

# Creative Reading, or the New Life of Literary Works: American Instances

Claire Bruyère

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## Article abstract

The “creative reading” referred to here is an extension of the reading of literature. To be inspired by a previous text is as old as literature itself; what we wish to understand is why the (re)reading of a number of works of imagination published in the United States between 1915 and 1940 leads contemporary writers, stage or film directors, composers, illustrators, and multi-media artists to adapt or transpose them. Why these works, in particular? Some “creative readers” reveal, in their productions, scripts, projects, and interviews, the ways in which they interpret works by “classic authors” such as Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Francis Scott Fitzgerald. They also reveal how they hope to bring their spectators or readers, especially the younger ones, to share their enthusiasm and read the source texts. The role of new technology cannot be overestimated, both in artistic creation and in the circulation of information.

# CREATIVE READING, OR THE NEW LIFE OF LITERARY WORKS: American Instances<sup>1</sup>

**Claire BRUYÈRE**

Université Paris VII – Denis Diderot

ABSTRACT

The “creative reading” referred to here is an extension of the reading of literature. To be inspired by a previous text is as old as literature itself; what we wish to understand is why the (re)reading of a number of works of imagination published in the United States between 1915 and 1940 leads contemporary writers, stage or film directors, composers, illustrators, and multi-media artists to adapt or transpose them. Why these works, in particular? Some “creative readers” reveal, in their productions, scripts, projects, and interviews, the ways in which they interpret works by “classic authors” such as Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Francis Scott Fitzgerald. They also reveal how they hope to bring their spectators or readers, especially the younger ones, to share their enthusiasm and read the source texts. The role of new technology cannot be overestimated, both in artistic creation and in the circulation of information.

RÉSUMÉ

La « lecture créative » à laquelle l'article qui suit fait référence constitue un prolongement de la lecture d'œuvres littéraires. Le fait de s'inspirer d'un texte antérieur est aussi ancien que la littérature elle-même. De nos jours, écrivains, metteurs en scène, compositeurs et artistes du multimédia souhaitent, par une vaste gamme d'adaptations, raviver l'intérêt pour certains classiques de la littérature américaine publiés entre 1915 et 1930, la plupart des titres de Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis et Francis Scott Fitzgerald étant désormais considérés comme « passés de mode ». Il s'agit de se pencher sur des entrevues accordées par des « lecteurs créatifs », sur les scénarios qu'ils écrivent ou les productions qu'ils réalisent pour comprendre comment ceux-ci traduisent leur interprétation des œuvres par l'entremise de divers médias afin d'amener des spectateurs, les jeunes surtout, à lire ou à relire les textes originaux. Le rôle des

nouvelles technologies est désormais crucial, tant sur le plan de la création artistique que sur celui de la diffusion de l'information.

“Creative reading” alludes in the first place to a relatively recent call to “challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries” in academia.<sup>2</sup> Starting with the history of the book in mid-twentieth century France,<sup>3</sup> creative reading has progressively given birth to a number of interdisciplinary fields of study, including media studies, film studies, drama studies, and adaptation studies. This last is now frequently taught<sup>4</sup> and is recognized as “a formal entity, a process of creation, a process of reception,” reflecting “the adapter’s creative interpretation or interpretive creation,”<sup>5</sup> so that one now speaks of “adaptation theory” as being applied to “the adaptation industry.”<sup>6</sup> Scholarly debates and studies are lively,<sup>7</sup> yet are not at the centre of this article, which is a form of field study. Concerned with the fate, in present-day American cultural life, of certain canonical pre-Second-World-War American literary texts, and struck by a series of contrasting analyses of the subject, I set out to explore adaptations of several comparable authors for different media. They are particular works of poetry or fiction published to great acclaim (including a Nobel prize) by five white male writers, mostly from mid-America, between 1915 and 1940, namely Edgar Lee Masters (1868–1950), Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941), Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945), Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951), and Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940). The adapters have taken up selected texts by each of them and decided how to adapt them to another medium today. Although this survey cannot be complete, I have been able to read a number of the scripts, to view and hear some of the new productions (live or on CD), and to interview several of these creative readers; it must be added that this paper would not be the same without the vast amount of data available on the Web, which is itself part of the subject.

One of the adaptations could serve as a paradigm for what I mean by creative reading and new life. When browsing the Web, it is possible to come across a very brief online video called “The Dumb Man.”<sup>8</sup> You hear a Sherwood Anderson poem (from *The Triumph of the Egg*, 1921) read aloud by the actor, Alex Wilson, while you watch—on You Tube or Vimeo—a beautiful surrealistic interpretation of that poem by the artist, Lainy Voom

(alias Trace Sanderson, from Great Britain), who uses a technique called machinima, animated filmmaking with a virtual 3-D environment. This powerful poem on a classic theme—the poet’s lack of words for wonderful, puzzling visions—is thus made accessible to a large audience and enriched by interpretation. How did this come to be? Wilson originally responded to a textual stimulus: “the poem was such a short, simple piece, but at the same time so elusive” that he felt like seeing “what kind of challenge it might be.”<sup>9</sup> When Voom heard Wilson’s recording via Creative Commons, “it stopped me in my tracks ... it was about death and desire, and it refused easy understanding.”<sup>10</sup> This oral reading led her to Telltale Weekly, his website, which is a free audio-book library. The images it evoked stayed in her mind for months as a “huge challenge” and the result was her video, done on Second Life, the 3-D virtual world. It was first shown in 2008 and is still readily available. Both artists used the word “challenge.” On a small scale, it illustrates a process I wish to underline: thanks to various techniques and to the technical support of a few Internet companies, two individuals can meet and create a new work which, in this case, includes both original text and audiovisual experiment. This multimedia rendering of a poem unknown to most viewers was created spontaneously on a non-profit, free-access website, and was enthusiastically received by those who posted a comment. Readers already familiar with the poem are free to react to this hybrid.

This points to the digital revolution, which may modify the perception of the presence of particular authors given by more traditional channels, public or private, like the four following. “Sinclair Lewis seems to have dropped out of what remains of world literature,” wrote Gore Vidal in 1992. “F. Scott Fitzgerald Gets a Second Act After All” was a headline in the *New York Times* in 2005. “Mention Sherwood Anderson these days, as I did recently at a dinner for a writer visiting my University, it’s as though you’ve mentioned something quaint and nostalgic.” “Masters’ verse was once recited in schoolrooms across the country, he too has fallen into obscurity, as our interest in poetry has faded to near-nothingness,” wrote the *Washington Times* in 2006.<sup>11</sup> It can indeed be argued that some of these writers are receiving less scholarly attention, that school and college reading lists have made room for more recent or formerly undervalued fiction. Nonetheless, genuine interest is shown by various types of readers, who can be active in reading groups or on the Web, or become creative readers by

re-reading a text to adapt it for one or more other media, or else just read the original text after hearing or seeing an adaptation. That is what prompted this article.

A number of groundbreaking studies in English and in French on the subject of modern literary adaptations, as such or in relation to particular media like cinema or theatre, have already been mentioned. Let it be clear that, once we admit that adapters can become creators, we no longer look at adaptations exclusively from the point of view of fidelity. Who are the adapters? What motivates their choices? Which texts have been chosen? What are the economic and legal restrictions and constraints? Can the source text be brought as such to new audiences? When deliberate alterations are made, what is their nature and their range? Are they needed in order to interest the next generation in writings of the past and pass them on without being tedious? The article first examines general aspects like the accessibility of the texts, the range of recent adaptations, and the processes they entail, and then proceeds with close-ups on a few significant productions. Its purpose is to understand why and how, beyond pious reprints or revivals, or an occasional financial gambit, these particular classics, which are not (unlike Shakespeare's plays) in a class of their own, can be made exciting enough for the younger generation to re-enter present-day cultural life. They can survive as texts that may be enjoyed by "common readers" who, even if they do not become visibly creative, should not be considered with the haughtiness of Edith Wharton. In her brief 1903 essay, "The Vice of Reading," Wharton opposed "born readers," the only worthy ones, to "mechanical readers," "poor readers" whose passive way of reading "becomes a menace to literature." (Her text is available to all on our computers or Kindles thanks to an electronic version.)

