

In Springtime: Myth and Memory in Grant Wood's Last Paintings

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Myth, Memories, and the Midwest: Grant Wood and Beyond Fifth Biennial Grant Wood Symposium

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Sometime in March or early April of 1941 in Iowa City, Grant Wood began work on a pair of paintings on the theme of springtime (fig. 1). He completed them that summer, in the northern Iowa resort town of Clear Lake, where, with his secretary and close friend, Park Rinard, he rented a lakeside cottage and an old disused train depot nearby as a studio. The pictures sold immediately—*Spring in Town* to the Sheldon Swope Art Gallery in Terre Haute, Indiana, *Spring in the Country* to Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney, Jr. for his private collection; that painting now belongs to the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.



Figure 1. Left, Grant Wood, *Spring in Town*, 1941, oil on Masonite panel, 26 x 24 ½ in. Collection of the Swope Art Museum, Terre Haute, Indiana, 1941.30; right, *Spring in the Country*, 1941, oil on Masonite panel, 24 x 24 in. Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Museum purchase, 93.12

Spring in Town is a small-town scene of spring cleaning and gardening, with a church overlooking the tidy neighborhood of single-family houses and a factory in the distance at the upper right. The picture clearly fulfilled Wood's intention to promote a galvanizing national myth, as war raged abroad and Americans soberly registered the threat of fascism. We know where Wood's political sympathies lay: he produced a poster for British war relief, and when the isolationist, anti-

interventionist America First Committee approached him for support, he refused. To fellow artists he announced, "It is time for us to admit we believe in the value of the goals we mean, in general, when we say 'the American way of life.'"¹ Though two boys in the right background of *Spring in Town* share a common task in beating a rug, other figures in the painting pursue their respective activities independent of the rest, performing a kind of individualism in work and play. So effective was Wood's scene in conveying a happy fantasy of everyday American life that after the U.S. entered the war, *The Saturday Evening Post* enlisted the picture as magazine cover and propaganda. Totalizing in its presumption of a homogeneous, white, middle-class, Midwestern, non-urban national audience, the *Post* presented the image as a visual response to the question "For What Are We Fighting?" That was April 1942, two months after Wood's untimely death in February of that year.

While illuminating its social/historical moment, *Spring in Town* functioned as well on a deeply personal level for Wood, and it's this truism I'd like to explore. To fashion his myth of the Midwest, he drew on his own memories, and I believe this retrospective, introspective exercise set him on a therapeutic path. The vicissitudes that plagued him at the University of Iowa in 1940 are well known; in the five years prior, moreover, Wood had suffered a series of painful losses—the dissolution of his marriage and his finances, the deaths of his beloved mother, his brother John, and his friend Jay Sigmund. These blows, I think, reactivated for Wood the greatest sorrow of his life: the long ago sudden death of his father and his imagined responsibility for it.

That catastrophe befell Wood when he was ten years old. Francis Maryville Wood had been a stern father and disciplinarian; he expected that his sons would follow in his footsteps as farmers, and was suspicious of Grant's interest in art. Maryville's death for Grant at a vulnerable and impressionable time in his childhood had meant not only the elimination of an oedipal rival for mother Hattie's affections, but also the freedom to pursue a life in art without parental interference.



Figure 2. Left, Wood sketching George Devine, Iowa City, 1941; right, *Spring in Town* (detail), 1941

Wood drew several motifs from direct observation in Iowa City for *Spring in Town*, including the shirtless gardening boy modeled by George Devine, son of the University of Iowa's football coach (fig. 2),



Figure 3. Left, Wood sketching house in the Goosetown neighborhood, Iowa City, 1941; right, *Spring in Town* (detail), 1941

and the house in the middle ground, with its distinctive asymmetrical elevation and window arrangement (fig. 3). Wood discovered the house in Goosetown, about a mile northeast of the university campus. Significantly, it sits at the edge of a cemetery. Wood was drawn to the house with the conscious purpose of creating a pleasant scene—while death's reminders lurked all around; what we don't see in this photograph of Wood sketching (fig. 4) are all the graves that lie directly *behind* the artist, in Oakland Cemetery, glimpsed here towards the west but which continues on a rise to the north. Wood hatched his plan, moreover, at a time when no snow was the ground nor leaves or blossoms yet on the bare trees, that is, around the time of an anniversary—forty years since Maryville Wood had died, on March 17, 1901.

