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WRIGHT MORRIS: IMAGINATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS OF COMMONPLACE, THE PAST, AND LANGUAGE

Rice University Ph.D. 1982

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WRIGHT MORRIS:
IMAGINATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS
OF COMMONPLACE, THE PAST, AND LANGUAGE

by

ROY KENNEDY BIRD

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

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HOUSTON, TEXAS

SEPTEMBER 1981
Wright Morris: Imaginative Transformations of Commonplace, the Past, and Language

by Roy Kennedy Bird

Abstract

Wright Morris's experience has sustained him through twenty-one novels and almost a dozen other books. In a sense all of these texts are a reprocessing of the same raw material: each new novel represents a different view through a flaw in the window of fiction. A slight change of perspective opens up new vistas of the Nebraska plains, bringing some objects into focus and blurring others that seemed clear before. Just as each novel distorts as well as clarifies, so too does each new critical perspective applied to the novels emphasize one interpretation at the risk of obscuring equally valid readings. For this reason, however lively and imaginative in its own right, no single discussion of a body of work of the stature of Wright Morris's fiction can hope to do more than add one new perspective to an accumulating number of critical repossessions. This study attempts a series of readings whose effect is at once discrete and cumulative. On one level, each chapter, emphasizing a different artistic technique in Morris's fiction, is a separate utterance, and the effect is meant to resemble the tossing of several pebbles into a pond at the same time. Each pebble creates its own system of waves, likely to interact with the waves created by the other pebbles tossed synchronously into the water. On another level, the chapters, which all culminate in a discussion of
the importance of the process of transformation in Wright Morris's
fiction, are intended to build to a crescendo of meaning the way that
pebbles tossed into a pond one after another in the same place create an
ever-expanding, ever more powerful system of waves. Acting
simultaneously along diachronic and synchronic axes of meaning, this
study therefore imitates the effect of a reading of all of Wright
Morris's novels.

The introductory chapter uses Morris's own critical statements as
a basis for establishing the importance to him of the concept of raw
material transformed through imagination into art. Chapter 1, employing
as a point of departure the Russian formalist idea of defamiliarization
(slowing down perception of the ordinary to force a reappraisal of
cliché), examines Morris's ability to transform the commonplace into
the uncommon. Chapter 2 explores the self-conscious relationship
between the author's real and imagined past in Wright Morris's fiction.
The same incidents and the same people—in particular, versions of his
uncle, his father, and his mother—appear again and again in his novels
as Morris struggles to master a threatening reality by transforming it
into a world of his own creation. Chapter 3 assesses Morris's
linguistic explorations of disparate modes of representing reality.
Calling into question the traditional assumption that words directly
represent reality, Morris emphasizes the indeterminacy of language and
the subjectivity of all perception by allowing his own voice to mingle
with that of his narrators, by mixing photographic and verbal modes of
representation, and by self-consciously asserting the fictive status of
the authorial enterprise. Chapter 4 applies the critical perspectives established in the first three chapters to a careful reading of Morris's two most recent novels, *The Fork River Space Project* and *Plains Song for Female Voices*, emphasizing once again the importance in Wright Morris's fiction of the artistic transformation of commonplace, the past, and language.
Acknowledgments

To Marion B. Brady, who taught me to read; to David L. Minter, who encouraged me to take chances; to Walter W. Isle, who knows the course; and to Penny C. Bird, who endured it all.
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My books (which do not know that I exist) 
are as much part of me as is this face, 
the temples gone to gray and the eyes gray, 
the face I vainly look for in the mirror, 
tracing its outline with a concave hand. 
Not without understandable bitterness, 
I feel now that the quintessential words 
expressing me are in those very pages 
which do not know me, not in those I have written. 
It is better so. The voices of the dead 
will speak to me for ever.