## Access

The notion of access is to be understood in two ways. First, the question of the new life of an old novel or poem cannot even be raised if it cannot easily be found and read by the general public. For example, in the period examined here, an American writer who was fully recognized during her life and for some years after her early death, whose remarkable writings are unfortunately inaccessible today except for a single reprinted volume, is Margery Latimer (1899–1931). None of her work is online.<sup>12</sup> Less

disadvantaged writers, like those under focus, can be read in reprints or new editions, in libraries, and now digitally, thanks to commercial e-books and free online libraries.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, reprints and adaptations depend on permissions as long as the work is under copyright. Contrary to what many readers might think, most of the works discussed here are still under copyright in the United States (although not necessarily in Canada or Europe), which means that permission for each project has to be granted by the estate or the trust through the agency that handles the rights. Once in the public domain, they are available without restriction. *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), by Sherwood Anderson, fell into the public domain at the end of 1975 in the United States and on December 31, 2011, in France. The same would be true of E. L. Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), because both works were published before 1923, unlike the other works examined here.<sup>14</sup>

Material access is a prerequisite, but serendipity alone will not ensure the discovery of older texts by new readers. Works by these writers used to be taught in high school, but now the only one to appear on most reading lists or their equivalents is *The Great Gatsby* (1925).<sup>15</sup> How, then, can they find readers, aside from students in American literature or older fans? There are books that recommend fiction for young people, like *500 Great Books for Teens* by Anita Silvey. She includes *Winesburg, Ohio*, which has now “found a new home in cyberspace.”<sup>16</sup> Much more important nowadays are blogs, which spread the word about books that have pleased or displeased individual readers or spectators of adaptations.<sup>17</sup> In August 2011, the website GoodReads<sup>18</sup> was displaying hundreds of “community reviews” of *Spoon River Anthology*, a small sample of the “ratings” received. These comments reveal much about readers’ sensitivities: there are no references to naturalism or modernism, but, when not repelled by the dark literal content, the readers frequently exhibit a poetic sense and make connections with other texts, either through memories or through the desire to read another poet, Whitman for example, after *Spoon River*. The young bloggers have sometimes read Edgar Lee Masters’s book at school or even acted in a dramatization there, since it is one of the classics drama teachers like to use. Besides, a number of them came into contact thanks to *The Hill* (2000), a CD recording by Richard Buckner, a country singer / songwriter, well-known without being mainstream, who created his version of some of the poems with music and vocals.<sup>19</sup>

## Range

Recent creations/adaptations vary from the above-mentioned five-minute video to operas at the New York Metropolitan, that is, from one extreme to the other as regards production costs, number of participants, and position of the spectators. *An American Tragedy*, the 1925 Dreiser novel (850 pages, 101 chapters), became an opera first performed in December 2005. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in New York, its music was composed by Tobias Picker. The same novel has since been the subject of several operas or musicals created and performed in smaller theatres, usually attached to arts colleges, many of them in Pennsylvania, such as Muhlenberg College near Allentown (March 2010, music by Robert Strouse) and Hedgerow Theatre (October 2010, adapted by Louis Lippa). Also in Pennsylvania, the People's Light and Theatre Company presented Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) adapted by Louis Lippa in 1991. Before going into specifics, let us note the difference between an opera at the Metropolitan, with its huge cost and commercial responsibilities, and the non-profit theatre productions. These are not cheap to produce, since they all include live music, a designer, and often a choreographer—*Sister Carrie* had a cast of nineteen and was eight years in the making—but they are supported by public grants, sponsors, and sometimes the colleges, whose students participate and whose productions run only a short time unless they are invited to tour. An intermediate case was provided in 2008, in Nashville, Tennessee, by *Elmer Gantry*, an opera after the 1927 Sinclair Lewis novel, commissioned by the Nashville Opera and Montclair State University, New Jersey. It was a creation of composer Robert Aldridge and librettist Herschel Garfein. The *New York Times* called it “an operatic miracle” (January 20, 2008). What turned out to be a huge success had taken seventeen years to polish and be produced, partly for reasons of cost.<sup>20</sup> This same opera, directed by John Hoopes, with slight changes, premiered in Milwaukee's huge Florentine Opera (general director W. Fiorescu) in July 2010. It is now a set of six Naxos CDs, for which Robert Aldridge and Herschel Garfein won two Grammy awards in February 2012. Several works by our authors, like *Dodsworth* (1929) and *Main Street* (1920) by Sinclair Lewis, *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters, and *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, have been turned into musicals on the stages of regional theatres in the last twenty years.

Where films are concerned, there is also a gap between Hollywood productions and personal or local initiatives. Older Hollywood versions of *An American Tragedy*—one in 1931 directed at first by Sergei Eisenstein but then rejected by Paramount in favour of von Sternberg, the other in 1951 called “A Place in the Sun” and directed by George Stevens with Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift—were so revealing of the politics of the Hollywood system and of Dreiser himself that they deserved a study of their own in that light.<sup>21</sup> Much later, in 2011, Warner Studios released an adaptation of Fitzgerald’s short story, “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” (from *Tales of the Jazz Age*, 1922), filmed by David Fincher, while a remake of *Tender is the Night* (1934) was in preparation. Three previous film ventures into the world of Fitzgerald had been weak, especially Jack Clayton’s version of *The Great Gatsby*, with Robert Redford and Mia Farrow in 1974. Bruce Jackson gives the basic reasons in a nutshell: everything alluded to in the text is shown or explained in a flashback, and so these films are unable to deal with the narrative voice or point of view of the novel. This is true of many other film adaptations. However, there is no necessary disaster attached to Hollywood. In 1960, Lewis’s *Elmer Gantry* was a valuable adaptation, thanks to director Richard Brooks and to actor Burt Lancaster. The latest version, directed by Baz Luhrmann, with Leonardo DiCaprio, ready to be released at the end of 2012, will at least end a suspense.

Nothing could be further from a Hollywood production than the feature film entitled *Chicago Heights*, filmed in black and white, directed by Daniel Nearing. This is a transposition of *Winesburg, Ohio* set in a present-day, mostly black southern suburb of Chicago named Chicago Heights, with an Afro-American cast. The screenplay is by “Sherwood Anderson, Rudy Thauberger and Daniel Nearing,” and the filming was done by Sanghoon Lee. Nearing and his team worked on this adaptation/transposition with a budget of a thousand dollars, filming in various locations, including Nearing’s apartment. The film was shown in 2010 at several festivals, had a weeklong run at the Chicago Film Centre, and was highly praised by influential movie critics like Roger Ebert, who called it “one of the best art films of 2010.”<sup>22</sup>

We shall conclude this glance at the range of adaptations born of these texts with two ventures in other forms. The first is a graphic novel created by a single person, Nicki Greenberg, an Australian artist who published her



highly imaginative adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* in 2007 after six years of work.<sup>23</sup> The characters are no longer human beings—they are replaced by fantastic animals—and the original text is integrated into the drawings. In Greenberg's words:

To me, Fitzgerald's characters are so incisively rendered, their personalities, movements and voices so immediate and true, that an ordinary human representation does not capture the essence of the written characters. In imagining the physical form of each creature—Nick's shy antennae and soft body, the lift of Daisy's dandelion head on her slender neck [...] my aim was to illuminate that 'series of successful gestures' so sharply drawn by Fitzgerald.<sup>24</sup>

The other is a resurrection of *Spoon River Anthology* inspired by the setting of the original monologues. In the expanded version of their 1963 adaptation for the stage, at the Parkland College Theatre (Champaign, Illinois, 2006–7), Charles Aidman and Randi Collins Hard included students dressed as “living statues” who gave a mime performance in the lobby of the theatre before the play, then went onstage and became part of the set as statues. A little later, Tom Andolora launched his *Spoon River Project*. This adaptation has been performed at night, in real cemeteries, first in his hometown, Jamestown, New York, in 2008, and then, in the summer of 2011, in Brooklyn's famous Green-Wood cemetery. The spectators are seated and the actors move around, holding lanterns. “There's no fourth wall, which is fantastic,” said Andolora.<sup>25</sup>

