The Art of Becoming: Sherwood Anderson, Frank Sargeson and the Grotesque Aesthetic

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Since his death in 1941, Sherwood Anderson, best known for his 1919 composite novel *Winesburg, Ohio*, has been both celebrated as a great American writer committed to the task of creating durable American literature, and derided as a Midwestern writer of mediocre ability. Much recent criticism has taken the former stance, admitting Anderson’s shortcomings, but also recognizing the subtle genius of his representations of frustrated, marginalized Americans who face both ghosts of the past and more immediate alienating forces. Perhaps most importantly, Anderson has been increasingly recognized as ‘a writer’s writer’, as Malcolm Cowley labelled him in his widely quoted introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio*: ‘...The only storyteller of his generation who left his mark on the style and vision of the generation that followed.’ Indeed, his direct influence on literary giants including Hemingway and Faulkner is well-documented, and he would pave the way for writers from Sinclair Lewis to Philip Roth. Anderson, a self-proclaimed ‘American Man’, could probably never have imagined, however, that his influence would extend to the opposite side of the earth.

The 6 November 1935 issue of *Tomorrow*, a liberal independent weekly published in Christchurch, New Zealand, included a brief laudatory article simply titled ‘Sherwood Anderson’, written by the man who would later be referred to as the country’s literary ‘founding father’. In this piece, Frank Sargeson praised Anderson’s literary devices, from his use of
repetition and 'short, suggestive' sentences to his ability to make 'you understand how his characters feel by placing himself inside their skins'. In the following years these literary devices and values would often be identified as Sargeson's own, and many critics have at least mentioned the connection between the two authors in essays on Sargeson's life and work.

What comparisons do exist between the two have generally been limited to issues of style and execution surrounding Sargeson's early work. For example, many have seen the influence of Anderson's prose style in the language and rhythms of everyday speech found in the New Zealander's short stories. Anderson, operating in the tradition of Mark Twain and Van Wyck Brooks, had built his literary career around a rejection of 'neat slick writing', dramatizing instead 'the crude expression' of people's lives. 'And if we are a crude and childlike people, how can our literature hope to escape the influence of that fact? Why, indeed, should we want to escape?' wrote Anderson in 1917. The first phase of Sargeson's career seemed to ask similar questions through his stories peopled with working class, inarticulate characters whose speech was conveyed in a vernacular that was new to New Zealand literature, stories that are often credited with giving New Zealanders a distinctive literary voice and with capturing the spirit of the nation.

Sargeson's career eventually moved in the direction of longer works featuring articulate, well-educated narrators, and this shift has proved difficult to reconcile with the critical analyses that have developed around his earlier work. Not surprisingly, all mention of Andersonian themes and values disappear from the literature concerning Sargeson's later works, as similarities are no longer clearly evident on the level of language and style. Deeper, more pervasive resonances between the two authors lie beneath that initial shared use of seemingly simple characters, short sentences and colloquial language however. They are bound up in what is perhaps the most provocative, and certainly the most often quoted sentence of Sargeson's essay on Anderson.

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Sargeson wrote, ‘Anderson has lived his life in an environment similar to our own, raw, aesthetically hostile; yet by his courage and his sincerity he has become a first-rate artist’ (15). When Sargeson shifted from his early laconic prose style to long, complex sentences, from a reliance on the implied author to a more direct, articulate narrative voice, most stylistic similarities to Anderson may have disappeared, but the fundamental shared influence of that ‘raw, hostile’ environment remained. It manifests itself in Sargeson’s later writings, in part, through an aesthetic that has become so familiar that it is now often taken for granted.

That aesthetic—the grotesque—has a long history in art and literature, but in the past century its irresolvable clash of incompatibles has come to be viewed as an ideal manner of capturing the innocence and horror of modernity, and of subsequent alienation from the self and others. Anderson’s name has long been inseparable from the concept of the grotesque in American literature, but it is only recently that Sargeson’s later characters have been recognized as ‘grotesques’, in works that are, as Lawrence Jones has commented, ‘openly and sometimes magnificently eccentric and idiosyncratic’. From the characters of The Hangover (1967), to those of The Joy of the Worm (1969) and Man of England Now (1972), Sargeson’s creations share the quirky excess and the complex oppositions that define Anderson’s grotesques, and the aesthetic more generally. It is the pivotal novel Memoirs of a Peon (1965) that best offers a procession of boundless characters through constantly shifting social and physical spaces which, when compared with Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio, illuminates facets of these writers’ developing settler societies; societies grappling with the effects of a Puritan monoculture, the increasing obsession with material wealth that it engendered, and the realities of utopian dreams gone awry.
Incomplete Metamorphosis

