



Winesburg, Ohio: A Group of Tales of Ohio Small Town Life

Sherwood Anderson

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by Irving Howe Several years later, as I was about to go overseas as a soldier, I spent my last week-end pass on a somewhat quixotic journey to Clyde, Ohio, the town upon which Winesburg was partly modeled. Clyde looked, I suppose, not very different from most other American towns, and the few of its residents I tried to engage in talk about Anderson seemed quite uninterested. This indifference would not have surprised him; it certainly should not surprise anyone who reads his book. Once freed from the army, I started to write literary criticism, and in 1951 I published a critical biography of Anderson. It came shortly after Lionel Trilling's influential essay attacking Anderson, an attack from which Anderson's reputation would never quite recover. Trilling charged Anderson with indulging a vaporous sentimentalism, a kind of vague emotional meandering in stories that lacked social or spiritual solidity. There was a certain cogency in Trilling's attack, at least with regard to Anderson's inferior work, most of which he wrote after Winesburg, Ohio. In my book I tried, somewhat awkwardly, to bring together the kinds of judgment Trilling had made with my still keen affection for the best of Anderson's writings. By then, I had read writers more complex, perhaps more distinguished than Anderson, but his muted stories kept a firm place in my memories, and the book I wrote might be seen as a gesture of thanks for the light—a glow of darkness, you might say—that he had brought to me. Decades passed. I no longer read Anderson, perhaps fearing I might have to surrender an admiration of youth. (There are some writers one should never return to.) But now, in the fullness of age, when asked to say a few introductory words about Anderson and his work, I have again fallen under the spell of Winesburg, Ohio, again responded to the half-spoken desires, the flickers of longing that spot its pages. Naturally, I now have some changes of response: a few of the stories no longer haunt me as once they did, but the long story "Godliness," which years ago I considered a failure, I now see as a quaintly effective account of the way religious fanaticism and material acquisitiveness can become intertwined in American experience

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