## Process

The creative reading involved goes somewhat like this. The director is a reader of the original or source work (sometimes its author) and then becomes an intermediary who rereads it in an imaginative way, which implies a degree of personal projection and collective work. Eventually, the spectator has the chance to view the work, adding another level of reading, which may or may not include the pleasure of recognizing the original.<sup>26</sup> There are also more and more re-adaptations.<sup>27</sup> These stages do not commit the adapter(s) as to how to regard the original text or how to bridge the gap between the time in which it was written and the cultural climate and the attitudes of audiences when the new work is presented, but usually “an

adaptation is not vampiric.”<sup>28</sup> As to a supercilious attitude towards adapters, as early as 1919, T. S. Eliot questioned “why originality was valued over ‘repetition’. No poet, no artist, of any art, has his complete meaning alone.”<sup>29</sup> Another instance is of particular relevance here: Sinclair Lewis’s novel, *Dodsworth* was dramatized by Sidney Howard in 1933. To the first published edition of the script, Howard added a postscript on dramatization (vii–xvii) and Lewis himself an essay, “The Art of Dramatization” (xviii–lxvi), worth quoting. After mocking the “earnest Intellectual” who told him he had “sold out” by approving a film based on *Arrowsmith* (1931), Lewis asserted: “Actually, portions, and sometimes all, of a dramatization are valuable precisely as they *depart* from the detail of the original fiction” (italics in the original). He took pains to demonstrate literally how Howard had improved on his own story at one point by compressing thirty-eight pages into one short scene. Anticipating many theorists, Lewis claimed, “Dramatization is quite as much an act of creation as any play based entirely upon the dramatist’s own design, and an acute study of the tale to be dramatized is less important than the process of imaginative reflection which recasts the original elements for the stage.”<sup>30</sup> *Dodsworth*, in Howard’s stage version, was performed again at New York’s Metropolitan Playhouse for three weeks in 2010.

Usually, the rereading of a work of fiction in view of a change in medium is partly conditioned by its length and style, so it was daring of playwright Louis Lippa to conceive an adaptation of *Sister Carrie* for the stage in two parts, of three acts each, which lasted six to seven hours and could be seen in one sitting (with a dinner break) or on two consecutive nights. The 450-page Dreiser novel lacks stylistic grace and would be unfamiliar to most spectators. Audience reactions were sharply positive or negative, but the play ran for two months at the People’s Light and Theatre Company, where Lippa is playwright-in-residence, and won international acclaim. Richard Lingeman, Dreiser’s biographer, praised its grappling with the novel. It “did not attempt to condense the book or to narrow its focus to the relationships among the three main characters” (*The Nation*, May 27, 1991). Since 2005, the New York collective Elevator Repair Service (ERS), founded and directed by John Collins, has been challenging spectators in a different way in its treatment of *The Great Gatsby*, a short, beautifully written novel. The title, *Gatz*, is the only change made in what turns out to be a complete, eight-hour reading aloud, with two intermissions and a meal. But there is

more: in this version, Nick Carraway, the narrator, is a present-day office worker who is bored, finds a copy of the novel on his computer-filled desk, and begins to read it out loud from line one; soon, his twelve colleagues are impersonating the various characters and moving around as Nick reads on. Critics and spectators have either been irritated by the chosen context or utterly enthralled by the sound of Fitzgerald's prose, the inventiveness in the acting, and the quality of Scott Shepherd's reading. The critic Ben Brantley gave *Gatz* a prize for incitation to creative reading: "Mr. Collins's production endows [Nick] with the godlike power conferred on a reader by a great novelist. We the audience are the vicarious creators of Nick, and Daisy and Gatsby."<sup>31</sup>

A remarkable feature of these productions is that, however disconcerting, their intention is without exception to pay homage to the original works. They acknowledge their source without ambiguity, even in a transposition; there is no hidden appropriation or plagiarism.<sup>32</sup> Striking examples of dynamic homage paid to earlier texts were offered by the New York Public Library: for its hundredth anniversary (2009–10) and the 250th of Voltaire's *Candide*, the library presented an exhibition called "*Candide*" at 250: *Scandal and Success*. Along with this very rich show tracing the many readings and reinterpretations of Voltaire's tale since 1759, an experiment "in public reading and communal annotation" took place in the blog series *All Possible Worlds*, "taking this history of readings and turning it toward the future, plugging *Candide* into the intellectual networks of the new millennium: a kind of Enlightenment 2.0." Lasting two months, placed under the sign, "Let us cultivate our garden," it offered a digital journey, inviting as many types of readers as possible to participate. The library's website shows traces of the exchanges in addition to the images of rare editions of Voltaire's work.<sup>33</sup> Even more experimental was a new performance of Elevator Repair Service for the same centennial: readers in the periodical room were suddenly interrupted by individuals among them who started reciting short fragments from three well-known novels, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), in a strange, chaotic way, speaking at the same time. Called *Shuffle*, this hybrid, which included projected images, used changing software algorithms to draw lines from the three books, the whole performance lasting twenty-two minutes. The "mash-up" or "remix" (not done completely at random) aimed at creating literary

reminiscence or curiosity beyond the disturbing fragments.<sup>34</sup> Enjoying it was certainly made easier by close familiarity with the three modern classics.

## Close-Ups

### *Genesis*

I shall now focus mainly on five of the adaptations mentioned above, four performed live and one on film, in an attempt to discern first what motivated the adapters, composers, and directors to work on these particular projects. Charles Richter, the director of theatre at Muhlenberg College, was drawn to *An American Tragedy* through his admiration for the composer, Charles Strouse. Strouse, who had written the score for three successful Broadway musicals, conceived the idea of a musical adaptation of Dreiser's novel, but abandoned a first attempt in 1995. Richter, upon hearing that first version in an early "reading" session done to interest potential backers, was "struck by Strouse's haunting score for the dark morality tale." Several years later, after what Richter is not alone in calling the "disaster" of the opera at the Metropolitan, he initiated, with Strouse's approval, a revision of Strouse's draft with a team of specialists and a large production staff, and only then, he says, did he read the novel for the first time, "an odd, foreign experience, ultimately compelling." After one year, they obtained the rights from the Metropolitan Opera, which had been given them by the Dreiser Estate. Only then could the team really get to work on the production, which was financed by the college, a grant, and a foundation, in the total amount of \$50,000.<sup>35</sup>

Richter co-directed with Strouse's wife, Barbara Siman, who also choreographed. Charles Strouse had an additional personal motive, as he had been involved in a boating accident with a woman. The lake scene, the climax of the story, difficult to stage, became the focus of the musical and "the best writing" in the rewriting of the libretto by Mark Saint-Germain, according to Charles Richter. When did the other directors under consideration read the books they would adapt? Eric Rosen, who turned *Winesburg, Ohio* into a musical, had not previously read the book, whereas Tom Andolora, Daniel Nearing, and John Collins had first read the books by Masters, Anderson, or Fitzgerald in school or college. Andolora adds that *Spoon River Anthology* is often used by teachers of acting like himself with

their students. The idea was with him for many years. Nearing and Collins also worked on their respective projects on *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Great Gatsby* for several years.

Yet to say that these productions were on their creators' minds for a long time is not enough. Each is also the result of an intense collaboration. The two musicals, *An American Tragedy* and *Winesburg, Ohio*, were conceived by large teams, revised, and rewritten many times. All include music, several need a choreographer, all require a large production staff, and then there are the actors. The resulting musical, one notes, was performed six times only, which is not unusual. For *Gatz*, John Collins said, "Scott [Scott Shepherd, who plays the narrator, Nick Carraway] has been as much of a dramaturge, co-director and co-author of this piece." Elevator Repair Service (ERS) is a company and its director insists on the necessary complicity between the actors. For his film, Daniel Nearing, in exchange for being trusted by his African-American cast as a white director, agreed to accept some of their suggestions for the screenplay.

### ***Text to performance***

What has become of each original text? It has gone without saying so far that none of them was converted into a comedy. Indeed, all deal with the contradictions of the American dream as exemplified largely through figures of tragedy or pathos. We have seen what a challenge it is to adapt *An American Tragedy*; all its adapters, however, have been sustained by the mythical dimension acquired by the Gillette murder case of 1906, the *fait divers* which inspired Dreiser. The trial and execution of Chester Gillette, considered guilty of the drowning of his pregnant girl friend, Grace Brown, a co-worker, when boating on Big Moose Lake one night, was a case that thrilled readers of the press and aroused debates because of the doubts about Chester's guilt, because of the death penalty, and because of its class aspect. Many versions of the story, in content and form, circulated before and after Dreiser's novel. The presence of Grace's ghost, perceived several times, has kept it alive.<sup>36</sup> In such a rich novel, the textual reduction cannot be neutral, especially as its interpretation has varied sharply, from emphasis on the young male victim of the American dream to pity for the tragic female victim. In the musical presented at Muhlenberg, which lasts two hours, the long novel has been turned into a dialogue in two acts of about

fifteen scenes each. The skeleton of the story is there, with the names changed, except for Roberta's. The haughtiness of the upper class, the class-consciousness of the female factory workers, the naïveté of Roberta and Charlie/Clyde, Charlie's ambivalent relationship to religious faith, and the role of the press are all underlined. The abortion theme, still shocking to some, is present, though very briefly. Roberta tells Charlie/Clyde that she is probably pregnant in act 2, scene 2. Then comes Charlie/Clyde's moral dilemma—will he kill his pregnant working-class girlfriend who bars his way to the upper class? Dreiser's text leaves Clyde's act—purposeful or accidental?—in doubt, and that ambiguity is preserved, after which his trial and execution are raced through.