Both Anderson and Sargeson were writing at times of immense change in their nations’ pasts; moments of great expansion as industrialization flourished, as attitudes toward work, leisure, consumption, and the self shifted, bringing unimagined results to the ‘unique experiments’ that the nations were based upon. It is such periods of transition that the grotesque tradition best suits: “Times of change, periods which, like the carnival season...elicit the “carnivalesque” response of bewildering fecundating distressful delight.” Grotesque imagery, characters and spaces reflect cultural shocks and shifting traditions, offering new ways of experiencing a world that is no longer quite familiar. Bakhtin made this carnivalesque realm of physicality and primitive pleasure the basis of his discussion of the grotesque, and in many ways his analysis helps to capture the essence of the constantly shifting, ‘raw, hostile’ environments that Anderson and Sargeson portray through their grotesques; worlds caught between what might have been and what was becoming.

For Bakhtin, the basis of grotesque imagery lies in the exaggerated portrayals of the body that are so prevalent in both writers’ characters. The gaping, irrational features that course through these books immediately establish the sense of absurdity, horror and comedy that is at the heart of the grotesque. From Anderson’s Wing Biddlebaum with his uncontrollable fluttering hands or Jesse Bentley with his persistent eye twitch, to Sargeson’s comic gymnasium coaches, Eddie and Spots, or his Uncle Hilary, the academic recluse with a perpetually disintegrating body, characters remain unresolved and disconcerting, making up a series of strange, uncomfortable incompatibilities.

The oddities and incompleteness of the carnivalesque extend not only to the characters who flit in and out of the narrative, but to George Willard and Michael Newhouse, the central
figures of each book. Despite the fact that he is present in nearly every story in *Winesburg, Ohio*, George remains an intangible being—a mass of ideas—some consistent and concrete like his desire to be a writer, but most undeveloped and shifting. His physical appearance is never made specific, and as a reporter he is, for the most part, a receptacle for other people's tales. While he serves as the novel's only means of ordering and presenting information, he does not leave the reader with a firm sense of himself, remaining an isolated enigma despite his fleeting moment of communion with Helen White in the town’s decaying band-stand.

In *Memoirs of a Peon*, Michael maintains a much more significant physical presence in that book than does George in *Winesburg, Ohio*, conforming to a more traditional view of the grotesque, but remaining just as enigmatic. Michael is completely incongruous, unable to reconcile his intellectual and carnal desires, and even seemingly unable to decide whether he prefers men or women, despite every effort to live up to his literary namesake of Casanova. His athletic build, for example, is at odds with his mental pursuits and his sporadic attempts to control his sexual appetite. ‘... I had grown into a muscular young man of somewhat rough and rocky appearance’, comments Michael:

...I could have done with some lengthening of stature, and it was a grief to me that my facial features, far from revealing my intellectual interests, instead did nothing at all to contradict the suggestion that with adequate training I might prove myself a successful pugilist. ... I would search anxiously in the glass for some sign of at least one redeeming feature, and ruefully conclude that the best I could hope for facially was to serve as an illustration of an attempt at reconstruction of Neanderthal man (48).

This description of Michael as a grotesque primitive, quite literally a man unfinished, is in keeping with ideas of his sexual
appetite, but provides an odd juxtaposition with his lust after culture and book learning, ensuring that he too remains an uncertain entity, caught between the values of his forefathers and the desires of a more modern age.

George and Michael then, like the various characters whose paths they cross in the course of these books, reinforce Bakhtin's contention that 'the confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn in the grotesque genre quite differently than in the classic and naturalist images' (315), and his continual reinforcement of the idea that the grotesque body is one 'in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body' (317). Through not only their physical instability, but their corresponding psychological ambiguity and status as perpetually unfolding beings, the characters of these novels resist 'deep' forms of knowing.

