic disparity between that word's normal romantic context and the reality of their protagonists' situations. But whether intended or not, both stories examine schoolmastery social hungers and

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pretensions, social effeteness masking other appetites, and the defeat of Europeanized males by their two-fisted, more American rivals.

This particular scene not only has social drama but an implied sexual one as well. Henry Bradford, wielding those hard, bare knuckles, seems a parody of masculine brutishness. He stands above the frightened teacher, who receives the relentless force of his blows. The fact that the "hard knuckles beat down *into* the frightened face" rather than *on to* strengthens the metaphorical rape quality. But there is also something else in the tone of this remarkable sentence. The narrator lends an Old Testament Jehovah quality to Henry Bradford's moral indignation. "Wrath" is one of those slightly elevated words belonging to larger epic contexts. It's the "wrath of Achilles," not a "snit" or "anger," that deserves a poem. Here, the "wrath becomes more and more terrible," which pulls the anger into biblical proportions. The effect of these insinuated cultural codes and narratives is to once again complicate our response to the immediate scene. If the man who initially beat up Adolph Meyers had represented some sort of cretinous militant stupidity, a good old boy of the midwestern kind, a leering, cartoon dumb guy whose fearful violence was made more fearful because of the immoral stupidity that guided him, then our emotional response would be wholly, uncomplicatedly, on the victim's side. It's possible, of course, that Henry Bradford is exactly that midwestern lout, but the narrator mediates, interprets, or enlarges him in such a way that our response is confounded. Part of the effect of that biblical language may encourage us to see Bradford's actions in sympathetic contexts, even as we may want to sympathize with Adolph Meyers. Even his name, Henry Bradford, seems more, well, American—if not necessarily aristocratic then at least in touch with the founding-father lineage, certainly more English than either of Wing's somewhat exaggerated and therefore comic Teutonic names. Of course, that's the point or yet another possible point. In another turn of the kaleidoscopic perspective, the little social reversal can be viewed as the narrator's wry ironic treatment of the repressive New England temperament, represented by the downwardly mobile bartending descendant of America's founding fathers now reasserting a lost dominion, reasserting the puritanical, sexually repressive strain of New England over the European newcomer. The presentation works to keep both possibilities alive, each in a sense interpreting the other.

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While we don't suspect for a moment that Henry Bradford is indulging in cheap ironies as he beats up the schoolteacher, we register a joke when he explains to Wing why he's pummeling him. "Screaming with dismay, the children ran here and there like disturbed insects. 'I'll teach you to put your hands on my boy, you beast'" (11). Just as the idiot boy becomes a more effective artist of self than had Adolph Meyers, so too does Henry Bradford become a more effective teacher. In the final irony, Adolph Meyers, who in his own dreamy-eyed mythology had been the revered, wise teacher, discovers that instead he is a beast in the town's mythology. The narrator further controls our response to the assault on Adolph Meyers by means of the children's response. They are "Screaming with dismay" and running "here and there like disturbed insects." The screaming registers their intense emotional reaction, but the "here and there" and the "disturbed insects" are the narrator's interpretation of their reaction. The description diminishes the children's response, figuratively at least, making them less than human. The "here and there" gives almost a laughable silliness or "willy-nilly" quality to an event that might have been treated with magnitude. Again, the treatment is not quite what we would expect, but because the narrator does not articulate the different treatment in his consciousness but only through his images and diction, we are likely to experience initially only a slight uneasiness, perhaps even a suspicion that Anderson wasn't quite able to pull off the scene. Whatever we suspect, such scenes don't allow us to get our full emotional purchase. The suggestions of images and words skew our expectations. When we don't have that full purchase, we are likely to be more conscious of just exactly what we are trying to hold on to. In other words, Anderson's art works to defamiliarize or destabilize the situation at hand so that we sense the cultural formulae at work. A bewildering number of cultural narratives and conventions run through these several sentences describing a saloon keeper's homophobic beating of a timid schoolteacher. No matter what side we come down on politically, psychologically, or culturally, we see mingled here cultural fictions of masculinity and femininity, narratives of anti-intellectualism, social dramas of class, and Old Testament wrathfulness all combining with each other.

