David Joseph Marcou has so far published 100 of his own books (including “Spirit of La Crosse”, his 18-volume series “Human Character”, and his 19-volume series “Spirit of America”). He graduated St. James and Aquinas Schools, and earned a B.A. degree in History at UW-Madison (1973). He also earned degrees at the Universities of Iowa (MA) and Missouri (BJ), and has lived in London, Seoul, Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin. He edited the Adams-Friendship weeklies in 1990, and was the longtime La Crosse correspondent for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. He also taught adults writing and photography 11 years at Western Technical College. His works have twice been nominated for Pulitzer Prizes, including his play “Remembering Davy Crockett”. Many archives, galleries, museums, and libraries house his works, including the Wisconsin Historical Society, and La Crosse Public Library Archives (both of which display his online galleries), various Smithsonian (SI) Archives, British National Portrait Gallery, and National Assembly Library of South Korea. His photos have been in many exhibitions, too, including the SI National Museum of American History Archives Center’s “Gift of the Artist” 2011-2012 group-show, curated by SI Archivist David Haberstich. David Marcou also has an online gallery of 3,600 photos on the Digital Photographer Website in the UK. His son, Matthew A. Marcou, an Army Special Ops veteran and now university Engineering student, is married to Jessica Amarnek-Marcou, an artist and university teacher.
Ethical Naivete and “The Crucible”—Written in 1979 by David Joseph Marcou for UW-Madison’s Theatre & Drama 911 Class Taught by Prof. Esther M. Jackson. Because my long essay (next entry) about Eugene O’Neill was rejected as the basis for my MA Thesis by my T&D Advisor Prof. Jackson ca. 1976, it took me three years to do the paper she required, though it didn’t prove the basis for my thesis. And I don’t know if I ever submitted this shorter essay to her, because I was no longer attending T&D graduate school in 1979, but thought to prove my good faith in the program and her at least, by writing something about the subject she most wanted my MA thesis to be about, Arthur Miller’s “The Crucible”. But I could never understand why she didn’t accept my O’Neill paper, a very good, well-developed, and well-written paper.

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The formal innocence of Arthur Miller has been discussed by others in many contexts. It may be the source of strength in his greatest work, “Death of a Salesman”; in connection with “The Crucible”, however, it can also be the source of a bit of ethical over-simplification. Gerald Weales among others has criticized the lack of ethical complexity in fairly strict terms by claiming it is not “… dramatically tough, tough in soul, driving below its partisanship, to a
judgment of anti-social action from which, as in Dostoyevsky, none of us could feel exempt…: in ‘The Crucible’, our principles are neither jeopardized nor extended, however much we may fail to live by them anymore.”

This “social” partisanship of implicit ease is no small reason for complaint, especially in a play purporting to represent the vital right of individual conscience in the face of tyrannical social pressure. How does Miller’s play, after all, compare with pretender plays not so democratically or optimistically inclined? The issue involved here might have something to do with an unsettling naivete in other of his works as well. Here specifically, it relates to an aesthetic choice made by Miller in 1952 that entailed a peculiar acceptance of majoritarian influence at a time when greater attention to the sources of evil might have been paid. (Culturo-aesthetically speaking, it is questionable to some that Raymond Williams’s social realist playwright, who “has restored active social criticism to the drama, and has written on such contemporary themes as the social accountability of business, the forms of the success-ethic, intolerance and thought-control, the nature of modern work-relations” with their typical non-historic settings, should look to history for his material at this particular time.)

In the context of a broader cultural “partisanship” at least Miller’s choice makes some sense. At a time when the larger forces in American society seemed ominous and inscrutable, Miller understandably felt compelled once again to see out the “hidden order in the world”. To the playwright most constantly linked with the evolutionary aspects of life, it might not seem unreasonable for him to adapt an old genre, romantic or neo-heroic, to a new didactic pitch – that form, the history play, being so accommodating to the vortex of time. Miller did feel the impress of history strongly, in his suggestion that others (before, simultaneous with, and even after), help form us: “The vast majority of us know – not merely as knowledge but as feeling, feeling capable of expression in art – that we are being formed, that our alternatives in life are not absolutely our own, as the romantic play inevitably presupposes.”

Do we not to some extent agree with Miller in the final two acts as Proctor is pressured by degrees not only to confess his “sin”, but to publicize it as well? Yet another question remains -- why and how would a playwright who accomplished so much in “Salesman” with quiescent expressionism and seemingly spontaneous complexity create a play that is so romantically broad, even perhaps simplistic?

The playwright chronicles the changes in his thinking and in the thought of an era (1949-1952) in “The Year It Came Apart.” In the writing and production of “Salesman,” Miller relied on an assumed symbiosis nurturing enough to reflect real anxieties in an intuitive, experimental form. After its production, things happened quickly in America. By the end of 1949, Miller recollects, he was already experiencing a “persistent dread that we were entering darkness… a sort of somnambulism was spreading, a waking dream in which one was aware of everything but was paralyzed to speak.” Yet when he completed “The Crucible” in late 1952, he realized that his own “…fear was gone, I could very nearly laugh. For in the writing of the play, a year’s work, I
had come out not as I had gone in, trying to save the majority from itself and thus make myself acceptable.”

Might Miller in fact have succumbed to a need to make himself accountable in a more subtle way out of a fear that the unified audience of 1949 had not the ethical will now to make a comparable empathetic response to cultural crisis, or out of a sense that he had lost contact with the real anxieties he so deeply had reflected in “Salesman”? Might he not have feared that the urge to formally reconstitute the crisis artistically could not outlast the equally strong need to make any sort of committee response – even willed poetry? These are questions for the cultural historian, but if this surmise is correct, would not the culturo-aesthetic naivete of Arthur Miller be proved? Failing this, however, we might ask -- in an era when “nothing any longer could be what it seemed”, was this broad-stroked piece capable of discerning the hidden truth?

If the ambiguity of evil in “The Crucible” is any indication, it was not, at least not fully-enough. The first case in point are Proctor’s sins – what are they? His adultery has been prompted, and falls away beside the pettiness, envy and greed of others. His greatest struggle, on the other hand, is not with others but with his own fear and selfishness. With a little discipline and self-consciousness, even these (large though they may be) must fall away. (An interesting dualism develops in this connection. Miller seems to view the personality as externally constructed – that is, one cannot know the mode for moral behavior except through the immediate determinants in society – but to a key extent in my view, many Final enactments depend largely on internal exertion of consciousness and conscience.)

In the era of Joseph McCarthy and the Cold War, this is all well and good up to a point, but who is the real enemy and how is one to recognize the evil that other people do? Even Judge Danforth is “almost coerced” into carrying through the workings of the court. Yet to admit that Miller fails to inquire into the manifold layers of evil is not to say the play does not have the strong, though unclearly defined, sense of evil about it; or that it lacks a positive, if broad, heroic example – “… however vague Miller may be in depicting the exact nature of villainy, he is precise in showing the nature of heroism. As always with Miller, it lies in self-knowledge.” The issue rather is one of edge or fineness of complexity. The simple belief in self-esteem makes all else stand aside, somewhat too simplistically in this play. There was never really any doubt that Proctor would right himself, but we are left wondering what it is that could have thwarted him.

If “The Crucible” has power in performance, then, it is in the growing dynamism of conscience-shattering propensities that demand the melodramatic response Proctor gives: “A fire is burning! I hear the boot of Lucifer, I see his filthy face! And it is my face, and yours, Danforth!” The material greed of Putnam or Parris can barely be seen as mortal sin, or even intrinsically dangerous, but coupled with the good intentions of the ignorant or easily cowed amid the whirlwind of “hysteria”, they do contribute to the archetypal “benignity of evil” that allows doom to advance. If Elizabeth could only have told the legal truth in court, John would have gone free.
It is one thing, though, to accept the formal innocence of Miller, the playwright – quite another to defend his ethical naivete. The latter shows itself on two levels, the aesthetic and the cultural. Along an aesthetic line, Robert Warshow has criticized Miller as not being sufficiently “actualist” in his plays. Though Warshow uses the term in a more specific sense, we might broaden it to support the claim that Miller’s ethical naivete resides in his formal inconclusiveness about just what the extant evil in Salem is. Though it is abundantly clear to Proctor in the end, it may not be so clear to the audience. (The effects of the extant evil, hysteria and immoral executions, are clear though.) As Arthur Ganz puts it: “In finding his own identity, Proctor… finds the strength to do battle with the enemy. Exactly who that enemy is, Miller has not made clear-enough, for despite his later protestation that the Salem judges are consciously evil, we do not know from the text if they are sincere but narrow believers in the supernatural, authoritarians who find witchcraft a convenient instrument for repression, or merely sadists. Miller has been so careful to keep his parable from being limited by the special circumstances of the McCarthy era that he has perhaps prevented it from being very like the circumstances of any era.”

One is put uncomfortably in mind of Miller’s own words on the nature of cultural retreat in the 1950’s: “The word for it all was betrayal; the liberals by the Russian’ unfolding aggressions, the country itself by the liberals who had run the war and handed the fruits of victory to the Reds. We would be entering a period of what the Puritan theology called Spectral Evidence….” We hardly mean to imply Miller was in any sense a traitor; neither was he a vague “accuser”. If Edward Murray’s criticism is accurate, though, it seems the playwright was guilty of that ambiguity of moral thought plaguing others in the era, and Hale throughout most of “The Crucible”.

The question of reconstructivism, of experience and not history, then, crops up here. It is not altogether divorced from the issue of historical-ism, but the latter is tangential to it. Some have argued that if Miller would only have had more respect for the historical predicament, he would have recognized the “witches” died as the result of an ingrained metaphysical error (the incapacity to offer the virtual lie), and thereby produced a more effective drama; perhaps it would have been no less “timely”. Others have demanded close parallels to McCarthy. Out of all this, it becomes apparent it is not so much where the artist searches out material as how convinced he or she is that the “materials” are worth employing – and that a substantial quality of imagination is being exercised.

We are not in a position to criticize Miller on the latter count, though other critics might, but with regard to the question of experiential versus historical content, one should not berate the play’s content on the grounds that it fails to reproduce an historic-philosophical question in all its circumstances, but rather on the basis of its failure to employ the depth of same question with regard to the ethical questions. (In a curious twist, one critic assessed part of the romantic success to be attributable to an effective historical-ism. Stephen Fender asserts that with regard to value systems, the playwright’s verbal reaction, via Proctor, to the dramatized community’s metaphorical hysteria is a deft counterpoise to the moral uncertainty-anarchy that was 17th
It is doubtful Miller tried any harder than John Proctor to clarify the reason for his own or a far-reaching metaphysical discomfort in America of the 1950’s, for the “existing objective fact” Miller claimed he set out to reveal in each of his plays, was either not fully perceived or inadequately conceived in “The Crucible”. The significant question is – was this the artist’s responsibility? By partial evasion of a key part of the “concrete” in his own situation (including his era’s psycho-socio-political collusion with various evils -- and many people would soon equate the new Eisenhower Administration with these evils, when President Eisenhower was a moderate not a reactionary, and studiously separated himself from McCarthy, never endorsing him though of the same Party), it was his responsibility too. Arthur Miller ignored a key lesson in his own past and potential experience – the lesson of how to combat complicated evils amid a complicated community. We are a bit poorer, then, for the loss of a more-definite picture of the range of moral uncertainties in that chaotic, still-too- indecipherable period of American history.

Introduction: Every person has his or her “home”, a heritage and configuration of reinforcement-denial relationships through the early years in particular. Some “homes” aid in the development of greater social commitment (and well should this be the case in the home’s role as society-in-microcosm). The form that commitment takes, though, depends on how well family heritage and individual disposition become integrated. If the personality thrives in the family, the person’s social function may be that much more fluid. While, on the other hand, if he or she lives beyond their social function, that person must find him- or her- self an expatriate of sorts, and their function or dysfunction in the larger sphere will depend upon the person’s reaction to their own inner harmonies, and quite possibly, resolved against the family posture.

In the case of Eugene O’Neill, perhaps America’s most gifted playwright, the search for unity in family heritage and mother love would always be complicated by emotional obstruction. What follows is the account of a soul yearning for solace, within and without the family. The resultant substantial artistic contribution to modern humanity’s changing perception of reality should be recognized, though, as not only the unusual response to the necessity for social commitment, but also as the “middle product” in the quest for home and order in a disordered universe.

1.
“No home except this summer dump in a place she hates…. You’ve dragged her around on the road, season after season on one-night stands, with no one she could talk to, waiting night after night in dirty hotel rooms for you to come back with a bun on after the bars closed. Christ, is it any wonder she didn’t want to be cured. Jesus, when I think of it I hate your guts.” -- Edmund, Act IV, “Long Day’s Journey into Night”.

In the beginning there were James O’Neill, Ella, his wife, and their son, Jamie. Into their lives on Oct. 16, 1888 came a key integer in the O’Neill equation, Eugene. Inevitably, his birth had the aura of bad timing about it, something his stage-loving father rarely fell victim to. The sixth season of James’s perpetual “love affair” with “The Count of Monte Cristo” had just begun, and after giving an “excellent performance to a large house” on Oct. 15, the elder O’Neill was kind enough to return for one day and spend it with his newborn son and wife before escaping once more for some alien arena to conclude once again: ‘Save. Mine, the treasure of Monte Cristo. The wor-rld is mi-n-ne.” The pattern remained the same until the actor’s final years, when an inexorable fate declared he would be accompanied not only by the shy Ella, but by his sons as well. In sharp contrast to the stable sort of home a child normally needs was the eternal mélange of hotel rooms with their changing faces and moods. (Later in his own life, Eugene would seek a home with his loving Carlotta, only to shift his center of operations from one secluded locale to another.) The sole locus of early stability for Eugene was the family’s summer cottage at New London, Connecticut, where his father liked to quarter the family during his non-performing summer days. It was a tidy place with a good-sized yard and cozy porch. But as a “home”, standing at a distance from the town, and within the home semi-alienated from each other, the physical and emotional framework must have seemed more a fast-passing oasis to the nomads in a parched desert of semi-tragic symbiosis.

