

Winesburg, Ohio: A Modernist Kluge

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Abstract

This article argues that Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, while it cannot be considered a text straightforwardly concerned with technology, offers a modernist version of the story cycle that anticipates the delocalized and highly structured interconnections facilitated by the network. Unlike today's seamlessly embedded networks, however, the prototypical form depicted in *Winesburg, Ohio* functions as a kluge, "an ill-assorted collection of poorly-matching parts, forming a distressing whole" [OED]. Anderson's kluge augurs network technology and therefore suggests that the form loomed large in modernists' mind. However, *Winesburg, Ohio* illustrates the network's propensity to foster users' inner alienation while enabling their unprecedented connection and thereby warns against the antagonistic quality of the network's rhizomatic structure.

The network is the great Outside that always surrounds and envelops me. But it is also the Inside: its alien circuitry is what I find when I look deeply within myself. The network is impersonal, universal, without a center, but it is also perturbingly intimate, uncannily close at hand. (Steven Shaviro, *Connected*)

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It is now a matter of fact that the nonlinear, nonhierarchical, and delocalized functioning of the network has transformed the ways that many individuals define themselves, establish themselves in relationships, situate themselves in and apart from communities, and accumulate knowledge about what can be known in and about the world. While today's most pervasive network — the Internet — facilitates posthumanist demonstrations of the power of ameliorative, (according to theorists Barry Wellman and William J. Mitchell), connectivity, the Internet and the virtual identities and communities it fosters also facilitate far more complex and ambivalent connections.^[1] Perhaps unsurprisingly, pundits and journalists have been largely responsible for warning against the network's potentially negative and even harmful effects. While members of the media increasingly focus on the Internet's detrimental impact and point to social networking platforms for evidence of the shallow and ultimately false promise of community that networks extend to users, Twitter and Facebook are only the most recent manifestations of the network's long tradition of fostering users' inner alienation while enabling their unprecedented connection.

Rather than proceeding *in media res* and looking to the Internet to understand networks and to comprehend the dynamics of network culture, I take my cue from N. Katherine Hayles and look to literature. Apparently antithetical to the culture of the blurb, literature reveals "the complex cultural, social, and representation issues tied up with conceptual shifts and technological innovations" [Hayles 1999, 24]. Its representational capabilities stem in part from its own status as an evolving technology, a point explicitly demonstrated by the continued publication of electronic texts and hypertexts and implicitly demonstrated by William Powers in his recent bestseller, *Hamlet's Blackberry*. Literary forms illustrate

technology's varied promises to and pitfalls for individuals and the communities to which they do and do not belong, but so too does literary content. In science fiction, for example, technology often leads to the "cognitive estrangement" that results in the fragmentation of individuals and the disintegration of their tenuous relationships to one another [Suvin 1972, 372]. Similarly, "systems novels" generally display technology's propensity to abet its own out-of control proliferation [McHale 2006, 175]. Ultimately, literature's dependence on and representations of technology and technology's effects on its users make it an ideal medium through which to investigate what network theorists Shaviro and Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker describe as the antagonistic quality of the network's rhizomatic structure.

While it cannot be considered a work of science fiction, a systems novel, or even a text straightforwardly concerned with technology, Sherwood Anderson's modernist pastoral *Winesburg, Ohio* uses the story cycle form to offer an illustration of the ambivalent future technology promises. Although seldom considered a contribution to any modern comprehension of electronically inflected networks, the text, published in 1919, features a town poised at a technological divide: its inhabitants look back to their agrarian past in which relationships were dependent on proximity and information was disseminated by storytelling, but they also look to the specter of the future where relationships are more arbitrary and excessive information is routed along the information superhighway. The town and townspeople, denied the connections of the past but unable to convene as a community of the future, form instead the tenuous connections based on the delocalized organization of a nascent network. Unlike today's seamlessly embedded networks, however, the network in *Winesburg, Ohio* serves as a stopgap measure; it arises from out of an explicitly liminal space and can only awkwardly connect the text's grotesque forms and deformed bodies. Rather than hailing what will serve as the network's 21st-century iteration, *Winesburg, Ohio* warns against the network, suggesting that while it may offer the only means by which a community can be connected, that community is not only monstrous and deformed, but functions as a trap.

Accordingly, although Galloway and Thacker claim that the "the idea of connectivity [...] so highly privileged today" has "only recently attained any level of authority as a dominant diagram for mass social organization and control" [Galloway & Thacker 2007, 26, 15], *Winesburg, Ohio* suggests that the network loomed large in modernists' imaginations. Because the model of community that traverses the technological breach in *Winesburg, Ohio* is characterized by its awkwardness and lack of refinement, however, the term "network" may be a misleading descriptor. A network cannot help but assume the craftsmanship necessary to producing a "work of net", and in Anderson's work, manual craftsmanship is relegated to that pre-technological past that *Winesburg* and its denizens no longer inhabit. Accordingly, that community, which exists in the space between the past's emphasis on manual craftsmanship and the future's emphasis on communicative technology, depicts an incipient, not yet fully formed network that might be better termed a "kluge," an awkward but effective makeshift device that precedes technical progression.