The scene describing the lynch mob that ends up merely running Adolph Meyers out of town has several provocative elements. Again,

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the narrator uses language that at once satirizes and elevates an event: "With lanterns in their hands a dozen men came to the door of the house where he lived alone and commanded that he dress and come forth" (11). We've already discussed the narrator's sensitivity to the word "command." Here, linked with "come forth," it seems to belong to the world of knighthood and dignified challenges to be answered on the field of battle in honorable combat instead of what we know the case to be. But "dress" is curious here. Why such timid civility at this point? A motif runs through several of the tales concerning the seeing of people naked or rather refusing to see them naked and the metaphorical implications of failing to see them fully, honestly. Perhaps connected to this sense of not fully seeing is the mob's modesty or their concern for the teacher's modesty, which probably amounts to the same thing. We might suspect that the twelve men, Adolph Meyers's shy anti-disciples, repress their own desires by planning to eliminate the man whom they have been led to believe has acted out those desires. As another possibility, we might see the failed lynching as a comic aspect of the small town. They can't even pull off a good lynching because they know the guy and end up feeling a bit sorry for him. Such a comic perspective connects to the deeper issue of the delicious aesthetic conditions of the small town. In chapter 1, we discussed how it would have been impossible for James Gatz to become Jay Gatsby if he had stayed at home in North Dakota. Some of that same altering knowledge is present in this lynch scene. The men had come to the schoolmaster's house, where, we are reminded, "he lived alone," fully intending to hang the assumed molester of their children. But they take pity: "but something in his figure, so small, white, and pitiful, touched their hearts and they let him escape" (11). Twice now, the narrator's language has connected George Willard's experience with Wing to the experience of the Pennsylvania town. When the idiot boy initially tells his story, a shiver goes through the Pennsylvania town (10) just as a "shiver of dread" (9) went through George Willard when Wing was about to caress him on the grassy slope. The men who came to kill him are "touched" just as George Willard will be "touched by the memory of the terror he had seen in the man's eyes" (9). These links tie George's textual relation to Wing to a larger community's textual relationship to him. The young man's artistic/interpretive struggle to comprehend his older friend is inseparable from, intertwined with, community interpre-

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tations of Adolph/Wing. And just as we were suspicious of George's compassion, we must also be suspicious of the men's pity.

The description of the schoolteacher's escape seems just beyond the boundary of literary realism: "As he ran away into the darkness they repented of their weakness and ran after him, swearing and throwing sticks and great balls of soft mud at the figure that screamed and ran faster and faster into the darkness" (11). The details are perfectly realistic on the one hand and yet suggestive and richly symbolic on the other. The men standing about with the lanterns provide the lighted area so that there is a darkness to run into. The darkness, especially when we consider the nature of the event, has a moral referent as well and perhaps even a psychological one, especially when the phrase "into the darkness" is repeated in such a short space. The vigilantes' letting Wing go and then pursuing him strikes the reader as realistic, the way men might actually act, but the narrator's choice of "repented" and "weakness" is curious. Partly because the narrator has so slyly complicated his response before this, we can't be sure how he intends these words. Are they ironic at the expense of the men, calling attention to the monstrous misuse of the word "repent" to refer to something, the compassionate act, that instead of repenting, they should feel thankful for? In other words, is the irony aimed at their stupid manliness that believes that compassion is a weakness? Or are these words not ironic at all? Are they instead intended to make us see that in this moment, the men recognize that in letting Adolph Meyers flee into the darkness, they are indeed being weak, their pity a cloak for their desires to let themselves off the hook. To refuse to punish Adolph Meyers is to refuse to punish their own outlaw hungers, to sanction them, a weakness that certainly needs to be repented: Joseph Conrad and secret sharers in Winesburg, Ohio. As the schoolteacher runs away, the men follow after him, throwing sticks and soft mud at the screaming figure. While sticks may be perfectly realistic, there's something a bit odd, nonthreatening, even kidlike, in the idea of throwing sticks at someone. The act may invoke the childhood taunt "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words shall never hurt me," which liberates all sorts of implications and ironies, given the fact that the idiot boy's words have turned out to be really harmful. Whether that phrase comes to mind or not, the word seems an opposite in shape and texture to the "great balls of soft mud" that the men also throw at the fleeing figure.[6] The mud and darkness

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lend a primordial feeling to the scene and connect with the earlier description of Wing's shadowy personality that was submerged in a sea of doubts. We see the older self, in a kind of reverse birth or reverse evolution, scampering back into the preconscious darkness, into the darkish, sexless womb in terror of the world that pursues it in its representative shapes, hard sticks, and soft mud balls. Such an undignified scurrying contributes to our sense of the questionable relationship of Wing's two narratives of self.