We see a similar pattern of intention in a youthful work, the *Old Sexton's Place* from 1919 (fig. 5), created while Wood was living with Hattie in Kenwood, north of downtown Cedar Rapids along Indian Creek. Typical of his loosely painted, picturesque images from the late teens and early twenties, the composition features a striking juxtaposition: the dark doorway and the stark white cross that rises beside it in Kenwood cemetery, carefully framed in the thin vertical space between barn and house. The sexton who inhabits the place performs the duties of caretaker and groundskeeper, but like Wood's father in 1919, he is nowhere to be seen. The empty chair in the right foreground suggests his absence, and the shovel propped at the entry to the barn implies a garden perhaps recently spaded, or a grave freshly dug. The wash-bench at the side of the house, prosaic and incidental as it appears, recalls the object Maryville Wood had made for his wife with his own hands, as the artist remembered in his autobiographical "Return from Bohemia." In that account, child Wood watches father at work in the barn:

As he leaned over the saw-horse . . . , sweat dripped from his face and the veins stood out on his arms. . . . How strange and wise my



Figure 4. Wood sketching house adjacent to Oakland Cemetery, 1941 (detail of fig. 3)

father is, I thought, as I watched him guide the plane across the pine board that was to be the top of mother's wash bench. . . . If it had been a yoke for a cow, or a fence to be mended, Dave Peters [the hired man] could have done the job. But this was to be a bench for mother Father would build [it] himself. He sent the plane singing across the wood with long careful strokes, and the fragrant pine shavings whispered to the barn floor.²



Figure 5. *Old Sexton's Place*, 1919, oil on composition board, 15 x 18 1/2 in.
Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, gift of Harriet Y. and John B. Turner

Grant then marvels that although other big people—his older brother, Frank, or the hired man—could do many things, "the way *father* did them was the right way—the *model by which all other performances were approved or condemned*" (emphases added).³ Maryville modeled for his sons a certain kind of industry, masculinity, heterosexuality, and paternity. Grant departed from his example on all these counts. Idealizing Maryville while at the same time internalizing father as superego, Wood remained subject to his judging disapproval indefinitely, even from beyond the grave.

Father's memory forms the buried content, in Tripp Evans's understanding (and mine), of the beautiful landscape commemorating the end of the agricultural cycle, *Fall Plowing* (fig. 6). Wood



Figure 6. *Fall Plowing*, 1931, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 3/4 in. John Deere Art Collection, Deere & Company, Moline, Ill.

rehearses the pageantry of this cycle in the very first pages of his autobiography, concluding with the farmer's last tillage before the onset of winter frosts. Similarly elegiac in tone, *Fall Plowing* is set in the past; picturing an antique walking plow, the painting memorializes a bygone method of working the land and harks back to the nineteenth century in another way as well—evincing Wood's debt to Barbizon painting, which had awakened him, in France in the early 1920s, to the landscape of agricultural toil as a legitimate subject matter for art.



Figure 7. Left, Jean-François Millet, *Plain of Chailly*, 1862, oil on wood, 60 x 73 cm. Oesterreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna, artwork in the public domain; right, Grant Wood, *Fall Plowing*, 1931

The memory of one of several versions of Jean-François Millet's *Plain of Chailly* seems to me a possible inspiration for Wood's picture, with its lone plow set against a harvested stubble field. Wood's rendering insists on tidiness as a supreme virtue—of both farming and painting. The casual neglect implicit in Millet's image of plow and harrow left to the elements contrasts starkly with the meticulous effort everywhere apparent in Wood's scene. While there is a sense of aftermath in Millet, conveyed by crows pecking at the remains of a harvest, *Fall Plowing* is poignant in a different way: the tilling is unfinished, as if suddenly abandoned mid task, implying—like seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings of the interrupted meal—death's unexpected intrusion. The plow itself becomes a metonym for the suddenly departed farmer.