Although Gary Marcus, in *Kluge: the Haphazard Evolution of the Human Mind*, has recently revived the concept of the kluge as a helpful metaphor for the "inelegant — but surprisingly effective" [Marcus 2008,] solutions to the problems constantly encountered by the human mind, the kluge's contemporary meaning is rooted in early computer jargon. J.W. Granholm's parodic guide for "computer hardware men" in the 1962 publication of *Datamation* popularized the term kluge (or "kludge") as a word that "stands ready...220 VAC source." "One of the most beloved words in design terminology," a kluge is an inelegant bricolage, a transitional tool comprised of an "ill-assorted collection of poorly-matching parts." It works, but its unnatural shape and aberrant arrangements "form a distressing whole" that constantly calls attention to its awkward construction and its unlikely usefulness, and likely temporary usefulness [Granholm 1962, 30–32].

Because kluges — effective and progressive but distressing and ugly — belong to the lexicon and job requirement of computer hardware men, they underscore the early and anticipatory efforts towards the interconnection and delocalization that characterize information systems and models of interconnection and organization. Kluges are especially relevant to network technology: indeed, in "the lashing together of whole modules of equipment [...] the opportunity for applied kludgemanhip presents itself to the hilt" [Granholm 1962]. In part because "the lashing together of whole modules of equipment" [Granholm 1962] aptly describes Anderson's take on the story cycle form, the kluge provides an important emblem for *Winesburg, Ohio*. The term calls attention to the transitional and intermediary nature of the vision of community imagined in Anderson's text, but it also supplies a technologically relevant context for

understanding why the progression towards the networked future can be considered monstrous.

Published before “kludge” or even “network” became a crucial part of computer glossaries, *Winesburg, Ohio* was nonetheless considered by many of its early readers to be a distressing collection of interconnected but ill-assorted parts. Its modernist version of the short story cycle garnered unfavorable reviews claiming that it was disjointed, that it violated the pastoral it appeared to represent, and that it described too vividly the immoral lives of America’s provincials. Heywood Broun of the *New York Tribune*, for example, argued that Anderson’s work was marred by his apparent obsession with neurotics, and an anonymous reviewer for the *New York World* hoped that Anderson “would one day learn to censor his unnecessarily ugly stories” [Broun 1919]. Despite such pans, positive reviews welcomed the text as innovative. According to these critics, Anderson’s text ushered in a new era for the short story via the new, or newly recycled, form of interrelated stories. Writing for *The New Republic*, M.A. called *Winesburg, Ohio* a “challenge to the snappy short story form, with its planned proportions of flippant philosophy, epigrammatic conversation and sex danger” [M. Anderson 1919, 34],^[2] and H.L. Mencken claimed that the work offered “a new order of short story,” something “*The Spoon River Anthology* aimed at, and missed by half a mile” [M. Anderson 1919, 258] .

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According to its supportive readers, the ill-assorted parts of *Winesburg, Ohio* were particularly appropriate to narrating modernity’s influence on America’s post-industrial small towns. These readers implicitly recognized the discontinuity that characterized the twentieth-century’s bifurcated landscape between rural and urban America and understood that the story cycle, once a tool used to unify disparate poems or tales, could also be used to underscore difference. The story cycle, unlike traditional novels, lashes together disconnected and often discordant stories to capture what Llewellyn Jones describes in reference to Anderson’s work the “significant episode[s]” [Jones 1919] that characterize twentieth-century rural America. Indeed, consequent to Jones’s description and the widespread influence of *Winesburg, Ohio*, the short story cycle came to be accepted as an appropriate means by which to chronicle the episodic and seemingly increasingly discontinuous lives of small-town America.

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Although Anderson’s text’s contribution to the story cycle’s modernist resurgence can be gauged in part by the story cycles that followed in its wake,^[3] the text’s mixed reviews and its readers’ reactions to the “grotesque” figures at the center of its stories have made the text’s lasting significance (and most all of Sherwood Anderson’s other works) a matter of debate.^[4] Today, however, critics such as Robert Dunne, citing the text’s modernist revision of a traditional form, seek to redeem Anderson’s work from its increasingly “minor [...] place within the American canon” [Dunne 2005]. Referencing Robert Spiller’s *Literary History of the United States*, Dunne claims that *Winesburg, Ohio* deserves deeper and more complex contemporary interpretations because Anderson “liberat[ed] the American short story from a petrifying technique” [Dunne 2005, xiv].