But a musical is not just a text. In this case, most of the dialogue (about 80 percent) is sung, often by several of the characters forming a chorus. There is emotional power in some lyrics like Charlie/Clyde's "Lost in the Dark," in which he implores God, feeling like a helpless child, "Comfort me, so one day I may be a man! Who am I, I want to be a man," or Roberta's repeated "Don't leave me now" in the lake scene. The orchestra underlines moments of irony or pathos. There is much dancing and partying in the representation of the carefree upper class, and the play ends on that note. The production (a DVD was made by Muhlenberg College) is efficient as a musical melodrama, but while the focus is naturally on the three major characters, much of the nuanced reflection on the forces that drive them (on Clyde's being trapped by his dream, or on guilt and innocence) is lost. Nevertheless, when one changes the focus from textual comparison to the adapters' goals, one feels that the composer and the directors tried to bring the basic questions raised by Dreiser's tale to spectators of another age, few of whom would ever read the novel. Charles Richter says, "it's a real downer" and "its darkness limited its appeal," but I observe that they retained the title, unlike Hollywood in *A Place in the Sun*. In fact, the reception at Muhlenberg Theatre, from several eye-witness accounts, was sometimes unexpected: older spectators came out smiling, nostalgic memories having been awakened, while younger ones were frustrated by the sketchy treatment of serious issues. A generation gap?<sup>37</sup>

Most present-day spectators do not suspect that *An American Tragedy* was banned in Boston in 1929, its publisher being found guilty of obscenity, whereupon Dreiser and his attorneys fought the courts of Massachusetts to

the last appeal; nor do they generally know that, in 1931, he ran away from “Hooeyland” and sued Paramount—the Hollywood studio that had bought the rights—or what was happening to the same book at the hands of Joseph von Sternberg. Dreiser provides us with a lasting caveat by a living author: “Even though they buy the right of reproduction, they don’t buy the right to change it into anything they please.” He was particularly incensed at the suppression of nearly a third of the novel, the description of Clyde’s youth, which he considered essential to an understanding of what “would cause the boy to want something he never had.” He attributed the studios’ unfortunate choices not to their own timidity, but to their catering to “the lowest common denominator”<sup>38</sup> in their audiences—the same words Dos Passos would apply to the press five years later, in his novel, *The Big Money*. Dreiser could not use non-existing moral rights to protest or forbid the cuts. In 1951, the Cold-War climate in Hollywood affected the next version, but Dreiser was no longer alive.

Whereas Dreiser’s novel follows one major plot, *Spoon River Anthology* tells 246 stories, each poem an epitaph, the voice of a deceased inhabitant of the town of Spoon River. *Winesburg, Ohio*, subtitled “A Group of Tales of Ohio Small Town Life,” deals with “adventures” or epiphanies in the lives of twenty-five characters, a “cavalcade of lost souls.”<sup>39</sup> Tom Andolora, adapter, director, and producer of *The Spoon River Project*, calls his work “a theatre piece with music,” as distinguished from a musical. Guided by his innovative idea of performing it outdoors at night in its literary setting, he chose forty-six poems to be spoken by the eleven actors whom he selected from two hundred applicants. He made it clear to me that no poem was abridged or modified, his only additions being “one paragraph at the end to give it an ending that makes sense theatrically” and the songs he chose, all from the era between 1880 and 1930. The costumes are of the same period, because “it suits the flavour of the poetry,” he said. Like the volume, the play opens on “The Hill”:

Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,  
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the  
boozier, the fighter?  
All, all are sleeping on the hill.  
One passed in a fever...  
Where are Ella, Kate, Mag, Lizzie and Edith...?

Then the first single voice selected, Archibald Higbie's, cries out, "I loathed you, Spoon River." These men and women are free at last, free of social hypocrisy and mendacity. Deacon Taylor declares:

I belonged to the church,  
And to the party of prohibition;  
And the villagers thought I died of eating watermelon,  
In truth I had cirrhosis of the liver,  
For every noon for thirty years,  
I slipped behind the prescription partition  
In Trainor's drug store  
And poured a generous drink  
From the bottle marked  
*"Spiritus frumenti."*

Other denizens are subtler, more poetic, like Robert Davidson:

I grew spiritually fat living off the souls of men.  
If I saw a soul that was strong  
I wounded its pride and devoured its strength.  
The shelters of friendship knew my cunning,  
For where I could steal a friend I did so...  
Devouring souls, I should have lived forever.  
But their undigested remains bred in me a deadly  
nephritis...  
I collapsed at last with a shriek.  
Remember the acorn;  
It does not devour other acorns.

The choice is even-handed, but with proportionately more women than in the printed volume. All the human passions are represented, each character's language reflecting background and personality. Lucinda Matlock, who died at ninety-six after raising twelve children and doing all the chores, ends with a peaceful statement: "It takes life to love Life". Rosie Roberts shot a rich client and later, "mad at the crooked game of life," told the police herself. Men are not spared in the recital of women's victimization, all this within a small community. In the outdoor production, perhaps because Andolora is a voice-coach, he made sure the spoken epitaphs would come across clearly. As the actors move in and out of view among trees and tombstones with their lanterns, we perceive how the director, following E. L. Masters, suggests the contradictions of life, its mysteries, and the ambivalence of many towards their home town. As for the audience, according to Andolora, more than half do not know, when



they come, what the play is about and are surprised at the substance; high school students, he thinks, do not really understand it. A reviewer wrote: “We may live in a very different world than that of Spoon River, but Masters’ truths about the human condition are eternal. *The Spoon River Project* delivers them with love, care, and a rich, enveloping atmosphere.”<sup>40</sup> Most spectators can subscribe to that.

Dylan Thomas read Masters while writing his drama, *Under Milk Wood, A Play for Voices* (1954), a radio play about people in a Welsh village much like Spoon River (or the Gopher Prairie of *Main Street*, the Zenith of *Babbitt*, or Winesburg, Ohio) in a comparable mood. *Under Milk Wood*, the work of a poet, is a closer heir to Masters than Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938), although it too focuses on a small community in which the dead are present and, in act 3, talk to the living from their graves. Wilder’s goals were somewhat different, however. Let us not forget that the most creative readers often become authors. Not all become famous, but the process is fascinatingly repetitive. Here is an instance of a chain reaction, Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* being the subject. On an open media site called AllVoices, a young blogger (“Mathitak,” June 13, 2008) reports his reaction to a book in the series, *Field-Tested Books*, made available by a Chicago company, in which authors write about titles they enjoyed reading in particular places. One such author is Joe Meno, the Chicago novelist (born 1974), who discovered Anderson through an assignment in art school, liked a short story, and so read *Winesburg, Ohio*. Several years later, Meno wrote,

That book became my Bible, not just as a student trying to learn to write (my first two novels are direct rip-offs of *Winesburg*)... It was one of those rare moments where a book intersects exactly with the reader’s life... The people on the Red Line could be pretty grotesque. Not ugly, not disgusting, but a little too real, a little too human.

Mathitak reacts: “He [Meno] wound up writing about two things that have had a strong influence on me growing up—Chicago’s Red Line and Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*.”<sup>41</sup>

A few years before that supposedly “unfilmable” book became a film called *Chicago Heights*, a collective led by Eric Rosen (book and lyrics), Andre Pluess, Ben Sussman (music and additional lyrics), and Terence J. Nolen

(director) gradually developed a one-act musical called *Winesburg, Ohio* (Chicago, Steppenwolf Theatre, 2002) into a longer one (Chicago, Steppenwolf and About Face Theatre, 2004) and then into a more inclusive one presented in 2005 at the Arden Theatre, Philadelphia, and then at the Kansas City Repertory. The reason for the extension was the unexpected success of the first version, “the kind of revelation that happens very rarely in creative life.”<sup>42</sup> What first motivated Eric Rosen, the co-founder of About Face Theatre? He had not read the book before it was recommended to him by Jessica Thebus, and then he wished to work on it, but what he needed to start imagining was a powerful image. He found it in Alice Hindman, the young woman so tortured by unfulfilled desire, so miserable, that one evening she has what Anderson calls “an adventure.” She runs naked along the street in the rain: “She thought that the rain would have some creative and wonderful effect on her body.” Then, once back in her bed, trembling, “she began trying to force herself to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in Winesburg” (“Adventure”). The team ended up selecting thirteen of the stories. The music is rooted in nineteenth-century folk music, and the costumes are in keeping. One reviewer wrote that it would be “a hit with audiences who believe in theatre music as a means of heightening dramatic emotion.”<sup>43</sup> He was right.

