

NATURALISM IN AMERICAN FARM FICTION

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Since the deaths of Sherwood Anderson and Theodore Dreiser and the partial eclipse of writers like James T. Farrell, literary naturalism in the United States has fallen into obscurity. Whether it is "dead as the well-known dodo," as Randall Stewart says in a recent article,¹ or whether it has merely been transmuted and transformed into something no longer recognizable, the kind of naturalism practiced by Crane and Dreiser assuredly cannot be said to be a dominant force in contemporary literature. It is possibly significant that the period in which literary naturalism, characterized by an attitude and a method, was most influential in American writing coincided roughly with that in which the farm novel, a literary genre characterized by its theme and setting, enjoyed its greatest vogue. Despite a popular conception of farm fiction as prevailingly nostalgic and sentimentally romantic, a careful study of the whole genre will reveal that many of its best practitioners employed the methods of naturalism and often shared the attitude toward man and the universe held by the greater naturalists.

There seems no good reason to quarrel with the definition of naturalism given in 1922 by Vernon L. Parrington, who defined it as "pessimistic realism," characterized by objectivity, frankness, amorality, and a bias in the selection of characters, with emphasis on those of strong physical drives and little intelligence and those at the mercy of their neuroses.² If the first two of these characteristics have become the common property of virtually all twentieth century writers of fiction and if complete amorality has never been achieved, even by the most confirmed of naturalists, the acceptance of a philosophy of determinism and a bias toward pessimism remain valid criteria in determining whether a writer may be called a naturalist. Many farm novelists choose situations and characters and juxtapose these in such a way as to indicate a bias toward pessimism; and, although only a few, like Sophus Keith Winther, expressly state a belief in determinism, many of them manipulate the events in their novels so that the reader is obliged to see the characters as helpless victims of circumstance. For the purposes of this inquiry, a narrow rather than a broad definition of naturalism has seemed appropriate. Rather than label an author a naturalist if his writing displays any of the characteristics found at

one place or another in the work of those authors generally accepted as members of the naturalist school, it has seemed desirable to restrict the term to those writers whose fiction conspicuously displays the central, most frequently encountered characteristics of naturalism. If we apply Parrington's criteria--particularly determinism and pessimism--to American farm fiction, we shall find that the influence of literary naturalism has been great in this genre, that in fact some of the most indubitably naturalistic works in American fiction are to be found among those dealing with farm life.

Significantly, the beginnings of farm fiction in this country are contemporaneous with the rise of literary naturalism. Three historically important novels appeared in the 1880's, all dealing wholly or in part with farm life, and all evidencing naturalistic attitudes and techniques. The earliest of these, Edgar Watson Howe's The Story of a Country Town (1883), is, as the title indicates, a story of small-town life and touches upon actual farm life only briefly at the beginning of the book. Because of this and because its pessimism is expressed through an extremely melodramatic situation, the novel is at best only on the peripheries of farm fiction and of naturalism. In the unsparing realism of its treatment of country life, however, it anticipates the second of these three novels, Harold Frederic's Seth's Brother's Wife (1886).

Seth's Brother's Wife can be regarded as the first authentic treatment of farm life, and, together with Frederic's better-known work, The Damnation of Theron Ware (1896), as a harbinger of naturalistic fiction in the United States. Despite holdover trappings from earlier nineteenth century romantic fiction, features which seem to have made it the victim of burlesque treatment,³ Seth's Brother's Wife portrays upstate New York farm life in colors gloomy enough to satisfy the most pessimistic of naturalists and offers little if any indication that the characters are free agents. Rural life is decadent and rural people either share its decadence or run away to the city at their first opportunity. This is the consequence of inevitable social changes, Frederic implies, and if the individual has any freedom, it is only the freedom to choose between submitting to these changes or wasting his energies in impotent rebellion against them.

Another early novel of farm life, Joseph Kirkland's Zury: The Meanest Man in Spring County (1887), displays some evidence of a deterministic philosophy in that the main character, a miser whose name, Zury, is a corruption of "usury," is the product of a hard pioneering environment in which the personal qualities favorable to the accumulation of wealth are necessary to survival. But it ultimately fails to qualify as a work of authentic naturalism. Zury's regeneration and transformation at the hands of a young schoolteacher whom he marries are both artistically inept because implausible and at variance with the deterministic attitude displayed earlier in the book.

