Confessions of an Ethnoskeptic-American

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At this safe distance from American Academia, let me put forth a skeptical thesis: In its most meaningful sense, the term "ethnic literature" is nothing more nor less than a thematic classification; to the extent that one makes more ambitious claims for it, one indulges in the same sort of essentialist stereotyping that has marginalized minorities in the first place. The zeal for "canon reformation" and affirmative action anthologizing displayed by many critics is, if you will, the postmodern version of the "White Man's Burden." Such a provocative statement should send the reader scurrying back to the top of the page for a second look at my name, for an indication of my own gender and ethnicity, and thereby, presumably, of my inherent agenda, hidden or otherwise. Surely, though, my readers will be of sterner stuff than to unresistingly accept the implication that my ethnic origin is determinate of my experience and thought, though it is this logically repugnant principle that underlies more than a little of contemporary championing of writers of various Hyphenated-American persuasions on the mere basis of their ethnicity.

If we are to accept that writers of a given gender, race, religion, or ethnicity embody *ipso* facto particular insights, moral perspectives, literary merit, what have you, then aside from the fact that we are spared reading them once we have successfully identified their group and its corresponding attributes, there are certain other nefarious consequences. In the present case, if you have correctly recognized the Sicilian provenance of my name, you must be led to inevitable conclusions about this article, none of which will be very pleasant for you. For in the logic of ethnicism's *argumentum* ex gente, as surely as Chicano-American

means oppressed, Chinese-American means hard-working, and Jewish-American means guilty, Sicilian-American (to the extent that it is liberated from the generic Italian-American) means criminal. You should fully expect that accepting my argument (the non-refusable proposition) will put you in my debt, that is to say my power, for the foreseeable future. "Someday, dear reader, your Godfather may call on you to perform a service. Until that day, go in peace and accept this logic as the gift of Don Petruso on the day of his daughter's wedding" *(pace* Puzo). On the more positive side, you may pleasantly anticipate that this ethnic essay will at least contain many heart-warming scenes of familial devotion, a good deal of homemade wine, and at least one usable pasta recipe. This conjunction of literature and cuisine is not haphazard, for one of the consequences of considering literature ethnically is its reduction to an item of subcultural consumption analogous to ethnic cuisine. One imagines the ethnically-savvy reader asking his spouse if she feels like having Chinese tonight, and passing a volume of Amy Tan.

Of course, I have deliberately obfuscated the generic differences between fiction and essay writing here to make my point. I assume that one will readily grant to the logic of argumentation the power of transcending the generic and ethnic specificity of the arguer. If reason, applied to a given set of facts, leads me to a conclusion identical to that of say, a lesbian Korean-American, that would not in itself be especially startling, though it might be unexpected on the part of a heterosexual Sicilian-American male in the same way that we are pleasantly surprised to find that some pigmentally disadvantaged people can sing the blues, and some persons of color are more fond of philosophy than basketball. What I wish to illustrate by this is what I shall call *ethnicist fallacy number one:* namely, that an action performed by a member of a given group necessarily partakes of characteristics typical of the group. A chicken enchilada made by me and my cousin Franky is not Sicilian-American cuisine, and I happily concede expertise in Italian cooking to Jewish-American Helene Siegal, and only a fool would dispute her right and/or ability to cook Italian food on the ground of her ethnicity (this mention of her *Italian Cooking for Beginners*[1] is as close as you're going to get to the recipe I promised, but then as a Sicilian-American, I am expected to break my word when it suits me, at least with respect to

1 (New York: Harper Collins, 1992)

you, who are not family). I am hoping, then that my reader will concede to me the potential to cook a passable *bi-bim-bob* or write a pro-lesbian essay, despite my generic and ethnic handicaps. Am I wrong to assume it will be quite another story if I presume to write a novel with a lesbian Korean-American protagonist? Does one greet the latter possibility with skepticism? Without knowledge of my experience with Korean-Americans and lesbians, on what do you base your skepticism? What of "negative capability," the projection of oneself into an imaginative other? When another Sicilian-American, Salvatore Gambino, wrote The Blackboard Jungle under his chosen name of Evan Hunter, did this de-ethnicize it, or did the nonethnospecificity of his theme do so? Had he written it under his given name, what then?