— Jorge Luis Borges
Introduction

Wright Morris and the Helmet of Mambrino

... although it is Sancho who inherits the world, it is the Helmet of Mambrino, that illusion, that makes it desirable. — *The Territory Ahead*

Among the photographs Wright Morris took during a retrospective visit to his home state of Nebraska is a right-side view of an old car entitled "Model T Ford with California Top, Ed’s Place, near Norfolk, Nebraska, 1947."¹ The car, sitting in a dirt yard in front of a wooden farm shed, is emblematic of much of Morris's fiction, set so often in an old car on the open road or in the small towns of Morris’s boyhood Nebraska. Nevertheless, the most arresting component of the photograph is neither the car nor its rustic surroundings. Instead, it is the shadow of the head and camera of the photographer, projected into the bottom of the picture. This shadow, "an intrusion," as Morris calls it, prevented him from using the photograph in a book he was writing at the time, but when he came back to the photograph several years later and "saw that picture for the first time," it began to win him over.² Indeed, others of Morris's photographs contain similar intrusions, including the reflection of the photographer in the plate-glass doors behind a sleeping derelict in *Love Affair--A Venetian Journal.*³

Discussing the meaning of these intrusions and others of Morris's photographic techniques, Peter C. Bunnell points out that
the self-conscious frontality and framing of a Morris image exploits the fragmenting properties of photography. By calling attention not only to the arbitrariness of angle but to the edge of the picture, Morris refers to the world outside the limits of the picture.4

What Bunnell says about Morris's photography serves equally well to characterize his fiction, for, although his subjects inevitably are real, even commonplace, he moves beyond mimesis with authorial intrusions and contemplations which call attention to the fictive status of his novels. Morris himself asserts that

If I were only telling a story, I wouldn't bother to continue writing. Fiction is more than action. I want to be able to meditate from page to page on what the page is about.5

Beyond Morris's skill as a storyteller,6 then, it is these authorial intrusions and meditations on the status and meaning of fiction and consciousness which claim the interest of careful readers. These very techniques which so exasperate and confound the casual reader are the qualities which reward the more painstaking reader with a richness of vision, a density of intermingling of fact and illusion which earn Morris a place among America's best contemporary novelists.

Wayne Booth describes Morris's involvement in the depiction and reformation of reality as "a form of the Platonic drive for permanence, reality, timelessness, in a time-bound world of change."7 David Madden identifies in Morris's works a "rhetoric of meditation" which "modulates between the vernacular and formal syntax," between the raw material of observed reality and the imagination of the artist.8
G. B. Crump sees Morris as taking up a position between those of his contemporaries who attempt "to give the audience reality as directly and in as unmediated a form as possible" and those who "feel that fiction is to be prized for its very fictiveness, prized because it is not reality."9

Morris begins *The Territory Ahead* with a discussion of a passage from *Don Quixote* which shows the tension between raw material and technique, a tension of central importance in his own fiction:

"God alive, Sir Knight of the Mournful Countenance," said Sancho, "I cannot bear in patience some of the things that your Grace says! Listening to you, I come to think that all you have told me about deeds of chivalry and winning kingdoms and bestowing islands and other favors and dignities is but wind and lies, all buggery or humbuggery or whatever you choose to call it. For when anyone hears your Grace saying that a barber's basin is Mambrino's helmet, and after four days you still insist that it is, what is he to think except that such a one is out of his mind?"10

Morris says that "We have the barber's basin, more crushed and dented than ever, among us today. It symbolizes the state of the imagination in the raw material world of facts." By raw material, he means

that comparatively crude ore that has not been processed by the imagination—what we refer to as life, or as experience, in contrast to art. By technique I mean the way that the artist smelts this material down for human consumption."11

Morris decries the lack of imagination in the works of such writers as Truman Capote, whose non-fiction novels show the extent to which he allows himself to be dominated by his raw material.12 Morris's warnings are just as strong against the excesses of an art which
sacrifices raw material to imagination. Though James Joyce may have been
brilliant enough to subordinate experience to technique in *Finnegans
Wake*, we are led, Morris says, to ask,