A stronger case can be made out for Hamlin Garland, whose early works show a definite bias toward pessimism and an apparent acceptance of determinism. In the best of the six stories that composed the first edition of Main-Travelled Roads (1891) the characters seem inescapably molded and victimized by the harsh environment in which they find themselves. Although the prairie is lonely and man is sometimes the victim of natural forces, Garland's emphasis is on social determinism; the defeated characters, like Haskins in "Under the Lion's Paw" and Jason Edwards in the later (1892) novel of that title, are conquered mainly by economic conditions. Yet Garland's obvious sympathy for these characters militates against any suggestion of amorality, and his reformist zeal is ultimately inconsistent with a thoroughgoing determinism. More fundamental in rendering Garland's "naturalism" suspect is his own desire to dissociate himself from the naturalism of Zola. As a recent study points out, "Garland's comments show that he desired to stand apart from the naturalist movement which to him meant a preoccupation with sexuality, vice, and crime."⁴ In view, therefore, of such evidence as this and also of his later apostasy even from the genteel realism of Howells (in romantic novels like Hesper and The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop), one is forced to regard Garland as, at most, a borderline naturalist and that in only a few early works.

The early deaths of Crane and Norris and the suppression of Dreiser's Sister Carrie slowed down the development of American naturalism in the first decade of the twentieth century, but it experienced a revival in the next decade, with a succession of novels by Dreiser, Masters' Spoon River Anthology, Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, and other works in various genres. Farm fiction, however, did not experience a parallel growth. After an auspicious beginning in the 1880's and 1890's, it slipped back into the sentimentality and romanticism of the earlier nineteenth century. Except for the contributions of Willa Cather, which are romantic rather than naturalistic, almost no artistically significant farm novels appeared in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and it is not until 1925 that we encounter a work that can definitely be termed naturalistic.

In that year, which saw the publication of the novel that has come to be regarded as the best example of literary naturalism in America, Dreiser's An American Tragedy, the appearance of G. D. Eaton's Backfurrow provided the most clearly naturalistic treatment of farm life (and, incidentally, the severest indictment of that life) since Frederic's novel in 1886. This "hymn of hate," this "paean of loathing," as one reviewer called it,⁵ apparently sets out to debunk once and for all the myth that depicts the farm as the repository of all virtue, and, like Frederic's novel, goes to the opposite extreme of showing it as the repository of all vice. Nature and man conspire to produce this condition. The locale chosen is a stony, hilly region where even the hardest work is no guarantee of a living, and the people are uniformly selfish, vindictive, hypocritical, grasping, and thoroughly miser-

able. The central character, Ralph Dutton, is scarcely more of a hero than Clyde Griffiths. He is the product and victim of his environment, deluded for a time into the belief that he has some control over his fate but falling at last into a kind of nihilism. Even while life seems to contain a measure of hope for him, his reading and his experiences lead him to interpret it in purely materialistic terms:

It was a little disappointing, and yet every little thing, every big thing, which he thought fine and good, resolved itself into something very material when he sought the origin of it. All genius, all art, all love, all tenderness and consideration must be just as material, just as lacking in the spiritual. Everything in one way or another, caused by the needs of the body.⁶

After a series of shattering misfortunes, he finally resigns himself to the inevitable, too dulled and beaten by his experiences to struggle any longer. Looking on his prospects at this stage he sees that "In any case he would be simply a human animal, unable to do more than to live, or to die and to disintegrate as ignominiously as a dead rabbit or a fallen apple."⁷ Both in his unsparing pessimism and in his apparent acceptance of a dark determinism, Eaton is writing as a naturalist in this novel.