Borders and Boundaries

The incompleteness of these grotesques is further extended through the complex narrative and geographical territory of the novels. Since the basis of the grotesque, carnivalesque aesthetic is largely a visual and physical one defined by incomplete bodies 'in the act of becoming', the aesthetic's spatial nature is often critical. Indeed, both Winesburg, Ohio and Memoirs of a Peon are spatially oriented works, the first a composite novel made up of episodic stories scattered across the social and geographical realm of the American Mid-West, the second aligning itself with the picaresque tradition and similarly composed of an assortment of moments offering a fragmented view of New Zealand society.

The episodic nature of each book enables the grotesques to flit past the reader's eye, dropping an image or association before moving on toward the fringes of the narrative. These characters
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seem to stretch out over a thin, horizontal surface, ‘a long procession of figures’, like the grotesques that pass before the eyes of the old writer in the prologue of *Winesburg, Ohio*.7 While largely discrete, characters and events do overlap at ‘symbolic crossroads’, encouraging the reader “to juxtapose and counterpose them, and to stretch them out into a developing series”. The process brings to mind a canvas, which the reader-viewer, like the participant in a carnival, perceives in time only to translate it into a spatial reality’ (Hayman, 102). The series of frenetic snapshots that each novel offers maps a society, then, both vertically and horizontally, and the characters converge in space to describe a world ‘eternally suspended on the flat lake plain between the town and the city, between one century and another’,8 between the realm of the colonial intellectual and one ‘integrated by modern transportation and communication into a world-wide intellectual community’.9

It is this in-between realm that Claudio Gorlier addressed when writing of ‘a territory with jagged borders. Rural and urban locales seldom coalesce; rather, they combine to display “the making of a New Zealander,” of what “being” a New Zealander means…the individual self proceeds along the paths of an endless labyrinth’.10 This same comment could easily apply not only to Sargeson’s work, but to Anderson’s and to the American regionalism and nationalism developing as he was writing. The borders that define the social and geographical space of both *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Memoirs of a Peon* are largely those between rural and urban spaces, and between corresponding social settings and world views. These oppositions are critical in any developing settler society, and were particularly significant as Anderson and Sargeson wrote. Small towns, initially symbols of ‘civilization’ in the wilderness of the frontier, became sites of ‘incompleteness, anticipation and…practice’,11 as they grew into larger cities, rather than places offering stability or any kind of solution to the problems of settlement. Large towns and cities seemed to develop into new frontiers that needed to be

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negotiated and tamed in turn, and any sense of a rational, knowable self disappeared in the chaotic tangle of urban space. More negative ideas of the city, of course, then generated a romantic nostalgia for an agrarian past and a sense of unity that may never have existed in the first place.

In emphasizing the borders between these realms, the divisions within them, and the extent to which they do or do not overlap, both Anderson and Sargeson effectually take familiar, knowable landscapes—that of the rural, agrarian town and the developing city—and de-familiarize them through their emphasis on the irrational and their highlighting of oppositions and changes. The resulting discomfort contributes to the reader’s questioning of his or her conception of these spaces and to the acknowledgment of a destabilized world in transition.\(^1\) Perhaps not surprisingly, this spatial discomfort and the uneasiness caused by the excess and irrationality of the grotesque characters goes hand-in-hand. Franco Moretti, in his study of literature and space, concludes that ‘comic and “tragico-sublime” characters’ are often spatially oriented, generally being found in proximity to ‘borders’. In this sense, ‘space acts upon style, producing a double deviation (towards tragedy and comedy: towards the “high” and the “low”).’\(^1\) In *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Memoirs of a Peon* such comic, tragic characters—grotesques—are everywhere, as there are borders everywhere; borders between rural and urban, high and low culture, Old World and New.

**Mapping Irrationality**

Although Anderson’s novel is obviously centred around a small, rural Ohio town which is given a physical presence in many editions of the book through the inclusion of a simple map of the town, and the city is, for the most part, a distant focal point, all of Winesburg’s activities are increasingly oriented
toward the ‘privileged setting’ of the city, an ideal and simplified vanishing point ‘toward which lines of sight and projects of every kind converge’ (Fisher, 1985, 9). The ‘lines of sight’ directed toward that setting are made rather explicit in the image of the train tracks that connect the two places. The train is the most pervasive indication of the encroachment of the outside world on Winesburg, and in several stories its noise is noted in the background. It is explicitly described as a tool of developing commerce and of migration, taking the town’s ‘twisted little apples’, to the cities to ‘apartments that are filled with books, magazines, furniture, and people’ (36). The city is, then, a space that is in the process of consuming Winesburg, both its products and people, its ways and values, and is rarely described positively. People either never return from its clutches, or they come hurrying back to Winesburg forever changed.