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Contemporary interest in the text’s emancipatory version of the story cycle, although calling for renewed attention to Anderson’s text, overlooks its kinship to a kluge. While the story cycle form is rooted in ancient storytelling tradition and emphasizes unity achieved through “structure, movement, and thematic development” [Nagel 2001, 2], *Winesburg, Ohio* emphasizes instead the labor by which such unity is forged [Nagel 2001, 2]. Accordingly, because *Winesburg, Ohio* is irrelevant to the “roaring, word-ridden cities” [Love 2008, 39] after the “revolution [of] industrialism” [S. Anderson 1919, 70], can no longer function as a unifying force, a narrator and his young counterpart, George Willard, bear the sole responsibility of assembling *Winesburg*’s grotesques, alienated from themselves and isolated from each other, into a connected and temporarily cohesive community.^[5] The narrator and Willard’s work to narrate and therefore connect the grotesques’ heterogeneous stories results in a community characterized not by continuity but by fragmentariness, not by cohesion but by disparity.^[6]

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Winesburg, Ohio provides a model of affiliating disconnect individuals who, in an increasingly urban, information-oriented environment, are no longer linked by meaningfully sharing a geographic space or by participating in shared labor with one another. The text therefore merits the contemporary critical attention for which Dunne calls, but such attention should focus on the ways in which the text’s modernist version of the story cycle anticipates the delocalized and therefore highly structured interconnections facilitated by a network. In situating *Winesburg* as less a meaningful geographic space and more a potential hub able to connect isolated nodes, the text envisions the social group that can

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be made to materialize after more traditional social groups, such as those formed through shared stakes in a common livelihood or in the collective construction of tangible histories, are no longer possible.

Networks often assume positive forms. For example, for Manuel Castells, who obliquely follows Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's identification of the network's rhizomatic, non-centralized, and non-territorialized function, networks and information systems promote the "search for new connectedness around shared, reconstructed identity" [Castells 2004, 23]. However, *Winesburg, Ohio* suggests networks are more ambivalent. Notwithstanding the narrator and Willard's facilitative roles, the characters designated as grotesque in *Winesburg, Ohio* search for connectedness but are not able to overcome their marginalization and isolation. These characters, interpolated into a new system of organization but unable to progress or develop there, are barred from the "liberation rhetoric of distributed networks" and thereby suggest that incorporeal connections and reconstructed identities offer instead superficial and fragmentary cohesion [Galloway & Thacker 2007, 16]. Although they cannot help but signify an underlying unity, the grotesques are connected by their condition: the nodes of Winesburg's network — what constitutes its vision of future community — underscore the etymological root of nodus that includes "tumor or swelling" among its meanings. Distinguished by "distortion", "unnatural combinations" (much like the kluge to which they refer), and excess, the grotesques suggest that in the modernist iteration of the network, infection is endemic to the network itself [OED].^[7]

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While the grotesques personify the unnatural combinations that characterize the text's modernist interpretation of the story cycle, their own stories are also important. Introduced by the narrator in the prologue, "The Book of the Grotesque," the grotesque figures appeared first to an old writer in a "dream that was not a dream" [S. Anderson 1919, 24]. The vision, which was prompted by the old writer's conversation with an old carpenter who had attempted to fix the writer's bed, inspired the writer to write a book called "The Book of the Grotesque." The narrator claims that the book was never published, but that he "saw it once", and its "simple statement" made an "indelible impression" on his mind [S. Anderson 1919, 24–5]. According to its aphoristic statement, mankind makes truths, but when men and women take up these truths, take them for the Truth, and try to live their lives by them, the truths become false and the men and women become grotesques.

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In the stories that follow "The Book of the Grotesque," the grotesques that appeared to the old writer emerge as Winesburg's denizens. Although they are diseased, the grotesques are "not," [S. Anderson 1919] the narrator writes in "The Book of the Grotesque," "all horrible" [S. Anderson 1919, 24]. In his 1960 introduction to Anderson's text, Malcolm Cowley argues that the deformation suffered by the grotesques proceeds from a quintessentially modern condition: alienated and isolated by the forces of post-industrialism, the grotesques cultivate obsessions they mistake for truth and grow increasingly deformed by their inability to "express themselves" [Cowley 1960, 367] or "truly communicate with others" [Cowley 1960, 367]. Dependent on constructed connections, their communicative disability indicates why they need the narrator and Willard to relate (and thereby make meaningful) what Jones calls the significant episodes and what David Bordwell calls the "attenuated links" [Bordwell 2006] that characterize every network narrative [Bordwell 2006, 99].

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According to Cowley's reading of Anderson's text, social groups formed by individuals' tenuous links to a mutual alienation or a common claim to a defunct geographic space have little to say that can be meaningfully said. While the modernist iteration of the network's delocalized and hyperlinked form may facilitate connectivity and ensure unprecedented access to information, that connectivity cannot overcome "the innocence and horror of modernity [and the] subsequent alienation of the self and others" [Gniadek 2005, 23]. *Winesburg, Ohio* anticipates a networked future made possible by information's rising value (and the correspondent falling value of material, mechanical work), but the kluge the text actually constructs suggests that industry, technology, and information do not enable the (implicitly more valuable) kind of communication exchanged during the shared, hands-on labor of more traditional communities.

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Before returning to "The Book of the Grotesque," it is worth pointing out that seventeen years after the publication of Anderson's text, the same information saturation and degradation of meaningful communication functions as the subject of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller". In his work, Benjamin describes the process by which "secular productive forces of history" outstripped communities that were once defined and held together by the communicable experiences

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of storytellers and the symbiotic relationship between storytellers and craftsmen. According to Benjamin, the forces of history contributed to the proliferation of information, and because information “does not survive the moment in which it was new”, it functions as an insidious “form of communication” that “confronts” traditional communities “in a more menacing way” [Benjamin 2002, 146–8].