> Is the end result . . . still alive? Is life, real or
imaginary, meant to be processed as much as that? In
Joyce the dominance of technique over raw material
reflects one crisis of the modern imagination. Raw
material has literally dissolved into technique.\(^{13}\)

Turning to an evaluation of his own fiction in *The Territory
Ahead*, a confident statement of literary theory he wrote just after
winning the National Book Award for *The Field of Vision* in 1956,
Morris confesses that

> raw material, an excess of both material and comparatively
raw experience, has been the dominant factor in my own role
as a novelist. . . . The realization that I had to create
coherence, conjure up my synthesis, rather than find it,
came to me, as it does to most Americans, disturbingly
late.\(^{14}\)

Perhaps because of this fear that he has allowed raw material to
dominate in his own fiction, Morris reserves highest praise for Henry
James, who processed an excess of raw material into "an immaterial
essence, an orchestration of vibrations that dodged no issue, but
reduced all issues to parentheses."\(^{15}\) In fact, Wright Morris sees
himself as a kind of contemporary Henry James, ignored by the public
because of the interiority of his texts and neglected by critics
because his works do not flow in the mainstream of American fiction.
Morris fills his books with Jamesian parentheses and authorial asides
which he identifies with the intrusions of Thomas Mann,\(^{16}\) confident that
what he is doing is essential to bring balance to a fiction susceptible
to the domination of a life's experience burdened by "Too much crude
ore."

As Booth, Madden, and Crump demonstrate, and as Morris's own
criticism implies, no thorough study of Wright Morris's fiction can
ignore the tension in his works between raw material and technique,
between what the artist perceives with his senses and what he transforms
into fiction through the power of his imagination. In terms of the
analogy of Wright Morris's photography, his readers must be cognizant
of more than the artifact in the photograph or the novel; they must
always be aware of the consciousness with which Morris frames his
portrayal. The author's shadow is just as discernible in Morris's
fiction as it is in his photograph of the Model T Ford. His novels
are mirrors which reflect back Wright Morris's consciousness at the
same time that they mirror reality, just as the plate-glass doors
behind his photographic subject reflect back to Morris his own image
in his photograph of a Venetian derelict.

Morris's consciousness that his novels mold a fictive world that
mirrors and yet at the same time transforms perceived reality into a
new vision places him squarely in what Robert Alter calls the tradition
of the self-conscious novel. Beginning with Cervantes, Alter argues
that such early practitioners of the novel as Sterne, Fielding, and
Richardson were keenly aware of the illusory nature of their enterprise.
While their novels mirror reality, they also play with their recogniton
of fiction as an imitation, as an illusion. Alter says that the
fully self-conscious novel is one in which,

from beginning to end, through the style, the handling of narrative viewpoint, the names and words imposed on the characters, the patterning of the narration, the nature of the characters and what befalls them, there is a consistent effort to convey to us a sense of the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention.18

Though consistently aware of the fictive status of the authorial enterprise, to the point of asserting that "we carry on the business of living in fiction,"19 Morris is not as thoroughly self-conscious as Vladimir Nabokov, who, Alter says, "has been more self-conscious about his novelistic self-consciousness than any predecessors or imitators,"20 nor is he as self-conscious as the "fabulators" John Hawkes, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., whose fiction, Robert Scholes says, has abandoned its attempt to represent reality and relies more on "the power of words to stimulate the imagination."21 Instead, Morris reflects more faithfully the historical development of the self-conscious novel, which experienced a period of eclipse during the realism-dominated nineteenth century, only to be revived in the twentieth century.22 Indeed, Morris's fiction gains much of its energy from the tension between his need to depict, master, and thus assert authorial control over the chaos of experience and his recognition that such authorial mastery is illusory. In his best efforts, Morris measures up to the standard Alter sets for the resurgent self-conscious novel of the twentieth century: he contrives "to have the mirror held to art show forth the face of history as well--
even as history increasingly challenged the artist and any value his art might attain."  