Actually, there is a hidden assumption behind fallacy number one, namely that the existence of an ethnicity implies identifiable characteristics brought by members of the group to any activity. Obviously, some discrimination is in order here. It is one thing to talk about, say Irish-American folk songs, but has anyone ever seriously argued that there is an Irish-American mathematics? Is Stephen Hawking's physics Anglo? It should be evident that there is a difference in kind between those activities which, in themselves, constitute the common cultural (or sub-cultural) practices within a group and those practices, common to the species, that transcend ethnic specificity. An important point about the first type of practices—the ethnic ones—is that they are neither exclusive nor defining. That is, doing a jig does not make me Irish, any more than being Irish enables me to do one. Unless one happens to view the tarantella, frikadeller, or any number of quaint national costumes, for example, as snduring triumphs of humanity, it seems rather unnecessarily limiting to hinge one's identity on the particular customs forced upon one by accident of birth. Such cultural baggage should be nothing to be ashamed of, but surely there is a paradox in championing "ethnic pride" on the one hand and condemning the wars that result from it whenever and wherever the transcending perspective breaks down.

I was raised in the days before "multiculturalism"/essentialism, that is, in a time when one's education included the idea that all statements uniting an ethnic group in a single predicate were ridiculous and prejudicial to the individual people with whom we interact in the world on a daily basis. Indeed, one could argue that the great dynamism of American life has been the result not of an interaction of various ethnicities,

but rather of the liberated energy of people who, in coming to the New World, cast off the restrictive apparata of the cultures they left, which had evidently failed them.

The problem in ethnicist thinking is its implicit double standard: one wants to keep the advantageous group characteristics and dissociate oneself from the negative. I doubt: anyone will object to a meaningless generalization such as "African-Americans are deserving of better opportunities in higher education," but just let me try something like "African-Americans are good dancers." In their frenzy to object to the racial stereotyping of the latter statement, many critics will overlook its structural similarity to the first statement, which is neither more nor less ridiculous. One ought to recognize the insidiousness of both of these propositions, however. If we accept even the most flatteringly positive statement of group characterization, we will have undercut the very ground from which we could object to negative stereotyping. In *Mount Allegro,* Jerre Mangione's portrait of his pre-World War II Sicilian-American community in Rochester, New York, he describes how as a schoolboy he was expected by his teachers to excel in Latin, art, and music simply by virtue of his Italian surname.[2] In fact, he was once paddled by the school principal for having produced a still-life whose decided inferiority was interpreted as evidence of willful disobedience on the part of a putative descendant of Messieurs DaVinci and Buonarotti. Mangione, of course, knew better than these presumably well-intentioned teachers (who were after all, only trying to enhance his self-esteem and positive ethnic awareness, right?). If, despite the evidence of his own abilities, he had bought into the self-definition offered to him on the basis of his ethnicity, then by what logic could he ever have disputed ethnic slurs? If Sicilians are all artistically inclined, couldn't they all be criminally inclined by the same token?

In my own case, the choice not to overplay the ethnic hand is an easy one; there is little to gain by being noticeably Sicilian-American. It is not one of the "protected species" given priorities in hiring, indeed it is not even a recognized ethnicity, thrown in as it is under the Italian-American category.[3] Some Italian-Americans have even been known to claim

2 *Mount Allegro: A Memoir of Italian American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 302.

3 One will appreciate the absurdity of this logic, which confers upon me an "ethnicity" derived from politico-military events of the last century. If Sicily comes under the dominion of Tunisia in the next war, will my descendants and I thereafter be Tunisian-Americans?

