

## JOHN UPDIKE

## Twisted Apples†

Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* is one of those books so well known by title that we imagine we know what is inside it: a sketch of the population, seen more or less in cross section, of a small Midwestern town. It is this as much as Edvard Munch's paintings are portraits of the Norwegian middle class around the turn of the century. The important thing, for Anderson and Munch, is not the costumes and the furniture or even the bodies but the howl they conceal—the psychic pressure and warp underneath the social scene. Matter-of-fact though it sounds, *Winesburg, Ohio* is feverish, phantasmal, dreamlike. Anderson had accurately called this collection of loosely linked short stories *The Book of the Grotesque*; his publisher, B. W. Huebsch, suggested the more appealing title. The book was published in 1919, when Anderson was forty-three; it made his fame and remains his masterpiece.

"The Book of the Grotesque" is the name also of the opening story, which Anderson wrote first and which serves as a prologue. A writer, "an old man with a white mustache . . . who was past sixty," has a dream in which "all the men and women the writer had ever known had become grotesques."

The grotesques were not all horrible. Some were amusing, some almost beautiful, and one, a woman all drawn out of shape, hurt the old man by her grotesqueness. When she passed he made a noise like a small dog whimpering.

Another writer, an "I" who is presumably Sherwood Anderson, breaks in and explains the old writer's theory of grotesqueness:

. . . in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. . . . It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.

Having so strangely doubled authorial personae, Anderson then offers twenty-one tales, one of them in four parts, all "concerning," as the table of contents specifies, one or another citizen of Winesburg; whether

they come from the old writer's book of grotesques or some different set to which the younger author had access is as unclear as their fit within the cranky and fey anthropological-metaphysical framework set forth with such ungainly solemnity.

"Hands," the first tale, "concerning Wing Biddlebaum," introduces not only its hero, a pathetic, shy old man on the edge of town whose hyperactive little white hands had once strayed to the bodies of too many schoolboys in the Pennsylvania town where he had been a teacher, but also George Willard, the eighteen-year-old son of the local hotelkeeper and a reporter for the *Winesburg Eagle*. He seems a young representative of the author. There is also a "poet," suddenly invoked in flighty passages like:

Let us look briefly into the story of the hands. Perhaps our talking of them will arouse the poet who will tell the hidden wonder story of the influence for which the hands were but fluttering pennants of promise.

A cloud of authorial effort, then, attends the citizens of Winesburg, each of whom walks otherwise isolated toward some inexpressible denouement of private revelation. Inexpressiveness, indeed, is what is above all expressed: the characters, often, talk only to George Willard, and then only once; their attempts to talk with one another tend to culminate in a comedy of tongue-tied silence.

Anderson himself took a long time to express what was in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Raised in the small Ohio town of Clyde, he worked successfully as a Chicago advertising man and an Elyria, Ohio, paint manufacturer, and acquired a wife and three children, but remained restless and, somehow, overwrought. In late 1912, in the kind of spasmodic sleep-walking gesture of protest that overtakes several of the pent-up and unfulfilled souls of Winesburg, he walked away from his paint factory. He was found four days later in Cleveland, suffering from exhaustion and aphasia, and, more gradually than his self-dramatizing memoirs admit, he shifted his life to Chicago and to the literary movement that included Dreiser, Sandburg, Ben Hecht, and Floyd Dell. Already Anderson had produced several long novels, but he later wrote, "They were not really mine." The first Winesburg stories, composed in 1915 as he lived alone in a rooming house in Chicago, were a breakthrough for him, prompted by his reading, earlier that year, of Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* and Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*.<sup>1</sup> Masters's poetic inventory of a small Midwestern community stands in clear paternal relation to Anderson's rendering of his memories of Clyde; but perhaps Stein's elevation of humble lives into a curious dignity, along with her remarkably relaxed and idiomatic style, was the more nurturing influence in releas-

1. A collection of short stories about three women (1909). *Spoon River Anthology*: see p. 161, n. 1, above [Editors].

ing Anderson into material that he *did* feel was really his and that gave him for the first time, as he later related, the conviction that he was "a real writer."