With the appearance of Giants in the Earth in 1927, the farm fiction of Ole Edvart Rølvaag began to appear in English. Although Rølvaag would hardly qualify as a thoroughgoing naturalist, the importance of his work in the genre requires that he be given some consideration. His biographers find both naturalistic and romantic elements in his work: a naturalistic technique employed on essentially romantic material.⁸ Certainly the death of Per Hansa, sent into the blizzard on a futile quest for the minister desired by the dying Hans Olsa, seems to have been determined by circumstances over which he has little if any control. Earlier, however, Per Hansa seems the very embodiment of free will--resourceful, adventurous, energetic. It can be argued, of course, that Per Hansa is as much the product of forces beyond his control as Frank Cowperwood in Dreiser's The Financier and The Titan; and on this argument must rest the case for Rølvaag as a naturalist. But there is a buoyancy about his portrayal of Per Hansa and other characters, in Giants in the Earth and in the later novels on the same theme, that appears to preclude any deeply pessimistic view on the part of the author. Despite Beret's insanity and her later religious fanaticism, there is a cheerfulness about the Spring Creek settlement that fails to accord with the deepening gloom that settles over McTeague and other clearly naturalistic novels. One is left with the feeling that Rølvaag was finally a believer in free will, within limits, and that, despite doubts about the cultural fate of the Americanized descendants of the immigrants and about the prospects of an increasingly urban society, he was fundamentally a meliorist to whom any consistently pessimistic view was alien.

Upon the foundations laid by these novelists of the 1920's, farm fiction proliferated in the next decade. The romantic vein persisted in the work of authors like Bess Streeter Aldrich and Rose Wilder Lane, but in others the influence of naturalism was now more fully evident than before. In 1932 Vardis Fisher began a series of grimly realistic novels about farm life in a primitive section of Idaho. Despite a good deal of romantic coloration, his first novel, In Tragic Life, is essentially naturalistic in its emphasis on the environment as a conditioning and determining force in the development of the individual. In choosing as his central figure a hypersensitive, neurotic boy (in accord with the practice of naturalists like Sherwood Anderson), Fisher underlines the harshness and brutality of the environment in which the boy grows up. Pessimistic is a mild term to apply to his picture of a world filled with a continuous round of violence, cruelty, mutilation, and death; a world in which all the forces of nature and man seem to the boy bent on his humiliation, torture, and ultimate destruction. Fisher's fondness for characters of gargantuan strength and size and his interest in Old Testament heroes suggest an admiration for the heroic and intensely individualistic reminiscent of Norris in The Octopus and such minor novels as Moran of the Lady Letty. Whether this predilection, found also in Jack London, is strictly compatible with a philosophy of determinism is at least disputable. In any case, it does not figure importantly in Fisher's novels about farm life, where his treatment of his materials is essentially naturalistic.

Elements of naturalism may be found in Erskine Caldwell's two novels of the early thirties, Tobacco Road (1932) and God's Little Acre (1933). His characters are the helpless victims of circumstance, their fates determined by economic conditions (and resultant ignorance) and by their own biological drives. Jeeter Lester and his relatives live in a poverty of whose causes they have only the vaguest comprehension; their actions and their chronic inaction are alike the result of their biological heritage, coupled with an economic plight that affords them no opportunity to escape by realizing even their limited potentialities. Toward them Caldwell maintains so scrupulous an amorality that the reader is hard put to feel sympathy for them, and there is a substantial risk (as evidenced by parodies) of producing laughter rather than compassion or indignation. The presence of this danger does not disqualify Caldwell's work as authentic naturalism, however, for it is apparent also in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg and even in Norris' McTeague.

Although Caldwell's novels are definitely naturalistic, the weakness just alluded to suggests that employment of the techniques of naturalism does not always guarantee farm fiction that can be called genuinely naturalistic or artistically satisfying. When applied to recalcitrant material (basically romantic, for example) or when utilized by a writer who is either not wholly in sympathy with the naturalistic view of life or simply not a

competent craftsman, these techniques sometimes produce grotesque results. Howard Erickson's Son of Earth (1933) seems to be an attempt to employ the naturalistic principles of determinism and pessimism to the career of an immigrant farm boy. Like Eaton's Ralph Dutton, Tolf Luvversen is the victim of circumstances, chiefly environmental, which prevent him from achieving any measure of success and drive him finally to a state of hopeless resignation and cloddish indifference. But the persistent oversimplification and exaggeration, both of the obstacles confronting Tolf and of his emotional response to those obstacles, result in nothing more than a highly colored, essentially romantic melodrama.