As Eugene’s formative years rushed on, however, young Eugene did have a fair amount of maternal care, sometimes from his mother, most of the time from his nurse, Miss Sarah Sandy. From the start, he encountered a mother who could be gentle, gay, and loving one moment, while strangely gray and detached the next (morphine addiction was already taking hold of her). A remoteness toward others in himself resulted to a degree, as he tried to defend himself against hurt from a mother who grew more and more distant. A figure of similar effect and strangeness was that cut by Miss Sandy. Her influence sheds light upon the evolution of a certain mysticism and darkness in the future playwright’s disposition. Schaeffer, in his biography “The Son and Playwright”, reserves this judgment for the boy’s “second mother” -- “Sarah seemed a quite perfect governess… [but] she was a dozey-looking teapot that contained a brew stronger than tea…. She had a penchant for horrible tales… from the latest murder to the farthest terror that her whimsy could contrive. To supplement this, the nurse would often take little Eugene to those ghastly museums where were displayed the wax effigies of criminals and malformed dummies. She delighted in this sort of sadistic glee when the little lad winced at the things he saw and heard. Yet I did not hear that this woman was unkind to her charge. I gathered an impression quite the reverse.”
Young O’Neill’s truer, more ambiguous feelings emerge clearly in his famous micro-diagram wherein he delineates the psychological impact of his close-by elders. One entry reads: “Mother love -- meaning -- Nurse love…. World of reality practically unrealized – in background – terror of it emphasized by the nurse’s murder stories – terror of dark alone but delight in it when feeling protecting influence (Mother-Nurse-Nuns) about.” Indeed, the playwright would prove quite boldly creative under a sustaining influence (when Mother, Nurse, and Nuns were doing their best by him, and later his wife Carlotta), and immature or hyper-emotional without such. His heart would seldom be able to discern large amounts of that love, hence a persistent but potentially creative detachment from reality. When he was capable of facing both sides of real life (light/dark) more objectively, he examined it with a painfully, yet mystically, sensitive eye.

An attraction to life’s mystical underside, though, was not the largest part of experience in those early years. Even as he gazed at the constant ebb and flow of the sea near their New England homes, which became enhanced when he actually went to sea, or a similar flow of his father-count on-stage, or the life and death-in-life of his mother, he must have gained not only in his ability to see and feel, but also in a flaming desire to live a vital life himself. A passionate attitude toward life’s peaks and valleys, then, was the outcome of a throbbing family background. No matter whether his future waking moments comprised drinking, reading, writing, or just watching and feeling, he accomplished them all with an earnestness that was second-nature. This intensity of purpose did not extend so far, though, as to cause him to be much in love with a life of physical action. What that passion did consist of was a thirst for “escape”, or a more or less acceptable form of semi-rational personal behavior. He may not have been a man of action or even a political activist in traditional senses, and may have suffered from that physically and even emotionally. Still, many actors, writers, and lovers of the arts grew ever more thankful and hopeful for the experience of more O’Neill “escapes”.

One chief cause of this predisposition for escape and rebellion (the two were inextricably linked in Eugene) was his family’s unique emotional posture. Often on each other’s nerves, this group of oft-times misfits couldn’t generally leave well-enough alone. If O’Neill’s “Long Day’s Journey” is an indication (by many analyses, it was accurate-enough regarding the O’Neill family), without even flexing, any one of them could make a bad situation hellish via a good flick of the tongue. And yet an empassioned readiness to both repent and forgive were by-products of their Catholic upbringing and their strange love for one another. Often at the climactic moment, when the worst was done, that conditioned response would spring to the foreground, only to subside and repeat itself when tensions arose again. Though James Sr. was durable enough to thrive in this cataclysmic environment (and Eugene too. To his last, James could quarrel with his younger son, Eugene, out of a sense of necessity or duty yet still commiserate lovingly with him after all was said and done.), his wife and elder son, Jamie, were not. Jamie was a tough nut to crack, but in the end succumbed to the effects of alcohol (ca. 1923) following a life fraught with thirst for love, offbeat potency, Irish ribaldry, and cynicism. Ella never quite knew the strength required to withstand torment and withdrew further into her-self as
reality and fixes grew harder to bear. Ironically, it was the theatre in both cases that offered some solace and reinforcement to the two surviving souls – father and younger son. A more legitimate and more enduring form of absolution was perhaps available there.

As a result of the early years of torment and love, light and darkness, mystical inclination and passionate verve, then, the young O’Neill responded ever more rebelliously to the routines and traditions presented to him in his life. By the age of 15, he had rejected the Catholicism of his fathers’ after doing his best to accept it; after a single year at Princeton he was dropped for pulling a prank; at age 21 he married and set sail mateless two weeks later on his first sea voyage – upon his return, the couple divorced; and before his 25th birthday he had attempted suicide and was well on his way to a potentially terrible end. He contracted tuberculosis, however, and while at Gaylord Farm Sanitarium began to see some light and felt a rejuvenated sensitivity and compassionate determination sweep over himself. He managed to compose his first plays there after a self-taught course in the modern drama (e.g., works of Synge, Yeats, Hauptmann, and Strindberg – he had previously acquainted himself with Ibsen). Although he would intermittently be found dissolute and sickly in the future, upon his release from the sanitarium he was a new man. At least he now possessed a partial outlet for his rambunctious spiritual yearnings and emotional frustrations/leanings. The drama had answered his call; the family less so then.

2.

Armed with a passionate, mystically-interested attitude toward life and his circumspect hopes anchored in the drama, we might now sketch the fabric of the world of ideas Eugene O’Neill embraced. We need recall the words of Thomas Mann: “… the eyes that rest on the wide ocean and are soothed by the sight of its waves rolling on forever, mystically, relentlessly, are those that are already wearied by looking too deeply into the solemn perplexities of life.” The morose sentiments of the German writer hardly could be considered the esoteric response to life and the sea they once might have been, with so much analytical study having been done in the years since Mann’s time, into depression and melancholia. Perhaps indeed, this poetry-in-prose represents modern self-conscious humanity’s particular reaction to his or her neurosis – that mental and spiritual malady arising from the perception of a dissociate array of deeply “solemn perplexities”, impinging upon human beings with an unyielding, yet somehow subtle, weight. Mann pictures his sea as a means of romantic escape, but what distinguishes that vision from a more close-cropped escape is a certain disquietude pervading the modern psyche no matter where it seeks peace or comfort. (We will soon see how the “urge to order” arising from such emotional trauma drives modern humanity even beyond the bounds of the Romantic era, with its dependence on order in reality, in search of at least semi-radical form and style.) Alienation and guilt accompany humanity wherever they may journey, and self-consciousness only enhances the inevitable paranoia and/or world-weariness. With no errant symbolism intended, O’Neill’s own autobiographical drama, “Long Day’s Journey into Night”, is an inexorable trek into that night of
gloom and doom. Even as the dramatist forthrightly exhumes his ghosts and faces his past, the heavy tone of gloom marches on to a pessimistic, though somehow semi-compassionate, finale.

But O’Neill also knew enough to shed some light on the lighter sides of life and family too, as his one comedy, “Ah Wilderness” suggests in particular. To shed relevant light on his more generally impinging gloom, though, we should set it as an underpinning beneath a background of family and global heritage. If the young Eugene had been able to adapt to a tense family situation more pleasantly or at least more stoically, he would not have been drawn as dramatically to the desolate and heady brew of Nietzsche’s “Zarathustra” or Strindberg’s “Ghost Sonata”. What were the forces beyond him-self that caused so much dismay? And what were the antithetical powers within himself and the world that enflamed his passionate rebelliousness and inquisitiveness?

In a sense Eugene O’Neill was an “expatriate” (whether by disposition or by early environment mainly is debatable) early on. Remote and introverted at the outset, it now appears he always rebelled, always counted on an existence in the “beyond”, over the horizon, perhaps reinvigorating in earthly terms Christianity’s long-held belief in “heaven”. Photos during that impressionable early period reveal a youthful countenance searching for the behind and beyond. His eyes would generally hold that distant look – heart and soul waiting for just the right moment to reach out to grasp his idea of heaven on earth. Unlike the “lost generation”, the exhilaration of physical detachment came not in another land, but rather at sea. The fresh rawness of life was a thrill ubiquitous there and in the myriad unsavory ports his ships docked at, but he could not accept a life of total dissociation from the past; his family experience had proved too intense and all-consuming for that. Something always beckoned him home to the land and heritage he would always know. Perhaps it was his compassion for his own family enlarged to encompass the human family that moved him most. Just as likely, though, was his passion in the search for something he could find only abstractly and temporarily at sea – that Nirvana of total and true mother love, or an affirmation in a life he could not wholly affirm by himself.

Prior to his direct exposure to that avenue of escape, his total early encounter with that all-embracing “love” (besides constant hours staring along the New England coast) was through the magical world of literature. Born and bred the son of a fine Shakespearian actor, it was only natural the detached youth should find some early enlightenment in the realm of the masters’ works. (If we take O’Neill’s dramatic account to be true-to-life, in “Long Day’s Journey” the family bookcase held “sets of Dumas, Victor Hugo, Charles Lever, three sets of Shakespeare, Hume’s History of England, Gibbon’s Roman Empire and miscellaneous volumes of old plays, poetry, and several histories of Ireland. A very young Eugene must have at least browsed those books from time to time.)

Predominant as Shakespeare’s work was, a boy whose predilections were rebellion and a certain father-hate could not be expected to cherish too heartily his father’s idol. One of the spurs to someday move him to seek different, riskier answers in a modern world apart from his father’s
perception might be detected in a bit of dialogue from the above O’Neill drama. The overly didactic, moralistic patriarch complains: “Why can’t you remember your Shakespeare and forget the third-raters. You’ll find what you’re trying to say in him – as you’ll find everything else worth saying. Edmund: (Ironically): Fine. That’s beautiful. But I wasn’t trying to say that. We are such stuff as manure is made on, so let’s drink up and forget it. That’s more my idea.”

O’Neill was not overreacting against the Elizabeth per se, but against a romanticized, 19th century rendition of the bard’s world view. This bastardized American product was much the result of the sentimental posturing of 17th and 18th century British drama. It persisted among audiences who felt a need to glorify human existence and purge emotions on a more-or-less melodramatic plane without close inspection of life’s harsher realities. James O’Neill held similar aesthetic attitudes to the sentimentalists’, and approached his family situation with those attitudes pervasive in him. To such an ugly degree had this drenched much of the father’s family mien that Eugene grew to despise the masking, hypocritical manifestations of that outlook. (A special stigma was the revelation of his mother’s drug addiction after many mysterious years of deception by his brother and father.) Eugene would suffer to the end with the knowledge that so much of life must be shrouded in mystery and the repression of truth and honest emotion. His early interest in mysticism may even have exacerbated his laments. Another lesion of the soul that provoked an attack on family and national heritage was the sapping lechery of American materialism. O’Neill someday hoped to deliver up a cycle of plays fashioned out of the country’s history in light of its aggressively possessive instincts, but never concluded that cycle for a confluence of reasons. Yet one need look no further than James Tyrone to uncover the gross effects of that materialistic impulse upon a once-starving Irish-American actor. The over-arching, stifling reality of at least one man’s American Dream is rudely acknowledged by the old, embittered father in “Long Day’s Journey into Night”: “I’ve never admitted this to anyone before, lad, but tonight I’m so heartsick I feel at the end of everything, and what’s the use of fake pride and pretense. That god-damned play I bought for a song and made such a great success in – a great money success – it ruined me with its promise of an easy fortune. I didn’t want to do anything else, and by the time I woke up to the fact I’d become a slave to the damned thing and did try other plays, it was too late…. What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder, that was worth…. What may have been the greatest American romantic role ever played for sheer sake of staying power (worth a small fortune every season then), had claimed a man’s inner-most identity, and denied his most profound dreams. Disillusionment and rotten illusion would be a recurring theme in so much of the playwright’s work.

If we name Eugene artistic rebel or spiritual expatriate without some reservations, though, we would diminish the complete picture of the man-become-playwright. In a world where the anti-hero most often reigns supreme, it is valuable again to view the rather thorough influence of a “heritage of rebellion”. From the very first moments of perception, young Eugene sensed still another “heritage” – one which hearkened to him as incessantly as the traditional one of his
forebears, for even James Sr. had some sense of rebellion in him; otherwise, he wouldn’t have prodded and provoked his sons into doing something with their lives.

Eugene’s older brother James Jr. or Jamie (he also had a brother Edmund, who died very young when Jamie snuck into Edmund’s room after being warned not to; Jamie had measles), was a figure so in touch with the darker sides of life that his cynical, darkly-comical resonance was a power beyond powers in young Eugene’s life. He was the personification of not only rebellion but also a mangled sort of love. We glance at his inner depths as he confides in his younger brother near the close of “Long Day’s Journey”: “…My putting you wise so you’d learn from my mistakes. Believed that myself at times, but it’s a fake. Made my mistakes look good. Made getting drunk romantic. Made whores fascinating vampires instead of poor, stupid, diseased slobs they really are. Made fun of work as sucker’s game. Never wanted you to succeed and make me look even worse by comparison….. Oscar Wilde’s ‘Reading Gaol’ has the dope twisted. The man was dead and so he had to kill the thing he loved. That’s what it ought to be…. Remember I warned you for your sake. Give me credit. Greater love hath no man than this, that he saveth his brother from himself.”

In his pre-drama years, though, Eugene would not be saved. For the warring spirit within his older brother glimmered with all the sordid radiance of the hero-daemon. One real weakness in many of the early plays and often the sign of subjectivist experimentation is a recurrent flow of philosophical attitudinizing with its heavy reliance upon the writings of Nietzsche and Strindberg, and the poetic spirit of the “third-raters” according to some moralists (fin-de-siecle writers like Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud). Without a scenario of darkness and a partner in rebellion in a seedier-than-thou brother, the appeal of those life-attitudes (especially that the unnatural could express beauty better than traditional morality) might never have influenced Eugene’s works.

Reemerging along the horizon of world rebellion and the larger dust storm swelling about modern humanity and O’Neill’s emerging world-view, we may see a newer outlook on heroic action originating in the Renaissance’s glorification of Man. With its concern for humans as the center of creation, a new inner-directedness awakened. In the intervening centuries a process of expansion and sophistication of that response developed. Esther Jackson in “The Broken World of Tennessee Williams” illuminates the concept’s present-day implications: “Because of a new sense of historical crisis, the hero, the man of action, has grown less appealing as an image of present moral and ethical aspirations than the anti-hero, a man of reflection and contemplation. But perhaps an even more profound change in perspective is represented in the growing influence of the Judaeo-Christian ethic on the moral aspirations of the common man. Despite the apparent record of history, the principles of Christianity have become in the past century, a more meaningful part of the common standard for meaningful action. The substitution of the ‘inner-oriented’ ethic of the Christian protagonist for the ‘outer-directed’ heroism of the Greek hero is one of the significant contemporary adjustments in Western drama.”
Reaction against a traditional life of action, then, was becoming the transcending “heritage” of modern man when Eugene was young, and if he rebelled, he was not fighting the current as fully as some of his torn predecessors did. Rather, the world of new ideas offered him a pathway as a light amidst the dark jungle of discontent he was experiencing regarding his family. The influence of the “new heritage” should not be underestimated, for O’Neill was very often a man of repose, living in a contemplative world as few do. From the early days in a no-man’s-land of family crises, the new light could be adhered to whenever his mind sought fraternity in an often friendless world. The open sore of separation or alienation from family could find at least temporary succor in the scab of rebellion.