Hispanicity in an attempt to crack the job market. Does the fact that my family can be traced to Catalonia in the 12th century qualify me? Where is the cut-off point? At what generation did ethnicity congeal into identity? When did the Catalonian Petrusos become Sicilian? These questions should indeed be troubling, for the answers to them are entirely relevant to the question of ethnic identity for Americans of the second and subsequent generations. It seems to me that the only operable frame of reference for the concept of one's cultural identity must be the culture in which one is born and raised. Otherwise, where do we stop climbing the family tree? Like Jerre Mangione, my father, whose father came from Sicily and who grew up bilingually, might have been accurately called Sicilian-American in his youth at least, though by now, aside from a few eating habits and gardening techniques learned from his father, there is little to distinguish him culturally from his non-ethnically-identifiable neighbors in Pennsylvania. My implication is that the Ethnic-American label only accurately applies to the second generation (i.e. the first born in America). Can it be applied to me on the basis of my grandfather's country of origin? Unlike my father and Jerre Mangione, I didn't grow up in any kind of Sicilian-American context other than the very sporadic community that formed on the occasion of weddings and funerals. If one responds that the identity derives from the blood line, rather than the immediate cultural context, then I've got just as accurate a claim to Catalonian-American, but why stop there? How about Proto-Indo-European-American, which would seem to be the logical equivalent of African-American, though it won't account for the likely Siculian, Hamitic and/or Semitic strains in the Sicilian gene pool.

In any event, the most one can expect to get from Sicilian-Americanism is a chance to intimidate people by virtue of one's presumed underworld connections.[4] I am by now no longer shocked by the questions provoked by revealing my ancestry: "Oh, do you know anyone in the Mafia?" "Where does your money come from?" These manifestations of ignorance know no national or educational bounds, and as I said, this is not a protected species, so one need not have bad conscience about it. Nor should one think that Academia is an enlightened province; indeed some of the worst stereotyping offenders are found

4 Traditionally, being Sicilian was in fact a requisite for rising above the "glass ceiling" in organized crime management positions, but the enlightened modern bosses have been aggressive in affirmatively promoting Colombians, East Europeans, and members of other traditionally criminally-disadvantaged groups.

there. It is within the ivory tower, after all, that essentialist (non)thinking has found one of its strongest preserves.

All of this musing on the paradoxes and abusiveness of ethnicism brings me to, and is in large measure inspired by, the Instructor's Guide for the Heath Anthology of American *Literature,*[5] which takes some pride in its ethnocentric inclusivity. If a more egregious example of the double standard of social engineering applied to literary studies can be found anywhere, I am happy to say I do not know of it. The condescending tone of many of the Heath's editors is accompanied by a good dose of the self-congratulation that comes from knowing one is doing the "P.C." thing. In the individual guides to the various authors, the editors are fond of pointing out the limitations that presumably stand between students and the chosen material (in P.C. Heathspeak, this comes out as students being "resistant"). To quote a few: "Students are resistance [sic] to texts that withhold key information" (p. 454). "Since [Michael Gold] does not deal with any complex or difficult concepts or ideas, his work is immediately accessible to students" (p. 501). "Satire ... upsets students, who see it as too negative" (p. 503). To be sure, these comments do at times offer useful suggestions for facilitating class discussions, but whatever the "resistance" of students, it is doubtful they will fail to see through the transparent criteria of selection behind the affirmative action canon à la Heath, which brings to light the previously (and at times deservedly) obscure in an effort to be all inclusive (though they seem to have neglected American Samoan-American writers), and is very heavily slanted toward texts of a social activist character. Thus, the condescension toward students described above extends to their need for political enlightenment. An ongoing subtext in the editors' comments is contemporary students' presumed lack of sympathy with the instructors' social agenda, and we are offered generous instructions for reorienting their thinking (e.g. getting them to understand the marginalization of sentimentalist novels as an effect of white male bias rather than of any artistic limitations in the genre itself).[6] One of the

5 Judith A. Stanford, editor, *Instructor's Guide for "The Heath Anthology of American Literature, Paul Laurer, General Editor"* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1990).

