DANTE'S LOVERS IN SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S "HANDS"

by JIM ELLEDGE

Sherwood Anderson is not generally associated with Dante, although one might readily link the Italian poet to T. S. Eliot or a number of other writers. Perhaps years of reader prejudice—that the Midwest and its people do not adequately lend themselves to a serious art—coupled with Anderson’s almost obsessive regionalism has created the impression that he is simply a spit-and-whittle tale-teller whose stories are quaint but gloomy pastoral episodes in a variety similar to, although far less substantial than, Joyce’s Dubliners. While there are obvious correlations between Dubliners and Winesburg, Ohio, there are many specific parallels between Anderson’s “Hands,” the introductory story in the collection, and the Paolo-Francesca segment of Dante’s The Inferno.¹ By investigating these complementary works, one recognizes that Anderson is a sophisticated writer whose technique not only parallels Dante’s but profoundly reveals the depth and complexity of Wing Biddlebaum’s suffering.

Wing Biddlebaum is the first person with whom George Willard interacts in Anderson’s collection, but George never initiates any conversation with Wing. In fact, he and Wing never engage in dialogue.² Although he intuits a correlation between Wing’s hands and “‘his fear . . . of everyone’” (p. 31) and although “he had been on the point of asking” Wing about his origins, his life, and especially his hands many times, “only a growing respect for Wing Biddlebaum kept him from blurt out the questions that were often in his mind” (p. 29). Paolo and Francesca are the first souls with whom Dante speaks, but it is he who initiates the conversation, calling to them, “‘O wearied souls! / if none forbid it, pause and speak to us’” (ll. 80-81). Dante’s presence momentarily interrupts their tortured existence. George’s meetings with the grotesques of Winesburg are also interruptions, but it is the grotesques who approach him, intruding into his life with

1. The texts used are Sherwood Anderson, “Hands,” in Winesburg, Ohio (New York: Viking Press, 1960), pp. 27-34 and Dante, The Inferno, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1954). The pagination for subsequent references to “Hands” will be given in parentheses following the excerpt. The Paolo-Francesca episode is in Canto V, 11. 73-140, and the line numbers of passages quoted from it will also be given in parentheses following the passage.

2. John J. Mahoney has revealed that in Winesburg, Ohio there is “an extremely small amount of alternate speaking. But it is never in response to anything the previous speaker has said; hence is not conversation” and that “one does get a good deal of the sense of conversation. All that is lacking is the conversation itself.” (“An Analysis of Winesburg, Ohio,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 15 [1956], 246).
their suffering. However, such interruptions permit George and Dante to progress toward, and finally attain, knowledge. For George this knowledge may be defined as sophistication, while for Dante it is divine revelation. George collects the secrets the grotesques impart to him, and Dante is entrusted with the confessions and grumblings of the souls he encounters. Both are writers — George a newspaper reporter, Dante a poet — who will someday record what they see and are told during their journeys.

Francesca tells Dante the story of her and Paolo's adultery, claiming that, while reading the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere together, "'one soft passage overthrew /[their] caution and /[their] hearts'" (ll. 129-130). Also in an unguarded moment, when "he forgot the hands" (p. 30), Wing reveals to George his dream of "a kind of pastoral golden age" in which there figures "an old man who sat beneath a tree in a tiny garden and who talked to [young men]" (p. 30). At least a portion of the stories which Francesca and Wing tell mirror, with idyllic overtones, their actions in a previous time and place. Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery parallels Paolo and Francesca's, and Wing's old man, a teacher, is himself as he imagines he might have become if left unharrassed in the Pennsylvania town.

Love is the prime reason for Paolo and Francesca's and for Wing's expulsions from previous states of happiness and is the key to their current states of suffering. It is "'love that drives / and damns'" (ll. 77-78) Paolo and Francesca, "who sinned in the flesh, . . . who betrayed reason to their appetite" (ll. 38-39). Murdered by her husband, who was also his brother, Paolo and Francesca were expelled from the world of the living and were subsequently damned. Unlike their carnal love, Wing's "love of men" (p. 31) is a Platonic love of humankind which was misinterpreted by his students' parents and his neighbors as homosexual desire. Their misinterpretation of his actions compelled them to consider murdering him. They relented and, instead, ran him out of the Pennsylvania town where he had been happy as a teacher.

The memory of what is lost is also an instrument of Wing's suffering, as it is for Paolo and Francesca. She admits to Dante that the "'double grief of a lost bliss / is to recall its happy hour in pain'" (ll. 118-119). Wing's happiest hour was teaching. He "was meant by nature to be a teacher of youth" (p. 31), and he was an ideal teacher, a miracle worker of his profession whose very touch could "carry a dream into . . . young minds" (p. 32). When he was stopped from performing his natural role, his nature was perverted, his means of self-fulfillment destroyed, and he became a grotesque. This point is emphasized when one realizes Wing's major, and perhaps only, dream in Winesburg is the fantasy of the Socratic teacher who imparted wisdom to youths gathered about him.