### ***Text to Film***

Judging from the script of *Chicago Heights*, Daniel Nearing’s reading of that same book in cinematic form also reflects a form of empathy, “celebrating the universal power of the source while playing on its anachronisms,” to use his words. He and his team, Rudy Thauberger and Sanghoon Lee in particular, did not hesitate to change the medium, the period, the location, the title, and the origins of the characters. Among these one finds that, as in the musical, emphasis is laid on the mother, the ex-rebel whose marriage was a disaster, whose literal dying hope is to convince her beloved only son to get away and become somebody. At the end, going away and becoming a writer is exactly what he sets out to do as she dies.<sup>44</sup> Nathan Walker (George Willard in the book) is the observer, often the confidante of the townsfolk who will eventually be the substance of his writings. This adaptation, like *Gatz*, is structured by a narrator who becomes the central character. But, in *Chicago Heights*, the original text has been rewritten, and the screenplay, while including many passages *verbatim*, takes a number of liberties. Some aim at

adjusting it to the new time and place;<sup>45</sup> others, at helping today's spectators grasp the timeless meanings. Older Nathan duplicates the teenager whenever he makes comments, so that we see two Nathans. We may be surprised to see and hear a pastor singing gospel at the beginning, since religion in the book is limited to a maniacal old farmer who wants to sacrifice his grandson, little David, and to a minister's sexual obsessions, but an insert shown at the outset indicates how close to the spirit of the book the film will attempt to be:

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms  
Inside your head, and people in them, acting.  
People you know, yet can't quite name; each looms  
Like a deep loss restored. (screenplay, scene 1)

The poet who wrote these lines, Philip Larkin ("The Old Fools," in *High Windows*, 1973), is credited as the film's editor since his poem helped Nearing restructure his film. The old writer of the prologue, "The Book of the Grotesque," gets due emphasis, and an interesting shift makes Older Nathan take the place of the anonymous old writer in his bed. As his fancies file by, he even becomes Sherwood Anderson himself, the writer, reminiscing. An echo of the grotesques is artfully suggested by some beautiful odd-shaped reflections on Anish Kapoor's recent sculpture in Chicago's Millennium Park, nicknamed "the Bean." Then, the famous sentences that define Anderson's understanding of the grotesque are shouted by a preacher (Rev. Hartman) addressing his congregation, made up of all the characters: "The moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood." This "declarative moment" in the form of a sermon is, to me, a debatable decision, although culturally rooted in its new environment.

Other choices in the film eliminate or blend characters, place or displace emphasis according to the team's technical needs and to their own feelings, which could differ and result in compromises. The image of the twisted apples, for instance—"only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples" (Dr. Reefy, "Paper Pills")—is so telling, since it also counterbalances the bitter insights, that it could have provided more than a passing reference. On the other hand, the African-American cast, in the way they act and are filmed by Sanghoon Lee, offer such a natural-looking

equivalent to the white Ohio villagers of over a century ago that one need not have known the source. The widest distancing is in the dialogue, the actors considering that they had to modernize speech and atmosphere, which meant including some crude words and fleeting expletives absent from the original, along with the insistent presence of gospel music and hymns. If this transposition amounts to a form of appropriation, it is equivalent to what Julie Sanders calls “an embedded text.” It could stand on its own but offers intertextual play at the same time.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Sight and Sound***

The unique conjunction awaiting the spectator of *Gatz*—hearing the full text and watching the characters come to life in a strange setting—has proved risky, like any bold piece of work, with the long hours spent by the spectators listening to a story of the 1920s and watching the same characters interacting inside a room of the twenty-first century. The intention is crystal clear. In the words of John Collins, “We bring the text, the beauty of the writing, to them [...] it is all about reading and writing [...] about the act of reading [...] we want to make it mysterious.”<sup>47</sup> The added role of the accidental, from one six-hour performance to another, is there mostly for the sake of the actors, to spare them possible monotony. The reception has been divided. Some viewers are enthusiastic, finding the production “transporting,” largely because of the quality of Scott Shepard’s reading of the whole novel, or because of the transformation of the office workers into the characters. Others are critical of the staging, which they find tedious or ill-suited. Keeping Nick Carraway at the centre, having us follow everything through his eyes and his words, including his own evolution, is a great achievement; however, critic Diana Simmonds brought up an important point when she regretted the devaluation of Jay Gatsby, who is treated contemptuously or comically as a fake, whereas to her he remains a tragic figure: “The line between clever and too clever by half, distancing and disrespect, is so fine as to be invisible.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, the performance is so successful that ERS keeps being asked to perform *Gatz*, inside and outside the United States.

## Continuity and Change

Even if no reader can outdo Pierre M  nard who, as Jorge Luis Borges explains, was able to improve on Cervantes—without identifying with him or plagiarizing or playing with anachronism—by writing the same words as those in *Don Quixote*, as a kind of palimpsest, we now witness, in Europe as in America, a rather surprising amount of creative activity applied to adapting written fiction or poetry to other media. And yet, especially in the cases I have highlighted here, adapting a modern classic is far from being a lazy or sure-fire choice. With verbal elements removed or added, or both, plus the visual and sound dimensions, the metaphor of grafting comes to mind,<sup>49</sup> but this does not include the crucial historico-social factor, to be understood both as the time of writing and that of reading. All the textual sources we have dealt with expressed strong criticism of American society, in combination with a sense of the tragic. Dreiser’s case is of particular interest because his manner of writing has obscured its power for later generations.<sup>50</sup> How is it, then, that there are currently so many Dreiser adaptations? Thomas Riggio, an eminent specialist of his works, gives a concise answer: “Dreiser always reads better in hard times,” implying that the dark overtones do come across.<sup>51</sup>

In none of our examples do the creative readers as intermediaries intend to attack the work of the past (there is no hostile parody, for example); on the contrary, they wish to capture the interest of contemporary spectators, possibly bringing them to read the original, and since most of the adapters and their teams are young, their own interpretation is both personal and a product of their culture. The frequent recourse to operatic and other types of music and song, rather surprising to a French person, seems as natural to them as to their elders; it also signals an entrance or re-entrance of these classics into mainstream or even popular culture. Several times, as in the *Elmer Gantry* opera, the subject has lent itself to a compendium of popular American folk and religious music. I have already mentioned the economic strictures of large productions, but *Elmer Gantry* is also a test of ideological reading. Lewis’s vibrant satire of evangelical religion through a pseudo-minister faking it for gullible believers has been toned down here, so that one wonders if it is a personal choice or the result of a compromise. It is difficult to tell. In several other instances involving each of these texts, the crudely realistic or subversive content is also weakened, either because it is

drowned in pleasant music, within the tradition of the musical, or because it is made entertaining by the staging and the acting. Or is it that the topics are less shocking or controversial today? This is partly true for sexual matters (except for abortion), so that there are very sexy scenes (especially in the *American Tragedy* opera), but not for evangelical religion, which is flourishing at present, or for class difference and greed. It may be relatively easier not to try to adjust to standard genres. The dreaming rather than the tragic potential of the American dream certainly lends itself best not only to lyricism, but also to a shared vision—and most of these printed works rest on characters dreaming of some great individual destiny or collective future. These works afford great opportunities to contemporary dramatists' creative reading, unless their inventiveness, bearing on passages where the writing is particularly poetic and suggestive, as in parts of *Winesburg, Ohio* or *The Great Gatsby* (the last paragraphs), detracts from it.