Winesburg, Ohio, which separates the past’s meaningful communication from the future’s excessive information, anticipates and illustrates Benjamin’s analysis. The narrator and Willard, by mediating the grotesques’ modern condition, help to provide this illustration. Together, they cast a Janus face over the text’s divide: the narrator looks longingly back to a time before the “coming of industrialism” [S. Anderson 1919], while Willard looks optimistically forward [S. Anderson 1919, 70]. Illustrating Benjamin’s trajectory, the narrator’s voice begins *Winesburg, Ohio*. Because, however, he — like the grotesques — cannot accommodate the information age he describes, he cedes his storytelling role to Willard. As *Winesburg*’s young journalist, Willard represents the future. Because he looks forward to the realization of his dream of becoming an urban reporter, it is the story of his departure from *Winesburg* that ends Anderson’s text.

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Although the entirety of *Winesburg, Ohio* narrates the shift from the traditional communication constituted by storytelling to the modern communication constituted by informationalism, in “The Book of the Grotesque” that shift is most conspicuous. There, the typological relationship (or “mythopoetic”, in Benjamin Spencer’s words) between the storyteller and the master craftsman is revised away from symbiosis and towards division. The relationship, which Benjamin in “The Storyteller” claims defines the storytelling age, and its modification in the wake of information’s influx augurs the storyteller’s increasingly liminal role in the twentieth century and his ultimate replacement by the journalist.

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In “The Book of the Grotesque,” an exchange between an old writer and an inept carpenter the writer hires to fix his bed illustrates the alteration of the relationship between the traditional storyteller and the master craftsmen. Although the writer’s dream of the grotesques and basis of his manuscript are prompted by the carpenter’s story of his dead brother, the “ludicrous” [S. Anderson 1919] tears the story causes the carpenter to cry, and the carpenter’s faulty reparation of the writer’s bed, the old writer’s manuscript was never published and the story of his vision never told. Seen only once by the narrator, the missing manuscript provides evidence, according to Jonathan Stouck that “we are meant to view the old writer as ineffectual” [Stouck 1969, 147]: consequently, in the place of the traditional storyteller and the master craftsman who listens and repeats the storyteller’s stories stand a book seen once but never published and an inexpertly repaired bed.^[8]

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The old writer’s unpublished, uncirculated book depends for its expression on the narrator, a figure who, standing on the threshold of the text’s technological divide, can connect the theme of “The Book of the Grotesque” to the procession of grotesques that constitute *Winesburg*’s nodes. Yet, as suggested above, the narrator positions himself as part of storytelling’s dying tradition. When he refers to *Winesburg* as “our town” [S. Anderson 1919, 203], he reveals that he, like the grotesques he describes, remains figuratively trapped in *Winesburg*. Additionally, and according to his own account, the narrator also suffers from a communicative disability: he is unable to interpret the “art of storytelling” [Benjamin 2002, 143] into anything approximating a master craft. Although the narrator claims in “Hands”, the first story following the prologue, that “[t]he story [...] is a job for a poet,” [S. Anderson 1919, 29–31] he emphasizes his inadequacy to the task: “Perhaps our talking of [the hands] will arouse the poet who will tell the hidden wonder story [...]” [S. Anderson 1919, 29–31]. The narrator’s own words are, he admits, “ but crudely stated. It needs the poet there” [S. Anderson 1919, 29–31].

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The narrator’s efforts to overcome the grotesques’ isolation by establishing those links that connect them to one another and to *Winesburg* are undermined by his admission that he is more like the grotesques than not. Similar to the depletion of the traditional storyteller that follows from the emergence of information as a major mode of communication, the narrator is crippled in his effort to link *Winesburg* to the mode of communication he works to illustrate. George Willard, however, offers an antithesis. His job as *Winesburg*’s newspaperman makes him the recorder of the town’s significant episodes and enables him to implicitly predict *Winesburg*’s role in the information age Benjamin later identifies and describes.

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In contrast to the narrator's inability to adequately express himself as a storyteller or poet, Willard possesses a talent for composition. Within him, there is a "secret something that is striving to grow" [S. Anderson 1919, 43] that gives him a "place of distinction" [S. Anderson 1919, 43] in Winesburg.^[9] Identified by that secret something, by "the idea that [he] would some day become a writer," Willard's character conflates not the storyteller and master craftsman, a partnership that "The Book of the Grotesque" suggests is no longer possible, but the storyteller and journalist [S. Anderson 1919, 134]. In the context to which Willard belongs, a writer is no longer a masterly storyteller or a poet; he is instead the urban reporter and city newspaperman that Willard makes the object of his ambition. Willard prepares himself for his future career as a journalist by meeting Winesburg Eagle's "one policy," [S. Anderson 1919] to "mention by name in each issue, as many as possible of the inhabitants of the village" [S. Anderson 1919, 134].