Ultimately, from this background of detachment, cynicism, hypocrisy, materialism, repression, and anti-heroism, emerged Eugene O’Neill the thinker, dramatist, and “Black Irishman”. Although the latter term engenders many connotations, we mean only one by it. Raised in a personal ambience peculiarly Irish Catholic (based upon family and church loyalties), any criticism of traditional evils could be labeled but one thing – rebellion. By the age of separation, Eugene had deliberated and made his choice: he bolted from religious faith and moralistic tradition, but not wholly from the family or humanity. He would seek a new faith, a new meaning based upon compassion in a life he saw as easily corrupted.

3.

“Tyrone. There’s the makings of a poet in you all right….
Edmund (Sardonically). The makings of a poet. No, I’m afraid I’m like the guy who is always panhandling for a smoke. He hasn’t even got the makings. He’s got only the habit. I couldn’t touch what I tried to tell you just now. I just stammered. That’s the best I’ll ever do I mean, if I live. Well, it will be faithful realism, at least. Stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people.” – Act IV, “Long Day’s Journey into Night.”

Until now it has been our endeavor to sketch the confluence of ideational forces that shaped O’Neill the thinker, O’Neill the man. We have delayed approximation of the more direct influences that molded him as playwright, because it seemed appropriate to consider the keyest mode of social definition last, his plays. This side of the man, of course, was an outgrowth of the rebel in him, the child, the seaman, the lover, the thinker. Within the comprehensive totality of rebellion (with all its nativist yearnings), we now to deal with O’Neill the thinker-dramatist. The extent to which writing philosophy (in theory and practice) plays a part, indirectly or directly, in his dramaturgy should be at least one of our concerns. Form and content being dictated by those elements to a degree, it will help to delineate the proportion of not only rebellion in his works, but maturation also.

From the first time young Eugene glimpsed his father carrying that adventurous persona of Edmund Dantes across the stage, Gene knew one theatre – the romantically melodramatic one of his father’s “Monte Cristo”. He himself tried to define the impact of his earlier childhood close
to that theatre, stating in the early 1920’s: “My only experience with the theatre through my father really made me revolt against it…. As a boy I saw so much of the old, ranting, artificial romantic stuff that I always had a sort of contempt for the theatre.” Even though a large part of that response is true, Robert Brustein follows another ironical thread in “The Theatre of Revolt” — “…the major components of his plots, in this particular (early) phase, are romantic love and swashbuckling adventure, both treated in a manner more appropriate to the melodramatic stage of his father, James O’Neill, than to the theatre of revolt.” “The Fountain”, “Marco Millions”, “The Hairy Ape”, “The Emperor Jones,” “Lazarus Laughed” and many others, all carry certain earmarks of that earlier, less subtle theatre. Though his whole career served as an enthusiastic reaction against “theatrical” theatre, Gene might no more escape it totally than any person may hope to flee his early “embedded” heritage. Even his concept of a “dream theatre” seems to have arisen in part from James’s concept of theatre, but more on that later.

Not all of Gene’s works did consist of “swashbuckling adventure”, though, or his name would never have risen to the prominence it did. After all, Eugene would win the Nobel Prize in Literature eventually. What exactly does separate Eugene from the crowd of staid “parlor entertainers” or second-rate experimenters? How far did he carry his rebellion? Brustein declares -- “If the rebel dramatists are inclined to revolt against each other as well as against the external world, O’Neill is similar only to Shaw in his willingness to set himself to school in the composition of his plays.” (Brustein also might have added Sean O’Casey to the latter category.) If this be the case, what were the cause and the outcome?

In the tradition of Nietzsche, O’Neill was in many ways a man unto himself. His “heroism” (arising from his detachment as a boy) made it possible to ward off discouragements and temptations that other, lesser playwrights could not endure. Like the heroes of past worlds, O’Neill might doubt his aesthetic quest at times, but would not swerve from his main path when push came to shove. Rene-Marill cites one anti-heroic quality in this regard -- “[The anti-heroes] wish to be alone, and it is in this sense that they refuse, from the beginning, the solutions of other men, the guaranteed, proven solutions…. Solitude defines the conditions of the [anti-] hero, and his heroism in that he has not been born to accept the help of proven formulas. Prometheus is alone because he is the only one to dare, and his solitude expresses only the audacity of his enterprise.”

Audacious and solitary, the lone source of companionship in O’Neill’s artistic world, in fact, was granted him in an idealized view – comprising Greek, Nietzschean, Strindbergian, and personal elements in coalition. If he accepted a few suggestions from close critic-friends about naturalism, he took his ultimate tone and scope from his visions only. Out of them emerged a “dream theatre” (he said he imagined his works at the back of his mind in so vivid a fashion that he believed no “live” staging could approach its vitality) with the vague, almost mystical, larger-than-life quality of his father’s theatre, but with his own high-flown goal of keenest tragedy. As
JW Krutch wrote in “Eugene O’Neill, the Lonely Revolutionary” -- “What the lonely O’Neill soon discovered was that neither modern optimism nor modern pessimism corresponded to either his own experience or his own vision. On the one hand, man’s unhappiness was not simply the result of ‘social maladjustment’. ‘The sorrows of our proud and angry dust are from eternity and shall not fail.’ On the other hand, those sorrows are not merely the ignoble thing which pessimistic naturalism makes of them. What obsessed O’Neill was a tragic sense of life not to be expressed either in the mere play of social significance or in the mere drama with an unhappy ending which was the nearest the modern convention ever approached to tragedy. He needed something more passionate, and more mystical [and truly historic] than that. He needed a form which acknowledged man’s relevance, not merely to society, but to the universe which is larger than man and larger than human society. And the only form which does presuppose what he presupposed is Tragedy in a sense of the term almost lost.”

With his tragic determination and sense of life, Eugene O’Neill set out to create dramas that might express humanity’s staunchness and courage in the face of indomitable Fate. Unfortunately, that Fate was nothing so straight-forward as Grecian deities or an Elizabethan wheel. O’Neill may not have totally grasped what that Fate was, but often suspected laughing gods. At other times, he seemed to define that Fate as the deterministic forces of heredity and environment. Whatever “it” was, it always consisted of some insensate power that had great influence on people. Not specifically optimistic or even pessimistic in the traditional main, O’Neill sought a humane approach, a way that would not glorify humanity cheaply nor demean humanity, but uplift people semi-tragically. A trail had not been bazed as yet, so he needed time to discover forms to communicate, and time to ensnare content.

During the embryonic years of his career – a life at sea, at home, at the sanitarium, at Jimmy the Priest’s Saloon (scene of his attempted suicide) -- all these elements and more swelled at the artistic damn walls, swirling and rising to flood the banks. He would do well to integrate variegate ideas as smoothly as he did. The sea plays, the Glencairn cycle, emerged soon (ca. 1914-1917), which semi-religiously depicted the theme of man fighting the odds against an ultimate friend and enemy, the sea. Generally naturalistic in style due to a need to express his content faithfully, realistically, even at times sentimentally, O’Neill could not restrain a non-realistic spirit of external domination in the presentation of scenery and background. The ship’s cabin, for instance, seems to shrink at times, enclosing her captives as the drama mounts. Also, when the eternal sailor, Yank, in “Bound East for Cardiff” is on his deathbed, we feel something beyond the natural quality of her influence in his harangue against a life at sea: “… I ain’t never had religion; but I know whatever it is what comes after it can’t be no worser’n this… travelin’ all over the world and never seein’ none of it; without no one to care whether you’re alive or dead. (With a bitter smile) There ain’t much in all that that’d make yuh sorry to lose it, Drisc…. I’ll be buried at sea…. It’s as good a place as any other, I s’pose – only I always wanted to be buried on dry land – But what the hell’ll I care – then? (Fretfully) Why should it be a rotten night like this with that damned whistle blowin’ and people snorin’ all around? I wish the stars was
out, and the moon, too; I’d lie out on deck and look at them, and it’d make it easier to go – somehow.” Just as the ship’s bell and whistles sound throughout this death scene, so do other symbols of primitive drives and instincts reoccur through most of the playwright’s works (e.g., tom-toms, sea chanties, blues music, a foghorn).

If O’Neill’s mind found it necessary to unravel in dramatic forms a life he felt so impetuously in his bones, his dramatic sense realized that sea life or any other sort of life identical to his own background was not the total experience and content he would have to encompass before discovering truer, larger-than-life drama. Thus, his never-ending battle with form did not preclude a quest for stronger content also. In an undying search for philosophical absolutes, the “Black Irishman” tangled with everything from spiritual polarities to modern psychology. The latter journey proved to be endemic to the age and though his interpretations may seem pretentious or simplistic in the dramatic transfer to us, they are still consequential as far as personal and dramaturgical philosophy go.

To contain the new ideas and themes from the playwright’s life, it only seems logical, in an atmosphere of rebellion, for him to create new and still newer forms. “The Emperor Jones” (1920) is a full-bodied example of theatre with a primordial, psychologically-deep theme and experimental form. Standing at a physical distance from the expressionistic milieu in Europe, O’Neill is able to incorporate some of the latter’s techniques, along with some of its symbols, to produce with a bit of homage still to his father’s theatre, a meaningful “theatrical” drama. His content is the age-old corruption of rational man by his non-rational fears. The form, though, is expressionistic in that it goes beyond the world of surface reality to define its order in the subconscious. It is symbolic, on the other hand, in that O’Neill utilizes setting and characters to suggest mysterious forces combining to overwhelm humanity. The total form is well-integrated in its use of mysterious images, coincident visual and aural appeal, and automaton-like characters to further the primordial theme. These elements combine to surround the victim and “live”, though not as representative observable, everyday reality. The treatment of the character Jones, though, is direct and more real as he responds at a corresponding rate to the images thrown at him. Unreal effects are achieved even more fully with the backdrop of forest as dark as the nether regions of the mind and soul -- “… a wall of darkness dividing the world. Only when the eye becomes accustomed to the gloom can the outlines of separate trunks be made out, enormous pillars of deeper blackness. A somber monotone of wind lost in the leaves moans in the air. Yet this sound seems but to intensify the impression of the forest’s relentless immobility, to form a background throwing into relief its brooding, implacable silence.”

Internalization is the key to emotional comprehension and O’Neill accomplishes it with the simple juxtaposition of subtly speeding-up tom-tom (heart) beats and Jones in flight. In the end, defeat is total and reflected in the beat of tom-toms that seem to be “on the very spot” until the rifles crack in the distance and the drumbeats cease. The “mysterious forces” of the world have struck yet another blow –the biological and racial pasts of humanity have caught up with Jones.
They are inescapable in the forest of fear and paranoia. The drumbeats mirror the psychological Fate of the Emperor and of humanity generally, according to the playwright.

O’Neill’s experiments, though, did not always unite form and content as thoroughly as might be desired by the critics. In “The Hairy Ape” (1921), though a certain equilibrium is attained at various points in a drama that can only be called “super-naturalistic”, many other attempts to gain culmination of form and content together, were more futile. The list of O’Neill soft-spots is long. In “The Great God Brown” (1925), a fairly interesting, but still a bit too incoherent, combination of forms and ideas marked the creation of a drama fraught with experimentation and discreet meanings. In “Strange Interlude” (1926), a slightly ponderous form and vital theme (life as a strange interlude between the electrical poles of the Mother-god and Father-god) are weighted with a millstone of generally meaningless interior monologues. Two years later, in the naturalistic “Dynamo” (1928), lifeless characters and dialogue struggled through a simple, but unrefined, plot to a dismal, unconvincing conclusion. Another ponderous form in “Mourning Becomes Electra” (1929) gains a bit of height in its original treatment of the Oresteia myth in terms of modern psychology. The “sins of the fathers” may not be as credible in their consequences as in “Long Day’s Journey” (1940), but the problem is at least resolved dramatically. Finally, if “Desire Under the Elms” (1924) succeeds, even though its dual theme of incestuous love and maternal possessiveness are overplayed at times, it is due to a return to a fairly smooth realistic style (with symbolist aspects).

In “Days without End” (1934), a highly contrived play signals an end of experimentation, especially with regard to form. It contains some experimental techniques (especially the split characterization of John Loving in John, the loyal husband and fading Catholic, and Loving, a cynical pagan akin to O’Neill’s brother Jamie in his “Take what you can get” attitude), but they do not dominate the content. A sign that the play represents a new posture on O’Neill’s part is the Catholic ending, which was more of a problematic situation previously for the playwright. It is not the Catholicism that is crucial per se, but rather the fact that it made little difference to the playwright now what philosophical attitude a human being held. O’Neill rejected the messianic attitudinizing that dominated his plays previously and had been the basis for much “artistic” non-objectivity. It was just such active rebelliousness that had been O’Neill’s earmark in the past with its resultant experimentation. In the future, a purer form of rebellion would become evident and more rational control enacted in his work. One reason for the change of heart may have been the psychological need to face his past maturely through the vehicle of refined art (with a more easily accessible form). It is germane here, though, that the “Black Irishman” in search of new meaning was likely encountering a distasteful reality – there seemed to exist little ultimate Truth in the world. Each messianic role he had previously assumed to approach that Truth in the long run, had disillusioned him as much as the one before it. In “Days Without End”, he unravels the tale of spiritual odyssey through Father Baird -- “First it was Atheism unadorned. Then it was Atheism wedded to Socialism. But Socialism proved too weak-kneed a mate, and the next I heard Atheism was living in free love with Anarchism, with a curse by Nietzsche to bless the
union. And then came the Bolshevik dawn, and he greeted that with unholy howls of glee and wrote me he’d found a congenial home at last in the bosom of Karl Marx…. Soon his letters became full of pessimism, and disgust with all sociological nostrums. Then followed a long silence. And what do you think was his next hiding place? Religion, no less. But as far away as he could run from home – in the defeatist mysticism of the East…. I enjoyed a long interval of peace from his missionary zeal, until finally he wrote me he was married. That letter was full of more ardent hymns for a mere living woman than he’d ever written before about any of his great spiritual discoveries…. The only constant faith I’ve found in him before was his proud belief in himself as a bold Anti-Christ.”