At the same time as Dreiser was having trouble with *An American Tragedy* being mutilated in Hollywood, in December 1930, Sinclair Lewis was giving his Nobel Prize speech in Stockholm, and he did not mince his words. Before an international audience, he voiced biting accusations against the American public: "The writer is oppressed [...] by the feeling that what he creates does not matter, that he is expected by his readers to be only a decorator or a clown." Why are his great "colleagues," like Dreiser, the pioneer, and Masters, Anderson, and even himself, so viciously attacked? The answer lies in the American fear of literature (the title of his address): "In America most of us—not readers alone but even writers—are still afraid of any literature which is not a glorification of everything American, a glorification of our faults as well as our virtues [...]. To be really beloved, a novelist must assert that all American men are tall, handsome, rich, honest." He also charged the academy with rejecting anything close in time or real, that is, with respecting only past masters: "Our American professors like their literature clear and cold and pure and very dead."<sup>52</sup> Now of course the authors around Lewis belong to the canon (or rather to one of the canons, since definitions and inclusions keep changing fast in the United States),<sup>53</sup> but the accusation holds. The cultural context evinces more continuity than change, at least as regards regions away from the big cities: we recognize the same complaints in the 1980s by Garrison Keillor, in his descriptions of the expectations of citizens in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, one more imaginary small Midwestern town (*Lake Wobegon Days*, New York: Viking, 1985). In

that unusual case, the adaptation was from very popular radio chronicles to book, by the author himself, and in print the satire was more acute than on the airwaves. Is it that the human voice, let alone the other components of dramatization, tends to soften the critical content?<sup>54</sup> Thus, even though Nick Carraway says, near the end of *The Great Gatsby*, “I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all,” the new readers of these books perceive that a cultural critique is raised that transcends provincialism.

Culture is inseparable from the socio-political whole. In the middle of the Great Depression of the 1930s, Sinclair Lewis worried enough over the popularity of demagogues like Huey Long to write *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), a novel imagining the election of a fascist president of the United States. The following year it became *Impossible ici* in France thanks to a translation by Raymond Queneau; a Northwestern University junior called Saul Bellow published “The Hell It Can’t,” his first short story, to express his own fears in the form of fiction; and then Lewis himself adapted his novel for the stage with John L. Moffit. The Federal Theatre Project, a great but short-lived creation of the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration, commissioned it and mounted twenty-two simultaneous nationwide productions of the adaptation.<sup>55</sup> The reason why this is brought up here is that on October 24, 2011 (on its seventy-fifth anniversary), the same adaptation was read in twenty-two local American theatres at the same time, at the instigation of actor, writer, and comedian Daniel Henriques.<sup>56</sup> The after-performance discussions all reflected the same feeling, which is that such a revival “had everything to do with what’s going on in America today,” many admiring “Lewis’ prescience in foreseeing society’s present day problems,” so that, in the words of Richard Lingeman, that play “resonates” today. The involvement in this event of academics as well as people in the media and in the arts also confirms that some things have changed in academia since Lewis attacked it.

A few months later, in February 2012, a lively email exchange began among the members of the Sinclair Lewis Society after a public theatre in New York City showed the 1931 film, *Arrowsmith*. They discussed the old Hollywood film and seemed to agree that a remake would be an excellent idea, not just to honour the novel, but because “a remake of *Arrowsmith* would be appealing today. The conflict between money and science is as compelling if not more than it was in Lewis’ time. *Arrowsmith* could even

be cast as an AGW (Anti-Global Warming) sceptic torn between following his own research and falsifying his data in order to retain funding by the socio-political science establishment. Interesting idea?” (Michael Goodell). Several of his colleagues responded positively. One wrote, “I was reminded of your email yesterday when our local hospital announced across-the-board cuts. It has long been known that this hospital follows a business model of service [...]. Certainly the issues presented in *Arrowsmith* completely cross to contemporary research” (Susan O’Brien). The novel, it seems, is taught in medical schools (Sally Parry)—a kind of preventive medicine?

## Conclusion

One is tempted to distinguish two major types of interest aroused today by these old novels or poems, interest strong enough to lead to creative readings, and also to instill sufficient energy to motivate others and get the adaptations produced or published. One is the topicality of many subjects, here found especially in several works by Theodore Dreiser and by Sinclair Lewis. The two writers’ main characters are social types described not sentimentally, but objectively, satirically, or critically, in whom the desire for riches and power dominates. The frequent choice of *Sister Carrie* or *An American Tragedy* by adapters rather than *The Financier* or *Jennie Gerhardt* perhaps makes it easier to create emotion. In any case, what Marianne Debouzy wrote about Dreiser applies also to Sinclair Lewis: they “tear off masks,” the masks of fatality, religion, and morality that society uses in order to function.<sup>57</sup> Lewis’s protagonists—the doctor who eventually cheats on his research (*Arrowsmith*), the lyrical preacher who is an impostor (*Elmer Gantry*), the fascist who wins the presidency (*It Can’t Happen Here*)—are not old-fashioned or foreign to twenty-first century concerns, as witness the exchanges quoted above. The other type of interest, which is more characteristic of Masters, Anderson, and Fitzgerald, comes from a blending of poetry of language and timeless human moods and emotions, plus the coincidence of individual and national projections, under the sign of dream and disillusion, embodied mostly in characters who lead common, ordinary lives. In three cases described above, the adapters significantly chose to give spectators the original text to hear, even if abridged, without giving up an imaginative staging.



With new technology, reading itself has changed in many ways. Among the positive effects of the phenomenon is the lowering of barriers between printed and digital texts, and between different artistic expressions including the virtual (hence the resulting hybrids). Transmission remains important but need not be literal. At the heart of it is the appeal to the imagination: without it, there is no emotion or reflection, so the self-appointed transmitters as artists try to interest the newer generations in literature of the past that has stirred their own imaginations and possibly pass it on, or, in the words of Alex Wilson, “repurpose it.”<sup>58</sup> The vitality of this artistic scene is remarkable and tempers a bitter remark on the writers of short stories “who give their life blood to make it easy for uncreative dolts to pass the time away.” Henry Miller wrote this in his last tribute to Sherwood Anderson.<sup>59</sup>

This same Anderson today presents a case rife with contradictions or paradoxes. In schools, his presence has dwindled; on the academic side, there have been a few recent studies in book form, but, after the deaths of most long-time American Andersonians and the absence of younger ones, there is no longer a Society or circle to inform, organize, keep up a website, or publish a bulletin (such as the late *Winesburg Eagle*). Even though The Library of America is finally about to publish a volume of his works, planned for 2013 and long overdue, it will not replace the interaction we have seen between academics and various new or confirmed artists apropos Dreiser, Masters, Lewis, and Fitzgerald. So what follows is unexpected:

Winesburg, OH—In a move retail-industry insiders are calling “thematically fitting”, Wal-Mart opened its newest store Monday in Winesburg, a town of 25,000 in Northern Ohio [...] “We chose Winesburg due to its convenient location [...] and the darkly powerful inner lives of its residents,” said Thomas Coughlin, president and CEO of Wal-Mart Stores [...] Doc Reefy, 72, works at the new Wal-Mart as a greeter and stockperson. A physician for nearly 50 years, Reefy grew bored with the quiet routine of retirement and now uses his large, gnarled hands—which resemble clusters of unpainted wooden balls fastened together by steel rods—for rolling back prices [...] If the Winesburg store proves successful, Wal-Mart next plans to open stores in Spoon River, IL, and Gopher Prairie, MN.

This is excerpted from a much longer article entitled “Wal-Mart Opens Store in Winesburg, Ohio” which appeared (with a photograph of the “new building”) on May 30, 2001, in the news section of *The Onion*, a weekly that defines itself as satirical and has been appearing in print and online since 1988. This brilliant piece assumes reader complicity in an extensive joke that includes many passages from the 1919 book by Sherwood Anderson, as if written by the reporter. Does this mean that *The Onion*’s readers possess the necessary cultural capital? It is taken for granted that some have read the book or seen one or another of the adaptations, or perhaps will become curious enough to read it. And then, in his novel *Indignation* (2008), Philip Roth had his New Jersey protagonist, young Marcus Messner, flee his father by enrolling in college in Winesburg, Ohio. Several names, especially place names inside the town, are borrowed from the book. Philip Roth, questioned, replied that he thought that if there had been a college in Winesburg, “it would have been the college I wrote about”; all he did was “to respectfully borrow Anderson’s place.”<sup>60</sup> Depending on their familiarity with Anderson’s book, Roth’s readers are free to associate with the first Winesburg to varying degrees. Intertextuality is another form of afterlife for literature.

