and deep and agonizing it
k in hollow emptiness for
on the hillside crying out
s and waves as the ever
nt of the land. The dust
winter drift in swirls and
its story.

In The World in the Attic (1949), Wright Morris broke
with his once nostalgic view of the midwestern rural past.
In The Field of Vision (1956) and Ceremony in Lone Tree
(1961), he returns to the Nebraska of his earlier work with
a complexity of vision that takes him beyond his ambivalent
feelings about the past. Yet, as in much of Morris's fic-
tion, these novels are often interpreted in terms of the
failure of a sterile present in contrast to a pioneering
gust. In fact, they are not about the pull of polarities,
but a form of resolution and reconciliation. In them,
pioneering is not a matter of the past but a metaphor for the
need to risk being open to new experience, to imaginatively
realize the present moment. As Boyd concludes while watching
the swiftly changing patterns of the bullfight:

In an age of How-to-do-it the problem was how
not to be embalmed in a flannel pocket, how
not to be frozen in a coonskin hat. How to
live in spite of, and not because of something
called character. To keep it open, to keep
the puzzle puzzling, the pattern changing and
alive (p. 155).

Just as in these novels Morris views experience as
being, like the plains, an open field to be imaginatively
mastered, so he views language as exploratory—a medium for
puzzling out meaning. Language becomes a form of pioneering
as his animated word play is a way of keeping "the puzzle
puzzling, the pattern changing and alive" (p. 185).

In forcing Morris into a mold of contemporary aliena-
tion, many critics have overlooked this element of spiritual
pioneering in his work. Those who read these two central
novels as denunciations of a debased present have difficulty
reconciling their negative readings with Morris's spirited,
balanced tone, and wry humor. The tendency has been to
ignore the comic elements or to consider the theme apart
from the tone. Marcus Klein distinguishes between the
vitality or felt life of the novels and their meaning, main-
taining that although Morris's "mode of apprehension is
comic, his characters' lives are pathetic because they are
bound to be fruitless." Klein assumes a split between
style and meaning that cannot be made if we recognize how
Morris's technique, his use of rotating narrators, a
distancing humor, and an animated poetic style, is in itself
a means of resolution.

Like the structure, the language of Field and Ceremony
is highly patterned and poetic as Morris's tendency toward
word play in his earlier work becomes more pronounced.
Each of the rotating narrators has a stance in relation to
the problem of language, of escaping the confines of the cliche, of keeping the pattern open. The language thus enacts the process of imaginatively grasping the present moment.

Filled with inversions, reversals, and ironic twists, Morris's syntax mirrors a world where, like Scanlon's desert hell where you look up for water, everything is upside down. In the first Scanlon section of Field, Morris describes the way Scanlon, who has turned his back on living, lives on:

With little or nothing to live for, he continued to live. He had renounced his children the moment it was clear that they intended to face the future, or even worse, like his daughter Lois, make a success of it. Tom Scanlon lived—if that was the word—only in the past. When the century turned and faced the East, he stood his ground. He faced the past. He made an interesting case, as Boyd had once observed, being a man who found more to live for in looking backward than those who died all around him, looking ahead (p. 44).

Morris's use of a series of turns of phrase and of parenthetical comments establishes a rhythm of paradox as he sets up one expectation, then reverses it. Nothing is as it ought to be. There is a whimsical, ironic humor in this inversion of cliches. Boyd is a man who "had everything to live for, everything worth living for having eluded him until now" (p. 14). When old Scanlon meets his Davy Crockett-suited grandson, "I was, as the family had feared, love at first shot" (p. 49).

With the same perverse insistence, Morris's characters often find themselves confronted with what they would like to forget, as he ends viewpoint sections with motifs that provide an ironic twist. In both Field and Ceremony, little Gordon's obsession with guns surfaces in a variety of ways to torment his grandmother, Lois. When Lois finally fires the shot out the hotel window, wide-eyed Gordon, having gained new respect for her, asks, "Grandma, which one did you shoot?" (p. 269). This use of motifs can have a comic effect of bringing the characters together in their frustration without their being aware of it, as when, toward the end of Ceremony, Moene, little Gordon, and Etolle independently mimic "Mrs. Boyd's" refrain of "Sweet Jesus."

Morris's imagery has this same homely, earthy, yet comically bizarre quality. In Ceremony he describes the explosion of an atomic bomb at a test site, "there was this flash and then this pillar of fire that went up and up like a rabbit's ear," (p. 31). While McKee reflects that the mass murderer on the loose in Nebraska "runs around shooting people as though they were no more than signs on the highway" (p. 49).

Morris's omniscient voice provides a comic detachment, and it is impossible to view these novels as expressions of alienation and despair when confronted with the geniality of his tone. Always in Morris, but particularly in these plains novels, the voice we hear is consistently a folk voice,
The language thus grasping the present

relaxed, wry, and playful, expressing a delight in experience for its own sake that is rare in contemporary fiction.