The policy, which predicts the social networks that today characterize many Internet users' experiences, means that Willard can define Winesburg by constructing connections grotesques' incidental and sought after listener and the implicit recorder of their experiences. Unlike the narrator, Willard can function as prosthetic ear and mouthpiece for the grotesques' untold and untellable experiences. In "Hands," for example, Wing Biddlebaum "hop[es] that George Willard [his only friend] would come and spend the evening with him" [S. Anderson 1919, 28]; in "Doctor Parcival" the doctor tells Willard "I have a desire to make you admire me, that's a fact. I don't know why. That's why I talk" [S. Anderson 1919, 50]; in "Respectability," Wash Williams tells Willard that he hates all women and that he will tell only Willard the reason why [S. Anderson 1919, 124–25]; and in "The Teacher", Kate Swift seeks to try to "bring home to the mind of the boy some conception of the difficulties he would have to face as a writer" [S. Anderson 1919, 163].

Although critics have often considered Willard's maturation and departure from Winesburg a symbol of the development and subsequent liberation of the artist who unifies the text's poorly matching parts, he is actually only the collector and implicit circulator of the grotesques' stories.^[10] Unsurprisingly, however, this enables Willard to function as a more useful hub than the town itself. Through his work, he ensures that as long as the Winesburg Eagle provides a log of the town's denizens, the grotesques cohere, even if only nominally, into a social group and community. Consequently, Edwin Fussell's argument that Willard can only "expose [the grotesques] as they really are" because he can "joi[n] sympathy and understanding to detachment and imperturbability" describes Willard not as the artist Fussell supposes, but as the reporter and journalist who does not "live the common passion," (original emphasis) but who reports on it [Fussell 1960, 111].

Willard's occupation in Winesburg ensures that he represents the only figure capable — mandated, in fact — to accommodate the excessive information that so handicaps the other characters. It is therefore only fitting that Willard's departure from Winesburg, undertaken to "meet the adventure of life," [S. Anderson 1919, 246] turns on his hope of "get[ting] work on a city newspaper" [S. Anderson 1919, 230]. In the urban environment Willard makes his goal, the civic journalist has replaced the inadequate storyteller, the failed poet, and the inept craftsman. The journalist, opposed to the artisans from whom he descends, trades in the currency of information, that which Benjamin suggests is, like the newspaper that features it, imminently disposable. Constantly expending the moment in which it was new because it demands superfluous "explanation," [Benjamin 2002, 147] information obstructs and therefore threatens the value of meaning. Put another way, information, inherently excessive and therefore expendable, disrupts meaningful communication by necessitating explanation, clarification, and commentary. While Willard's career aspirations adapt him to this proliferation, the narrator bemoans industrialism's shift towards a culture defined by the information conveyed by a newspapers instead of first-person experience.

According to *Winesburg, Ohio's* narrator, the excess of information renders once-significant and substantial stories incomprehensible, and thus makes it "difficult for the men and women of a later day to understand" anything without understanding that [a] revolution has in fact taken place. The coming of industrialism, attended by all the roar and rattle of affairs, the shrill cries of millions of new voices that have come among us from overseas, the going and coming of trains, the growth of cities, the building of the interurban car lines that weave in and out of towns and past farmhouses, and now in these later days the coming of the automobiles has worked a tremendous change in the lives and in the habits of thought of our people of Mid-America [S. Anderson 1919, 70–1].^[11]

The narrator's claim that industrialism's propagation has destroyed what Benjamin calls the "artisanal form of

communication” of storytelling and made the town of Winesburg inscrutable suggests why “The Book of the Grotesque”, which enabled the narrator to “understand many people and things”, exists only in the narrator’s memory. Instead of a published manuscript detailing a vision or dream from which all stories can be told, “books, badly imagined and written [...] in the hurry of our times, are in every household, magazines circulate by the millions of copies, newspapers are everywhere” [Benjamin 2002]. All men according to the narrator’s purview — both the “farmer by the stove” and “the men of the cities” — talk “glibly” and “senselessly” [Benjamin 2002].

Little symbolizes this early picture of information overload so well as that ubiquitous city newspaper to which Willard aspires. Today, social media critic Paul Gillin and his website newspaperdeathwatch.com attest to the inability of newspapers to compete with twenty-first-century information technology’s multiple and immediate distributions of data, but in *Winesburg, Ohio* newspapers offer an early analogue for the network.^[12] Mikhail Bakhtin gestures towards this point, although certainly not in relation to Anderson’s text, in *Problems with Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. While Bakhtin examines polyvocal discourse,^[13] itself associated with the heteroglossia enabled by networks and hypertexts, his claim that newspapers offer “a living reflection of the contradictions of contemporary society” invokes the diverse nodes, multiple contexts, and transferential accruals of meaning that also characterize the network [Castellucci Cox 1998, 30].^[14]

For Bakhtin, the newspaper’s polyvocal discourse demands the reader or user’s active participation in the construction of meanings and thus foretells the network’s promise to give every user a figurative voice [Bakhtin 1965, 30]. In Bakhtin’s favorable formulation, newspapers provide and therefore anticipate what Sproull and Kiesler describe as the network’s “free exchange of information,” a forum that both enables and requires discourse and debate. Willard, in *Winesburg, Ohio*, is suited to participate in this polyvocality: when he adheres to his newspaper’s one policy — recording as many names as possible in each newspaper’s issue — he gestures towards his aptitude for making the otherwise isolated grotesques assemble into a discourse rendered temporarily meaningful by the newspaper’s intermediary record. Notwithstanding Bakhtin’s salutary description, however, the early analogue for the network represented by newspapers in *Winesburg, Ohio* offers another instance of a kluge. Indeed, aside from Willard and the names he writes on its pages, no other character in Anderson’s text appears to contribute to or read the newspaper. *The Winesburg Eagle* does not, therefore, provide a forum for the discourse and debate that strengthens interlocutors’ connections; instead, it characterizes the connectivity assigned by Anderson to a nascent network by its inability to assemble fragmented and otherwise monstrous or distorted individuals into anything more than a transitory community. The paper’s apparent departure along with Willard not only suggests its transformation into the city newspaper for which Willard hopes to work, but it also underscores every newspaper’s temporariness and transience.