Claire Bruyère has taught American literature and civilisation at the University of Lille, then at University Paris VII-Denis Diderot. She is the author of *Sherwood Anderson L’impuissance créatrice* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1985) and *Sherwood Anderson Le grotesque tendre* (Paris: Belin, 2001) and edited a selection of Anderson’s stories, *Les Chevaux de l’adolescence* (Paris: Éditions du Rocher, 2006). She has developed an interest in US reading and publishing (editing *Revue française d’études américaines* (RFEA), no. 78, 1998), in book history and its relationship to creativity (“The Author: Alive or Dead?” *Critical Studies* 3, no. 1, 1991), the role of translation (“La traduction au carrefour des cultures,” with M. F. Cachin, in *Les Mutations du livre et de l’édition dans le monde du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle à l’an 2000*, Laval/Paris: 2001), and in freedom of expression, censorship, and surveillance (“De la censure à l’autocensure,” co-edited with Henriette Touillier, special issue, *Ethnologie française* 36 [2006]). She also edited “The Shifting Sands of Secrecy: Private Communication at Stake,” special issue, *RFEA* 123 (2010).

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Corrigan, “Literature on Screen, A History: In the Gap,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, ed. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29–43 (41).

<sup>3</sup> Henri-Jean Martin and Lucien Febvre, *L’Apparition du livre* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Jeanne-Marie Clerc and Monique Carcaud-Macaire, *L’Adaptation cinématographique et littéraire, 50 Questions* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2004); Dennis Cutchins, Laurence Raw, and James M. Welsh, *The Pedagogy of Adaptation* (The Scarecrow Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Simone Murray, “Materializing Adaptation Theory: The Adaptation Industry,” *Literature Film Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2008): 4–20; Simone Murray, *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Ariane Hudelet and Shannon Wells-Lassagne, eds., *De la page blanche aux salles obscures: Adaptation et réadaptation dans le monde anglophone* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Lainy Voom, “The Dumb Man—Sherwood Anderson,” online video, 5:08, Mar. 23, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/609147>.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Wilson, email to the author, 31 August 2011. Wilson could not remember how he first came across the poem.

<sup>10</sup> W. James Au, “Imagining ‘The Dumb Man’: SL Machinima Auteur Lainy Voom’s Latest Movie,” *New World Notes* (blog), 15 January 2008, <http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2008/01/lainy-voom-and.html>. A blogger wrote in 2008, “it’s far superior to what we usually see on Second Life.”

<sup>11</sup> Gore Vidal, “The Romance of Sinclair Lewis,” *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 8, 1992; Steve Chagollan, *The New York Times*, Aug. 21, 2005; essay by Robin Hemley, “Something Has to be Understood: An Appreciation of Sherwood Anderson,” *Ohioana Quarterly*, Summer 2004; Jayne Blanchard, *The Washington Times*, Jan. 13, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Margery Latimer, *Guardian Angel and Other Stories* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1984). There are three afterwords in the volume, and, on the Web, several introductions to her life and career by critic Joy Castro.

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<sup>13</sup> The large digitization initiatives like Project Gutenberg and Pennsylvania State University's Electronic Classics Series ("an ongoing student publishing project to bring classical works of literature in English to free and easy access to those wishing to make use of them") include titles by these authors (e-books and audiobooks). There are countless other University and non-University websites (e.g., [Bartleby.com](http://Bartleby.com), or [www.online-literature.com](http://www.online-literature.com)) that offer texts online. Specialized sites on Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and F. Scott Fitzgerald list the texts available online. The Sherwood Anderson Literary Center website, [www.sherwoodanderson.org/center.htm](http://www.sherwoodanderson.org/center.htm), was on sale in 2011. Its ex-director, Mr Schuck, did not respond to inquiries. Material is also available on the site of the Chicago Newberry Library and of the Virginia Tech collections.

<sup>14</sup> The term of copyright in the United States is 95 years after first publication for works published after 1923 and before Dec. 31, 1977. For works published before 1923, it was 56 years from the date of publication. Since 1978, it is 75 years from the author's death (50 in Canada). It is important to realize that most works discussed here are or will be in the public domain elsewhere, especially in Europe, sooner. An edition may be published in the United Kingdom, for example, and then circulate in the United States. My thanks to Craig Tenney (Harold Ober Associates, representing the Anderson and the Fitzgerald estates) for clarifying the rules for me.

<sup>15</sup> In the Paris bilingual or International Schools, only that book is taught (in grade 9) but the others may be in the school library. One librarian, Emma Dornan, wrote to me: "We have books by all those authors, but they are not among the most popular" (April 2011). In the United States, some states issue reading lists. Except for Sherwood Anderson, titles by our authors are recommended for grades 9 to 12 in California. Other states, like Ohio, do not, because "it is a local-control state. It does not set educational curriculum; school districts do" (Susan Massey, consultant for the Ohio Dept. of Education, email to the author, June 2011). Some lists, intended for "college-bound students," include *Winesburg, Ohio*, *The Great Gatsby*, and/or *Main Street*.

<sup>16</sup> Anita Silvey, *500 Great Books for Teens* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 304.

<sup>17</sup> See Nathalie Collé-Bak, Monica Latham, and David Ten Eyck, *Les Vies du livre passées, présentes et à venir* [The Lives of the Book Past, Present and to Come] (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> GoodReads ([www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com)) is "a huge social network for readers of the world." Founded and run by a number of software engineers and editors, it is free once you register; its investors are Internet entrepreneurs.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Buckner, *The Hill*, words by Edgar Lee Masters, Overcoat Recordings / Convent Records, 2000, compact disc.

<sup>20</sup> The cost for seven performances was to be \$700,000. Very few new American operas are produced (under five per cent). The biting satire touching on certain forms of religion also played a part in the delay, in addition to the authors' acknowledged "missteps and failures" along the way.

<sup>21</sup> See Mandy Merck, *Hollywood's American Tragedies: Dreiser, Eisenstein, Sternberg, Stevens* (Oxford: Berg, 2008).

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<sup>22</sup> *The Chicago Sun Times*, Aug. 25, 2010, and Feb. 17, 2011. A DVD of the film is ready for distribution.

<sup>23</sup> It was published in Sydney, Australia, and in New Zealand by Allen and Unwin, and then by Penguin Canada in 2008 (306 pages).

<sup>24</sup> “The Great Gatsby: A Graphic Adaptation by Nicki Greenberg of the Novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald,” [www.nickigreenberg.com/gatsby.shtml](http://www.nickigreenberg.com/gatsby.shtml).

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in the *New York Times*, June 16, 2010, by Jennifer Schuessler. Andolora, a teacher at Brooklyn College, said how “astounded” he was that the play was reviewed there, adding that it would be “most helpful” (telephone interview with the author, July 2011). I lack space to describe other adaptations. One, at Eastern Connecticut State University, entitled *Spoon River*, was, its directors wrote to me, “adapted and abridged” from the original, “the result of a special topics course in which we explored the staging of various forms of literature using Readers Theatre techniques [...]”. This has been a very creative collaborative process of many artistic voices.” It was performed in the spring of 2002 at the University Theatre and later in New York City. Another one, not linked to a school, is Lee Meriwether’s *Women of Spoon River*, a 55-minute one-woman show directed and co-adapted with Jim Hesselman. She first understudied in the adaptation by Charles Aidman in 1962 in Theatre West (a non-profit theatre in Los Angeles), which went on to Broadway. Forty years later, the “solo” play has been revived and Lee Meriwether has wished to tour schools with it. In 2011, recorded spectators’ comments were mixed, but the show was extended. I have been unable to reach Lee Meriwether.

<sup>26</sup> Clerc et Carcaud-Macaire, *L’Adaptation cinématographique et littéraire*, 92–93.

<sup>27</sup> See Hudelet and Wells-Lassagne, eds., *De la page blanche aux salles obscures*. Re-adaptation is studied in particular from the economic angle and through several great western myths.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 176.

<sup>29</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 8.

<sup>30</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *Dodsworth*, dramatized by Sidney Howard (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934).

<sup>31</sup> *The New York Times*, October 6, 2010. *Gatz* has since been performed in many European cities, including Prague, Lisbon, and Amsterdam. It was booked for seven weeks at New York’s Public Theatre in the spring of 2012. The title name, of course, is no invention, being Jay Gatsby’s original name, revealed when his father turns up for his funeral.

<sup>32</sup> See Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, chapter 2.

