

Sacred Land: Sherwood Anderson, Midwestern Modernism, and the Sacramental Vision of Nature

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Dean, Thomas K. "Sacred Land: Sherwood Anderson, Midwestern Modernism, and the Sacramental Vision of Nature." *The Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 89-91.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12271>

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The Pentecostal interpretation was anathema to businessmen like Crowell.

Gloege also deftly describes how The Fundamentals project, which sought a new American Protestant orthodoxy, was funded by West Coast oil baron Lyman Stewart but largely framed and controlled by Crowell. Gloege is particularly good at showing the ways this “old-time religion” was not only not old but also ever shifting; how direct-mail marketing begat fundamentalism; and how capitalists like Crowell, whose success was based on retail sales and advertising, thought differently from speculators like Stewart. The contrast between Stewart’s obsession with end-time prophecy and Crowell’s careful cultivation of middle-class respectability, Gloege suggests, had roots in their divergent business paths.

Moody Bible Institute entered the 1920s thinking itself poised to be dominant in American religion but instead was hemmed in by a more militant fundamentalism (largely of its own creation) on the right and the Moody family’s dissatisfaction with its appropriation of Moody’s name for dispensationalist purposes in the center. Wary of fundamentalism while preaching dispensationalism, it did manage to influence the neoevangelicalism that emerged in the 1950s.

Gloege is not quite as sure-footed in dealing with the labor movement; he makes the tired, redundant mistake of identifying the IWW as “International” (rather than Industrial) Workers of the World. He does not fully explore religious connections with the Haymarket riot or the revolutionary potential of early Pentecostalism. Gloege also just hints at the funding and ideological ties that modernism had with capitalists like Rockefeller. But maybe all that is just opening the door for more of the trend.

Sacred Land: Sherwood Anderson, Midwestern Modernism, and the Sacramental Vision of Nature, by Mark Buechsel. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2014. xii, 371 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Thomas K. Dean is senior presidential writer/editor and adjunct assistant professor at the University of Iowa. His extensive writings about the importance of place include *Under a Midland Sky* (2008).

With *Sacred Land*, Mark Buechsel seeks to bring a new understanding of modernist midwestern literature through the lens of “sacramentalism.” For Buechsel, a “sacramental worldview” is “one in which the physical realities of Creation—such as food, sex, other people, our human selves, all of nature—are not merely material realities but realities containing and conferring spiritual . . . presence” (13) Buechsel

posits that the Midwest's nineteenth-century pastoral vision failed because its New England Calvinistic Protestant grounding philosophy inherently carried an "abstract, deadening, systematicity" (34), which inevitably led to the "stifling literalism and spiritual narrowness" of a practical, industrial, capitalist culture (35) that "no longer allowed for any complexity or ambiguity" (24). According to Buechsel, modernist midwestern writers tapped into the "exuberant fertility and sensuous lushness" (30) of the region's land, its "powerful, sensually mystical presence" (22), and its "mysterious cosmic life forces that are larger than human beings" (31). The endgame for these writers was to portray the land "as a sacramental source of spiritual guidance and inspiration" that "would facilitate a spiritual rejuvenation of Midwestern culture and eliminate the stultifying intellectualist and industrialist New England spirit" (31). This midwestern sacramental literary vision of the land would also "reenvision from its unique historical and geographical vantage point all of modern culture," providing "the regional literary tradition's contribution to the modernist quest for a new cultural wholeness" (43). Unfortunately, this very premise casts doubt on Buechsel's analysis before it even begins.

While it may be reasonable to claim that Protestant ethics and philosophy failed to cultivate a unique, vital midwestern culture, Buechsel's leap to European Catholic sacramentalism is, at best, across a huge critical chasm and, at worst, very thinly founded. Buechsel claims that "in formulating their vision of cultural wholesomeness, these authors tend to pit Catholic spirituality against Protestantism and medieval values and perspectives against the beliefs and sensibilities of modernity" (10).

Sherwood Anderson is the primary subject of the book, and the sweeping premise above is based on some comments Anderson made in his autobiographical *A Story Teller's Story* (1922) about the beauty, vastness, divinity, and otherness of France's Cathedral of Chartres. But Anderson was neither Catholic nor particularly informed about medieval European Catholicism (which Buechsel freely admits). Nor were the other authors analyzed in the book with the possible exception of the nonpracticing Fitzgerald. So to base an entire argument on such a source for these writers' literary vision of a renewed regional and spiritual culture seems stretched to the breaking point.

Buechsel returns to the tradition of close reading, and certainly the finely detailed analysis of Anderson's work comprehensively catalogs the early modernist's characters, who were seeking more than a narrow, rationalistic, capitalistic, industrial life in the palpable mystery of nature. Absent the questionable "sacramental" premise, however, the

argument loses originality. Others have analyzed regionalist writers and other artists through their relationship with the fertile land of the Midwest—for example, E. Bradford Burns's succinct and skillful *Kinship with the Land: Regionalist Thought in Iowa, 1894–1942* (1996).

Buechsel's argument suffers from other weaknesses as well. It is difficult to parse any analysis of modernism when the author mostly does not define *modernism*—not a simple idea—other than as a general ideological or thematic movement away from the Protestant ethic.

Four chapters are devoted to a thorough analysis of Sherwood Anderson's works, but then each of four other chapters is devoted to another midwestern author (Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ruth Suckow, and, anachronistically, Jane Smiley). Such a collection suggests more random choice than comprehensive literary scope. The organization and, at times, the analysis itself reveal the book's origins as a doctoral dissertation and, for me, its ultimate inability to rise above that form's limitations. Those with a particular interest in Iowa literary history can certainly gain some value from the close readings of Suckow's *The Folks* and Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, but Cather and Fitzgerald, of course, have been treated much more extensively (and adeptly) elsewhere.

Finally, in this era of ecocriticism, with its rich and diverse new understandings of writing and the natural world, the book's monolithic conception of "nature" itself remains overly simplistic and ultimately opaque; agricultural fields, woods, backyards, and so forth all constitute an undifferentiated "land" or "nature." Bringing new understandings of nature to bear on modernism's regionalists would no doubt provide more insight into midwestern relationships with the land than medieval European spirituality does.

Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture, by Sharon Ann Musher. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 293 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Victoria M. Grieve is associate professor of history at Utah State University. She is the author of *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middle-brow Culture* (2009).

This engagingly written account of New Deal arts funding quickly put to rest my concerns about whether we need yet another book about the New Deal art projects. Although there is not much new information for scholars in Musher's account, the thematic organization of the material and her excellent use of biographies and key examples make it a useful book for both students and experts in the field. The