The playwright, at this juncture, virtually revoked his own license to work out the cares of the world in the orb of the old drama. He ceased to “dig at the roots of the sickness of today” – the new order (political, spiritual, or dramatic) would not be discovered by him – at least, that is, with the tools of the past (his father’s melodramatic theatre combined with his own sometimes superficial attempts to unite form and content). Perhaps Eugene O’Neill had always sensed a certain futility in his era. But then he had determined in theory the future course of his career as early as 1922, when he stated: “Time was when I was an active socialist, and after that, a philosophical anarchist. But today I can’t feel anything like that really matters.” It is paradoxical, then, that O’Neill should conclude “Days Without End” on a Catholic note. Although he was struggling over whether or not to return to the Church at that time, some have suggested he did so only to partway appease the spirit of his dead father. Whatever his motive, the playwright some time later expressed a wish to revise the script. If that was the case, then Brustein may be close to the truth in speculating that he might have concluded on a Strindbergian note instead (from “The Inferno”): “And suppose I again become religious, I am certain that in another ten years, you will reduce religion to absurdity. Do not the gods play games with us poor mortals.” As the future reveals to us, though, the finale did remain Catholic and O’Neill did reject his own messianic role from the past. The search for “home” would go on, but no longer would it follow the path of “ideal” or “liberated” form.

Eugene O’Neill’s career had reached a turning point, but though experimentation for its own sake was over for him, he did not waver in his journey toward ultimate theatre. Ironically, as he became more absorbed into the world of his plays and more removed from everyday life, his drama took on a new life-like quality it may have often lacked before. He looked to the past, his heritage, and those memories made all other life seem bathetic. In the coming years, he took on the role of spiritual recluse. If some critics label his personal isolation as the acceptance of anesthesia to exclude the pains of reality, it should be specified that the anesthetic was of the variety that heightened insight into the past and at times wore off enough to produce a unique dulling pain that could be more horrible than the sharp, shooting pains of his earlier life.

As for his search for content and form, that search now found itself subsumed under the quest for personal identity and a kind of repentance (“home”). In “Long Day’s Journey into Night” we come upon our rebel (though on the verge of “re-conversion”) once again in Edmund, the
playwright’s on-stage persona, but in the past-existential role rather than the modern-messianic one. O’Neill finds himself locked into a life and death struggle with the ghosts of his memory. This time, though, he must not fail in the resolution of conflict, for life had been too short and the time for retribution and compassionate revelation was at hand. The theme of the play itself is love-hate and the ineffectuality of illusion. The Tyrone family has been living on each other’s nerves since its conception and the torment has driven each to their own forms of escape: James, to a life of self-delusion in acting and investment; Ella, to a world of fog and fixes; Jamie, to the cynical extreme, though he holds out a slim hope until the last fix hits; Edmund (Gene), to a world of black and hopeless hope (and, significantly, not to the theatre). The men all face their true pasts to varying degrees, but are incapable of transforming their present out of fear and or ignorance. In the end what “saves” the men (Mary is pretty far gone by now) is an understanding of and compassion for one another. Unfortunately, that is insufficient to the entire family’s needs and offers nothing more than temporary respite from the fog. Although a moment of uplift occurs, it is brought resoundingly down in the “Mad Scene” as Mary re-enters wholly submerged in her world of the “happy past” (isolation). The author’s final message is inferred – a cry for compassion.

Beyond the basic plot and character tension is the story of personal repentance-in-recollection, of forgiveness-in-retrospect. The purpose is therapeutic (nativist impulse, if not his Catholicism, may have come back to haunt him). The avenue of therapy is artistic objectivity in that it is only through rediscovery of the past (and seeming “escape” from the present, which is actually the transformative present, not the abandoned present) and keen semi-rational control of emotional observance and reaction that a previously solipsistic routine evolves on-stage. Out of this process arises a form we might call “charged realism”. That is, the images Eugene’s mind projects subjectively are realistic vis-à-vis the symbolic or wholly suggestive. Also, they veer closer to reality’s “poetic” heat and pitch (poetry in the unpoetic) than nearly all other realistic modern drama. The effect is as near, in its larger-than-life intensity, to “dream theatre” as to fourth-wall realism or naturalism. It is the personal association in a need for exculpation of personal guilt, and in a need also to forgive, like the “Our Father” says; and the suppression of a more experimental outlook, so that in “Long Day’s Journey”, the human-family ordeal is transported to the heights O’Neill had envisioned for his drama. His emotions had given way to keenest reflection and human understanding.

4.

If Eugene O’Neill yielded to introspection and compassion to “re-associate” him-self with the family spiritually and artistically, his ingrained ambiguity of feeling responded with the final push in the opposite direction too. In the past, he had seen modern life through the eyes of the anti-hero, but found problems in the dramatic transubstantiation of that concept. With the later plays of his career, though, he displayed an ability to communicate his life’s worth in the drama
and assume the role himself in reality. He became the anti-hero within his own life and found himself now existentially alone and yet simultaneously joined via history to his birth-family. From this dual role of his comes the great power of his greatest play. Ironically, his Carlotta’s love (acting as a protective shield to keep even old friends away) during the personal ordeal of its creation, robbed him of other human fellowship and intensified his pessimism in a way. But in a state of partial realignment with his birth-family and heritage via “Long Day’s Journey”, he very much reclaimed his past. With others outside his family, though, came the “dream” that the only possibility for community among most human beings was through the mutual alliance of illusion-dwellers in “The Iceman Cometh”. The single basis for both family and world must be, of course, love. The order he had yearned for was concrete in his mind, debatable in reality. He loved Carlotta, but he had not been able to love his entire family as a playwright without creating a great tragedy on-stage. Perhaps the men of his birth-family loved each other a bit in the end. But what of poor Mary (O’Neill’s mother-figure standing for Ella, his own mother)? As one of his most compassionate, yet despair-laden, play’s title has it, maybe Mary/Ella and her men inhabited no more than a “Moon for the Misbegotten”. “She” deserved better; so did her men.

Despite a crippling physical illness in later years, Parkinson’s, in 1946 Eugene O’Neill came out of partial seclusion for a time to direct and become actively engaged in the premier production of “The Iceman Cometh”. He’d won the Nobel Prize for Literature 10 years before that. With “Iceman”, he seemed more extroverted than ever before in the usually distasteful realm for him of theatrical staging. He joked and criticized, and even took criticism, as if emerging from a shell. If he were on the brink of re-identification with the human family in a more mature and gratifying respect beyond the drama, he had little chance thereafter to consummate it. The Parkinson’s that was to speed his moribund state and end his writing career (and plans for the American heritage cycle of which “More Stately Mansions” and “A Touch of the Poet” were completed) grappled with his body and spirit to the death. He found his outstretched hands and heart mainly incapable of artistic or social fulfillment in his final days. If Eugene O’Neill the man always “a little in love with death” found the wait in those unproductive final years at all relaxing, then he deceived those close to him. The older-than-his-years, crippled, nearly mute shadow of a man glared out at life once more with those dark, somber eyes as if to say: “Give me life again, oh morbid world, only if you can give it with abundant, not sparse, love this time.”

P.S. The world debut for “Long Day’s Journey into Night” was in Sweden in 1955, two years after Eugene O’Neill’s death. In 1957, that landmark drama was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize, O’Neill’s fourth Pulitzer. Eugene had donated his papers and manuscripts to Yale University shortly before he died. His son Shane earned his Ph.D. in Classics at Yale. His daughter Oona had married Charlie Chaplin. Carlotta was Eugene’s third wife, and proved to be his longest-lasting spousal partner.—djm.
Journal Entry 1: “The Education of Henry Adams”

“The Education of Henry Adams” reads a bit like the story of the man who threw an effigy of himself into the abyss from the highest cliff -- at first he watched it in descent; then he wondered at, then began to experience the sensation of gravity’s pull on the body; finally, he discovered, to his surprise, that the effigy had always been himself. There is one key difference: in the story the fusion of selves occurred. The sense of fatality was admitted by the man who at length allowed the effigy’s “reality” to infuse him-self – it was, after all, his own reality. In the case of Adams, the manikin remains a figure detached, never to deeply engage the body and mind that gave it shape.

The reason for this peculiar suspension of Henry Adams? I think it can be seen as the inevitable result of a man’s ambivalent quest to find meaning in and outside of his age. Adams would never fit the role of simple chronicler or romanticizer of the bygone; he yearned rather to be the synthetic agent of heritages. His profound introspection, then, encompassed the present, as well as the past, but never with quite the serenity and balance of Chartres. The unity and rightness of organization in aesthetic materials he found there could not be applied to the maelstrom that was America at the end of the 19th century -- to the degree he could not transform his response into similar organization (artistic) in the present, he failed in his expansive mission.

Henry Adams, in a word, remained forever the historian (albeit one with an some “imaginative understanding”) who demurred as artist. America had not yielded up the intellectual subtleties that may have bestowed some sort of existential relief for him (through the acknowledgment and acceptance of limitation), and Adams was burdened to the end with the consequences.

Journal Entry 2: “The Theory of the Leisure Class”

Thorstein Veblen was the ultimate entrepreneur (with morals). He knew every minute who his audience was and manipulated it: “It is hoped that no one will find his sense of literary or scientific fitness offended by this recourse to homely facts…” There is a great sense always in Veblen that he is indignant about and despising of the leisure class, but never does the rankle come immediately, aggressively to the fore. With coy, seductive vengeance, he draws them in –
that is to say, the agents for the leisure class in the intellectual marketplace. His ratcheted language and hierarchical sentences have invisible purpose: he intends to do full psychological battle with the “rhetoricians.”

What I think wins the battle for Veblen is his subtle commutation of death sentences, all the while giving the enemy a dose of its own medicine furtively between the eyes. This is the ultimate irony of his style. He uses, in addition, the same tool, rehearsed diction, as that invidious class to expose facts and fantasy inadmissible until then. Historically the question is whether or not he succeeded much with his contemporaries, but in the period since then, there is little doubt he has worked his magic successfully.

In the process, Veblen has extended the boundaries, not only of sociology, but more importantly, style and depth of debate. America can lay some claim to maturity by the fact it recognizes irony more now (even in the economic marketplace) and utilizes satire to demolish false idols. In “The Leisure Class”, Thorstein Veblen fastened more than the spiritually devoid context of life back onto those glossy lapels. By furnishing us with techniques through which we can see ourselves obliquely, he, like Lear’s fool, suggests new powers of perception, and neatly gives us back the responsibility for subtler forms of action.

Journal Entry 3: “Jennie Gerhardt”

“Jennie Gerhardt” is not a subtle or richly sophisticated work by many standards, but its steady, driving love story still compels. The unassuming Jennie and her charming, if in the end duplicitous, Lester are pressed hard by forces inside and outside themselves, and doomed by them. The “impossibility of love” theme is not diminished, then, as it becomes the vehicle through which nature (impulse) can be thwarted by the constrictions and allurements of society. Thus, Lester’s duplicity even can be empathetically described in the hard, but inevitable, surrender of instinctual past to instinctual present.

What is most endearing about the story, though, is the sight of Jennie going through acculturation to love. In her the early “choice” to rise (through “higher” society for the sake of the family) sets her in the precarious position of marrying for prestige or security. But the fact she needs to feel deeply about the person she becomes attached to, makes her appealing to me – that is, social aspiration and emotional need never are separate for long in Jennie. As time passes, however, social necessity prompts Lester more and more to the point where he must consider his own long-range instinctual needs. Unfortunately, this coincides with Jennie’s deepest involvement (maternal and womanly) with him.

Jennie deserves so much, yet change (the workings of time on human emotion and social events) expels her from the world she still loves. Her last romantic gestures (at the deathbed and funeral) are even more moving, because we still believe that spirit is among us today, though somehow invisible. Dreiser’s moral is clear: the world hasn’t a soft enough core to allow the True Nurturer a very regular place in its innermost heart.
Journal Entry 4: “Three Lives”

Gertrude Stein is the patron-saint of all Simple-Sharing and the Nurse-Mother of what sometimes signifies real “trouble” too – the loneliness of spent days adding up, passing by other days (of other people), stripped of the possibility of human communication. Her Melanctha and Lena are soul-sisters, each a container for some “rare strain” that may fade from want of comparison with sufficient kindred spirits. This leads to the tragedy of that work of Stein’s: in a tightly knit texture of psychological relations, somehow the crucial human relation never emerges. Melanctha and Lena both have needs, and those needs disappear, at least in the grave.

To say needs, however, is never to say obsessions with Stein’s women, but rather “possessions” of themselves. They have a gift, that is, something which should be shared – they are instinctual “lovers” bereft of common objects, and that fate is sometimes worse than any death. In “Lena” the quality of helplessness is pathetic, because she cannot even know to hope. She stands to you and me as a gentle sister whose life’s essence may not have been revealed to her until it was too late. That she can’t know why her essence hasn’t been previously revealed to her, is no reducer of her tragedy. Who is to blame, after all? What could have been changed, and by whom?

Stein’s deepest “passion” is the world as it isn’t, her deepest love the world as it is, deeply. When I remember Lena I feel that, when I think of Melanctha, I know it.

Journal Entry 5: William Carlos Williams

Until now, I had always thought of William C. Williams as a nature-poet. In the little bits of poetry and hearsay I had picked up, it seemed to me he wrote about nothing so much as flowers, chickens or rainwater – poor man. And if he never did deal with the more human world around him, it was always with the eye of the gardener, the beekeeper, or the country doctor. But what eyes these people actually have!

If my bias was indicative of any sort of general trend, it may or may not be unfortunate (I found that bias helped me to ask good questions about Williams’s real intentions). WCW is not at all about the business of reifying nature in traditional terms. He demands something new in “seeing” any object, natural or man-made. He forced me to reconstruct with him the shape and atmosphere of key parts of the world he perceived anew. His commentary in “Koral in Hell” is so attuned to the pulses that irrigate (or subdue) dreams that there is no longer any doubt in my mind about his unique kind of “nature-humanism.” To me, his style and vision seem more aware of the close-fought battles we live and die with than either Dreiser’s or Crane’s (Stephen). He forces us to see past superficial distinctions to the heart (better, core) of existence. Perhaps others could have simulated the pathos in his inscription on “poor and sentimental households” – none other would have emphasized the perfection of every object and seen it as “secure in its own perfections.”
If this man was lacking in passion and forgiveness, as some critics have suggested, then the reading of his work still can be a learning process, a discovery of a new form of empathy, at least – that is, the protector of relations among things, the restorer of imagination in the fact, so that imagination after the fact is more proportionate to feeling and meaning bound up in that very real set of relations.

Journal Entry 6: “Winesburg, Ohio”

Sherwood Anderson had the hand of the illusionist and the heart of the sentimentalist. Happily, his best gift was for proportion. His sentimentalism did not often distort (the countenance of) the deeper pathos of life, while his illusionism did not effect a slice of life (in that more fictive deception that would have us believe it gathers its power from the naturalistic excision of scene from flux). Anderson’s scenes are “slices of life” true enough, but they retain always a kind of literalness that can only come from the proximity to dreams of real people. Thus, his realism emerges not from a study in force, like Dreiser’s, but rather from the observance of the seldom detail, the neglected inquiry. In “Winesburg,” he, like George, is reborn in the furtive knowledge of the death-shadow of dreams.