Both godparents of *Winesburg, Ohio* had a firmness and realism that was not part of Anderson's genius. Masters was a practicing lawyer, and his free-verse epitaphs state each case in almost legal prose; many have the form of arraignments, and a number of criminal incidents are fleshed out as each ghost gives its crisp testimony. Stein, before her confident and impudent mind went slack in its verbal enjoyments, showed an enlivening appetite for the particulars of how things are said and thought, a calm lack of either condescension or squeamishness in her social view, and a superb feel for the nuances of relationships, primarily but not only among women. For Anderson, society scarcely exists in its legal and affective bonds, and dialogue is generally the painful imposition of one monologue upon another. At the climax of the unconsummated love affair between George Willard and Helen White that is one of *Winesburg's* continuous threads, the two sit together in the deserted fairground grandstand and hold hands:

In that high place in the darkness the two oddly sensitive human atoms held each other tightly and waited. In the mind of each was the same thought. "I have come to this lonely place and here is this other," was the substance of the thing felt.

They embrace, but then mutual embarrassment overtakes them and like children they race and tumble on the way down to town and part, having "for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible."

The vagueness of "the thing" is chronic, and only the stumbling, shrugging, willful style that Anderson made of Stein's serene run-on tropes affords him half a purchase on his unutterable subject, the "thing" troubling the heart of his characters. Dr. Reefy, who attends and in a sense loves George Willard's dying mother, compulsively writes thoughts on bits of paper. He then crumples them into little balls—"paper pills"—and shoves them into his pocket only to eventually throw them away. "One by one the mind of Dr. Reefy had made the thoughts. Out of many of them he formed a truth that arose gigantic in his mind. The truth clouded the world. It became terrible and then faded away and the little thoughts began again." What the gigantic thought was, we are not told.

Another questing medical man, Dr. Parcival, relates long tales that at times seem to George Willard "a pack of lies" and at others to contain "the very essence of truth." As Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*<sup>2</sup> reminded us, small-town people think a lot about the universe (as opposed to city

2. A play about life in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, first presented in 1938 [Editors].

people, who think about one another). The agonizing philosophical search is inherited from religion; in the four-part story "Godliness," the author, speaking as a print-saturated modern man, says of the world fifty years before: "Men labored too hard and were too tired to read. In them was no desire for words printed upon paper. As they worked in the fields, vague, half-formed thoughts took possession of them. They believed in God and in God's power to control their lives. . . . The figure of God was big in the hearts of men." The rural landscape of the Midwest becomes easily confused in the minds of its pious denizens with that of the Bible, where God manifested himself with signs and spoken words. Jesse Bentley's attempt to emulate Abraham's offered sacrifice of Isaac so terrifies his grandson David that the boy flees the *Winesburg* region forever. Anderson writes about religious obsession with cold sympathy, as something that truly enters into lives and twists them. To this spiritual hunger sex adds its own; the Reverend Curtis Hartman breaks a small hole in the stained-glass window of his bell-tower study in order to spy on a woman in a house across the street as she lies on her bed and smokes and reads. "He did not want to kiss the shoulders and the throat of Kate Swift and had not allowed his mind to dwell on such thoughts. He did not know what he wanted. 'I am God's child and he must save me from myself,' he cried." One evening he sees her come naked into her room and weep and then pray; with his fist he smashes the window so all of it, with its broken bit of a peephole, will have to be repaired.

There are more naked women in *Winesburg* than one might think. "Adventure" shows Alice Hindman, a twenty-seven-year-old spinster jilted by a lover a decade before, so agitated by "her desire to have something beautiful come into her rather narrow life" that she runs naked into the rain one night and actually accosts a man—a befuddled old deaf man who goes on his way. In the following story, "Respectability," a fanatic and repulsive misogynist, Wash Williams, recalls to George Willard how, many years before, his mother-in-law, hoping to reconcile him with his unfaithful young wife, presented her naked to him in her (Dayton, Ohio) parlor. George Willard, his chaste relation to Helen White aside, suffers no lack of sexual invitation in *Winesburg's* alleys and surrounding fields. Sherwood Anderson's women are as full of "vague hungers and secret unnamable desires" as his men. The sexual quest and the philosophical quest blend; of George Willard's mother, the most tenderly drawn woman of all, the author says, "Always there was something she sought blindly, passionately, some hidden wonder in life. . . . In all the babble of words that fell from the lips of the men with whom she adventured she was trying to find what would be for her the true word." *Winesburg, Ohio* is dedicated to the memory of Anderson's own mother, "whose keen observations on the life about her first awoke in me the hunger to see beneath the surface of lives."