Literary self-consciousness of the kind that Alter identifies in his title "History and Imagination" and that Morris implies in his dichotomy of "raw material and technique" manifests itself in several ways in Morris's fiction. The purpose of this thesis is to explore some of the major aspects of self-consciousness in Morris's works and to assess how this self-consciousness contributes to his achievement as a novelist.  

Wright Morris praises The Brothers Karamozov because in that book "the commonplace is made uncommon." Chapter 1 of this thesis examines Morris's ability to transform the commonplace into the uncommon in his own fiction. Since "Reappraisal is repossession" and since reappraisal leads the artist to the transformation of ordinary experience through the power of the imagination, one of Morris's predominant techniques is to manipulate the commonplace, the cliché, in such a way as to force his reader to reexamine attitudes toward everyday objects, commonplace experience, and clichéd language. Morris says that he seeks "to make my own what I have inherited as clichés." As the Russian formalists would put it, Morris defamiliarizes the commonplace, forcing reappraisal and thus repossession. In terms of the image of the helmet of Mambrino from Don Quixote, Morris complains that for contemporary Americans "It is the basin as basin that interests us, and no transformation is desired." At the risk of losing forever any popular appeal he might have, Morris turns away from giving people what they want to see and
insists on his artistic right to transform the barber's basin into the helmet of Mambrino. He forces his reader to re-view and re-appraise with him, insisting that the clichéd surface of the commonplace conceals a transcendence that can be attained only through the artist's imagination. And yet Morris's very insistence that "the use of the cliché is one of the subtler crafts of fiction" reveals the self-consciousness of his technique. He could deliberately avoid the cliché or the commonplace, but he chooses instead to revivify them, restoring some of the luster of the helmet of Mambrino lost through decades of use as a barber's basin. Morris thus seeks to fulfill Joseph Conrad's injunction that

it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences, that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour; and the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.

Because the commonplace develops as a cumulative effect of repetition of experience through time, and because cliché develops through a similar repetition of language through time, an analysis of the commonplace and cliché leads naturally to speculation on the uses of the past in Wright Morris's fiction. The second chapter of this study explores the self-conscious relationship of the author's real and imagined past in Wright Morris's fiction. Morris says that "Early memories, although lacking in detail, may be so charged with emotion they function as icons." Indeed, his fiction is filled with such
icons: the same experiences appear repeatedly in his novels, as do the same characters and the same families, however changed their names and incidents of background might be. Yet Morris confesses that he knows very little of his origins. He had "no 'family' life." Cryptically, he says, "My father knew me not at all. My mother had died." He spent only his first nine years on the Great Plains, though they are the setting for much of his fiction and indelibly affect all of it. The paradoxes of his past are resolvable only in terms which emphasize the self-consciousness of his fiction. Alter points out that the author's imagination is free, no matter what mundane reality may have done to him in his personal life. To Morris, history is no imposition because he is able to make anything he wants of the facts of history. What he does in his fiction, to a large degree, then, is very similar to what Alter says nineteenth-century realists did in their novels: "outdo a threatening or at least bewildering historical reality by remaking it imaginatively." Yet Morris is always conscious that his fictions establish rival realities; for this reason, his considerable humor is nevertheless dark humor and his analysis of character is equivocal and ambiguous.

Morris's ambivalence toward the uses of the past is visible in the course of his career. He began with a series of novels and photo-texts based solidly on his Great Plains experience. In the fifties he turned at times to settings outside the Midwest, yet his fictions still were grounded solidly in his attempts to repossess his personal past. But The Territory Ahead, published in 1958, argues
that American writers have traditionally been paralyzed by their inability to overcome their nostalgia for or reaction against the past. Morris consequently turned from his ruminations on the past to produce novels grounded in what he calls 'the immediate present.' Nevertheless, the turmoil of the sixties convinced him that ignoring the past to live in the immediate present of the sixties 'happening' is even more dangerous and stultifying than succumbing to the temptations of nostalgia. A Bill of Rites, A Bill of Wrongs, A Bill of Goods, published in 1968, is Morris's angry response to the excesses of an age which celebrated media, drugs, McLuhan, Sontag, and the non-fiction novels of Capote and Mailer. Since then, Morris has returned to the Midwest and to his own past for settings and characters for his fiction. And it is in these recent novels that Morris has achieved some of his greatest success in self-consciously transforming his perceptions of his past into imaginative fiction.