I felt close to those dreams. In the lingering doubt and still-yearnings of the “grotesques”, I listened to the story-teller. I think I knew his story – the subtle slippings of hope, that same sense of sadness that comes when one finally realizes that other people’s dreams have died. But they die hard. Their forms and gyrations live on in minds and bodies long after they are made impossibilities, like the flying fingers of Wing Biddlebaum.

There is no steady drive of naturalistic fate in “Winesburg”, then, because all dreams are gone. Each episode stands on its own as the last feeble, sometimes frantic, gesture of dream’s memory. The lesson is subtle: with a steady eye for small as well as larger pathos, Anderson reassures us that it is possible to “immerse” ourselves in the many silent deaths around us without giving up our own dreams. For although his love was greater than his “objectivity” in these moments of expression, he was never the weak sentimentalist, but always the earnest, enlisted companion of dreams and their makers – and for being that, I think the dream lives in me.

Journal Entry 7: “Enormous Room”

Subject to the cool non-meditation of a sleek chaos, EE Cummings came to know the clacking, sharp tongue of a twitching fate. Eyeless was God. But La Ferte Mace still demanded sight. Images stood apart, then came together in stunting combinations out of which one could resist only by giving them a “composed” life. Cummings may have had to be prodded a little by his father to turn out “Enormous Room” in final form, but his every day there must have forced bits of sharp impression into curious and stark reformulations -- the lugubrious cheek of the French; the austere non-belief, instinctual clamorings, impossible serendipity that became all too possible; the very un-seraphic nature of le Glorie and le Patriotisme; the gorgeous delights, when
they came, in their hypermotions and kinesthetic suspensions – all amid the embryonic doom of airless and fitful days.

And so are we “tormented” like Cummings through the facile “distancing” of art? In some way art makes it more disturbing -- we are able to know, after all, that this did happen and yet it is somehow “fiction”. But once I am absorbed by the scene, this picture is like none other I’ve read before. Urine-soaked mattresses, buckets, straw, re-used cigarette butts, all is bathed in the “delectable” light of Cummings’ evocations. All of this provokes us even more to ask the question – why does this meeting-place, the crossroads of sublime and absurd, work?

Perhaps it is because this is the world precisely, this “extreme situation”. Perhaps because the fate of our own age is flat, cool, sometimes “ripe” before us, sometimes as lame as the prisoner-of-war-never-to-be. Our unsettled natures, however, demand commitment to a self-propulsion unlike any before, if we are to survive. Our bodies have no trouble making amends with this non-discourse that is Modern Living; it is surely our faculties of mind and creative abandon that pay more of the price. Let us hope EE Cummings is remembered for his un-simpering chastity, chiding fidelity amid agnosticism, and a general fit of re-emergence into the world, and we cannot fail to know that the stunting power of the mind coupled to the heart is ready to the challenge of the un-fate of the world.

Journal Entry 8: “The Man Who Knew Coolidge”

Lowell Schmaltz deserves better. The ever-mothered boy; lounge-lover, slow, unswerving protoplasm; unstinting disciple of the Great American Dream Machine; Eternal Optimist, Elk, Booster, Babbit-in-a-baby-bonnet – all of these, yet deserving of something even better? If he is, it’s undoubtedly not more floor-time. Lowell is as fine an air-jammer as any CB-er now operating. No, what Lowell needs is a little variation – progeny, that is. He’s been around long enough perhaps. He’s gotten all too much attention and it may be a backhanded compliment to say that Lewis may have been the one to start it all. Step aside, Lowell, let your boys come through!

Yet our time has forgotten Lowell and his mates well-enough in its way. He doesn’t really have center-stage anymore, or does he? Will the real-life Lowells please stand up? And there they are – running the schools, church groups, PTOs, Lions Clubs, JCs… We don’t need any more “spiritual descendants” either. Just like Lowell, they’re real enough... and they diversify. But in stories, movies, novels, they’re just nowhere to be found. It’s just not fair. Maybe it would be just a little too much to ask after the 1960’s to expect artists to draw once again on the family for their subject matter, but that’s on its way back and I won’t be surprised to see people using Lewis for a kind of model.

There is a certain pathos in all this. We have forgotten the evolution of the Schmaltz family (our own parents, grandparents, uncles, etc., perhaps) in much the same way they forgot their progenitors. I wonder if 50 years up the line, a generation will think back on us and our childish
propensities with any sympathy. Now’s the time to wonder how much wisdom there is in William C. Williams’s observation that “Age and youth are great flatterers. Brooding on each other’s obvious psychology, neither dares tell the other outright what manifestly is the truth: your world may be poison.

Journal Entry 9: “The Great Gatsby”

I read “Gatsby” like other Fitzgerald stories I’ve read so far, with a nostalgia for my own past – and some dreams we all bet out lives on, and the dreams we really continue to have to live up to. I mean how many of us have not lived through that Gatsby stage when even the parties, the success, the “prestige”, the ruin, all seemed nothing beside “our love”. It’s a nice dream. All those brief, but impressive, moments we have believed could be true, if we just hoped and tried long enough (positive-thinking America in a nutshell). Sometimes we have to let just a little of the nostalgia go. Perhaps that’s all life is, those little releases.

What’s even more incredible, though, is to contain that nostalgia, excluding all else, until it overflows. It’s then that we believe that power and prestige of any other kind is useless. But love needs contexts, eventually. It depends upon social prerogatives and promises – in short, it requires some vision, and breadth. I do for my wife, because it has a social and human meaning that we both theoretically can share in. To give “beyond” that (to go on believing in the rightness of an act when it may be detrimental to another) is to be a sentimentalist of Gatsby’s stripe – the eternal carrier of the flame. That fate is doomed, if reality loses its contexts along the way.

Gatsby’s chief context was pure dream-past, which is all any first love can be. The sadness comes when it is not capable of being brought into the present. Gatsby had no way of coping with that fact, though, for he had never lived through the failures that resided in those early parties, the first experiments in love – or if he did, he brought it all within himself, that accumulation that became a Platonic whole.

Journal Entry 10: “Facing the Chair”

My reading of Dos Passos’s book left me feeling not much different coming out from going into it. For one thing, there is not so much drama as distribution of facts in this account; in either case it needs more “work”. As far as the facts go, I guess I’d heard a lot of them before. One part that was new, however, was the evidence given with regard to Sacco’s alibi the day of the holdup. It seems airtight. The same cannot be said for his laying out of the eyewitness schema. If Dos Passos can obtain such a favorable breakdown for their innocence, how is it that some of the brightest, and a few of the most compassionate, observers do not see the breakdown so clearly? (E.g., see Francis Russell’s observations.)

However, I do not wish to promote their guilt. The attractiveness of their political beliefs goes without saying perhaps, but it still seems to me the question of their legal guilt or innocence is moot. Given the atmosphere of the time, though, it is somewhat remarkable that Dos Passes was
as unbiased as he was in the distribution of testimony. I do sense, though, absolutely no doubt on his part as to their innocence, and it seems this might have been something he decided upon long before the brunt of his investigation was behind him.

Finally, I am in no way sure Sacco and Vanzetti were not capable of committing violent “crimes” to further their cause. This is the great paradox of the case. When does one injustice warrant another injustice (or violent counterattack)? Obviously, there was too much injustice in 1920 for these men to lead quiet lives in the privacy of their homes or their political parties, but were there some better alternatives than violence? I don’t know. I think my heart goes out to the two martyrs, but my head is a little wary about some of the justifications (and attacks) their sacrifice has elicited.

Journal Entry 11: Hart Crane

Hart Crane’s undeniable gift was a willingness to follow the “music” wherever it might lead. His muse was the self, the self become sound, and the sound one which could transmit the heart’s proceedings. His ultimate search, then, was for the inner edge of reality, in terms of utmost emotional intensity. When it became apparent the “simple” music of his early work was inadequate to rendering a national spirit, a continental music, he began the greatest quest of his life. And for the first time he was forced to deal with larger and less ideal truths than ever before.

Crane’s motivation is still incomprehensible to me – his appetite was so large. As he moved from that charged symbol of omniscience and acceptance, the Hudson River Bridge, we discover with him more and more uncertainty as the music lacks inner connection, but then it did from the beginning. “The Bridge” is not a safe poem. To attack it, requires much of what the poet had – balls. His inability to find connection, driving him ever inward, may have resulted in the only possible “resolution”, transcendence, but I doubt it was the salvation it sometimes appears to be. Crane was tragic in his “successes” as well as his failures.

In reading his work in this and another class, I found myself identifying more strongly with Crane than perhaps with any other poet taught here recently – I don’t know whether that’s a curse or a blessing. But I did come to feel there is little acceptance of the true romantic, at least in this Midwestern circle. Crane seemed the least popular of poets. Perhaps anonymity breeds Greatness, but it does seem there is more at stake here. I find myself asking about Crane what others have asked about Fitzgerald – did the artist fail the age or did the age fail the artist? The artist is generally not a superman or superwoman. I believe we fail not so much the artist, but our own potential selves, in the general neglect of artists in society – potential selves that Hart Crane (along with many others) is at great pains to help release from social frustrations.


I related to Wilson’s “Earthquake” on two levels. On one, there was the feeling of sharing insights and history as they unfolded. Wilson had an uncanny eye for detail and its manifold
meanings. His gripping narratives in chronicle fashion were full-bodied without always being full-blooded, however. Wilson operated near the edge, being detached in so many ways. His “uniqueness”, to be sure, lies not with his political assumptions (some fairly liberal views: the government could be effective if it only had the desire, people are capable of great strength if given strategic help, conversion need be almost an aesthetic process rather than an evangelistic one) for me, but rather with the cool, mobile eye he dispatches to many scenes, only to remove from the stage’s edge when the story is up – the classicist’s prerogative.

Unmistakably, “American Earthquake” demonstrates a handling of materials far superior and more objective than just about anything else in the period. But still I do find myself asking an historical question – why are there no signs of life (talking, breathing people)? The scene in Illinois with the picture of Lincoln on the table was the height of sentimental indulgence, but there seems to be a lower-keyed attitude throughout toward the working people of this country that is not real for me. As often as Wilson describes a human scene in great detail and with insight, he gives just a little of his paternalism away…. It may be a doubtful proposition after all to rely so heavily on a man’s descriptions-as-history solely because they are highly articulate and capable of implying many ramifications in a single word. Still, Wilson is a source to be dealt with at every turn. I admire his spunk, his pertinence, his language, his large eye, but I like to see him, too, in his contexts.


“The Grapes of Wrath” is a monument. Whether that makes it a great work of art may or may not be another matter, but it still serves as a reminder and a guidepost to all of the severity of forces we think we have so neatly under control – forces that can lash out to lacerate frail and sturdy dreams alike. Fortunately, Tom Joad is a purebred defender of dreams; many others in the 1930’s were not.

What continues to impress me most about “Grapes”, though, is the power of people generally, not only the Joads, but even Casey and the people in the Hoovervilles and labor camps. There is a unity of expression there that seems so far from us today. If there ever was a sliver of a chance, somehow, these people carry an idea through, or die trying. The proletarian sentiment may seem overdone today, but we might bypass the thickest of it to ask what we’ve put in its place. And whatever that is, is it worth saving?

Perhaps a clue to an answer can be found in that last sentimental gesture of Rose ‘o Sharon. How do we stand in relation to the nurturing faculties of our bodies and the land? I feel very close to these sentiments ideally, but the clutter of mind vs. body seems to confuse the issue so much of the time. We may or may not be able to free ourselves (up) enough to really be in tune once again with the physical world (in and outside ourselves), but the courage and sagacity of the Joads is something to take into account in the trying. Still, I am not fully optimistic the good word is capable of spreading itself thinly.
Journal Entry 14: “Go Down, Moses”

I’m left with many questions after reading “Moses”. Perhaps the biggest ones arise from my reaction to the primal sadness in Faulkner’s book. Is it because the universality of experience represented leaves the question of personal transcendence nearly unaffected? Is it because the American culture of the 1970’s mitigates against the representation of and learning through such feelings, thus leaving me wondering what kind of world it was that produced Faulkner? Or is it simply my own lack of imagination or initiative that fails to grasp the proportions of his sadness?

This was my first reading of Faulkner and I realize there’s a little more work to be done by me before I can truly “enjoy” his works, but the other questions, I think, are still valid. Perhaps the inexorability of “Moses” is hard to deal with in an age so inarticulate of its own tragedies. And our incapacity for historic empathy does enter into this – we do live in a very anti-historical age. This raises the even more loaded question of the artistic maturity of our age. We have to reformulate historical symbols in our own terms, and where we do so classically or “existentially” isn’t the issue – it’s just not being done enough. Also, is Faulkner’s conception of time applicable in the near future? In an impulsive age turning back more and more to conservatisms of all kinds, will the chronicle or epic progress be more relevant?

These are not easy questions. “Moses” resists easy answers. It resisted me even as I saw and appreciated the subtle weave and juxtaposition of character, time, and the inescapable conditions of fate. I may have to look into those elements more in future. If anything, though, I do feel certain that the power of history needs demonstration in art now more than ever. All of which leads to the experiential question, how, and finally to the general one: has this generation been “cheated” by a heritage that looks less historically at life, with less awareness of regenerative and restorative power in the past?

Journal Entry 15: “Walker in the City”

I was struck by the way in which Alfred Kazin could not only descend into the past, un-layering it a bit at a time, but how that descent evoked so many memories of my own past. I think it has to do with his unique style of recreation that enacts a scene from the past with all kinds of detail, but always as it bears upon his individual “passage” at any one point in time – the universal brought to bear on and through the unique.

In his last walk through the “American” sections, I felt he was doing something positive for me. Wondering throughout the book how he would transcend his past, we suddenly become aware the “walks” have become more liberating extensions for all of us – beyond their realistic frame, they merge to signify all the small extractions-of-the-self from the womb that finally make each of us a “me”, an inviolable person. He deserves that, we deserve that too.

I empathize with Kazin, then, because he is truly an “historian of the self”, a man who has made his break so cleanly that he can re-enact, re-capitulate a progress. The difference between Henry
Adams and Kazin is miles, and I can say that the “cleanness” of his facing up to, and of his
reconstruction of, a self, is like a beam of light, warm and tolerant. I doubt I can say I feel any
less an outsider to my own past yet, but I’m sure if I could face up to my history like Kazin has,
my present might respond to the touch the way his did throughout Walker, especially in the end.

Journal Entry 16: Projective Verse

“It is my impression that all parts of speech suddenly, in composition by field, are fresh for both
sound and percussive use, spring up like unknown, unnamed vegetables in the patch, when you
work it, come spring.” – C. Olson.