6 To counter the argument that "canon formation" is a strictly subjective, interested (i.e. politically, generically, ethnically determined) activity, we need recourse to no other argument than a definition of literature as an ongoing transcultural, transhistorical artistic practice informed by evolving techniques, the mastery of which can serve as a criterion of judgment of the work. It is on this standard of artisanship that a writer like Rebecca Harding Davis, whose "Life in the Iron Mills" has become a staple of revisionist anthologies, might be

Heath's innovations is a table of contents in which the names of Native-American authors are followed by the name of their tribe in parenthesis, e.g., "William Apes (Pequot)," "Elias Boudinot (Cherokee)." This is done, I suppose, so that we won't miss the crucial fact that they are Native-Americans, and pass them over as simply more white men. I suppose that it is also intended to indicate to the reader the great variety of Native-American groups. Bravo! Such delicatesse is not extended to the white devils, however. According to the Heath logic, i.e., that the ethnic affiliation is the salient identifying feature, shouldn't we be writing "James Joyce (Irish)" and "Henry James (Anglo-American)" lest expatriate writers be miscategorized? Or how about "Al Wilson (>West African)" so we don't mistake him for a white hipster. And while I'm at it, why is a Native-American any more native than I am? Can one person be more born in a place than another? And since we all know that America is an Italianate misnomer anyway, shouldn't they be Native-Whatever-They-Called-The-Place?

In her prefatory note to the Instructor's Guide, editor Judith A. Stanford thanks "the contributing editors who 'sponsored' many of the writers included in the Anthology" (xvii). This notion of "sponsoring" is quite apt: one imagines the contributing editors, each with a suitably ethnic pet author in tow, marching into the great Faculty Club of the Anthology. Please do not misunderstand my sarcasm, Kind Reader; indeed, some of my very best friends are Ethnically-Underrepresented-in Literary-Anthology-Americans, and as a writer, I have a vocational sympathy for other practitioners of the art. My sympathies do not extend, however, to editors such as George Searles, whose introduction to John Updike (an author I'd otherwise be little interested in defending) bristles with the worst sort of P.C. jargon and hypocrisy:

> One valid objection to Updike is that he is too narrowly an interpreter of the WASP/yuppie environment, a realm of somewhat limited interest; another is that his work proceeds from a too exclusively male perspective. The former concern will, of course, be more/less prob-

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judged deficient on the grounds of what editor Judith Roman fairly identifies in the Heath *Anthology* as her "confusing dialogue, hard-to-identify speakers, vague frame story, religious solution [to what is presented as a socio-political problem], and juxtaposition of sentimental language with religiosity and realism" (p. 284). Roman very cogently offers us suggestions to ameliorate these difficulties in the classroom, but might a more expedient solution simply be a higher standard of selectivity to begin with? Should we commit our students' time to such unskilled writers in literature courses, particularly those in which effective writing is also an objective?

> lematic depending on the nature of the college (more problematic at an urban community college, less so at a "prestige" school).
> [...] But in Updike's case, it's also necessary to stress that his real concerns transcend his surface preoccupations. Although he's often described as a chronicler of social ills, really he's after larger game -the sheer intractability of the human predicament. Students must be shown that in Updike the particular is simply an avenue to the universal (p. 587).

How sad for Mr. Searles, to feel obliged to offer such a rationale for what is presumably a specialty of his; how sad for our students, who have evidently been so indoctrinated with multiculturalist propaganda that they have to be convinced—via Searles' rather unappetizing platitude—that any white guy is worth listening to. Never mind Updike's skill in narrative focus within female characters, that Rabbit Angstrom is from the working class, that Henry Bech (of *Bech; a Book* and *Bech is Back)* is Jewish, that the "Olinger" stories have nothing to do with "WASP/Yuppiedom," and that the species Yuppie hadn't even been identified before the last of the *Rabbit* novels was written. Elsewhere in his introduction Searles does get around to making some useful observations about Updike's writing and offering some constructive suggestions for teaching it. One might even be tempted to the cynical conclusion that his apologia is motivated by an externally imposed sense of inferiority for working on a white male Anglo-American author (if he actually believes what he says, it's hard to understand why he doesn't just drop Updike and go out and "sponsor" an ethnic)[7]. Be that as it may, the double standard here is so blatant that I'm embarrassed to mention it. Just imagine the uproar if I turned Searles' "valid objection" against, say, an African-American woman writer. Is it admissible to suggest that she is "too narrowly an interpreter of the Black/ghetto environment, a realm of somewhat limited interest," to say nothing of her "too exclusively female perspective?" In fact the latter charge was leveled against Alice Walker for *The Color Purple,* so might I safely assume that her many eloquent defenders will turn their anger toward Searles in defense of Updike? As for the first indictment, since when has it ever been "valid" to castigate an author for a narrow focus on his