Wood pushes it into the center foreground of his painting, making it iconic in a way that conjures an unforgettable passage in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* in 1918: "Presently we saw a curious thing," narrator Jim Burden reports, in the company of Antonia and three of their friends. "On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun . . . the handles, the tongue, the share . . . There it was heroic in size."⁴ This vision appears to the young people as Jim attempts to comfort Antonia who is missing her dead father. They imagine his spirit moving among the Nebraskan woods and fields that had been dear to him. One thinks too of how it struck Grant at Maryville's funeral that his father was now interred "in the same rich soil, the same rolling hill-land he had farmed from boyhood."⁵ In this reading, the painting becomes a thanatopsis, infused with an element of Eros in the sensual slicing of the earth by the phallic plow, a primal scene opening on the ground itself.

Love and death contribute to the emotional richness of Wood's work; guilt plays a role as well, perhaps the predominant one in *Fall Plowing*. Painted in 1931, from a position of triumph when Maryville was no longer and his artist son had become nationally renowned, *Fall Plowing* illustrates

Wood's unconscious childhood wish to be rid of father and the injunctions he imposed, and also suggests his ultimate evasion of filial duty. His failure to follow Maryville, to take his place behind the plow, aborts the agricultural and generational cycles he exalts in his autobiography, and he inscribes his own absence in the scene as well as father's, evoking his oedipal crime and its feared punishment in the same image. The hallucinatory perfection and clarity of the picture with its sense of arrested motion render it uncanny, the repressed returning at a moment coinciding with the artist's meteoric rise to fame in the wake of *American Gothic* (1930). As an envious child in the grip of magical thinking, he had imagined his culpability for Maryville's death (wishing had made it happen), an irrational notion he overcame in his conscious adult mind. But when he realized his secret ambition to surpass father, thoughts *did* seem omnipotent after all. His latent expectation of punishment was remobilized, lending an aura of suspense as well as eerie absence to *Fall Plowing*.



Figure 8. Left, *Spring in Town*, 1941; right, Wood sketching for *Spring in Town*, 1941

Ten years later, at age 50, Wood may have felt he was living on borrowed time, having already exceeded Maryville's life span of 46 years by four. The earthen plot that dominates *Spring in Town* (fig. 8) doubles in my reading as garden and grave, and the figures around it coincide with members of Wood's family, who go about life without father, exiled to Cedar Rapids—to town—after Maryville died and they had to leave their Anamosa farm. Father's own namesake, big brother Frank (after Francis Maryville Wood), tends the plot, while mother hangs the bedding, John mows the grass, little Nan bothers a sapling in bloom, and Grant peers out from among the irises, inscribed in his signature at the corner of the plot, in the ground itself (fig. 9). The same faceless figures reappear, as if in a recurring dream, in the background of the picture, in their same costumes, with Grant's avatar now assuming bodily form, climbing a ladder that leans against mother's



Figure 9. *Spring in Town* (detail with signature), 1941

house. Props delineate sexual difference: males are given phallic implements (spading fork, lawn mower, rug beaters, ladder); females are juxtaposed with containers (baskets, barrel, wagon, house). The Freudian symbolism in dreams of ladders and staircases is well known; the oedipal vignette of mother standing at the door of her house, at the top of a stairway, and son/husband ascending a ladder, distills Wood's familiar family romance: the son's guilty desire to have mother to himself requires that father go away—which he does, permanently. Wood engraves his own anticipated punishment in his signature in the soil, as if masochistically to announce, "Here (too) lies Grant Wood." And indeed, he conceived this painting, recalling the first spring after his father's death, in the last spring of his own life.