The projectivists, it seems, give new meaning to an old definition: Language as Sound-in-Action.
A key to helping me deal with this poetry has been the notion of “strident potential”. As the line
propels words onward, I suddenly feel jolted by discoveries of new, charged relations that
uncover words, not solely for the sake of imaging or rhyming, but to dramatize the “rush” of the
line, always to find a kind of halting meaning. Words, lines, syllables are all “exposed” as we are
forced to hear them in unnatural relations that make more and more sense as our ear attunes itself
to the actions contained in each movement. A careful improvisation is at work here and we need
to follow it even as the poet did – a poet who depends more on the ear and the potential in speech
than on emotion – a poet with a good sense of traditional metrics that becomes a useful tool in
the counter-activities of his “drama”. If projective verse did nothing else, its experimental
contribution to the active (dramatic) use of language is landmark.

By recovering speech in its physiological reactions (articulation and hearing) and its
presentational aspect, the projectivists demand attention to the spontaneous birth of language.
Somehow I feel good about that. To not have to wait for the flow to sink in, to not have to debate
over the myriad possibilities of an image-concept is a lightener. And although this poetry does
not always look good on the page, there is no doubt that, at its best, the effort it takes to sound
out the lines, to dramatic them, is worthwhile.

Finally, to listen to speech well, as equal partner to the total action of presentation, can be heart-
warming. The consequences of these “experiments” in language in the more recent examples I’ve
heard, makes me feel that this hasn’t been just another case of academic massage – there is
something very human, which is to say, fully aware, in all this.

Journal Entry 17: Allen Ginsberg

To experience “Howl” is to have an enflamed affair with the throbbing disasters of America. To
“witness” with Ginsberg is to stretch one’s body to its limits, only to regain stability after a dance
with demons. It is consuming, but then America consumes too, if the challenge is not met with
alacrity. America does not relent, in its super-slow to lightning-like swallowings, its blasting
arrogance, its general un-love of the deviant soul. To admit all of its conscious and unconscious
brashness, insincerity and murderousness is not to give up the fight to comprehend the small things that can be done to, not only survive, but salvage faith, hope, and love.

Still to “love”? That was Ginsberg’s solution – to engage the spirit and meaning of Holocaust, to remain the outsider, and yet to “re-enter” the civilization that ignites it by creating, re-witnessing it in terms it can understand – that is a form of love, perhaps the highest such form.

I’ve never felt these things in their extremest elements like Ginsberg, but poetry has a way of drawing us up to the height or into the depths as if one did. That is as potentially destructive as it is redeeming, because if the felt drive to change is not acted on, it is corrupting. It does take courage to uplift oneself, to truly root oneself too, in America. I don’t know that I’ve had the courage for either yet.

Jeremiah had no “program”, like Ginsberg, but they both had missions. Perhaps it is the responsibility of the less “enflamed” to determine new, creative programs. To be goaded, jabbed, finally compelled, yet with no clear action taken, is the ultimate travesty. I can only ask at this point: Have I taken sufficient action to make this world a better place?

Journal Entry 18: “Soledad Brother”

The main “failure” in George Jackson cannot be attributed to either personal conscience or to a fascist system, but rather to men, to many systems, and even to accident. Whatever the causes, the real result in George Jackson’s case was the impossibility of a man with mind and heart to make his thing work in this country of many “prisons”. Are we to take this “tragedy” lightly? Did Sacco and Vanzetti?

George Jackson never had enough time in America. Out of this sense of urgency arose an extremely compressed view of history, one that would demand much time, if it were ever to be redeemed personally. Soledad took that possibility away, absolutely. Forced inward in a struggle that energized his nerve-strung body and mind ten years, his only outlet grew to be abstraction. In the process his view of personal history became so entangled in the concept of Dialectic that his abstractions “confined” his being, while, paradoxically, giving it his only form of release.

There was a kind of “fall” in this, but the point is he had no chance to rise again. That is our peculiar shame. History thrives on freedom, the touch of life, and in a country that claims it as its middle name, that extinguishing of a personal victory in time is undisguised murder, which is to also say, cultural suicide. Death is the ultimate non-response of time and Jackson needed responses to him, if ever any man did. If he mistook men for systems, then I do not think it was because he failed to comprehend the Dialectic, but because men forced it upon him in such “unempirical” terms. What did men mistake him for?

Finally, I think of the bitterness that sometimes accumulates in me and think of how it seems at times there is no rescue, no way I can re-channel morbid energies. But generally, when I’m
really in need, there is another person, the remembrance of a small dream that is about to be made real, or even some whim of nature or the mind that saves me. George Jackson knew no such serendipity at Soledad, but I still experience serendipity myself. Let us pray for George and all who have helped and continue to help make this world a better place for all sentient beings.

_Chalenger and Nurturer: Wisconsin Civil Rights Pioneer James Cameron (1914-2006) – Researched and Written by David J. Marcou with Research Aid from Some Very Good People. First Published on the La Crosse History Unbound Website ca. 2008._

Wisconsin has long been a place of both challenge and nurture, and a diversity of peoples has settled in this state. African Americans, to name one group, have found the Badger State to be sometimes difficult, but also sublime – from runaway slave Joshua Glover, whose case was taken up by the U.S. Supreme Court; to former Wisconsin Secretary of State Vel Phillips, the first black constitutional officer elected in a state-wide vote; to NFL Hall of Famer and Christian Minister Reggie White, who helped lead the Green Bay Packers to an NFL championship, the list of key figures is impressive. Wisconsinites of all colors and backgrounds have taken on those twin characteristics themselves, becoming both challengers and nurturers.

In western Wisconsin, La Crosse has long had at least a modest African American population, but two among that group achieved national prominence early on. In politics, George Edwin Taylor published his _Wisconsin Labor Advocate_ there, and became the first African American party candidate for U.S. president, in 1904. In athletics, George Coleman Poage graduated from La Crosse High School and UW-Madison, and became the first African American Olympic medalist, also in 1904, in two hurdles events. However, it has just been since the death of James Herbert Cameron Jr. in June 2006 that people began to realize the longtime Milwaukee civil rights leader was born in La Crosse, and thus was a native-born Wisconsinite.\(^{(1)}\)

It has become clear through much research that James Cameron Jr.’s family history began in this state considerably before his birth. His paternal grandfather was Blake Cameron, a stone mason, who lived in Sparta, in Monroe County, from the end of the Civil War until his death in 1904.\(^{(2)}\) Blake and his wife, Amanda, had eight living children, from 12 born, including “Herbert,” or James H. Cameron Sr. James Jr.’s maternal grandparents, Jerry and India Carter, lived in Indiana when their daughter Vera married Herbert.

In 1910, the Herbert and Vera Camerons lived in Champaign, Illinois, where Herbert’s mother had relocated after Blake’s death.\(^{(3)}\) Herbert and Vera moved to La Crosse by 1913, perhaps due to the proximity of siblings in nearby Sparta, and the strong African American barbering businesses in the city, during the relative zenith of African American population in La Crosse.\(^{(4)}\) In various documents, James Sr.’s occupation was given as porter or barber at La Crosse’s grand Stoddard Hotel.\(^{(5)}\)

Pioneers in early La Crosse included the pre-Civil War, free-black Moss Family, some of whom worked as barbers, who assisted other blacks in migrating there. Herbert worked as a barber with a John Moss in Champaign; and John may have been related to the La Crosse Mosses. Even after most black families had left La Crosse by the 1920s, Orby Moss and his family still ran a
barbershop one block away from young Cameron’s birth place, on Mill Street. My dad, David A. Marcou Jr., had his hair cut by the Mosses sometimes.

La Crosse’s early logging-driven economy had become more service-oriented by 1910. By February 1914, James Sr., his wife Vera, and daughter Marie lived in a “rambling shack” on the 400 block of Mill Street, now Copeland Avenue. Mill Street was adjacent to railroad lines that brought in people who needed barbering and other personal caretaking, which is one reason why the Mosses located so close to the north side train depot, and given the possibility of a key connection between the Mosses and the Camerons previously, why the Camerons likely chose to live but one block away from them.(6)

In any case, the temperature was 25 degrees below zero, and on February 25, 1914, James Jr. came into the world weighing 10 pounds, as Mrs. Marilyn Brown and Mrs. Ostrowski assisted Dr. John Callahan and Mrs. Cameron. Mrs. Brown, a white woman married to a black man, prepared breakfast. James Sr. wanted to help, and was asked to watch four-year-old Marie in the kitchen.(7)

Time passed, and at 15 months of age, after bouts with pneumonia and whooping cough, James Jr. developed a bowel obstruction. Dr. Callahan operated on him at St. Francis Hospital, and saved his life in a tricky operation, given Cameron also had an enflamed appendix to be removed then. Cameron relates: “I had been the first Black baby ever admitted as a patient in the Saint Francis Hospital. Visitors who came to visit with their relatives and friends ended up coming past my room to visit me, too. A whole roomful of toys was accumulated from these people.”(8) Young Cameron may have been something of a patient-curiosity then, but visitors treated him and his family well.

The young family soon moved to Marion, Indiana, then Alabama, then back to Marion. Along the way, Herbert and Vera separated, then divorced. By the time he was 16, James Jr. associated with a tough crowd. He was tempted to mischief on more than one occasion. Then, on the night of August 6, 1930, Tommy Shipp, Abe Smith, and Cameron robbed a white couple on Lover’s Lane -- Claude Deeter and Mary Ball. Deeter recognized one of the teens, probably Cameron, who used to shine his shoes. Deeter was shot, then clubbed in the head, and died soon after. Cameron claimed he fled when the gun came out, and heard shots blocks away.

The three boys were arrested, and a throng broke into the Grant County Jail the next night, lynching Shipp and Smith. A white policeman, Charles Truex, saved Cameron, discreetly saying he’d been jailed for catching a free ride on a freight-train. But Cameron was later found guilty in Deeter’s death, and imprisoned for four years. No one was convicted for the lynching; Cameron ever-after thought the Klan was behind it. Still, after four years of confinement and reflection, Cameron emerged from prison, reformed, “I was now a young man, 21 years of age, who had time to pick up the loose ends of his life and weave them into something beautiful, worthwhile, and God-like.”

Soon enough, he established four NAACP chapters and became Indiana’s Civil Liberties Director, keen evidence of a salvaged, redeemed life. But his family received death-threats, and Milwaukee offered work. After the family’s move to Milwaukee, Cameron eventually opened a
successful air-conditioning and refrigeration firm, and became Catholic, because he thought he’d heard the voice of the Virgin Mary the night he was saved from lynching. He provided for his family well, and they helped give him the certainty and freedom he needed.(9)

In 1963, Cameron joined Martin Luther King Jr. for his nonviolent march on Washington, D.C., where King gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Then, in 1967, Cameron joined Fr. James Groppi to protest housing segregation in Milwaukee; that year marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in that city. In the Fr. Groppi papers at the UW-Milwaukee Library Archives, supportive as well as hateful letters and cards were sent to Groppi. One card showed a photo of Martin Luther King Jr., other blacks, and the white Groppi, and was captioned, “COMMIES”. But the majority of Americans were becoming exposed to the idea that blacks might actually be equal to whites, in the eyes of God, and the law, as well.

Later, in 1979, Cameron and his wife, Virginia, visited Israel’s Holocaust Museum, which reminded him of the struggles blacks had gone through in America. He told Cynthia Carr: “It shook me up… I said to my wife, ‘Honey, we need a museum like that in America...’”(10)

Cameron’s dream, America’s Black Holocaust Museum, became reality. With $5,000 of his own money, he opened the museum in 1988 on the second floor of Milwaukee’s Black Muslim headquarters, then moved it to a storefront around the corner. And yet, he didn’t have room to exhibit more than ten photos or to store many of his ten thousand books on civil rights. As Cynthia Carr writes, “And to his utter frustration, he would go for days without a single person coming in.”(11)

He felt an especial responsibility, though, as the key surviving near-victim of a lynching, so Cameron persisted, and moved into an old gym at 2233 N. Fourth Street in Milwaukee. Sponsors signed on, and his building was remodeled. Carr compared visits in 2003: “It was almost startling to remember how I found Cameron there in 1993, ensconced alone in one room stuffed with books and papers, while most of the space was just a big gym – all hoops, lockers, and ancient weightlifting equipment. That building was unrecognizable now. Glass doors opened into a lobby – administrative offices to the right, gift shop to the left. A small permanent exhibit on the Middle Passage led to the galleries.”(12) Depicted in the museum are six time periods: Before Captivity in Africa; the Middle Passage; Slavery in the Americas; Reconstruction; Civil Rights; and Modern Injustices. School and corporate interests visit today, and they come away with clearer ideas about what racial struggles and racial harmony consist of.(13)

Cameron fathered five decent children; but he also kept busy by visiting Indiana periodically to protest Klan rallies and push for the transfer of his museum to the Grant County Jail Building, where he’d once been an inmate. Marion had changed – with blacks in key leadership positions – including Grant County Sheriff Oatess Archey, the first black sheriff in Indiana. IU History Professor James H. Madison said, “Oatess Archey is very much aware of what James Cameron did for him – of what he did for justice and equality in America. James Cameron helped blacks like Oatess Archey come back in Marion.”(14)

The KKK may have helped prompt the Marion lynching, as Cameron believed. And Cameron knew the Klan even had influence in Wisconsin, though nowhere nearly as much as in Indiana.
To be sure, he knew the struggle for civil rights would be a difficult one, no matter where he went in America.(15)

In 1993, Indiana Governor Evan Bayh granted Cameron a pardon in Deeter’s death. Then, on June 13, 2005, the U.S. Congress apologized for not enacting anti-lynching laws earlier, another longtime goal of Cameron’s. James Cameron received an Honorary Doctorate from UW-Milwaukee. He was also featured on many widely televised news programs and in the news media, including on the Oprah Winfrey Show, the BBC, and in Newsweek. He died June 11, 2006, and is buried at Milwaukee's Holy Cross Cemetery.(16)

U. S. Congresswoman Gwen Moore, of Milwaukee, said upon his death: “Dr. Cameron endeavored to... build a foundation for real unity.... The Black Holocaust Museum has helped both black AND white Americans.... Dr. Cameron… taught us to be better, not bitter... He believed that if Americans learned the truth about the racist events in our history, then we would have a better chance to relegate racism to the past. Dr. Cameron exemplifies the imperative of the civil rights struggle: the call to listen to our humanity over and above our fear.”(17)

A somewhat rough, challenging start in life for James Cameron Jr., had helped turn his thinking around, and he became a beacon of hope and nurture not only for black Americans, but for Americans of every color in the rainbow. From his incarceration: “I realized I had reached and passed beyond the crisis between light and darkness, between good and evil... This knowledge obligated me as a human being to return that love and kindness to someone along the way of life who would need it. It would be proof to them that they are members of the human race, that they, too, belong in our world....”(18)

Both challenger and nurturer, Wisconsin’s own James Herbert Cameron Jr. made a name for himself and for all tolerant peoples, and all Americans, all World Citizens, should be grateful.