<sup>33</sup> *All Possible Worlds: Conversations on Voltaire’s “Candide”* (blog), New York Public Library, <http://www.nypl.org/voices/blogs/blog-channels/candide>; *Candide 2.0*, New York Public Library, <http://candide.nypl.org/text>. The exhibition is over, but the blog continues (last consulted April 2012).

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<sup>34</sup> It resulted from a collaboration among the collective, Ben Rubin (an installation artist), and Mark Hansen (a statistician): “Shuffle,” Elevator Repair Service, <http://elevator.org/shows/show.php?show=shuffle>. For an explanation and video extracts, see Samantha Henig, “Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald: The Remix,” *New Yorker*, May 25, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2011/05/hemingway-faulkner-and-fitzgerald-the-remix.html>. See also: Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure, Forced Entertainment, and Elevator Repair Service* (London: Routledge, 2010); Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender, eds., *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010). A similar experiment, a way of paying homage to a great past work, foreign to boot, by taking advantage of contemporary techniques, was presented in Paris, in June 2011. Writer and director Jean-François Peyret conceived with his company a beautiful, partly virtual, “reading” of Thoreau’s *Walden* or *Life in the Woods*, in the political spirit of the 1960s (Théâtre Paris-Villette).

<sup>35</sup> Charles Richter, interview with the author, July 14, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> There is a whole library on the subject of “the murder that will never die.” See in particular Craig Brandon, *Murder in the Adirondacks: “An American Tragedy” Revisited* (Utica, NY: North Country Books, 1986, rev. ed. 2006). Derek Taylor has produced a documentary of the case entitled *A North Woods Elegy: Incident at Big Moose Lake*, DVD, 62 min. (see trailer, Derek Taylor, “A North Woods Elegy: Incident at Big Moose Lake,” online video, 2:15, Apr. 3, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/25265929>). According to Thomas Riggio, “Dreiser’s novel is still used in law schools as the basis of a case to be studied” (to the author, June 2011).

<sup>37</sup> “Toeing the Line of Being a Real Piece of Art: *An American Tragedy* at Muhlenberg College,” *Artistic Integrity: A Quest for Theatre of Quality but not Quantity* (blog), Mar. 27, 2010, <http://samanthassembler.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>38</sup> Dreiser’s two interviews, given on the same day, Apr. 12, 1931, can be read in Frederic E. Rusch and Donald Pizer, eds., *Theodore Dreiser: Interviews* (University of Illinois Press, 2005); to the *New York American*, Dreiser also declared: “Hollywood producers will never violate the next Amendment to the Constitution, which will prohibit people from thinking.”

<sup>39</sup> “*Winesburg, Ohio*” *Study Guide* (BookRags, 2004), PDF e-book.

<sup>40</sup> Erik Haagensen, “The Spoon River Project at Green-Wood Cemetery,” *BackStage: The Actor’s Resource*, June 17, 2011, <http://www.backstage.com/bso/reviews-ny-theatre-off-off-broadway/the-spoon-river-project-1005240662.story>. Another theatre adaptation of *Spoon River Anthology* was announced for April 2012, to be performed in Manhattan (Riverside Theatre), then Brooklyn (Invisible Dog Art Center). Conceived and directed by Jimmy Maize, with a cast of a hundred performers, it “incorporates live music and dance, giving new life to the innovative spirit of Master’s work and updating it for contemporary audiences” (“The Spoon River Anthology to Play 2 Limited Engagements in NYC With Cast of 100 Performers,” *BroadwayWorld.com*, Mar. 6, 2012, <http://broadwayworld.com/article/THE-SPOON-RIVER-ANTHOLOGY-to-Play-2-Limited-Engagements-in-NYC-With-Cast-of-100-Performers-20120306#>).

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<sup>41</sup> Mathitak, "User Submitted Blog Post: On the Road," *AllVoices* (blog), June 13, 2008, <http://www.allvoices.com/user/blog/2495>; Joe Meno, "Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson Field-Tested by Joe Meno," Coudal Partners, [2008], <http://www.coudal.com/ftb/index.php>.

<sup>42</sup> Amy Matheny, "Eric Rosen: All Roads Lead to Winesburg Ohio," *Windy City Times*, 16 June, 2004, <http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=5370>; "Winesburg, Ohio: Eric Rosen Talks About his New Adaptation," Steppenwolf Theatre, News and Articles 4 (2003–4), <http://www.steppenwolf.org/watchlisten/program-articles/detail.aspx?id=39>.

<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the range of reactions depended on the spectator's sensibility and on his/her perception of the dark undertones behind all the singing and dancing.

<sup>44</sup> For Daniel Nearing, there was also a personal motivation: "The project was a little autobiographical."

<sup>45</sup> Why this particular place? "Something about black exploitation in America connects."

<sup>46</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 26–29.

<sup>47</sup> "Gatz: Interview with John Collins," parts 1–5, online videos, 2:42, 3:01, 2:08, 3:39, 1:51, Jan. 22, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5NlaCgLC4&feature=relmfu>.

<sup>48</sup> Review of *Gatz*, Elevator Repair Service, the Playhouse at the Sydney Opera House, *StageNoise*, May 19, 2009, <http://www.stagenoise.com/review/1355>.

<sup>49</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 12, 55.

<sup>50</sup> A sample: "While there were many dull-as-dishwasher classics forced upon us during high school English (we're looking at you, *An American Tragedy*), Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* was decidedly not one of them" (Rob Christopher, "Sherwood Anderson in the South Suburbs," *Chicagoist*, 1 Dec., 2010, [http://chicagoist.com/2010/12/01/sherwood\\_anderson\\_in\\_the\\_south\\_subu.php](http://chicagoist.com/2010/12/01/sherwood_anderson_in_the_south_subu.php)).

<sup>51</sup> Email to the author, August 2011. He also "was surprised at the number of young folks, largely graduate students, who showed up at a panel he chaired on Dreiser in a totally academic setting, in May 2011."

<sup>52</sup> Sinclair Lewis, "The American Fear of Literature," Nobel Prize address, Stockholm, Dec. 12, 1930, printed in *The Man From Main Street: A Sinclair Lewis Reader*, edited by Harry E. Maule, Melville H. Cane, and Philip Allan Friedman (New York: Random House, 1953), 3–17 (10, 6, 13).

<sup>53</sup> See John Atherton, "Canon Questions," in "Lire en Amérique," *Université Paris VII / Cahiers Charles V* 14 (1992), J. Atherton and C. Bruyère, eds., 157–72.

<sup>54</sup> See Claire Bruyère, "Garrison Keillor et ses publics," in "Lire en Amérique," *Université Paris VII / Cahiers Charles V* 14 (1992), id., 141–55.

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<sup>55</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *Impossible ici*, version française de Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1937); Frederick Betz, “*Impossible ici*: Raymond Queneau’s Translation of *It Can’t Happen Here*,” *The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter* 17, no. 1 (Fall 2008), 1; Roger Forseth, “Two Notes to a Low Dishonest Decade: Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* and Saul Bellow’s ‘The Hell It Can’t,’” *ibid.* 10, no. 1 (Fall 2001), 3; Tom Raynor, “A Message for ‘A Burning World’: Dorothy Thompson, Sinclair Lewis and *It Can’t Happen Here*,” *ibid.* 18, no. 1 (Fall 2009), 13–14. Another writer discussed here who ended up adapting some of his own works for the stage was Sherwood Anderson. In 1937, a volume containing his adaptations of *Winesburg, Ohio* plus three short stories was published by Scribner’s, with a detailed homage to Jasper Deeter, the founder of the Hedgerow Theatre experiment, who put up and directed the re-written *Winesburg*. Anderson’s preliminary note will by now sound familiar: “I have merely tried to capture again the spirit of the tales.”

<sup>56</sup> Richard Lingeman, “How It Can’t Happen Happened,” *The Nation*, Nov. 2, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Marianne Debouzy, *La Genèse de l’esprit de révolte dans le roman américain 1875–1915* (Paris: Minard, 1968), 317 (my translation).

<sup>58</sup> Email to the author, August 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Miller, “Anderson, the Storyteller,” *Story*, Sept./Oct. 1941, reprinted in Henry Miller, *Stand Still Like the Humming Bird: Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1962) and in *Homage to Sherwood Anderson*, ed. Paul P. Appel (Mamaroneck, New York: Paul P. Appel, 1970), 111–18.

<sup>60</sup> Letter to the author, November 2010.

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