The next paragraph fills in some of the details of Wing's life, his reason for coming to Winesburg (a black-toothed aunt with whom he lives until she dies, which delicately implies that Wing's Pennsylvania schoolmaster status was a step or two up from his social origins), and the lingering effects of the beating in Pennsylvania (he goes about "timidly" and strives "to conceal his hands"). The narrator then describes the events right after Wing was called out to by the girlish voice making fun of his "combing" his hair. Back on his rickety veranda, which after what we have learned is a convincing sign of social failure, Wing continues to walk until the sun that had been "departing" in the story's first paragraph has "disappeared and the road beyond the field was lost in the grey shadows" (12). We've already commented on the abstract quality of this short story, on the alternating and mingling of opposed tones of hard and soft, of masculine and feminine. Another dimension of this abstract quality is the manipulation of light and dark. In this very brief tale, the narrator contrives a surprising number of boundaries between light and darkness, moments at the edge but moving toward the dark: "kicked up a cloud of dust that floated across the face of the departing sun"; "had sat talking until dusk upon the schoolhouse steps lost in a kind of dream"; "ran away into the darkness"; and "ran faster and faster into the darkness." Indeed, the entire novel plays at the boundary line of these opposed states, resulting in concomitant moral ambivalences. The darkness seems most often to represent uncertainty, a lack of clarity, rather than a definite evil. There is the constant feeling of an obscuring of perception, a loss of distinctiveness.

When it becomes dark, Wing goes into the house and has a simple but sensuous meal ("he cut slices of bread and spread honey upon them"), the simplicity conveyed in the mere slices of bread, but the sensuousness conveyed in the determined lushness of "spread honey" (12). At every step, the narrator manages to keep up the sense of con-

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tradiction and uncertainty, born in this case of the mixture of ascetic simplicity and hedonistic pleasure. We are told that after finishing the meal, "Although he still hungered for the presence of the boy, who was the medium through which he expressed his love of man, the hunger became again a part of his loneliness and waiting" (12). Once again, the narrator deftly maintains the doubleness, the spiritually lofty notion of the sexless expression of the love of man combining with the emphatic "hunger" repeated twice, coupled with the nearly feral image of Wing as a patient predator "waiting" with his hunger. Next follows one of Anderson's more remarkable scenes, a tour de force summation of the story's contradictions.

> Lighting a lamp, Wing Biddlebaum washed the few dishes soiled by his simple meal and, setting up a folding cot by the screen door that led to the porch, prepared to undress for the night. A few stray white bread crumbs lay on the cleanly washed floor by the table; putting the lamp upon a low stool he began to pick up the crumbs, carrying them to his mouth one by one with unbelievable rapidity. In the dense blotch of light beneath the table, the kneeling figure looked like a priest engaged in some service of his church. The nervous expressive fingers, flashing in and out of the light, might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary. (12)

Generally favorable associations cluster around the expression "lighting a lamp." Even without Diogenes' particular quest for an honest man, the lighted lamp calls up a quest for truth or illumination. The Diogenes association especially appeals, however, because the story enacts a sense of a singular superiority to the world that is clearly relevant to Wing's admonitions to George Willard, although one might once again be alert to the Greek implications. But lighted lamps also recall the wise virgins who had oil for their lamps and were ready when their masters came. This referent, combining both heavenly chastity and sexual readiness, even eagerness, also seems especially appropriate because it embraces the central paradox of Wing's being, the principal uncertainty worked into the text at every point. We have a classical referent undermined by its emphasis on the contemptuous superiority of the singular self to the corrupt others (and possibly a hint of

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homosexuality in the Greek philosopher suggestion), and we have the elevated biblical suggestion complicated by the virgins eager to not be virgins.[7] After lighting the lamp, Wing washes the "few dishes soiled by his simple meal." This sentence combines monastic simplicity with the sexually suggestive "soiled," the compact bringing together of cleanliness—which will seem more obsessive, more rooted in a psychological need as we get farther into the description—with the slightly excessive word "soiled," referring to what is being washed away. "Soiled" appropriately carries, in addition to its more common meaning of simply getting dirty, the sense of defilement of something spiritually pure, especially physical defilement. There is something measured and stately in "prepared to undress" that will contrast with the "unbelievable rapidity" of picking up the "few stray white bread crumbs" that "lay on the cleanly washed floor." It is a tiny repetition of the rhythm noted at the beginning of the story. The emphasis on "few" stresses the meager, nearly imperceptible trace of the recent physical activity. The floor itself is clean because it has been washed clean, so we have evidence, if I may use that loaded term, of an ongoing cleaning up, which, of course, means that there has been an ongoing soiling.

The rhythm of the opening words of the sentence is itself an achievement. Anderson strings together six one-syllable words, each fully stressed, after the first non-stressed word, spondees galore: "Few stray white bread crumbs lay." These successive stresses have the effect of slowing our pace and focusing our attention, the equivalent of a cinematic technique in which successive shots focus our attention on a sequence of significant details. The successive stresses isolate each of the words, liberating their separate and sometimes conflicting qualities. Simplicity, hardscrabble meagerness, lonely isolation, spiritual purity, basic physical nourishment, and even the suggestion of sexual lapse ("stray") all mingle in these six stressed syllables. Then, before the two similes that conclude the story, the narrator describes Wing picking up the crumbs from the floor and eating them. The "unbelievable" registers the narrator's incredulity, a sense of wonder. This heightened or quickened interest is the setting for the narrator's final interpretive play, two extraordinary similes that gather several of the story's principal issues.