The author's hunger to see and express is entwined with the common hunger for love and reassurance and gives the book its awkward power and its limiting strangeness. The many characters of *Winesburg*, rather than standing forth as individuals, seem, with their repeating tics and uniform loneliness, aspects of one enveloping personality, an eccentric bundle of stalled impulses and frozen grievances. There is nowhere a citizen who, like Thomas Rhodes of Spoon River, exults in his material triumphs and impenitent rascality, nor any humbler type, like "real black, tall, well built, stupid, childlike, good looking" Rose Johnson of Stein's fictional Bridgepoint, who is happily at home in her skin. Do the Winesburgs of America lack such earthly successes; does the provincial orchard hold only, in Anderson's vivid phrase, "twisted apples"? No, and yet Yes, must be the answer; for the uncanny truth of Anderson's sad and surreal picture must awaken recognition within anyone who, like this reviewer, was born in a small town before highways and development filled all the fields and television imposed upon every home a degraded sophistication. The Protestant villages of America, going back to Hawthorne's Salem,<sup>3</sup> leave a spectral impression in literature: vague longing and monotonous, inbred satisfactions are their essence; there is something perilous and maddening in the accommodations such communities extend to human aspiration and appetite. As neighbors watch, and murmur, lives visibly wrap themselves around a missed opportunity, a thwarted passion. The longing may be simply the longing to get out. The healthy, rounded apples, Anderson tells us, are "put in barrels and shipped to the cities where they will be eaten in apartments that are filled with books, magazines, furniture, and people." George Willard gets out in the end, and as soon as Winesburg falls away from the train windows "his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood."

The small town is generally seen, by the adult writer arrived at his city, as the site of youthful paralysis and dreaming. Certainly Anderson, as Malcolm Cowley has pointed out,<sup>4</sup> wrote in a dreaming way, scrambling the time and logic of events as he hastened toward his epiphanies of helpless awakening, when the citizens of Winesburg break their tongue-tied trance and become momentarily alive to one another. Gertrude Stein's style, so revolutionary and liberating, has the haughtiness and humor of the *faux-naïve*<sup>5</sup>; there is much genuine naïveté in Anderson, which in even his masterwork flirts with absurdity and which elsewhere weakens his work decisively. *Winesburg, Ohio* describes the human condition only insofar as unfulfillment and restlessness—a nagging sense that real life is elsewhere—are intrinsically part of it. Yet the

wide-eyed eagerness with which Anderson pursued the mystery of the meager lives of Winesburg opened Michigan to Hemingway, and Mississippi to Faulkner; a way had been shown to a new directness and a freedom from contrivance. Though *Winesburg* accumulates external facts—streets, stores, town personalities—as it gropes along, its burden is a spiritual essence, a certain tart sweet taste to life as it passes in America's lonely lamplit homes. A nagging beauty lives amid this tame desolation; Anderson's parade of yearning wraiths constitutes in sum a democratic plea for the failed, the neglected, and the stuck. "On the trees are only a few gnarled apples that the pickers have rejected. . . . One nibbles at them and they are delicious. Into a little round place at the side of the apple has been gathered all of its sweetness." Describing a horse-and-buggy world bygone even in 1919, *Winesburg, Ohio* imparts this penetrating taste—the wine hidden in its title—as freshly today as yesterday.

3. Nathaniel Hawthorne's birthplace, in Massachusetts, and the setting for such works of his as "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) [Editors].

4. See Cowley's introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Penguin, 1992) 4 [Editors].

5. Falsely naïve [Editors].