Spring in Town is retrospective in its details as in its latent content. The bird-house atop the post anchoring the clothesline recalls the one Wood had fashioned for the Kenwood home he built for Hattie and himself in 1917,⁶ and the composite neighborhood setting derives from the back yard of poet Jay Sigmund's summer home in Waubeek, where Wood had often basked since the late 1920s in his friend's dotting good will, along with other members of Sigmund's sophisticated social circle.⁷ It was Sigmund who introduced Wood to writer Christopher Morley. Morley in turn praised Wood's art repeatedly in his regular column in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, and may have been the one to plant the idea for an autobiography by Wood with his colleague Malcolm Johnson, chief editor at Doubleday Doran. In this and other ways, Sigmund was a great support, and a beloved father figure to the artist; he had initially scolded the young painter of impressionist scenes for copying the French, pointing Wood down the street in Waubeek to a pair of quilts hanging on a clothesline, as evidence of the kind of beauty available close at hand in Iowa. The small painting Wood created of the poet's exemplary indigenous subject matter is signed and dated in the lower left



Figure 10. Left, *Quilts*, 1928, oil on board, 13 x 15 in.; right, *Spring in Town* (detail), 1941

corner "Waubeek/1928" (fig. 10). Wood made a gift of it to Sigmund as proof of a lesson learned. The quilts' colors in that early exercise predict those shown in *Spring in Town*: orange, green, and white on the left-hand quilt; green, white, and red on the right. It is a poignant detail: in October 1937, Sigmund had died in a hunting accident along the Wapsipinicon River, bleeding to death from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, at the age of 51. Wood had been so stricken by the sudden loss of his friend that he couldn't bring himself to attend the funeral. The motif of quilts in *Spring in Town* seems a quiet tribute, conscious or un-, to Wood's departed mentor and friend.



Figure 11. *Spring in the Country*, 1941

Turning to a time *before* his family's exile from their farm, Wood resurrected Maryville in the glorious prequel to *Spring in Town*—*Spring in the Country*, where father arrives with his team of horses, just as he does in his first appearance in "Return from Bohemia." "I sat on an island of sod," Wood remembers, "a small boy in faded blue overalls."⁸ And then, "Presently I heard the rattle of the harness and father's 'Whoa!' as he drove the horses into the farmyard." From the stuff of memory, Wood assembles in this picture a manifest scene of pure goodness, where clouds float beneficently above two adjacent farmsteads, the family's own and Grandma Wood's nearby; and father is back, restored to his position behind the plow. Undisturbed by siblings in this perfect world, child Wood in his faded overalls helps mother set out cabbage seedlings in neat rows. She shares a wedge of sunlight with a herd of cows grazing in the distance; *he* is in literal contact with his native soil. *Spring in the Country* responds to the felt need Wood announced in "Return from Bohemia," when, claiming the ground itself as his heritage, he then states: "I want to tell the story of my father and mother."⁹

This desire permeates his artistic enterprise, including *American Gothic*, but now he strips away all irony in envisioning a parental reunion, with his child self inserted at the center, aligned with mother, reassuringly phallic with her long hoe, the ladle in her bucket, even the stake at her feet. The blossoming apple tree in the middle ground evokes a prelapsarian Eden before the child's unwelcome recognition of sexual difference: the heavenly hermaphroditic tree displays a dark vaginal slit at the center of its phallic trunk. "Wounded" in this way,



Figure 12. Left, *Spring in the Country*, detail; right, *Parson Weems' Fable* (detail), 1939, oil on canvas, 38 3/8 x 50 1/8 in. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. 1970.43.

the tree also echoes the sapling in *Parson Weems' Fable*, the damaged cherry tree associated with the judging father and his threat of punishment. In *Spring in the Country*, however, that threat is mitigated in an image of paternal disempowerment: the tiny farmer-father with hunched shoulders mirrors the posture of the boy in the foreground—but his arms and legs are cut off by the edge of a hill.