The work of such French theorists as Derrida and Lacan has shown that problems of language and meaning are inextricably connected to problems of history, just as commonplace in experience and cliché in speech are parallel phenomena. In chapter three of this study I will expand my appraisal of self-consciousness in Wright Morris's fiction by turning from a consideration of his uses of the past to an analysis of his linguistic technique. Contrasting the methods of such modern realists as Capote and Mailer with his own vision, Morris says that

To dispense with the artifices of the novel, to describe no more nor less than what one sees, what one knows, is the predictable climax of the realistic tradition. Such a
writer must believe that what he sees, and what he knows, are easily rendered into language. He must be free of the doubt that this rendering is inescapably a process of fiction, and that his solid-seeming words are merely pictures of the facts. 37

Recognition of the indeterminate relationship between language and experience does not force Morris to abandon all attempts at representing reality, yet it impels him to be self-consciously tentative in constructing the language of his novels. Rather than attempt to give the impression that his language directly represents reality, as Mailer does in The Executioner's Song, for instance, Morris allows his own voice so to intrude and to mingle with his narrator's voice that it often is challenging to determine which voice is which. Morris explores other aspects of the problematic relationship between language and reality by doing such things as giving verbal descriptions of photographs and by juxtaposing photographs against text, without direct statement of the relationship between the two.

In the fourth and final chapter of this study, I will combine the perspectives developed throughout to make a detailed analysis of Morris's two most recent novels, The Fork River Space Project and Plains Song. Each of these works embodies in distinct ways the self-conscious qualities of Wright Morris's fiction. Together they show that Morris's art is an art of multifarious interplay between raw material and technique, history and imagination, the photographer's subject and his own shadow at the bottom of the picture, the barber's basin and the helmet of Mambrino.
Chapter 1
Commonplace Made Uncommon

... if we could feel anything, very long, it would kill us, ... and we get on by not even feeling ourselves. — The Home Place

Near the center of The Works of Love, which Wright Morris calls "the linchpin in my novels concerned with the plains," there appears a strange scene that self-consciously lays bare ideas and techniques central to Morris's fiction. Called "In the Moonlight," the scene is a solitary groping for understanding by Will Brady, central figure of the novel. Born on the desolate plains of Indian Bow, Nebraska, Will sees his father, Adam Brady, hang himself from his windmill and his mother, Caroline Clayton Brady, die of loneliness. Later moving on, Will establishes a liaison with Opal Mason, an aging whore who comes as close to giving him contentment as anyone whom Will ever meets, but she laughs at his proposal of marriage. Will offers marriage to a younger prostitute, who also refuses, though she later sends Will Brady her son to raise. Brady eventually marries Ethel Bassett, the widow of his boss. In bed on their honeymoon, Ethel winds herself tightly in her sheet until she can be certain that Will accepts her terror of sex. They coexist for years until Ethel leaves home after discovering Will's affair with an Omaha hotel cigar counter girl. Will and the girl marry and Will moves her and his "son," Willy, into a fine city house built incongruously on the outskirts of the small
town of Murdock, Nebraska. Living in the basement while his wife and son pass their time listening to records in the upper bedrooms, Will feels no more comfortable here than in any of his other homes. When his laying hens begin to die from a strange disease, he proposes a move to Omaha, the setting for "In the Moonlight."