Then, there's the sentence, "In the dense blotch of light beneath the table, the kneeling figure looked like a priest in some service of his church." We've already talked about the patterning of darkness and light;

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the number of scenes located at the dissolving boundary line between the opposed states, usually with some sort of movement toward the shadows; and the resulting feeling of encroaching obliteration and the loss of certainty. This scene, with its intense light, might seem an apt concluding illumination, a luminous denouement with its nearly spotlight conditions, clarifying, it would seem, the murky misgivings in our response to Wing Biddlebaum. It's an ironic radiance, however, right from the start. "Blotch," of course, calls the purely radiant moment immediately into question. As with "soiled," there is a meaning that seems realistically appropriate, the suggestion of an irregular area, a misshapen spot of light. We might feel a bit apprehensive at this "luminous" moment at having our attention called to the irregularity of the radiance, "blotch" being more suggestive of imperfection, even in its origin connected to "blot," but the commonsense meaning seems fitting. Yet "blotch" has other powerful associations with disease and unhealthy discolorations, the surface signs of deeper illness. These other meanings are viscerally repellant, their meanings intensified by the "dense," which does double duty here, both to magnify the radiance and to intensify the repulsive implications. This exceptional phrase occurs, significantly, before the use of the first of the two similes, what we can call, for lack of a better phrase, the uncomplicated simile: "looked like a priest engaged in some service of his church." Unlike the simile that will follow, this first trope straightforwardly points to a similarity the effect of which is to elevate Wing Biddlebaum, to make us see that in this wounded rustic there is something similar to the noble, chaste, dedicated man in service to something larger than himself. Under the influence of this simile, we are likely to suppress the misgivings that "dense blotch" might have produced and respond strictly to the intense glow of light and its radiant implications.

The simile that follows again throws us off balance. Describing the fingers as they flash in and out of the light, the narrator, almost as if correcting his previous simile, says that they "might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary." This simile questions the first. What was uncomplicated similarity is now deceptive similarity. Physical hunger might be mistaken for spiritual activity. The apparent clarity of the dense light now becomes the flickering, flashing strobe light uncertainty. In lieu of the simple comparison of Wing to a priest, this trope substitutes the image of a "devotee," a word associated with excessive zeal, a hint of too

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lavish a spirituality. There may even be a suggestion of Protestant suspiciousness at the superficiality and meaninglessness of Roman practices. The superficial, thoughtless babble of words has lost any significance other than ritualistic repetition, conveyed by "decade after decade," while that same phrase measures the magnitude of the sin that needs to be forgiven.[8] The terms of these two similes, Wing compared to a priest and/or devoted penitent, establish Communion as yet another referent for the bread imagery earlier. And again there is the double suggestion—priest in service, perhaps administering the sacrament, or penitent whose excessive penance reflects the seriousness of the confessed sin.

Note how many narratives are not just at play in this concluding scene but stitched overlappingly together so that they are inseparable: the simple rustic eating his simple but nourishing meal, good slices of wholesome bread spread thick with biblical honey, good hunger for good bread and honey, and that hunger mixed up with his hunger for the boy—but his hunger is for the presence of the boy, which is not quite the same thing as hungering for the boy. It's as if the boy's presence is a communion with the past; the stapling together of high abstraction ("love of man") and physical appetite; monkish denial of the flesh and crafty predatory patience; ascetic purity and sexual excess; neurotic, compulsive cleanliness and sacramental Communion; the hunger for Christ's body and the hunger for the boy's presence; and luminous, radiant clarification and flickering deceptiveness.

The story ends as it began, with artful simplicity, a story told by a narrator who is enchanted and fascinated by one of the many strange stories in his town but who slyly challenges his characters' assumptions about themselves and the assumptions that he has invited us to make about them. At several points in his autobiographies, Anderson tells the story of sitting down and writing "Hands" in one sitting. Whether or not this Coleridgean fable of spontaneity is true or not, there is the ring of truth to his reaction. He talks of his "terrible joy," of the "tears streaming from my eyes." He knew that he had done something remarkable, something true: "It's there. It's solid. It does not matter if anyone else ever understands all of the implications of my story, it is nevertheless sound" (*Memoirs* 417). It's hard to know if he truly means that business about not caring if all the shades of meaning, all the complex insinuations, are discerned. Certainly Anderson has stories about artists and artist representatives who are frustrated by their failure to be

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understood. But at the same time, they do not want to be understood; they fear it, in fact. Anderson offers us a story so rich in its contradictions that we must come away from it not with despair over the loss of a single truth,[9] but with amazement at the fictive, interpretive, storied maze that Anderson has revealed in a small Ohio town. Sherwood Anderson had every right to weep with joy.

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