This charge cannot legitimately be leveled against Sophus Keith Winther's Grimsen trilogy, even though the situation here is much the same--an immigrant family trying to make a place in the American environment--and many of the same techniques are used. The difference lies in Winther's more restrained use of these techniques. An avowed naturalist,⁹ Winther demonstrates a belief in determinism in his three Nebraska novels, Take All to Nebraska (1936), Mortgage Your Heart (1937), and This Passion Never Dies (1938), and he displays an equally strong bias toward pessimism in his selection of details. The Grimsen family are the victims of many features of the American world--the indignities suffered by people of foreign birth, the abuses of land speculation, the unpredictability of the prairie climate--but they are also the beneficiaries of the educational and occupational opportunities afforded by this new world. If the parents go down to ultimate defeat, the children meet with varying degrees of success. Winther shows that acceptance of a deterministic view does not necessarily lead to a preoccupation, in fiction, with characters whose careers end in mental or moral collapse or in violent death; and he is no less a determinist for his willingness to show, equally with those whom the inscrutable forces of the universe hurl to destruction, those who are by these same forces elevated to positions of material and emotional triumph.

After the efflorescence of the twenties and thirties, the farm novel, as a genre with many practitioners and a steady output, began to decline about the time of World War II and almost died out in the later 1940's. But its last decade saw the publication of works by three of its most distinguished writers, all of whom embraced the methods and philosophy of naturalism to some degree: Paul Corey, Herbert Krause, and Frederick Manfred (Feike Feikema).

Of these three, Corey is probably the most clearly a naturalist in his approach. In the Mantz family trilogy, Three Miles Square (1939), The Road Returns (1940), and County Seat (1941), he follows the fortunes of an Iowa farm widow and her four children in the period 1910-1930. The painstaking recording of details characteristic of Dreiser is evident in Corey's writing, together with the Dreiserian refusal to pass judgment on his characters or their actions. As in Dreiser, the implication seems to be that

these people are not in any real sense responsible for what they do. When Otto Mantz, who comes as close to being a central character as anyone in the trilogy, thinks he may have to leave college and marry a girl he has got into trouble, Corey records without condemnation the young man's wish to escape the situation, whatever the cost to the girl. The selection of details suggests not so much a bias toward pessimism as a desire to include a large and representative sampling of real life. If this involves the inclusion of what the tender-minded critic might call "sordid" details, it gives no undue emphasis to such material. Like Dreiser and Farrell, Corey can be charged with weighting his novels with too much factual documentation; the reader tends to lose his way in a forest of minutiae. Corey's rigorous amorality in the trilogy is abandoned in a later work, Acres of Antaeus (1946), in which his moral purpose (defense of the family farm and attack on corporate agriculture) overwhelms both his naturalism and his artistic sense.

Krause is much less obviously in the naturalistic tradition, but there are suggestions of determinism in his work and certainly strong evidence of a bias toward pessimism. The latter is most evident in his first novel, Wind Without Rain (1939), like Fisher's In Tragic Life an account of the trials of a sensitive youth growing up in a harsh environment. The universe seems utterly hostile to Franz Vildvogel, as it did to Fisher's hero, but the succession of misfortunes that befall Franz are more credible than those in the earlier novel, and the effect is more moving. A sense of determinism seems implicit in the hopeless struggle of Franz with his environment and in the suggestion at the end of the novel that he, who has suffered so acutely from the tyranny of his father, may be following in the same path toward ruthless dominion over his family. In The Thresher (1946) the main character, Johnny Black, seems driven by forces over which he has no control (symbolized by the threshing machines that he operates), driven to being a virtual accessory in the death of his best friend, to disharmony with his wife, finally to death. Pessimism is evident in this book as in the earlier one, but the author's restraint makes it less pervasive.

Manfred's chief contribution to naturalistic farm fiction is a long novel, This is the Year (1947), about Frisian immigrants to northwestern Iowa. The central figure, Pier Frixen, is not, like Winther's characters, much handicapped by his immigrant background (he was born in America), but he is, like the poor whites in Caldwell's work, illiterate and grossly ignorant of the economic and natural circumstances which mold his destiny. Imperious to warnings about bad farming practices, he loses much of his farm to erosion before he loses the rest to the bank. In the end he is defeated, although he is unaware of it, fully as much as the Lesters or Eaton's Ralph Dutton. Parrington's term "pessimistic realism" aptly fits this novel. Besides the obvious determinism in Manfred's choice of a central character, there is in this novel a frankness seldom surpassed in American fiction.