Such impermanence depends on the disposability that makes material the confrontation with meaning forced by the newspaper’s trade in excessive information. In Anderson’s text, this confrontation extends from Willard’s newspaper to his notepad and to the papers that belong to the grotesques. For example, although he carries “a little pad of paper” [S. Anderson 1919, 106] in his pocket to record the stories passed on by his sources, Willard accumulates only the information that enables him to adhere to his paper’s superficial policy. More emphatically, in “Paper Pills”, the second story following the prologue, papers signify the disposability of information and the disarticulation of meanings from stories. In “Paper Pills”, Dr. Reefy writes “ends of thoughts, beginnings of thoughts” [S. Anderson 1919, 37] on scraps of paper that he stuffs into his pockets until they become trash. When Dr. Reefy takes “handfuls of paper balls” [S. Anderson 1919, 36] and throws them at his one friend, saying, “this is to confound you, you blithering old sentimentalist,” [S. Anderson 1919, 36] he seems to comment on the sentimentality of the expectation that papers contain any communicable meaning at all.

Over time, the doctor, whose name joins a title indicative of health with a surname indicative of disease (“reef” refers to various diseases “which make the skin scabby” [OED]), has become unable to communicate his thoughts: meaningless to others and to himself, his words, in his pockets, harden into rubbish.^[15] Although the paper Willard carries in the form of the notepad in his own pocket suggests Willard’s adaptability to the future’s information age and therefore appears in contrast to Dr. Reefy’s disposable scraps, Willard’s newspaper (which does not attempt to tell its readers Dr. Reefy’s indescribable thoughts) functions instead as a similar symbol of superfluity. Expirable and daily consigned to scraps, the

newspaper's relevance must be renewed every day.

The grotesques' disposable papers, which oppose the old writer's absent and unpublished book in "The Book of the Grotesque", indicate the superfluity that makes communication meaningless in an information age and finds representation not only in these needless papers, but also in the needless appendages attached to the grotesques' bodies. As indicated above, because it claims among its many meanings both "distortion" ("twisted out of shape") and "exaggeration" ("heaping or piling up"), the word "grotesque" assumes the negative inflections of excess [OED]. Accordingly, the grotesques are marked as such by a corporeal mutation that indicates their collective inability to adapt to technological progression. The superfluity of hands in *Winesburg, Ohio*, for example, suggests the grotesques' failure to navigate informational excess. As disconnected from meaning as those papers they write upon, hands distort the grotesques and disable them from offering more than empty gestures.

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The meaningless of those hands engaged in producing a meaningless record of information is embedded in the text at a semantic level: "hand" or "hands" appears 201 times in this 224-page text. Unsurprisingly however, given the community's distance from its traditional agrarian past, few — if any — of these hands can be described as participating in significant craft or construction. "Hands," the first story to follow the prologue, most effectively illustrates this point through the useless hands of Wing Biddlebaum. A teacher before he migrated to Winesburg, Biddlebaum once used "the caress that was in his fingers [to] expres[s] himself" [S. Anderson 1919, 31]. When a "half-witted boy [...] imagined unspeakable things" [S. Anderson 1919, 31] and told his dreams "as fact," [S. Anderson 1919, 31] however, the teacher was driven to Winesburg. There, his fingers, "forever active, forever striving to conceal themselves in his pockets or behind his back, came forth and became the piston rods of his machinery of expression" [S. Anderson 1919, 28].

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Barred from teaching because of the non-generative sexuality his expressive fingers represented and unable to articulate the reasons, even to himself, for his disbarment, Biddlebaum attempts and fails to express himself with hands that paradoxically express too much and too little to Willard. When, for example, they once "stole forth and lay on George Willard's shoulders," [S. Anderson 1919, 30] Biddlebaum hurried home, and Willard resolved never to ask about the conspicuous hands. Although they function like piston rods in the "machinery of his expression," [S. Anderson 1919, 30] Biddlebaum's hands produce only silence and ensure his continued isolation. His hands, which as the story's title suggests, are entirely disproportionate to his body, distort Biddlebaum's body and suggest that those appendages, once an indispensable tool for both teaching and farming, are in Winesburg excessive and meaningless.^[16]

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Unlike the text's beginning in "The Book of the Grotesque," at its end, hands do not create even poorly constructed beds. Although Willard's hands are preoccupied "[a]ll day" [S. Anderson 1919, 134] in writing disposable "little facts upon [his] pad" about the grotesques whose hands are tied by the truths that trap them, his work produces information that ultimately appears unread [S. Anderson 1919, 134].^[17] Willard's notepad consequently anticipates both the place of the newspaper, for which it functions as precursor, and the activity hands occupy in the information-centric future of a post-industrial America. He replaces the narrator's self-proclaimed clumsy effort at poetry with an urban journalism that depends on the ability to assemble the fragments — in the sense of broken and isolated pieces — from which newsworthy information springs.