Dante discovered that hell is "a place stripped bare of every light / and roaring on the naked dark" (ll. 28-29), and critics agree that Winesburg is a

3. Ciardi, Footnote to line 74 of Canto V, pp. 63-64.
similar place, one of darkness, over which hangs an atmosphere of "charged stillness" analogous to "the tortured air" of hell (l. 28). Because the "crisis scenes of all but five of the tales [are] in the evening," Winesburg is a modernized version of Dante's hell: the darkness, the consuming flames of sublimated passions, and the inaudible shrieks of tormented psyches. Winesburg's inhabitants are "spiritually and morally ... as dead as the corpses whose epitaphs Edgar Lee Masters collected in the 'Spoon River Anthology' " [sic] and the "sterile, unchanging quality of their words and actions [is] a constant counterpoint to the growth and change of [George Willard]. Their repetitiveness and rigidity [implies], finally, ... atrophy and death."4

In such a hellish environment Wing exists, his life as decayed as his veranda.5 Ironically, his refuge has metamorphosed into his hell. As Paolo and Francesca, who were damned together to an eternity of being swept in a circle by wind, Wing is also characterized by movement: his incessant pacing on his veranda and the constant flutter of his hands. However, while Paolo and Francesca are driven by an external force representing their impetuous and passionate love, Wing is driven by an internal force, his uncontrollable anxiety which is the seat of his torture and suffering. After any experience even slightly threatening to his solitary and superficially peaceful existence, such as his meeting with George during which he caressed the boy, Wing runs "back to walk again upon the porch" as if it were a sanctuary (p. 28). He is often described as being on "the veranda of the house," pacing "up and down" long after "the sun had disappeared" (p. 33). Wing is the perfect example of an anxious personality whose only means of coping with his anxiety is to pace.

The movement of Wing's hands is also a manifestation of his inner turmoil. Having no students to teach, his hands constantly twitch and flutter, reminding him of the idyllic life he once led as a teacher who was "much loved by the boys of his school" (p. 31); of the violence that prefigured his expulsion from the Pennsylvania town and, simultaneously, from the teaching profession; and of the possibility that, if he is not circumspect, he may again draw upon himself the wrath of his neighbors. As his hands' fluttering reminds him of his past, he becomes more anxious, fearful, and confused, which makes his hands twitch more and, in turn, further stimu-


lates his memory. A psychological vicious circle is created, one from which Wing has no escape and with which he torments himself.

Wing’s attempts to deter his hands’ movements, by striking them on objects to deaden them or by hiding them, succeed only with a conscious effort on his part. His need to censor his hands’ expression is only slightly more powerful than his need to fulfill himself by teaching with caresses, and consequently, his hands are “forever active” yet “forever striving to conceal themselves” (p. 28), representing not only his inner struggle but the subsequent suffering his struggle entails. Only once does his hands succeed against him, when they “lay upon George Willard’s shoulders” (p. 30).

Paolo and Francesca “add to one another’s anguish ... as mutual reminders of their sin” in the same way that George’s presence adds another dimension to Wing’s suffering. Wing had one glimmer of hope — that George, with whom “he had formed something like a friendship” (p. 27), might have become his student, the person with whom he might realize his dream of the Socratic teacher, a dream of “a kind of pastoral golden age” (p. 30). When Wing begins “a long rambling talk” in which he becomes “wholly inspired,” he drops his guard, and his hands steal “forth and lay upon George Willard’s shoulders” (p. 30). For an instant, Wing is totally uninhibited, following freely his natural inclination for the first time since his arrival in Winesburg. However, Wing’s hands again remind him of his happier life and he also quickly remembers Henry Bradford’s warning: “Keep your hands to yourself” (p. 33). As a “look of horror” sweeps “over his face,” Wing jams “his hands deep into his trousers pockets” (p. 30). He is so distraught over and frightened by his loss of control that he runs away, leaving George as “perplexed and frightened” as Wing is (p. 31). Wing’s hopes are shattered by the experience, and from that moment on, he is doomed to spend his life in Winesburg with “never a hope of hope” (l. 44), pacing his veranda, his hands “beating [like] the wings of an imprisoned bird” (p. 28).

Although Francesca confesses having committed the sin for which she and Paolo suffer, Wing is not only innocent of wrongdoing but is so naive that “he did not understand what had happened” to turn his neighbors against him and only intuited “that the hands must be to blame” (p. 33) for the “unspeakable things” (p. 32) of which he was accused. Understanding neither himself nor the world around him, Wing believes his hands are independent of his body and powered by a consciousness other than his, as Anderson’s references to them as the hands, not his hands, implies.

The depth of Wing’s suffering is revealed in the last scene of “Hands,” a display of the “compulsive symptomatic act” of a penitent. On his knees in “the dense blotch of light beneath the table,” “he began to pick up the

6. Ciardi, Footnote to line 102 of Canto V, p. 64.
[bread] crumbs” he had dropped and to carry “them to his mouth one by one with unbelievable rapidity.” Wing’s “nervous expressive fingers, flashing in and out of the light, might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary” (p. 34). The phrase “decade after decade” refers not only to periods of ten years but also to the fifteen divisions of the rosary, each of which is a “decade” of ten beads. The image derived by combining both definitions is one of an eternity of suffering and penance. Several lines of one prayer of the rosary, the Pater Noster, are significant to a penitent like Wing: “Give us day by day our daily bread. / And forgive us our sins . .  .”

Ironically, Wing’s penance is futile and filled with pathos since he did not sin and logically cannot ask to be forgiven; but because he blindly accepted the lie of his guilt, he is forced by his anxiety to seek pardon. Wing chooses to be alone in Winesburg and to suffer loneliness out of fear of harsher suffering in the future, not out of an inclination toward hermitage. If he permits himself another person’s company, as he had with George, he is afraid of losing control of his hands and of being run out of Winesburg — or worse. The memory of his most recent happiest hour, his uninhibited moment with George, and the trauma which it produced prevents him from taking the risk of living a fulfilled life. Yet, because the memory of that moment is also enjoyable, he will not obliterate it.

If Wing Biddlebaum had realized he committed no wrong by following his natural mode of teaching, his torment would have ended. He would have become, in essence, his own savior. He could not. Henry Bradford’s warning echoes too loudly in Wing’s ears, so he devours the crumbs of a wasted life in an act of penance, suffering decade after decade in his self-created hell.