Clustered at the lower right of the composition, outsize pale-green blossoms with yellow stamens and red buds remind us of Wood's unending interest, as he framed it in his autobiography, in native flora, associated with mother who taught him the names of all the prairie flowers he gathered for her from the fields surrounding their farm: Sweet Williams, fireballs, prairie pointers, . . . gentians, asters, and many more. Here, in their almost hallucinatory specificity, the blossoms anchor the vernal country scene firmly in Iowa. They resemble the pink or white flowers of the *Malus ioensis* or Iowa crabapple, and even more so those of the fragrant wild prairie rose, the *Rosa pratincola* (fig. 13), adopted in 1897 as the Iowa state flower. The petals



Figure 13. Left, wild prairie rose (*Rosa pratincola*); right, *Spring in the Country* (detail), 1941

of Wood's wild prairie rose, however, are green—like those of Oscar Wilde's emblematic green carnation in the nineteenth century, worn in the lapel as a sign of one's homosexual tastes. Like the red tie and the pinky ring for Wood's generation, and the smoking of Pall Mall cigarettes, the green carnation belongs to an evolving semiotics of homosexual identity and desire, developed under pressure of censorship, whose meanings remain unavailable to all but the privileged few. The green carnation was celebrated in 1893 in an eponymous novel by Robert Hichens, in which the protagonists are thinly veiled representations of Wilde himself and Alfred Lord Douglas. (When in the 1950s Wood's one-time wife, Sara Sherman, delicately outed the artist in her memoir, she did so by invoking Wilde, whose "genius [she wrote] runs just as purely and clearly today as if the world did not know . . . the reason behind his final degradation.")¹⁰ Was Wood in 1941 punning on the wild(e) prairie rose as a variant of the artificially dyed and therefore "unnatural" green carnation?

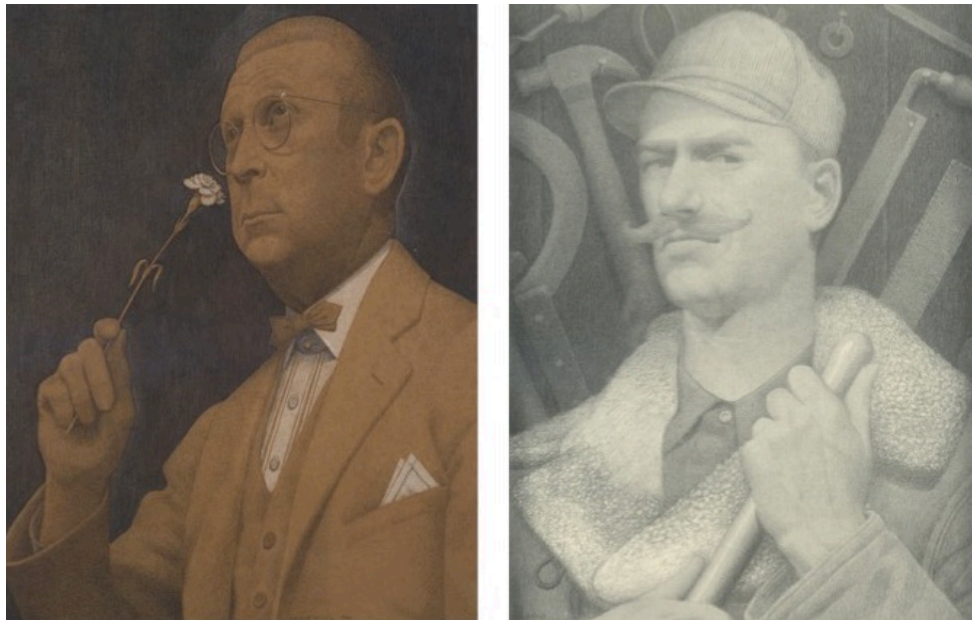


Figure 14. Left, *Sentimental Yearner*, 1936, pencil, black and white conté crayon, 20 1/2 x 16 in. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Gift of Alan Goldstein; right, *The Radical*, illustration for *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis, 1937

One of his illustrations for *Main Street* suggests that he was capable of just such a witticism, endowing the foppish shoe salesman, Raymie Wutherspoon, with a pale green flower in the preparatory drawing, though the carnation appears nowhere in Sinclair Lewis's narrative. Wood installed hidden symbols in plain sight in other illustrations, as Lea Rosson DeLong points out in her discussion of the hammer and sickle among the tools displayed behind Miles Bjornstam, the socialist-anarchist radical despised in *Gopher Prairie* as the Red Swede.¹¹