7 This sort of calling into question of one's intellectual interest on political grounds is, alas, not so unusual. I was once quite seriously challenged by an assistant professor of art history to justify the fact that I worked on Joyce and Proust "in this day and age." Her remark is notable in its application not to the sort of work I was doing, but to the subject itself. I might, after all, have been doing, say, a radical gay reading designed to demonstrate the repressive linguistic strategies of encyclopedic novels in the final stages of capitalism, which I assume would have been perfectly acceptable to her.

environment? Does this apply to Proust's "too narrow interpretation" of Parisian high society, or to the "too exclusively male perspective" of his narrator's subjectivity? Is it the narrow focus, or the particular environment in focus that is the problem here, and to whom? Of course, Searles' judgment is transparent: it's the Anglo-American middle class environment that's being deemed of limited interest here, though the criterion applied goes unmentioned. No matter, it's clear that the perspective behind the judgment is that of P.C.; it's simply not chic or trendy to discuss white folks from the suburbs.

This brings us to the matter of Searles' curious social analysis, which leads him to conclude that reading Updike will be more of a problem for students from an environment dissimilar to that described than for those from a similar environment. Of course what this says about white middle class students at the urban community college or black working class students at the prestige schools, for example, is very hard to see, but dealing with actual cases, as opposed to demographic stereotypes has never been a strength of the P.C. In the world of political correct thinking, if one doesn't conform to the various categorical definitions, one is simply left out of the discussion. But even granting the hypothesis that all students fit Searles' institutional stereotypes, what is the implication? On the one hand, his statement is simply a banality: an urban black student will find Updike's environment alien in a way that the white suburban student won't; a student at Dublin's Trinity College will be armed with a familiarity with *Ulysses'* milieu that far exceeds that of a student at the University of Pittsburgh. So what? If we can't be liberal-minded enough to allow literature to give us a sense of another viewpoint, environment, or subjectivity what good is it? Isn't this the very reason we're encouraged to read "minority" writers in the first place? Apparently, though, this process operates in one direction only. Would we accept as a "valid objection" that the Oglala Sioux, Harlem, or Chinatown environment is of somewhat limited interest? It seems fine for "ethnics" to affirm themselves by writing and reading about their specificity, so why not bourgeois honkies? Do we really want to encourage our students to read only about themselves?

In any case, I'm sure Updike and his fans will be quite happy to learn from Searles that there is redemption for this white male Anglo-American, namely that he has universalist concerns that justify and transcend his "surface preoccupations." Again, the hypocrisy and absurdity of this

condescending move become quite evident if we just reverse its application. Let's see the hands of all those who agree that it's worth putting up with Zora Hurston's "surface preoccupations" with femininity and small-town black communities to get at her "larger game," some facet or other of the "human predicament." We would quite rightly reject such trite nonsense from our undergraduate students, and there's no good reason to put up with it from Searles, either. As distasteful as it is to summarize his implicit argument, here it is: specificity of viewpoint is the *sine qua non* of the "ethnic" writer, but it is not good enough for a WASP male, to name one. Actually, maleness is problematic in general, but it can always be redeemed by claiming ethnicity, which puts one in the "victim" camp.

As I suggested above, there are a good many students, happily, who are not as dull-witted as the *Heath* thinks they are, and they will easily see through most of the convoluted rationale offered up to get them to swallow a lot of mediocre writing that is being pushed at them for political reasons. Fortunately students have many experiences in other spheres which show them that there are criteria of selection that have to do with the specific skills and evolving state of the art of a given activity, literature included. P.C. ideology notwithstanding, they will ultimately form more or less independent judgments (whether or not they dare confess them in the classroom), no thanks to the instructor's fervent exhortation that one suspend critical judgment in favor of multicultural inclusion. The heavy-handedness exemplified by the *Heath,* however, might encourage students to "Ghettoize" entire classes of authors if they perceive them to have been selected to fill a canonical quota. This is where the political appropriation of ethnicity does a great disservice not only to students, but to the authors as well. True enough, affirmative action applied to literature has resulted in the anthologizing of some writers who would otherwise have remained unknown, but the premium accorded to a writer for being ethnically identified can also take the focus away from artistic accomplishment that deserves notice. Indeed, the difference between fiction and nonfiction is somewhat overlooked by ethnicists eager to find documents testifying to group experience. Thus, for example, the large place taken up by personal memoirs and political tracts in the *Heath.* This is all fine sociology, I am sure, and historically very interesting, but offering it all up indiscriminately as "American Lit-