**Endnotes:** I’ve also published my writings on another noted James Cameron – not the noted film director by that name, but the British journalist James Cameron, with a prestigious journalism lecture and prize offered every year in his memory in Britain. The journalist JC had a lot in common with the black civil rights activist JC. My thanks go to America’s Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin’s Black Historical Society/Museum in Milwaukee, the UW-M Library Archives, La Crosse Public Library Archives, Wisconsin Historical Society, La Crosse County Historical Society, UW-La Crosse Murphy Library Area Research Center, Champaign County Historical Archives at Urbana (Ill.) Free Library, University of Indiana, and my other sources, too, plus this article’s publishers.-djm.


2) It takes hard, long research to discover new information on any historical figure who is somewhat guarded about their history. James Cameron Jr.’s early family photos, if they exist, seem impossible to find. Even his creation, America’s Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, does not own such photos. Also, he apparently left no information behind at his museum to indicate he ever traveled back to La Crosse after his family left there. However, he did write sufficiently on his own life to leave an enticing trail of places he ventured forth from and to, places where he intended others to take up the thread, to describe his ventures in fuller forms; “Recent Deaths,” Monroe County Democrat, Aug. 5, 1904, p. 1.
3) Champaign and Urbana, Illinois, City Directory, Containing ... Bloomington, Ill.: Chas. M. Samson, 1910. James Cameron Sr. is listed as a barber working for F. J. Jordan.

4) UW-La Crosse Professor Emeritus Bruce Mouser writes that from the time La Crosse became a city in 1856 until 1906, about 445 African-Americans made their homes here. The total La Crosse population in 1855 was 1,637; and in 1910, 30,417, which means African-Americans were a significant but not large part of the city’s population then. Mouser, Black La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1850-1906: Settlers, Entrepreneurs, & Exodusers, in La Crosse County Historical Society Occasional Papers Series, No. 1, 2002; blacks finally returned to La Crosse in increasing numbers from the 1980s on, drawn by greater economic, educational, and cultural opportunities. Total population numbers taken from La Crosse Public Library “Fast Facts” accessed April 26, 2007 http://lpl.lacrosse.lib.wi.us:81/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=1171944N57687.295&profile=main&uri=full=3100001~!41595~!2&ri=1&aspect=subtab14&menu=search&source=-!comres

5) James H. Cameron (Sr.) wasn’t listed in local city directories, pre-1913. The 1913 (Postal) City Directory lists as amendment J. H. Cameron at the Stoddard Hotel and Mrs. James Cameron at 2129 Vine Street. The latter address was occupied in 1915 by Mrs. Sophie Cameron, possibly a relative. The Ashley and Ellen Shivers family lived at 418 Mill and the Camerons were also listed there. Ellen Shivers owned that lot. No official records were found about the Ostrowskis; they may have been tenants between the Shivers’ and the Camerons’ houses, subletting to the Camerons. The memoir indicates the (white) Ostrowski rented to the Camerons, and Mrs. Ostrowski assisted Callahan with Cameron’s home-birth. But the 1915 directory varies from James’s birth certificate -- the latter lists 408 Mill, not 418, as the Cameron home. Another address for James H. Cameron was 327 N. 6th (see scratch-out/entry in 1915 postal directory). -- (Postal) La Crosse City Directory 1913, amendment to p. 229; (Postal) La Crosse City Directory 1915; U.S. Census, 1880, La Crosse County, A483; U.S. Census, 1930, La Crosse County, Sheet 7B; Obituary for Sophie Cameron, La Crosse Tribune, July 13, 1952, p. 8; Tax List of the City of La Crosse, 1914, Spreadsheet 27; 1906 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map(s) for the City of La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1906 and 1944, Plate/s 67; Author’s Interview with Anita Taylor Doering, La Crosse Public Library Archivist (also helpful in that Archives were Bill Petersen, Megan Isely, and Brian Hannum); Author’s Phone Interviews with Bruce Mouser, April 3 and April 15, 2007; Cameron, p. 98.

6) Carr, p. 31; Spirit of La Crosse, p. 97; Wright’s Directory of La Crosse for 1915, Milwaukee: Wright Directory Co., p. 210; your writer’s parents knew the Orby Moss Family, and on February 14, 1950, the Mosses were among the guests at my parent’s wedding reception; Robert C. Nesbit points out in Wisconsin: A History (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973, 1989, p. 196) that La Crosse, which at one time was the second largest city in Wisconsin, continued to have big-city ambitions. It had long been a transportation hub, with not only the railroads passing through, but, due to the confluence of three rivers there, including the Mississippi, riverboat traffic also brought many travelers through La Crosse. Thus, not only city residents, but also tourists and traveling entrepreneurs made use of personal caretaking services in that city.

7) Mouser, author of Black La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1850-1906, told your author that there were a lot of legal interracial marriages in early La Crosse, unlike Indiana, where interracial marriage was illegal until 1965; Cameron, p. 97-101; La Crosse County Register of Deeds, Birth Certificate for James Cameron, DOB: February 25, 1914.

8) Cameron, pp. 101-102; unfortunately, St. Francis Hospital’s 2007 staff could find no records for young James’s stay there, partly because they said records were sketchily-kept in those days.

9) Cameron, including p. 193; Carr, p. 161.


12) Carr, p. 453; *America’s Black Holocaust Museum*.

13) *America’s Black Holocaust Museum*.

14) Carr, pp. 396-401. Madison, James H., *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000; Author’s Phone Interview with Prof. Madison, April 4, 2007; Archey had been a star student-athlete in Marion, who then graduated from Grambling University. When he returned to Marion, the only job he could find was as a school janitor. He persisted, though, became a teacher and coach, and eventually worked for the FBI. In fact, he took the call for the Bureau the day President Reagan was shot. Cameron and Archey talked many times over the years, and the memory of Marion’s lynching motivated both men to persist in their work.

15) Founded in 1866, the KKK first appeared in Wisconsin in 1920. Mouser said the rise of Wisconsin’s Klan may have prompted the move of many African Americans out of La Crosse by the 1920s, along with new industries replacing old, and an influx of immigrant-groups bringing new workers for jobs blacks previously filled. The Wisconsin KKK was in decline by 1930, but simultaneously with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, it became revitalized again. Its rally in Janesville, Wisconsin, in 1992, drew on-site protests from Cameron. He often said at these protests that the KKK should allow white people who believe in civil rights to breathe fresh air with black people, wherever they go. That sentiment has carried the day more often than not in America since the passage of the U.S. Civil Rights Laws of 1964-65. In recent months, though, the national Klan is reported to be involved in anti-Hispanic activities, prompted by the outcry for immigration reform in the Congress. The struggle for all Americans, all peoples, to be free, continues. [http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp) (Ku Klux Klan) -- *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 5; Goldberg., Robert A., "The Ku Klux Klan in Madison, 1922-1927," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58 (Autumn, 1974); Author’s Phone Interview with Bruce Mouser, April 3, 2007; “500 Members in La Crosse, Is Claim of Ku Klux Head,” *La Crosse Tribune*, December 9, 1922, p. 1; Author’s Phone Interview of April 20, 2007, with Clayborn Benson, Executive Director, Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum (Milwaukee); “Hidden Hatred, by Josh Holzbauer, [http://www.journalism.wisc.edu/j417/fall03/social/holzbauer.html](http://www.journalism.wisc.edu/j417/fall03/social/holzbauer.html); [http://www.topix.net/city/amarillo-tx](http://www.topix.net/city/amarillo-tx)

16) Carr, p. 25; Historical Essay from *America’s Black Holocaust Museum*; Author’s Phone Interview with Bethany Criss, ABHM Program Coordinator, April 4, 2007.


The Perfect Height of Trees: From Joliet to Marcou in Wisconsin—Article by David Joseph Marcou.

“For me I cannot ever be at ease/With trees that grow no higher than one's knees/Or too tall trees that splinter in a freeze.../But here we have the perfect height of trees.” – From a Poem by Calvin Trillin.

(Author's Note: Trees, including family trees, vary in height. Wherever you come from, though, your family tree, like all positive natural products within and around us, should be, “the perfect height”.)

Modern history can mimic age-old history. Though evidence of Europeans exploring the region eventually named Wisconsin did not occur until the 17th century, insights continue to be gained by people of various backgrounds in the Badger State, as they were by Native Americans prior to the first Europeans setting foot on the shores of what today is Door County and beyond.

If one glances at modern aerial photos of the Yamaska River in Canada (partway between Montreal and Quebec) and the Black River at La Crosse, Wisconsin, these images suggest why French-Canadian families migrated to La Crosse's French Island in the 19th century from the Yamaska region. Sloughs, swamps, sandbars, woods, etc., abound, apt for hunting, fishing, and in key places after clearing, farming. The French-Canadians who made it to New Orleans, much farther south, to help settle that city with other French-settlers, called their area Bayou Country, and there are similarities among all three regions, though there are no alligators native to outdoor Wisconsin or Canada, as there are in the Deep South.

According to early family recollections, the paternal ancestors of the David Ambrose Marcou Jr. (wife: Rose Brunner-Muskat Marcou) Family of La Crosse, Wisconsin, were not in the very first-wave of French-Canadians on French Island led by the Goyettes and Jolivettes ca. 1850, but arrived there and stayed, beginning soon after. Their contributions have been both everyday and notable.

La Crosse-founder Nathan Myrick had arrived at Prairie Lacrosse in 1841, and established a trading post, around which houses and businesses sprang up. La Crosse is situated at the confluence of three rivers on the west -- the Mississippi, the La Crosse, and the Black. On the east side of the city are a series of bluffs -- the principal one being Granddad's Bluff.

However, many of the first French-American settlers of La Crosse lived on French Island, across the Black River on the northwest side of the city, and also in what is now Onalaska, just north of La Crosse, as well as on the east side of south La Crosse, where the old country club stands, said Ed Marcou in January 2013, then-90-years-old and an amateur historian, relative, and former administrator for the St. Louis Cardinals and Milwaukee Brewers' baseball teams.

The focal family's direct-line Marcoux-born ancestors came from Normandy, France (early spellings of the family's name include Marcoux) between 1722 and 1754, migrating to the three-rivers region between Montreal and Quebec, Canada. The earliest direct ancestors traceable for this article, including maternal sides, are Jacques Boucher (b. 1547 at Chartres, France) and his wife, Francoise Paigne Boucher (b. 1552 at Chartres).
The earliest direct-line Marcoux-born traceable ancestor was Thomas Marcoux, born ca. 1695 in Avranches, Normandy, France. He married Francoise Abraham, of Normandy, and their son Jean Marcoux was born ca. 1722 in Normandy. Jean married Marie-Madeleine Joliet-D’Anticosti Marcoux, and they had at least one child (perhaps more), Jean-Baptiste Marcoux, born ca. 1 Sept. 1754 in Quebec, Canada.

Marie was a granddaughter of Louis Joliet-D’Anticosti, who “co-discovered” the Upper Mississippi River with Father Marquette in 1673 for white populations. The discovery-corps seven-man team's portage across the Wisconsin River near present-day Portage, in Columbia County, Wisconsin, is very near Juneau County, which also factors into Marcou family history. Joliet and Marquette were sent by Canadian authorities, on behalf of the French King, “to explore the terra incognita west of the Fox River of Green Bay”, after Frenchman Jean Nicolet had landed at Green Bay in 1634. The 1673 team traveled south after they'd discovered the Upper Mississippi River at Prairie du Chien, down to the mouth of the Arkansas River, where they learned not only of fierce Indian tribes ahead, but of Spanish soldiers, too, and headed back. Later, for that expedition and other work on the King's behalf, Louis Joliet (soon adding D’Anticosti to Joliet) was given the Canadian island of Anticosti, which according to Wikipedia, was the world's largest privately-held island then.

Jean and Marie Madeleine's son Jean-Baptiste (who married Marguerite Lafond) had a son named Joseph, who married Genevieve Niquet Marcoux; the latter couple were direct-progenitors of the focal family, with Genevieve migrating to La Crosse soon after her husband's death in 1868, dying there in 1872.

An often-used male given name in the direct Marcou line of descent was Jean Baptiste (trans. John the Baptist). There was more than one Jean Baptiste Marcou living in the La Crosse area, soon after the family first arrived on La Crosse's French Island. Genevieve’s migration to La Crosse coincided with that of some of her children, including Jean-Baptiste Marcoux. Genevieve Niquet Marcoux died in 1872, at 93 years of age.

Upon first-arrival, the Marcous and Marcos, two La Crosse branches of relevant line, may have all spelled their names Marcoux. But at some points, many members of the general family decided their surname would be easier to spell by lopping off a letter or two. One branch became Marcou-s, another Marco-s, while a third branch retained the Marcoux spelling, though there was a bit of spelling-ambivalence with the three branches on official records then, etc. There may also have been rarer variations spelled Marcoe and Marcu.

Daniel James Marcou -- third son of David A. Marcou Jr. and Rose C. Muskat Marcou -- a former officer in charge of training for the La Crosse Police Department, a Wisconsin SWAT Officer of the Year in 2005 (for talking a killer-hostage-taker into surrendering to police while Dan was visiting Oak Creek, Wisconsin), and more recently a nationally-known crime novelist and workshop presenter, took your author to visit and take photos at French Island Cemetery ca. 1994, where many early La Crosse Marcous, Marcos, and Marcouxes are buried. Matriarch Genevieve's inscribed marker is in that cemetery, too.
Dan said our Grandfather David A. Marcou Sr. (1890-1978) told him the first French-Canadian Settlers of French Island arrived in modest early numbers. Soon after, the group of Marcouxes that included our direct-line ancestors, arrived on the banks of the Black River, near where the Clinton Street Bridge in north La Crosse stands today, camped there until the first hard-freeze set in, then crossed to French Island. A bridge or two was eventually built, so crossings did not have to be made by skiff or team ferry in warmer weather or by walking on ice, skiing on snow, or on horse in perilous frozen weather.

The name “Marcoux” derives from the old French “Marcwulf” or “Marculf”, which means “border wolf”, and many of the early Marcouxes lived in the southeast of France (a small-town is named for them), near the Italian border; and in the east of France, near the Swiss border; as well as in Normandy. The first part of the name may predate even that, and derive from Mars, the Roman god of war and agriculture, and possibly from Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor. It may also have partly sprung from the evangelist St. Mark.