His achievement of the American dream of wealth having brought him no closer to connection with people than he was before, Will happens upon a copy of Jules Verne's Journey to the Moon. Thoughts of the book keep him up at night. He decides that it is harder to know the man across the street or the woman across the room than to know the dark side of the moon, that men "traveled to the moon, so to speak, to get away from themselves." 2 What the world needs, Will Brady decides, is

a traveler who would stay right there in the bedroom, or open the door and walk slowly about his own house. Who would sound a note, perhaps, on the piano, raise the blinds on the front-room windows, and walk with a candle into the room where the woman sleeps. A man who would recognize this woman, this stranger, as his wife.

Will vows to find a book that contains such a traveler, or write his own if he has to, but because of his limitations, his quest for understanding succeeds only for the briefest instant at the moment of his death in a stinking canal in Chicago. In his characteristically self-conscious way, Wright Morris implies that The Works of Love is the book Will Brady needs to read. Always tentative in his assessments, Morris does not imply that he has all the answers Will Brady seeks,
but he knows that his book has the virtue at least of treating the
important questions.

In all of his fiction, Morris eschews a trip to the moon for a
trip around the room of a simple frame house or a trip through the
mind of an aging Midwesterner. Because Morris chooses most often as
his subject the commonplace, his novels, from their bare-bones style
to the often undramatic incidents they narrate, appear naively
simplistic. That simplicity is both deliberate and deceiving. In the
scene just examined, for instance, Morris deliberately limits himself
to the perspective of a man as impotent as Will Brady. This conscious
restriction of point of view enables Morris to explore the mind of a
limited person whose weaknesses stifle his desire for connection with
other human beings. Yet Morris's own voice is never far from the voice
of Will Brady, showing that the author empathizes with his hero's
struggle for understanding. To use Leslie Fiedler's phrase, Wright
Morris's novels try to convince his readers that "Nebraska is the
absurd hell we all inhabit," not just the private hell of characters
like Will Jennings Brady.

Wright Morris's abiding interest in the commonplace is a hallmark
of his fiction, but acknowledging his interest in the commonplace is
not the same as understanding the use Morris makes of it. Discussing
his stylistic technique with David Madden, Morris says,

In my use of language there is an element that the narrative
novelist has no interest in, might even find obstructive. He
would say, One of the things that is wrong with this novel is
that it holds the reader up. He has to read too carefully.
I would agree. But that's the way I write.
Victor Shklovsky and other Russian formalist critics share Morris's interest in "holding the reader up." In fact, Shklovsky reasons that art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things... The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.

Since, "as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic," art must take as its goal "to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception." The Russian term for this process of making objects seem unfamiliar is ostraneniye, literally, "making strange," translated into English as defamiliarization.

Shklovsky illustrates the concept of defamiliarization with such examples from Russian literature as Tolstoy's story "Kholstomer." By narrating from the point of view of a horse, Tolstoy succeeds at making the content of the story seem unfamiliar. The story holds up for ridicule the cruelty and absurdity of certain human actions in much the same way as does the fourth section of Gulliver's Travels. A similarly obvious example of defamiliarization occurs in Wright Morris's War Games, where the Colonel (central character and implicit narrator) adopts for a moment the point of view of his wife's pet canary:

... if he was a bird, he would find his wife's face frightening. Up close, peering through the fragile cage like that. It was possible the bird—the Colonel walked into the bathroom as if to finish the thought in private—thought that she was free and the Colonel and his wife were behind the bars.
Besides forcing his reader to rethink his assumptions about such commonplace notions as the relationship between owner and pet, this scene focuses attention on the irony of the Colonel's condition: because he is so uncomfortable around his wife that he must leave the room to think unflattering thoughts about her, he is virtually a prisoner in his own home, as are many of the other men in Morris's fiction.¹³