This is evident particularly in the detailed descriptions of Pier's wife's miscarriages and the injuries suffered by Pier in his frequent falls from windmills, roofs, and trees. The enormous amount of sheer factual detail in this novel brands Manfred a naturalist of the Dreiser-Farrell school. If This is the Year is something less than pure naturalism, it is because of a strong romantic strain in the author, evidenced chiefly in his incorporation into the novel of snatches of Frisian folklore and in the songs which Pier improvises as he goes about his work. Less jarring in their context than McTeague's canary or the affair of the elderly couple in Norris' novel, they do introduce an element not in keeping with the predominantly naturalistic tone of the book.

Other naturalistic writers than these have dealt tangentially with farm life. One thinks immediately of Frank Norris and The Octopus (1901), that Zolaesque story of California wheat ranchers in conflict with the railroad monopoly. Its exclusion on the grounds that the main characters are big businessmen rather than farmers may seem to be giving undue weight to what is, finally, a matter of definition; but a stronger reason for its omission here can be found in the fact, noted by C. C. Walcutt, that the protagonists in this novel seem possessed of much more free will than their counterparts in Zola's Germinal and La Terre and in some degree equipped to fight the railroad.¹⁰ The obligation Norris apparently felt to resolve in a higher synthesis the antitheses he has set up also weakens this novel's claim to consideration as a work of real naturalism.

John Steinbeck, too, deals with farm life in the early chapters of The Grapes of Wrath (1939), where the Joads are driven by many of the same forces, economic and biological, that afflict Caldwell's Lesters and Manfred's Pier Frixen, but where also the power of the individual personality, in the characters of Casy and Ma, plays a role not in strict harmony with a deterministic outlook. Of Mice and Men (1937) is more clearly naturalistic, for George and Lennie are almost equally powerless to determine their destinies and merely drift along from job to job pursuing an unattainable mirage of security and well-being. They are not farmers, however, but simply rootless men with no specialized skills, whose work in the short period covered by the novel happens accidentally to be agricultural. Hence there is some question as to whether Of Mice and Men can properly be termed a farm novel.

Other novels by other novelists might be mentioned and other objections raised to them. But the examples chosen are sufficiently numerous and sufficiently varied to afford a wide sampling of naturalistic farm fiction. As one looks back upon this assortment of good and bad novels, at least two questions arise: How do these books fit into the pattern of naturalistic fiction as a whole? And why has the naturalistic vein been so prominent in farm fiction?

In answering the first question, it may be useful to resort to the schemes of classification proposed by C. C. Walcutt in his study, American Literary Naturalism, a Divided Stream. He sees the naturalistic novel as taking five forms: the clinical, the panoramic, the slice-of-life, the stream of consciousness, and the chronicle of despair.¹¹ Of these, farm fiction has clearly preferred the last, with some efforts, mostly lacking in finesse, in the direction of the first; almost nothing of the stream-of-consciousness type has appeared and relatively little of the panoramic (except The Octopus) or of the slice-of-life. Walcutt sees four styles employed: the documentary, the satiric, the impressionistic, and the sensational.¹² Farm fiction has leaned heavily toward the documentary style, with a few examples of the impressionistic (as in Krause) and the sensational (notably Caldwell and Fisher), but with almost no trace of the satiric.

Qualitatively, farm fiction has not enjoyed a high reputation in the twentieth century. A critical public increasingly oriented toward urban life and urban values has seldom been able to take novels of farm life seriously and has tended to relegate all of them to the limbo of the sub-literary. The publication of a multitude of inferior farm novels has contributed to the denigration of a distinguished minority, the best of which are comparable to the works of the greater urban naturalists. It must be admitted, however, that all too frequently even naturalistic farm novels are better as illustrations of naturalism than as works of art. The authors employ the techniques and reflect the attitudes of naturalism without displaying the moral imagination, esthetic judgment, and technical skill required to produce truly superior fiction.

