

LANGUAGE AS PIONEERING IN WRIGHT MORRIS'S

THE FIELD OF VISION AND CEREMONY IN LONE TREE

by

Diana Saluri

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 is much of Morris's fiction, these novels are often interpreted in terms of the failure of a sterile present in contrast to a pioneering past. 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 alienation, 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, maintaining that although Morris's "mode of apprehension is comic, his characters' lives are pathetic because they are bound to be fruitless."<sup>1</sup> 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 cliché, 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 West. 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 clichés. Boyd is a man who "had everything to live for, everything worth living for having eluded him until now" (p. 145). When old Scanlon meets his Davy Crockett-suited grandson, "It 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, Maxine, little Gordon, and Etoile independently mimic "Mrs. Boyd's" refrain of "Sweet Jesus."

Morris's imagery has this same homey, 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,

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 as when Morris reports in *Ceremony* that the pocket watch of a man hit by the local train had stopped "at 7:34, proving the train that had hit him had been right on time" (p. 8). Morris's comic sense of the stubborn, crotchety side of his folk characters is similar to Flannery O'Connor's without the sharp edge. When old Scanlon, who despises the glass-walled suburban houses of his children, puts on mismatched socks, he complains that he "couldn't see the color because the windows let in too much light, there being nothing but windows in the new house" (p. 55).

As in all his multiple viewpoint novels, 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."<sup>2</sup> 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 pioneering 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 one 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 elope with her, "On the map in her atlas Ogallala looked close to Cheyenne where people eloped and got married, but Calvin, as his mother said, was not people. If people did it, Calvin would have nothing to do with it" (p. 181).

In this homey context, Morris is especially apt at choosing figures of speech appropriate to the viewpoint characters. In *Ceremony*, Lois thinks of her father's lifelong stubbornness as she stares at the back of his head at the breakfast table:

The top of his head, the hair matted since he never used a comb, was like the root-covered bottom of a rock and as hard, she always reminded herself, to penetrate. Nothing new had

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. 69).

To the prosaic McKee, 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 deirring-co 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 ironic 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 cliché. 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 clichés, the eccentric Dr. Lehmann, Boyd's spiritual adviser, has created his own language. Likened to the guttural sounds of cavemen'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 cliché, "Thod iss olter"--he would say, to everyone's joy--"than Atom and effenink" (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 Morris'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 greasewood, 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

comes upon the little six-sided stones, Scanlon imagines that they are the products of the devil's "tinkering," the country being so empty that even the devil might get bored:

It was just another sign that he must be human, and evil as he was, with that awful smell, Scanlon couldn't help feeling a sort of shameful liking for him. Some streak in him was human. He did his best to hide it, but the rocks showed it up. If he crawled out of his hole, he might even use food and water himself (p. 146).

Scanlon's matter of fact report of the grotesque gives his tale a further bizarre, tall tale twist. One member of the party eyes another with water on the knee hungrily while another complains that all his scouting is making Scanlon too stringy, "Stringy was the word Mrs. Norton used everytime she put a piece of jerked meat in her mouth and he knew that what she had in mind was him. He was too stringy already. She didn't want what little was left of him to get too tough" (p. 145).

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--McKee, Boyd, Lehmann, and Scanlon--struggles in his characteristic way with the problem of overcoming the cliché, 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 in Field, thinking of Boyd's complaint, "Why the hell aren't things as they seem?" decides that things are not as they were "meant to be" because there is no "meant to be" (p. 205). 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

1. Marcus Klein, After Alienation (Cleveland: World Publishers, 1964), p. 24.

2. "The Dictates of Style: A Conversation Between Wright Morris and David Madden," in Robert E. Knoll, ed., Conversations with Wright Morris (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 112.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Klein, Marcus. After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century. Cleveland: World Publishers, 1964.

Knoll, Robert E., ed. Conversations with Wright Morris: Critical Views and Responses. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: Atheneum, 1960.

Morris, Wright. Ceremony in Lone Tree. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959.

Morris, Wright. The Field of Vision. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1956.