Most examples of defamiliarization in Morris are less obvious than this one, but the technique pervades his work. Interested as he is in re–vision, re–possession, and transformation,¹⁴ Morris constantly holds his reader up by subjecting commonplaces of language, culture, and experience to painstaking analysis. More subtle than the laying bare of technique that Laurence Sterne employs in Tristram Shandy, which Shklovsky calls "the most typical novel in world literature" and which Robert Alter discusses as a model of self–conscious fiction,¹⁵ Morris's use of defamiliarization nevertheless places him within the self–conscious tradition of the novel. What this means is that Morris not only uses defamiliarization, which Shklovsky says is a characteristic of all art, but he uses it in a way which both forces a reappraisal of the commonplace and calls that reappraisal into question. Stated another way, Morris shows the absurdity of the commonplace while at the same time arguing for its necessity. This man who works so hard to force his readers to reappraise the commonplace nevertheless has a profound reverence for the ordinary—for the cliché in speech and the habitual in experience. Morris sees danger in Ezra Pound's artistic
injunction to "make it new."\textsuperscript{16} For Morris, newness \textit{per se} in art is no more desirable than conspicuous consumption in society. Rather than disregard the traditional, he revivifies it. Rather than avoid the cliché, he uses it in a way that makes it his own. In terms of the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, Morris is profoundly aware of the dangerously stultifying power of the commonplace—"we get on by not even feeling ourselves"—but he at the same time acknowledges that constant defamiliarization is completely disorienting—"if we could feel anything, very long, it would kill us."\textsuperscript{17} In his short story "Drrdia," Morris identifies "The desire to open out, to confront what is new, and the fear that dictated withdrawal" as the "two great forces that moved the world."\textsuperscript{18} It is these same two forces which make cliché at once evasive and comforting.

Unable to envision a world without the commonplace, Morris settles for a repossession of the ordinary. He makes it new by making it his own. Like Claude Lévi-Strauss's \textit{bricoleur}, Morris creates his myths (his fictions) from the shards of the commonplace he finds lying about him.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, he can treat with reverence and delicacy something so apparently silly as the following childish ditty:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Strawberry shortcake},
\textit{Huckleberry Pie},
\textit{Pee in the road}
\textit{An' you'll get a sty.}
\end{quote}
When Will Brady hears these words wash over him in a park in Omaha, their pleasant familiarity somehow "made him feel better." Perhaps Will Brady feels better because this familiar expression lulls him even further into the hypnotic insensitivity of the commonplace, but the expression at the same time helps him to reorient himself while undergoing defamiliarizing contact with a strange city. Absurd though the saying may be, it serves as a kind of reassuring mantra to carry Will through unsettling times. This very expression, along with modifications of it, is repeated often enough in Wright Morris's novels to make it a refrain that stands for both the soothing sameness of the commonplace and the need to repossess the familiar by making it strange.

Most Americans hear similar expressions repeated dozens of times in their childhood, but since few have ever read such sayings in serious novels, Morris's use of the ditty skillfully evokes his audience's nostalgia for the past and for the commonplace, at the same time forcing his reader to reconsider the meaning of the expression. It even forces the reader to reevaluate his understanding of a genre that permits such doggerel to appear in a story which ponders the emptiness of life in modern America. Moreover, it forces a reconsideration of human nature, which admits and even treasures the commonplace of time-worn cliché while at the same time struggling with the problems of love and death.

This chapter is a survey of some of the many uses to which Wright Morris puts the commonplace. It proceeds on the assumption that Morris's fiction embodies the process Victor Shklovsky identifies as
defamiliarization. It leads to the conclusion that Wright Morris sees defamiliarization (which he calls by such various names as repossession, revision, and salvage) as one way to transform the chaos of experience into a coherent artistic vision. However uncertain Morris may be about the permanence of the product of any individual act of transformation, his novels show him to be utterly convinced of the importance of the process of transformation itself.