Tingeing the petals of the wild prairie rose an unnatural green may have been Wood's secret way in *Spring in the Country* of queering Iowa while offering it as a synecdoche for the entire nation. "In making these paintings," he wrote of *Spring in Town* and its prequel, "I had in mind something which I hope to convey to a fairly wide audience in America—the picture of a country rich in the arts of peace; a homely, lovable nation, infinitely worthy of any sacrifice necessary to its preservation."¹² To find the lovable ideal he wanted to advertise to his countrymen, Wood mined his personal past and the inner world he had constructed of all its introjected elements (that is, objects, including the parents and siblings, internalized, taken into the psyche where they live on even after



Figure 15. Left, *Spring in Town*, 1941; right, *Spring in the Country*, 1941

death in thoughts, feelings, dreams, and imagination). Although he would continue to sketch and paint Iowa landscapes during the few months that remained to him, none were so programmatic as these dual apotheoses of springtime in conveying his patriotism, his intense love of a homeland that ultimately represented for him the mother from whom he had issued and in whose arms he had begun to experience his love affair with the sensuous world, the fundament of his artistic creativity. *Spring in Town* and *Spring in the Country* suggest, respectively, paradise lost and then retrieved, an imaginative development enabled by a process of mourning that I believe Wood underwent during the time he worked on these two pictures. He had reached an emotional nadir in 1940 as a result of the attacks on him at the university; those painful experiences reactivated in him past sorrows, including the guilty loss of his father whose death-anniversary informed the genesis of *Spring in Town*. As his feelings of persecution diminished, however, the artist could begin to restore the good objects of his inner world.

Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein speaks of how "encountering and overcoming . . . adversity of any kind entails mental work similar to mourning,"¹³ and Wood performed that work throughout the summer of 1941 as he finished *Spring in Town* and embarked on its Proustian counterpart. He accomplished this in the relaxing calm of Clear Lake (fig. 16) with Rinard, his most loving and supportive friend, by his side. From Klein's perspective, "every advance in the process of mourning results in a deepening in the individual's relation to his inner objects. . . , an increased trust in them and love for them because they proved to be good and helpful after all."¹⁴ In this way, writes Klein, "the love for the lost object wells up and the mourner feels more strongly that life inside and outside will go on after all, and that the loved object[s] can be preserved within." Accompanying his springtime pictures with a public plea for preserving a nation and a way of life, Wood externalized the



Figure 16. Wood at Clear Lake, Iowa, 1941

preservation project he was conducting in his psychic world. Although life outside did not go on for him much longer, *Spring in the Country* suggests that in his final year an inner reconciliation was underway.

Notes

Sincere thanks to the organizers of the Fifth Biennial Grant Wood Symposium for the opportunity to present this paper, and to Jacqueline Falco-Smith and Edward Trover for assistance with images from the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art and Swope Art Museum, respectively.

1. Grant Wood quoted in Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 113.
2. Wood (with Park Rinard), "Return from Bohemia: A Painter's Story" (1935), typescript, p. 11, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
3. Ibid.
4. Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (New York: Random House Classic, 2005), 165.
5. Wood, "Return from Bohemia," 113.
6. Darrell Garwood, *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1944), 237.
7. Zachary Michael Jack, ed., *The Plowman Sings: The Essential Fiction, Poetry, and Drama of America's Forgotten Regionalist Jay G. Sigmund* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2008), 7, follows this identification by Edward Pierce Ferreter of *Spring in Town* with Sigmund's back yard.
8. Wood, "Return from Bohemia," 4, and in the next sentence, *ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 3.
10. Sarah Sherman, thoughts on Grant Wood's art, 1959, Donna Clausen cat. no. 4, n.p. [2], Sherman Papers, Marysville, Wash.
11. Lea Rosson DeLong, *Grant Wood's Main Street: Art, Literature and the American Midwest* (Ames, Iowa: Brunnier Art Museum, Iowa State University, 2004), 135.
12. Wood, quoted in Nan Wood Graham, with John Zug and Julie Jensen McDonald, *My Brother, Grant Wood* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1993), 173.
13. Melanie Klein, "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States" (1940), in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1975), 360.
14. Here and in the next sentence, *ibid.*