The second question--why should naturalism so often have been found in farm fiction?--can be answered only by conjecture. Besides the probability that the two--the method and the genre--flourished contemporaneously because of separate causes which happened to coincide in time, there is the indisputable fact that the material of farm fiction lends itself with especial facility to naturalistic treatment. On the farm, where modern civilized man is most intimately and constantly in contact with nature, he can most readily be seen as a part of that nature, his personality and his behavior determined by it. Man-made types of determinism--economic and social--are not absent; indeed they are often made the principal forces operating on the characters. But they are conceived too as parts of nature, nature operative through man as agent. Because most of the farm novelists were of rural background, it may be assumed that their early experiences with nature had predisposed them toward a naturalistic view of life.

Furthermore, since pessimism is frequently the most conspicuous naturalistic trait encountered in farm fiction, one may conjecture that possibly some of these writers reacted against the farm life they had known and worked off their antipathies in their novels. Artists tend to be sensitive people, and some of those who spent their early years on the farm may have

felt toward the manure pile much as Hawthorne did at Brook Farm. This hypothesis might also provide a clue as to why so many of the writers here discussed--Garland, Corey, Krause, Manfred, to mention but four--turned after two or three farm novels to the writing of historical fiction or books about the romantic mountain West.

This pessimism may also be attributable in part to the series of economic crises that plagued rural America during the period covered by the writers of farm fiction. It is worth noting that farm fiction developed around 1890, in a period of agricultural depression, languished during the first two decades of the twentieth century, a period of relative prosperity, and reached a peak in the 1920's and 1930's, when agriculture was experiencing another time of crisis. This agrarian discontent, analyzed by John Hicks and Theodore Saloutos, probably influenced the work of these novelists in much the same way that the depression of the 1930's influenced the urban fiction of Farrell, Dos Passos, and others. This is not to say that most farm fiction is propagandistic or that there is much of it that could be termed proletarian literature. With notable exceptions (Garland's Jason Edwards and Corey's Acres of Antaeus, for example), these novels treat the economic issue as incidental factors in the lives of their characters, not as the central theme. But the economic troubles experienced by the American farmer in the five decades from 1890 to 1940 undoubtedly had some part in producing the pessimism that pervades most farm fiction about this period.

Whatever the reasons, philosophical, emotional, or economic, these writers and others chose to write their most distinctive works in the manner of the greater naturalists and in so doing made their individual contributions to more than a half century of significant fiction.

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Footnotes:

¹ Randall Stewart, "Dreiser and the Naturalistic Heresy," The Virginia Quarterly Review, xxxiv (Winter, 1958), 116.

² Vernon L. Parrington, The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America: 1860-1920 (New York, 1930), 323-325. The discussion of naturalism is based on notes for a lecture delivered at the University of California in 1922.

³ There are indications that the British writer Stella Gibbons had this novel, among others, in mind when she wrote her comic parody, Cold Comfort Farm (1932), whose cast of grotesques includes a young sensualist named Seth and an embittered dowager who saw "something nasty in the woodshed" at age two and has lived in seclusion ever since.

⁴ Lars Ahnebrink, The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction (Cambridge, 1950), 143. Although he concedes that "Garland's theory of veritism shows that he was substantially a realist--not a naturalist. . . ." Ahnebrink insists that in practice "Garland went a step beyond Howells' realism toward naturalism" (Ibid., 150) Of Main-Travelled Roads he says that "In these impressionistic stories the author came close to naturalism in his choice of subject matter and characters, and in his emphasis on social determinism." (Ibid., 82) On the other hand, Thomas A. Bledsoe, in his introduction to the Rinehart edition of Main-Travelled Roads, says categorically that "Garland was no naturalist, nor even one of the writers of the nineties who most nearly practiced the formula of naturalism." (P. xxvi.) Bledsoe rests his case on the contention that Garland never fully accepted the deterministic view but always left room for individual moral responsibility in his characters.

⁵ New York Times Book Review, February 15, 1925, 16.

⁶ G. D. Eaton, Backfurrow (New York, 1925), 258.

⁷ Ibid., 326.

⁸ Theodore Jorgenson and Nora O. Solum, Ole Edvart Rølvaag: A Biography (New York, 1939), 347.

⁹ Desmond Powell, "Sophus Keith Winther: The Grimsen Trilogy," The American Scandinavian Review, xxxvi (June, 1948), 146.

¹⁰ Charles C. Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream (Minneapolis, 1956), 142-145.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 22.