Although the city is only a shadowy presence, its influence is evident not only in taking people and things away from Winesburg, but in the transformations that the town itself undergoes and in the increasing grotesqueness and alienation of its residents. In one of the book’s most overt indications of these trends Anderson writes, ‘The farmer by the stove is brother to the men of the cities, and if you listen you will find him talking as glibly and as senselessly as the best city man of us all’ (71). With such statements Anderson seems to merge the space of city and town, physically and socially. While Winesburg does remain a distinct space, boasting little more than a small general store, a hotel, and three doctors, the line separating it from outside spaces and values is increasingly blurred. The realms are joined by the carnivalesque procession of grotesques that marches through the book, shaped to varying degrees by the harsh frontier, the community’s puritanical background, a related overpowering materialism, and the encroaching forces of industrialization and urbanization forcing a temporal progression from farm to town to city.
Memoirs of a Peon, on the other hand, centres around the developing city of Auckland, but Michael’s wanderings take him through a range of other spaces that stand in opposition to the young city, and through the grotesques who populate those spaces. Hamilton, where the novel begins, is portrayed as the small agricultural service town that it was at the time of Sargeson’s birth, but a place that, like Winesburg, is feeling the effects of industrialization and change. Rotorua, which Michael visits with the Gower-Johnsons, seems a social space of comparable size to Hamilton, but one filled with the leisure and boundless resources of the upper-middle class; a space where the new and old world collide.

Standing in contrast to these developing towns are the places that remain isolated, rural and associated with agrarian values. The most notable of these is the family farm where Michael was born, while opposing both the rural space and the small town is the city itself. As Michael moves through Auckland, spending time everywhere from a downtown boarding-house to the basement of a former doll’s-eye maker in Freeman’s Bay, the parade of grotesques reaches its climax. From Lolly, the Meiklejohn daughter with a prominent strawberry birthmark on her cheek, who caresses and coos over Michael’s threadbare overcoat, to the Richies, the seemingly perfect young couple who are founding an organization for the defence of the married state despite their abusive relationship, the idiosyncratic characters that flit in and out of the narrative sprinkle it with an overwhelming sense of irrationality and force the reader to question his or her sense of this space and its dynamics.

The physical locations of many characters within this city space are thoughtfully juxtaposed to emphasize ironic social discrepancies and to make each grotesque seem more so in contrast with others. Michael’s time in Remuera, for example, which is associated with the pretentious Gower-Johnsons, is followed by his stint with the proletarian Meiklejohn family in Ponsonby. Placing Moira’s flat, in which Michael is literally
reduced to an animal crawling on his belly, in close proximity to the Wynyard Street house where he first developed his sense of culture and language emphasizes the constant conflict between the bodily and the intellectual, and also contrasts the progressive feminist Moira’s world of outcasts with the Old World gentry represented by Michael’s grandparents and his Uncle Hilary (Ower, 315). Situating both in an area which was, at the time when Sargeson wrote the novel, being taken over by university buildings and student boarding-houses further contrasts Old and New World learning and culture. Such juxtapositions of values and desires, of spaces and borders, and of the grotesques who inhabit them, further reinforce the novel’s sense of a society in transition.

Transcendence

Ultimately, the incomplete status of these grotesques and the episodic, carnivalesque spaces that they inhabit combine to indicate what Philip Fisher has termed a ‘damaged social space’. In discussing the spatial structure of slavery in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Fisher writes of ‘a nation of patches and islandlike worlds of differential laws, social codes, and ways of life...islands and patches of social fact scattered across a great emptiness of flight....’14 Both Anderson’s Midwest and Sargeson’s New Zealand seem similarly fragmented, with characters that operate within what Fisher describes as island-like ‘disconnected scenes and brief stories [that] make up a narrative structure of glimpses’, and within worlds where social norms seem not to exist. These novels—through their episodic nature, their proliferation of borders which ensure that everyone is an outsider and an observer, through their characters who are themselves damaged, perpetually unfinished and in the act of becoming—emphasize the absence of idealized, undamaged

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democratic space which Fisher defines as being identical from place to place, unbounded, and transparent. These are not places that have achieved the egalitarian, utopian ideals set out by their founders, but are rather ‘raw’, ‘hostile’, and problematic. Yet while each character may reflect the disorienting conditions of his or her surroundings—the collision of older puritanical values with modern realities, the gaps between city and country, Old World and New—and while each character may find him or herself in some way limited or confined by these factors, ultimately they transcend these borders through their grotesqueness, inhabiting a constantly shifting world that cannot contain the figures that move through it.