erature" has a leveling effect to the detriment of many authors and to literature in general.

If we stop classifying writers by sociological categories for a moment, and consider them in the context of literary history, the terrain is somewhat different. My position is based on nothing more reactionary than a notion of fiction writing as an ongoing creative practice analogous to painting and other arts, whose practitioners form a community of common interest and influence across cultural and historic lines. To the degree that an author's creativity is a response to technical developments and struggles in the art, to the assimilation of others' influences, to the degree, in short, that the work reflects a knowledgeable labor of form and technique, and not just a thematic preoccupation, it can be considered more or less "literary," more or less artistically realized. If this sounds like a criterion of value judgment, it is one. There is no need to be embarrassed by evaluating something on the standards inherent in its genre. We do this routinely with respect to our choice of music, decorative art, or furniture; should we decline to exercise such judgment as readers simply because a vociferous lot who believe that literary criticism is the arena of social action tell us *ad nauseam* that writing is writing is writing and the only criteria of selection are political?

My point is that certain authors' works will be little appreciated or understood if we do not take into account their deliberate stance in literary history, that is to say with respect to their assimilation of or dialogue with chosen literary predecessors. We readily concede the importance of this dimension when discussing T.S. Eliot or Virginia Woolf or Edith Wharton, for example, but it is frequently overlooked as soon as a writer is categorized as "ethnic." In my view the only useful application of the term "ethnic writing"—if there is one—is to refer to the thematizing of the experiences of a given subcommunity *qua ethnos.* In American literature the great preponderance of such works would belong to the immigrant subgenre, typically written by second generation Whatever-Americans, both as memorial to the disappearing immigrant generation and a means of coming to terms with their own biculturality. Examples of this sort are plentiful, and would include Mangione's *Mount Allegro.* Interestingly enough, this work was, according to the author, originally written as a memoir, but was given a thin fictional veneer (i.e. a few name changes) at the insistence of the publisher, who thought fiction would sell more (p. 209). I, for one, will not speculate as to why Sicilian-

American life should be more likely as fiction than fact, We do have though, on the cover of the cited edition, Herbert J. Gans' assurance that the book has indeed become "a classic of ethnic American literature." In any case, the very short distance Mangione went to convert his memoir to fiction, suggests that it would come out on the thin side of my proposed standard of evaluation for fiction, and that is indeed the case. This leads me to a general observation about those works I'm suggesting can be safely classified as "ethnic:" they are primarily documentary and memorial in purpose. Please spare me any foolishness about the fallacy of authorial intention, etc. Neither Jerre Mangione nor scores of other "ethnic" writers will have any trouble with this definition. As Mangione explains it, he "hit on a style that would let me tell my story without sounding either like a sociologist or a fiction writer" (p. 303).

The "classic" ethnic form to which Mangione's story conforms is that of a personalized ethnographic document. That is to say, it presents narratively, as personal anecdote, a description of the characteristic language, beliefs, practices and dilemma of the given group. Furthermore, it is memorial and nostalgic in nature, having been written from the perspective of the community's dissolution, the passing of the older generation, and the author's own successful assimilation into American life (in Mangione's case as a professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania). There are many writers, though, who despite treating a specific ethnic milieu thematically do not meet this criterion of primarily documentary or memorial motivation. Such works might *also* be memorial, but they are distinguished as works of fiction, that is (beyond the obvious matter of their implicit claim with respect to imaginative license), by their use of formal patterns, literary allusions, symbolism, direct and indirect representation of characters' inner awareness, and so on—in other words, by their novelistic techniques. Mangione's work, like others of its class, is novelistically poor, and this needn't upset anyone, since he doesn't have novelistic pretensions. Works that are *also* "ethnic" but primarily novelistic would include, for example, Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* and John Edgar Wideman's *Homewood Trilogy."* First of all, let me hasten to say that no one would or should underestimate the evocative power these two demonstrate in depicting, respec-