35

It is with this handiwork that Willard reenacts and reinterprets the grotesque's inarticulate gestures. In filling his pad, Willard's hands suggest both the hands that create the newspaper's bylines and anticipates the hands that leaf through the newspaper's pages and enable their reader to see the network of polyvocal babble on the page and therefore read the discordant conversations that constitute the community the newspaper obliquely represents. In this manner, while *Winesburg, Ohio* laments the disappearance of the craftsman's skilled hands and the hands that work the soil in rural communities (as well as the corollary disappearance of the gestures that once augmented a story's meaning), Willard's hands act out an entirely new set of tactile activities. In fact, Willard's hands assemble a kluge: while Anderson's text indicates the newspaper offers a poor substitute for community, the newspaper to which Willard contributes does fill the void that traditional communities have left. Signifying a perhaps distressingly ugly technological progression, the newspaper also functions as the network's early analogue: it anticipates the "physical experience" of the computer whereby the continual movement of fingers and hands extend not the ear (even the prosthetic ear Willard offers), as a

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poet or traditional storyteller would have it, but the eye [Shaviro 2003, 6–7].

Its representation of the grotesques as both excessive and necessary to the future indicates that *Winesburg, Ohio* remains profoundly ambivalent about the concept of community it ultimately represents. Their interpolation into the expendable present signified by Willard's notepad ensures a community but the community is transient, made only temporarily meaningful by the newspaper's disposable immediacy and poised to become even more isolated and irrelevant as a result of Willard's departure. Without this kind of kluge, however, the "gesturing figures, [...] fragmented people, [and] 'unused lives' " of Winesburg would not even share the paradoxical distant intimacy and lonely connectivity [Ingram 1971, n. 20, 151] that makes them embody Shaviro's description of the network's "Leibnizean paradox" whereby those in the network are "simultaneously connected and alone" [S. Anderson 1919, 29].

37

Winesburg, Ohio, which begins with an unfinished map (illustrated by Harald Toksvig for the book's first edition) that features unfinished streets and undelineated boundaries, suggests that *Winesburg, Ohio* is, like a network, a place that is no place.^[18] Yet the nascent network named by Winesburg constitutes a trap. In fact (and in spite of Willard's narrative status), neither the narrator nor Willard affects a complete escape from *Winesburg, Ohio*'s grotesquerie.^[19] Willard departs Winesburg in the last story, but the train conductor notes that "a thousand George Willards" have already undertaken his journey. He may have outgrown Winesburg and "become taller than his father", but Willard has not appreciably advanced in intelligence, "one looking at him would not have thought him particularly smart." Even the commencement of Willard's journey is thwarted when he glances out the train and sees "the train [...] still in Winesburg." He departs, but as he does so he thinks not of his future, but of the "Turk Smollet [...] Butch Wheeler [...] Helen White." Ostensibly "a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood," Winesburg, in the form of the names still written in his notebook, attends Willard's escape.^[20]

38

Indeed, the grotesques of *Winesburg, Ohio* — in their implicit sickness and their unboundedness from geography — illustrate the meaninglessness of "escape" and point to the pervasiveness of the network *Winesburg, Ohio* implicitly critiques.^[21] The network brings the outside in and makes intimate what is otherwise distant; it, like Winesburg, captures users, making their "escape [...] nearly impossible" [Shaviro 2003, 4]. It is consequently no accident that Willard's incomplete flight from Winesburg merely reenacts the other grotesques' attempts.^[22] Indeed, Willard, like all of the grotesques, returns to Winesburg if only by virtue of the fact the narrator calls forth and connects their stories [S. Anderson 1919, 204].

39

If, as Shaviro argues, the modern conception of the network is a system whose "shape" depends on "the force of all the messages, as they accrete over time" [Shaviro 2003, 24], the shape of *Winesburg, Ohio* — formed by proliferating papers on which nothing of lasting meaning can be written and superfluous hands clumsily failing to engage in a new kind of labor — is the shape of a kluge. Although it is also appropriate to describe the network connected in Anderson's narrative in terms of the grotesque and its denotation of unnatural, odd, or distorted shapes, "grotesque" hearkens back to an older form ("grottesca," "a kinde of rugged vnpolished [sic] painters worke, anticke worke"), while a kluge both underscores the technology that yokes Winesburg to the information age, via the newspaper as an analogue of the network, and represents the accidentally-integrative role the urban journalist serves in the temporary communities he defines [OED].