There are some elements of Mark Twain's deadpanning in this voice, but Morris achieves ironic effects in Field and Ceremony by mingling his omniscient voice with the third person voice of the narrators. He has said that he believes in modulating the vernacular, which is true to character, with a voice "that is true to something larger than any one character, the tone of the work as a whole." In these novels, Morris is able to achieve this mediating presence without being intrusive, though he moves in and out of a character's perspective, often within a single sentence. In Ceremony, Calvin, the misanthropic teenage loner who has been out prospecting, trying to relive the days of his pioneerish grandfather, comes down out of the hills, unaware that a mass murderer has been terrorizing the state:

Then he found the mules over near Leggett, but before anything at all had been settled, a man was shot and killed as he slept in his car just a few miles north. Calvin didn't know till later, since he didn't read the papers, that this was the 10th murder in about eight days, the first nine having been in Lincoln where Etoile lived. Everybody in the state but Calvin got pretty upset (p. 106).

The reason that Morris can interweave his perspective with his characters' is that, not being the mindless victims of contemporary sterility that some critics would have them be, they have a sharp-eyed, wary sense of another similar to Morris's own. This allows for layered comic effects as the viewpoint characters observe one another. Etoile considers how she can get the recalcitrant Calvin to eloquently mimic "Mrs. Boyd's"

homey, earthy, yet comic he describes the exploit, "the weather was this flash up and up like a reflection that the mass runs around shooting than signs on the high-

ides a comic detachment, novels as expressions of with the geniality of particular in these plains tently a folk voice,
entered it through any opening for almost all of the ninety years. It had come sealed, like the motor in her appliances and it would go on working until the day it stopped (p. 58).

To the prosaic McKeen, Boyd has always looked like "the man in the insurance statistics who'd get up one morning feeling a little queasy and then be dead in an hour" (p. 149).

To Boyd's jaundiced eye, the McKees are "Refugees from the dustbowl, Sears, Roebuck gothic, wearing the dacron they could wash if they had to, and the expression that might wrinkle a little, but would never wear" (p. 101). Boyd's language is the most poetic and witty, his sense of the absurd being the most acute. It is Boyd along with Lehmann who establishes the mock heroic parallels in Field. He considers his act of squirting pop at the bull:

The daring-do of the nonprofessional touch, the high wax winged flights of Icarus Boyd, audacious amateur. The big touch was beyond him. As a touching example, he was still alive. He should have died, fizzing bottle in hand, as he turned to receive oles, as he should have drowned in the sandpit west of Polk. As something in him had (p. 100).

Boyd's would parallel is a comic counterpart to the action of the matador. In his use of sarcasm and word play, he is the most intensely aware of language, as he struggles to go beyond the confines of the cliche. He realizes that his clowning, like his cleverness in classifying it, is all part of his self-conscious degeneration. As Lehmann says of Boyd, "Every piece of his Fall had been borrowed from the wings, from the costume rack" (p. 70).

Unhampered by cliches, the eccentric Dr. Lehmann, Boyd's spiritual advisor, has created his own language. Likened to the guttural sounds of caveman's speech, Lehmann's language is insightful because it is original, "Broken rather than proper English spoke to the soul. A battered language, like an armless statue, had more value on the market, and Dr. Lehmann had broken, battered and glued together a language all his own" (p. 64). The novelty of Lehmann's speech soothes and heals his patients. His accent breathes life into the cliche. "Thad iss olter"—he would say, to everyone's joy—"than Atom and effenmink" (p. 64).

The truly visionary passages in these novels are in Scanlon's wagon train narrative, a blend of the surreal and the comic. In Norris's lyrical description, the desert has the eerie stillness of a vacuum, "It was as though he stood at the bottom of the sea and looked up through the ice. There was no trail that led in or out, no stinky greenwood, no whiff of sage, no speck on the sky, and nothing in the air that he would call light" (p. 150).

The narrative derives its unique tone from the fact that, though the observations are poetic and whimsical, they are expressed in Scanlon's earthy diction. When, out scouting, he
The straightforward narrative drive of Scanlon's tale is a contrast to the associative structure of the other characters' musings. His story has the imaginative intensity of a visionary experience, and as such there is no need for toying with cliches. Scanlon is alone in his desert hell, for the first time face to face with himself. In Boyd's mock heroics, there is no still point, no moment when the cliches of heroism or failure don't stand between him and genuine action.

Each of the narrators--Keecke, Boyd, Lehmann, and Scanlon--struggles in his characteristic way with the problem of overcoming the cliche, of confronting experience directly. In these novels language becomes the poetic process by which the characters transform their experience--Field and Ceremony are Morris's most complex rendering of this pioneering process through which he achieves a revitalized vision of life in the present.

Dr. Lehmann, at the end of his meditations, thinking of Boyd's complaint, "Why the hell aren't things as they seem?" decided that things are not as they were "meant to be" because there is no "meant to be" (p. 206). Each person must, in transforming his experience, find his own way, "Each according to his lights, such as they were, if and when they come on" (p. 206).
NOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