Notable people bearing the name in history include the French saint, St. Marcou (ca. 500 A.D.), who cured a French King of the then-dreaded skin disease scrofula. The kings of France for centuries continued that king’s tradition of processing north to a memorial in St. Marcou’s honor, right after each king was crowned at Rheims. (St. Marcou’s name was eventually given to an island off the Normandy Coast, fought over by the British and French in 1795.)

Jules Marcou, a 19th century Swiss-French immigrant, created the first reliable geological map of the United States and also created a world geological map, did the first scientific study of Lake Superior, taught at Zurich University and Harvard University (he is buried at Cambridge, Massachusetts), and wrote a biography of his mentor and colleague -- the noted evolutionary scientist Louis Agassiz, whom he assisted in founding the Museum of Comparative Zoology in Massachusetts.

Earlier, Captain and Lieutenant Pierre/s Marcou, a father and son not in the direct-line of the focal family, but perhaps still related, fought in the defense of Quebec during the American invasion of Canada in 1775-76. Legend has it that one of the Pierre Marcous killed the American General Montgomery, which seems to have turned the tide of battle the Canadians won. Americans haven’t militarily invaded central Canada since.

Dan Marcou said he’s fairly certain, by reviewing the Marcou coat of arms, an ancestor or two fought in the Christian crusades to the Holy Land, ca. 1100 A.D., because there’s a cross in a warrior’s helmet on that coat, as well as lilies, symbolic of loyalty. (More recently, there was even a French communist author of note named Lily Marcou.)

Francois (or Frank) Marco -- born in 1822 and a brother of the Jean Baptiste Marcoux (Sr.) born in 1829 in the Quebec-Montreal region, who also migrated to La Crosse -- served in the Civil War in the 21st Wisconsin, and is also buried in French Island Cemetery (Town of Campbell).

Walter Marcou, David Ambrose Marcou Sr.’s brother, served in World War I. Other family members, including in members of the focal family, have served in the military, including in Afghanistan. Although Genevieve may not have been the matriarchal ancestor for all the Marcous, Marcos, and Marcouxes of
La Crosse, she was a matriarchal ancestor for the focal family, and her husband Joseph Marcoux was a direct descendant of Louis Joliet.

Walter and David's father, John Marcou (or Jean-Baptiste Marcoux Jr., as his marriage record makes clear, with inclusion of his father – JBMSr. – and mother's names), who was married to Margret Brossard Marcou (from Detroit) until her death in 1924, transferred his farm to Walter late in John's life. The farm was later sold, and then sold again, helping make up today's La Crosse Airport grounds. John lived on the farm after its initial transfer, but apparently fell from a ladder and hurt his back. Walter's wife, Myrtle Exley Marcou, then may have asked John to move, and John was staying with daughter Tillie LaFleur on Wood Street in La Crosse, when he died in 1936.

David Ambrose Marcou Jr. is your author's father and the youngest child (of five children) of David Ambrose Marcou Sr. (born on French Island on 28 Aug. 1890) and Agnes Mary Fitzgerald Marcou (born to the James and Mary Cowen-Fitzgerald farm-family in 1888 in Juneau County, where many of Agnes's Fitzgerald early-family relatives still live). Rose Caroline Muskat Marcou, mother of their seven children, is David Marcou Jr.’s wife of more than 65 years and daughter of Roman Alex Stricker-Muskat and Ida Rose Brunner-Muskat, both born in Dane County, Wisconsin, ca. 1900.

Notable people with similar/same surnames are F. Scott Fitzgerald, writer; Ella Fitzgerald, singer; Barry Fitzgerald, actor; Larry Fitzgerald, football player; Lee and Claudia Cowan, journalists; Steve Stricker, golfer; Emil Brunner, Protestant theologian; Lisa Muskat, film producer; and Tamir Muskat, Israel-born musician.

David (Sr.) and Agnes Marcou owned and/or operated grocery stores and meat markets in western Wisconsin, from the 1910s to about 1970. (They wed ca. 1915.) Agnes died in 1963 and David A. Sr. died in 1978. They are buried next to each other in Holy Cross Cemetery, Trempealeau, Wisconsin, near where David Sr. spent the last few years of his life, in a trailer-home on daughter Margaret Marcou Kiedrowski Brom's property.

Roman and Ida Muskat worked on and/or owned farms in central and western Wisconsin. Ida died ca. 1961, and Roman in 1977. They are buried next to each other in a Sparta Cemetery, Monroe County.

David A. Marcou Jr. was born above his parents' grocery store on April 14, 1931, in Mondovi, Wisconsin. After his birth, the Marcous lived at various addresses in La Crosse, and for a short time in Reedsburg, Wisconsin, too. There is even a photo of David Sr. working in a meat market in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, because he worked and traveled throughout the state. (A military-draft registration document ca. 1941 indicates David A. Marcou Sr. was working then for Paul Vogel in Reedsburg, when David Sr. was 51 years old, but he and his family kept an apartment at 707-1/2 Rose Street in La Crosse, too.)

The La Crosse City Directories indicate the essay-relevant Marcou family lived in La Crosse ca. 1936, and after the Reedsburg stint, took up full residence in La Crosse again, when the Marcou parents bought a building at 732 Rose Street from Herman Hegge(sp?). By 1942 in the City Directory, that building had become the Marcous' (Market) grocery store, one of the biggest among dozens of mom and pop stores.
in La Crosse then. (The city's population in 1942 was slightly less then 50,000 residents, the latter being La Crosse's most-often quoted population-figure the last several decades.)

Rose C. Muskat Marcou was born on January 18, 1931, in/near Cross Plains, Dane County, Wisconsin. Rose's father and mother, both of Swiss-Austrian Catholic ancestry, owned their own farm near Cataract, Monroe County, Wisconsin. In addition to regular farming, Roman Muskat was also involved most of his life in selling/raising baby chickens, show-roosters, and bees. He drove Nash Rambler cars, and during his most productive years, is said to have traded his new Nash in each year for a new one.

For his part, David A. Marcou Sr. used to talk about visiting farms during World War II’s meat-rationing period, and shooting bulls there (walking into pens and downing each bull with a single handgun shot), which he purchased and butchered for, and sold discretely to, black market customers.

Also, each Saturday during its busiest years, Marcou's Market's floor was lined on both sides of two long aisles with boxes of groceries, to be delivered to customers via truck. Your author accompanied his paternal grandfather occasionally on deliveries, ca. 1962. It was a time when frozen pizzas were being sold in such stores for the first time.

In 1945, Rose Muskat was sent to live with the Clark family in La Crosse by her parents, who continued with the family's farm near Cataract (Little Falls Township, Monroe County). She enrolled at Aquinas High School and worked at a soda-fountain kitty-corner from Marcou's Market owned by the Kane family (whom she'd live with after the Clarks), and operated soon by the Sullivan family, whom Rose worked for during the rest of high school.

Rose and David A. Marcou Jr. both attended Aquinas High School, graduating in 1949. Rose was generally a better student than Dave, but he proved a good athlete, making the varsity baseball team as a freshman. His dad, however, made him quit the team then, to work in the family's store.

Dave and Rose married on Valentine's Day, February 14, 1950, at St. James Church in La Crosse, where they attended more than 64 years, and where all seven of their children were baptized, took first communion, and were confirmed, a series of events not uncommon in that era. There was a snowstorm the day of their wedding, which prevented Rose's parents from attending the wedding, though they did arrive for the reception I believe. Brother Ray Muskat gave Rose away, and other siblings also took part, including sister Zita Muskat (m. Pretasky), parent with husband Ed of eight children, including two Miss La Crosse/Octoberfest contestants. The Marcou couple honeymooned in Chicago and Milwaukee, and their first child, your author, was born Nov. 25, 1950.

After living in an apartment above 732 Rose Street until 1954, Dave and Rose moved their young family to 1720 Prospect Street (both addresses are on La Crosse's north side), where the couple resided for 60 years. All seven Marcou children attended elementary school (grades 1-8) at St. James School just off Caledonia Street. The four oldest boys would graduate Aquinas High School on the south side, and the three younger girls would graduate Logan High School on the north side, with the youngest, Mary Katherine, being valedictorian of Logan's Class of 1981, first class at that school's then-new campus.
David A. Marcou Jr. held many jobs, usually as a meat-cutter, before he retired ca. 2009. (He died soon after his and my mom’s 65th Valentine Wedding Anniversary in 2015.) In 1987, he underwent open-heart, bypass surgery, and a few years later, surgery to remove a large tumor in his colon. Despite his early penchant for at least an occasional drink, his wife made sure he made it to work every day, except when he hurt his ankle in a short-stint working for the railroad. He even crossed a picket line as meat manager for Boulevard IGA Foods in La Crosse in the 1960s, telling union-leaders from Chicago that he had seven children and a wife to feed.

After working for a local garment factory in the mid-1960s, Rose found a job she worked for 30 years, as a nursing home medical transcriptionist for the Bethany-Lutheran System. She was long the right-hand woman to B-L Director Florence Kahler, whose husband, Irvin, was La Crosse’s fire-chief and a president of the Wisconsin Association of Fire Chiefs.

As children, the Marcou kids were expected to work whenever possible, and maintain good school-grades. Each received a modest weekly allowance for helping around the house. The boys were also paper-carriers, early. In addition, they helped at Marcou’s Market, for two dollars a week plus all the the snacks they could eat, in the early and mid-1960s. The girls worked jobs away from home, too, including Mary at the Hollywood Theatre, which is now being renovated by attorney-owner Phil Addis.

As adults, the Marcou “kids” have become community-leaders. Dan and your author (David Joseph) are mentioned; Dennis is La Crosse’s municipal judge; and Tom, who first served a long stint in the US Air Force, recently retired to a third career in real-estate development, after serving many years in Washington, DC with his wife as top-level civilian employees of the US Government. Diane has served more than 25 years as a civilian employee of the La Crosse Police Department. Lynn was a longtime team-leader for Target Stores, later attended WTC, and is now an employee of La Crosse County’s Health Department. Mary is the accountant for a large construction company. All the Marcou children have their own children. Though our family has had setbacks -- including the drowning of Diane’s oldest son, Tony, among 11 college-age men who drowned at La Crosse from 1997-2010 -- like most families, we keep on keeping on. One thinks, all-in-all, of the perfect height of trees.

Finally, there’s an iron bridge built in 1931 (my parents’ birth-year), over the Yamaska River in Canada whose upper structure resembles very closely the upper structure of the bridge over the Mississippi River at Downtown La Crosse built in 2004. The two bridges suggest the spanning of families. My photo of the 2004-built bridge on its dedication day was published as the main-photo on the front-cover of a group-anthology I directed-edited in 2005, which all eight then-living governors of our state creatively contributed to. That group-anthology is titled, “Spirit of Wisconsin”.

**Note About Sources:** In addition to journalistic media contributing data to this article, various census and marriage records; birth, baptismal, and miscellaneous certificates; obituaries; family trees (including online, which had to be counter-checked often to verify connections); libraries and archives (especially the La Crosse Public Library and Archives, the Wisconsin Historical Society, the La Crosse, Monroe, and Juneau County Historical Societies, the La Crosse Catholic Diocesan Archives, and the National Library and Archives of Quebec); and many professional and amateur historians, this article also relies on word-of-mouth recollections (via interviews, etc.). The early history of French Island, for instance, wasn’t written down early, or if it was, those records have generally not become public.
yet, and recycled memories must be referred to generally in that case. Marcou family memories recounted recently also have helped, especially those of David A. Marcou Jr., Rose C. Muskat Marcou, Daniel James Marcou, Steve Kiedrowski, and 90-year-old Ed Marcou (whose memory is still sharp, a grandson of Gideon Marcou, who records show was a brother of a key Jean-Baptiste Marcou).

David Joseph Marcou has so far published 100 of his own books (including “Spirit of La Crosse”, his 18-volume series “Human Character”, and his 19-volume series “Spirit of America”). He graduated St. James and Aquinas Schools, and earned a B.A. degree in History at UW-Madison (1973). He also earned degrees at the Universities of Iowa (MA) and Missouri (BJ), and has lived in London, Seoul, Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin. He edited the Adams-Friendship weeklies in 1990, and was the longtime La Crosse correspondent for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. He also taught adults writing and photography 11 years at Western Technical College. His works have twice been nominated for Pulitzer Prizes, including his play “Remembering Davy Crockett”. Many archives, galleries, museums, and libraries house his works, including the Wisconsin Historical Society, and La Crosse Public Library Archives (both of which display his online galleries), various Smithsonian (SI) Archives, British National Portrait Gallery, and National Assembly Library of South Korea. His photos have been in many exhibitions, too, including the SI National Museum of American History Archives Center’s “Gift of the Artist” 2011-2012 group-show, curated by SI Archivist David Haberstich. David Marcou also has an online gallery of 3,600 photos on the Digital Photographer Website in the UK. His son, Matthew A. Marcou, an Army Special Ops veteran and now university Engineering student, is married to Jessica Amarnek-Marcou, an artist and university teacher.


Interior BW Add-ins (DJM means: Photo taken by David Joseph Marcou):
Roger Chase's Sign Defining a Friend, LaX, Nov. 2015 (DJM).
Alicia, Ed Robinson Sr.'s daughter, LaX, Nov. 2015 (DJM).
Marcou group at my 65th birthday party, Pizza Doctors, LaX, 11-25-15 (DJM).
Blonde Sarah, LaX, 2015 (DJM).
She looks familiar, smoker behind People's Food Co-op, LaX, 2015 (DJM).
Sports photographer Walt looss Jr., Newseum screen, DC, ca.2010 (DJM).
Tom and Joy Marcou with Mom and Dad Marcou (Rose & David A. M. Jr.), Onalaska, WI, 2014 (DJM).
Matt and Jessica hugging Matt's paternal grandparents, David A. and Rose C. Marcou, Prospect St., LaX, ca. 2013 (DJM).

Interior Color Pic Add-ins:
Photo taken of woodcut image copying an artwork showing Louis Joliet. Courtesy of DJM.
My mom kissing my dad in his casket, St. James Church, LaX, 3-13-15 (DJM).
Roger Chase's toy tractor collection, LaX, 3-13-15 (DJM).
Ebullient girl on WPT re: "Ode to Joy", taken from TV screen by DJM.
NFL Legends Bart Starr & Brett Favre greet each other night of Packers/Bears game in Green Bay, 11-26-15, taken off NBC-TV feed by DJM.
Looks like Badgers BB Coach Bo Ryan, Madison FB, ca. 2011 (DJM).
(L-R) David J. Marcou, Barry Alvarez (back showing), Paul Chryst (in cap in distance), & Charlie Freiberg, Camp Randall Memorial Stadium, Madison, 9-12-15 (DJM).
Portia Lee Armstrong places star ornament on Becker Plaza Christmas Tree, LaX, Nov. 28, 2015 (DJM).