40

Similar to the prologue's badly-fixed, but nonetheless story-inspiring bed, a kluge emphasizes the awkward transition from a pre-technological past, rich in tangible connections and endemic identity, to a hyper-connected, networked future. Accordingly, the grotesques upon which the text centers are the awkward and alienated casualties of the post-industrial rise of information that makes the networks to come both necessary and inevitable. While the network ultimately envisioned in *Winesburg, Ohio* provides a stopgap measure that kluges together an unraveling community, the bandage affixed to the site of its communicative disease provides only temporary relief and does not enable restorative progression. Rather than celebrating the network's "heroic tones" and "countercultural ideology" (despite its militaristic roots), the grotesques in *Winesburg, Ohio* embody a lamentation for information's pervasiveness and the corollary degradation of more meaningful communication [Castells 2004, 354]. Consequently, while *Winesburg, Ohio* suggests that the transition to the network as a dominant mode of contemporary organization is ugly, sick, and

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distressing, it also suggests that the transition is inevitable. An emblem of this transition, Willard transforms the old writer in “The Book of the Grotesque”: carrying uncannily close at hand the fragments of Winesburg, Willard redefines the meaning of a viral journalist to indicate the diseased nodes and alienated circuitry that enables the network’s connectivity.

Notes

[1] Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and N. Katherine Hayles have usefully named and explored posthumanist theory.

[2] Probably penned by Maxwell Anderson.

[3] Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, William Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished*, among many others.

[4] Indeed, as early as 1926 Ernest Hemingway parodied Anderson’s oeuvre to dispel critical comparisons to his own craft, and forty years later, Susan Sontag called Winesburg, Ohio’s melodrama “bad to the point of being laughable” [Sontag 1966, 284].

[5] According to Love, the book best represents the “Andersonian dilemma over the actuality of roaring, word-ridden cities versus the dream of pastoral stillness” [Love 2008].

[6] In “Magic and Memory in the Story Cycle”, Karen Castellucci Cox describes the story cycle’s unity as enforced by a reader who must navigate the story cycle’s progressing “erratically and nondirectionally, looping forward and backward, often omitting causal links between physical and psychological events” [Castellucci Cox 1998, 151].

[7] Consider Galloway and Thacker’s word choice when they argue that “the concept of the network has infected broad swaths of contemporary life” [Galloway & Thacker 2007, 7]

[8] The shoddy workmanship makes it necessary for the writer to use a chair to climb into this bed, but rather than aggravating the writer, the necessity makes the bed “quite a special thing,” and climbing into it gets “into [the writer’s] mind that he would some time die unexpectedly”, after which he feels “more alive” [S. Anderson 1919, 24] than ever.

[9] Here a parallel might be drawn between Willard and the old writer in “The Book of the Grotesque”. In the prologue the old writer is described as “like a pregnant woman, only that thing inside him was not a baby but a youth. No, it wasn’t a youth, it was a woman, young and wearing a coat of mail like a knight” [S. Anderson 1919, 24]. In this example, Willard functions as the writer’s heir, a modern, post-industrial counterpart to an artist from a bygone era.

[10] Malcolm Cowley, Edwin Fussell, David Stouck, Walter Rideout, and Ralph Ciancio position Willard as *Winesburg, Ohio*’s central consciousness and explore Willard as the artist central to Anderson’s work. Each critic also notes that Willard’s development proceeds along lines similar to Anderson’s own.

[11] Perhaps ironically, Ingram suggests that “[o]ne would expect to find such a passage on the editorial page of a Cleveland newspaper, but not in a short story” [Ingram 1971, 160].

[12] In many cases such data is also gratis, the cost of a computer and access to a network notwithstanding.

[13] Castellucci Cox argues that analysts have often used polyvocal discourse theory to discuss the story cycle as a part of the tradition of more experimental modern novels [Castellucci Cox 1998, 155].

[14] See *The Dialogic Imagination* and Robert Glenn Howard.

[15] Although Dr. Reefy finally unravels the scraps to, read to his wife, he afterwards crumbles them, “stuff[ing] them away into his pockets to become round hard balls” [S. Anderson 1919] again, and his wife, the only one to whom he communicated his thoughts, dies only a year after their marriage [S. Anderson 1919, 38]. He constitutes one of Winesburg’s nodes, but Dr. Reefy adds neither his voice nor his thoughts to its network.

[16] See Robert Frost’s 1915 poem, *The Death of the Hired Man*

[17] In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin argues that “[t]he role of the hand in production has become more modest, and the place it filled in storytelling lies waste” [Benjamin 2002]. According to Benjamin, “storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in

genuine storytelling what is expressed gains support in a hundred ways from the work-seasoned gestures of the hand" [Benjamin 2002, 162]

[18] Critical comparison to Anderson's hometown of Clyde, Ohio notwithstanding.

[19] Nor is it completely clear that the narrator and Willard are not themselves grotesques.

[20] In *Images of Idiocy*, Martin Halliwell claims that Sherwood Anderson views everyone as possessing a grotesque quality and "sees the antidote to it in communal compassion and sympathy" [Halliwell 2004, 163]

[21] The sickness the grotesques carry may indeed be the sickness of nostalgia, which, according to the OED, can be "regarded as a medical condition."

[22] Most notably Elmer Cowley who beats up Willard before "[s]pringing aboard a passing train" [S. Anderson 1919, 201]

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