8 *Call It Sleep* (New York: Avon, 1964) *The Homewood Trilogy: Damballah, Hiding Place, Sent for You Yesterday* (New York: Avon, 1985). For a fuller treatment, see my *Life Made Real; Characterization in the Novel since Proust and Joyce* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1991).

tively, a Lower East Side world of Jewish immigrants in 1908, via a six year old boy protagonist, and a black Pittsburgh neighborhood seen through characters of both sexes and several generations, including the author's fictionalized alter-ego. Beyond this, however, the differences between these works and Mount Allegro's classic ethnic form are substantial.

Henry Roth is every bit as accomplished as Mangione in representing the linguistic, religious, culinary and other characteristics of his milieu, but he eschews the first person, memorial tone, and nostalgia in his fictional form, and his novel is not written from a perspective temporally removed from its immediate time and place. Everything about the protagonist, Davey Shearl, flows from his encounter with his own Jewishness, but with an important difference from more classically ethnic writing of Mangione's sort. In Call *It* Sleep, the protagonist's ethnicity is problematic for him not so much because of any conflict between it and a dominant culture, but because of conflicts between it and himself. Furthermore, Roth's very considerable novelistic techniques (symbolism, systematic use of literary allusion, primary focus on the boy's consciousness [as opposed to its objects], and experiments in narrative voice) all minimize, if not fly in the face of, any memorial/ethnographic purpose. It is in fact evident that Roth's technique, as well as a certain degree of his characterization[9] are studiously Joycean in nature, and it is in this sense that the novel has more to say about Henry Roth as an artist than it does about Jewish-Americanism before World War I. To classify Roth as a Jewish writer on the basis of his subject is just as inadequately descriptive as calling Joyce an Irish writer. Yes, he's Jewish, and yes, he's a writer, but we need to be mindful of the ways in which putting the two together as a label minimize his distinctive characteristics as the latter. Put more simply, one could remove Roth's Jewish milieu and apply his novelistic techniques to another one, and the result would still be a compelling novel. If we remove Mangione's Sicilian-American milieu, there would be nothing left. In other words, there are better eyewitness descriptions and memorials of the Lower East Side than Roth's; we go to him not so much for the milieu per se as for its novelistic transformation, the work of imagination and technique.

9 See *Life Made Real*, **pp.** 119-25, 131-36.

It would be absurd to claim that John Edgar Wideman's work is not memorial; indeed it is a thoroughly gripping and moving portrayal of family life in an "ethnic" community, and it is no less drawn from the facts of Wideman's life than Mangione's is from his own. The capital difference in these works does not lie in their theme, but in their techniques. From a sociological point of view, I could not begin to say if either Wideman or Mangione does a better job as an ethnic chronicler, and I fear that such a judgment will ultimately be based on a reader's tastes in subcultural consumption. From a novelistic point of view, there is no doubt whatsoever that Wideman is the more accomplished writer. He brings to his work a knowledge and mastery of narrative techniques that calls attention not just to the details of the world he portrays, but to its status and quality as an artful rendering. Wideman portrays his characters in framed tales—family stories—that are recounted by various female relatives for the most part, and the frame narrative is that of a first person narrator, John, whose biography and family history we are piecing together from the mosaic of the tales. The narrative thread of this first-person story is provided by John's attempt to reconcile his position as an academic married to a white woman with his origins in Homewood, and particularly with the fact of his younger brother's incarceration. John's story corresponds to the facts of the veritable author's life, and it is in this conjunction of memorial purpose and fictive techniques that Wideman excels, and I would argue, joins company with the best practitioners of fictionalized autobiography that this century, whose literary history has been so marked by the genre, has to offer. His depiction of the continuity of family life through the stories told and retold when the principals gather shows us that family is itself a literary construct, consisting of an oral tradition:

> Past lives live in us, through us. Each of us harbors the spirits of people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence, just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest.
> (Epigraph to Sent for You Yesterday)

This insight is perhaps implicit in Mangione's or any other memorialist's portrayal of family, but Wideman's emphasis on the importance, the art, of telling the story sets him quite apart. Where the memorialist wants to tell the story without sounding like a novelist, Wideman, like Joyce or Proust, proclaims the value of artful transformation in preserving and

transmitting his sense of past life and lives. (Note that neither the memorialist nor the novelist wants to sound like a sociologist.) His complex narrative techniques are in many ways reminiscent of Faulkner's best, i.e. in the pervasive use of character-centered perspective. Wideman tells his tales from within characters who are themselves characterized for us in the process (Cf. Quentin Compson telling Shreve the Sutpen story as told to him by Miss Rosa, etc.). Like Faulkner's, these are stories of voice, highlighting not just their varied vernaculars and idiolects, but the art of oral composition and interpretation itself. To cite one masterful example, from *Sent for You Yesterday,* at a certain point one Lucy Tate is telling the first person narrator John (he of the framing narrative) the story of the boy Junebug as she heard it from the boy's mother, Samantha, whom she visited in the hospital. We have Lucy's walk to the hospital described from her point of view, then from that of Samantha, who is watching Lucy approach from a window. The Junebug story is then told from Samantha's point of view. Formally, then we have John's version of Lucy's telling of the Junebug story, as seen from within Samantha, in the latter's voice. Samantha's interior monologue also includes a dream consisting of a narrated monologue of Junebug's perceptions and sensations on his dying day. This is an especially Faulknerian moment (given Faulkner's interest in narration from within highly idiosyncratic characters) by virtue of the fact that Junebug is a mute toddler. This entire deftly handled passage conveys to us the inner voices and experiences of the three characters and a triple perspective on this one event and its significance to these characters and to the community at large, and it is ultimately John's assimilation of this knowledge that will enable him to become the teller in turn, defining his place in the community he is thus preserving. Nothing of Wideman's narrative complexity and superb technical skill—nothing of his art as a writer, in short—is explained by, justified by, or bears any meaningful relationship to his ethnicity or that of his characters.

The *Trilogy* offers itself as the author's own testimony of his arrival as an artist. This arrival is occasioned by and symbolized in his synthesis of two originally competing cultural traditions: that of his community of origin, and that of the world of letters into which he had moved (after studying at the University of Pennsylvania, he becomes a professor of English). While the story tells us of the family in Homewood, its techniques tell us of Wideman's chosen literary predecessors; it defines its

place in literary history. All of this is beyond the scope of what Jerre Mangione has in mind, although his motivation in writing Mount Allegro—to reconcile his painful biculturality—is not different than Wideman's.

The point of my comparison is not that Wideman does a better job than Mangione, but that they are not doing the same thing. For a sociologist, the two works might be examined on an equal footing as depictions of ethnospecific milieux, etc. In that case, Wideman's artfulness and greater degree of fictional transformation will merely present troublesome obstacles, and the same would be true of Call It Sleep. If we read literature as sociology, we have every right to expect impoverished readings. As material for American Studies, I might prefer Mangione, which offers a more concise case study of the emergence and disappearance of an immigrant community, but there is really very little to recommend it to a course on literature. As American experience, it is exemplary of its time; as American literature, there's little to say about it. A great many professors of literature haven't noticed, perhaps, but literary study is itself a discipline that reflects a specific practice, and there is no need to apologize for applying the criteria of judgment of that practice in our work. When we abdicate that responsibility and defer to trendy multicultural catch-alls whose criteria of selection are largely political, we help create a climate in which the best achievements of some authors go undiscussed, because we have taught our students that the works have been selected because of the ethnicity of their authors. Despite classroom ideology, students will ultimately exercise intuitive judgment of the most democratic sort: they will read, value, and recommend the writers they like, and they will cast the others aside, regardless of race, creed, or color. Reading, like thinking and writing, is done by individuals, not ethnicities. But then isn't that just what one would expect a male Sicilian-American to say?