Fisher writes that the function of an artist can be to take what is ‘socially scattered’ and subject it to ‘a composition by reassembly’ (Fisher, 1988, 90). While neither Anderson nor Sargeson seek to present suggestions for a coherent social space that they hope will be emulated in order to alleviate the fragmentation of their social environments, neither are their depictions of a ‘damaged social space’ entirely pessimistic. On the contrary, as their grotesques are images of incomplete metamorphosis, and as they are spread out over an equally open, unfinished, developing space, they are constantly expanding and moving toward a conceptual horizon that seems to offer, if not a degree of hope, then at least some sort of alternative.

Both Anderson and Sargeson spoke of an emptiness to life in America and New Zealand, an emptiness that can be seen as physical, intellectual and emotional. Sargeson once commented, ‘Now it is surely not to be wondered at that where you have an aggregation of people in the modern sense, you will find many substitutes, which compensate for the absence of a central core of belief. … The distressing fact of the matter is that central positions in New Zealand are usually discovered to be vacant…’15 While these grotesques certainly do not offer a ‘central core of belief’ with which to fill the absence that Sargeson speaks of, the space is taken up by their unresolved...
bodies, thoughts and words, constantly moving toward resolution, but never arriving. Stasis might inspire pessimism, but the cacophony of voices and images overflowing with life, the bodies bursting at their seams, exploding and imploding, crossing boundaries, escaping enclosure or seeking it, that these novels present provide a kind of joyous insanity. Poignant manifestations of damage and frustration are embedded in the fleeting images and distorted bodies of these characters, and in the fragmented social spaces they inhabit, but there is also a respect, a comedic appreciation, and a belief that they have something to offer to the art form that cannot quite manage to contain them.

While Anderson and Sargeson have typically been compared in light of the older writer’s influence on the younger’s early prose style, there are, then, deeper resonances between their respective artistic visions. That both authors should turn to the grotesque aesthetic to capture the tensions and dynamics of transitions in ‘raw, aesthetically hostile’ societies experiencing alienation and frustration as a result of being caught between a puritan past and the materialism of a more modern age does not seem entirely surprising. The open space of the carnival, in which characters are composed of fleeting images and incomplete flashes of humanity in an ever-expanding world, is an ideal forum for presenting such issues. In a more unlikely manner, however, the permeable spaces existing within and between these characters and the spaces of the country, town and city that they inhabit, create dialogic works that epitomize the problems of ever ‘knowing’ these grotesques or their worlds, while simultaneously evincing the faith these authors placed in the power of their art to offer boundless life in a most improbable manner. In that sense, the specific tragedies and frustrations of their individual grotesques are not as critical as the overflowing life the characters offer to the texts, the literary control required to suggest that excess, and the redeeming qualities that are embedded somewhere within it all.
Notes


2 Frank Sargeson, ‘Sherwood Anderson’, *Tomorrow*, 6 November 1935 (v.2, no.2), pp. 14-15. It is possible that this essay was prompted, in part, by a commentary appearing in an earlier edition of *Tomorrow*, in which Professor Frederick Sinclaire had accused one of Sargeson’s sketches of being chatty autobiography. In response, Sargeson suggested that ‘For an understanding of the spirit behind the sketches I would suggest a re-reading of Whitman, or Sherwood Anderson’. His essay on Anderson appeared a month later. See Michael King, *Frank Sargeson, A Life* (Auckland: Penguin, 1995), p. 154.


12 In contrast, critics have identified Willa Cather's use of the grotesque and the carnivalesque to indicate developing settler societies and the transformative processes that shape them, but have seen her use of the Southwest as a mythical, unique space 'without referents' in any other region of the United States. According to Manuel Broncano, 'this landscape seems to lie beyond the reach of the rational mind,' and thus lends itself to a development of the grotesque. Both Anderson and Sargeson start with very familiar spaces and make them a bit less comfortable. For a discussion of Cather and the grotesque see Manuel Broncano, 'Landscapes of the Magical', in *Willa Cather and the American Southwest* (University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