Perhaps Morris's most obvious use of the process of defamiliarization occurs in his manipulation of clichés of speech. Peter C. Bunnell points out Morris's "increasing concern with the vernacular artifact" in his photography, a concern equally visible in his use of vernacular speech artifacts. The "Strawberry shortcake" verse is such an artifact, as are the graffiti Morris's characters encounter in outhouses, restrooms, and cafes across the country. Representative is the sign

\[ \text{JESUS SAVES} \]
\[ \text{GREEN STAMPS} \]

which Warren Howe sees pinned to the wall behind his friend Saul Spiegel's desk. Significantly, Saul, like Jesus, is engaged in the salvage business, with the difference that Saul rescues junk from refuse heaps and sells it as antiques. Besides being an example of the "sicknik" humor with which Howe identifies it, then, "Jesus Saves/ Green Stamps" serves also to illustrate the warping of the idea of salvation in materialistic twentieth-century America. The slow,
careful reading of the expression which Morris demands, though, shows another side of the cliché. In an age which has lost all confidence in religious salvation, perhaps Green Stamps—tangible and negotiable—are representative of things truly worth saving. In context, the possibilities for interpretation of this clichéd expression are almost endless: Saul the junk collector, like Jesus and like his namesake, Saul of Tarsus, is a Jew involved in salvage operations. Furthermore, Howe and Spiegel fly to Europe to attend the funeral of Etienne Dulac, an audacious character who hid Jews in his castle during World War II and then accompanied them to the extermination camps when they were discovered by the Nazis. When they arrive at Schloss Riva (Dulac's castle), Howe and Spiegel discover that Dulac is not dead after all, that he has tricked some of his "disciples" (all of whom originally came to Schloss Riva for a short visit and ended up spending the winter) into returning to his castle. When Dulac finally does die in his sleep, Howe says, "'Dead, eh? You sure?''" heightening still further the unmistakable, if parodic, connection between Dulac and Jesus. All of these reverberations emanate from a carefully selected piece of graffiti. By forcing (or at least encouraging) his reader to slow down his perception of the phrase "Jesus Saves/Green Stamps," Morris produces a reappraisal which leads his audience never to look at graffiti in quite the same way again.

Throughout his work, Morris succeeds at achieving a fictional style which, in his own words, "opens up, reappraises, the familiar clichéd vernacular." As Shklovsky says of Pushkin, Morris uses
"the popular language as a special device for prolonging attention." \(^{25}\)

Morris risks using clichés such as "strange to say" and "As luck would have it" \(^{26}\) or "neat as a pin" and "let her hair down" \(^{27}\) because of what they reveal about the people who utter them and about the society which passes them from generation to generation. Even when speaking in his own voice in his recent memoir *Will's Boy*, Morris allows himself to use such colloquial diction as "Verne and me were driving" and "stuff like that" in order to characterize the style of his thought as a boy. \(^{28}\)

Readers insensitive to the complexity of Morris's style may fail to recognize these uses of cliché as a deliberate authorial ploy to force reappraisal of language, but at other times Morris comments on his own or his characters' commonplace expressions, making it plain that he intends for the reader to slow down his perception, reconsider this use of language, and thus repossess a phrase which has become stale through overuse. Dr. Lehmann's thickly accented rendition of the clichéd expression "Thod iss alter . . . than Atom un efenink" \(^{29}\) focuses attention on the absurdity of the expression and its use by a supposedly sophisticated person. As much as anything else, such utterances reveal Lehmann as the quack he really is. Similarly, Calvin's cliché-ridden response to Etoile's gift of a *Come On, Let's Dance* album of records—"'It's a honey'"—though he has no intention whatsoever of learning to dance, shows Calvin's bumpkinnish insensitivity to Etoile's attraction to him. \(^{30}\)

Morris's characters often make Calvin's kind of use of cliché as evasion. The following exchange occurs near the end of *The Huge Season*: 

---
Dickie reached Foley a hand, said, "It's been simply realer than life, old boy," and the eyes under the coonskin cap were those of a Space Cadet. "We'll keep in touch," Foley said, who had flunked a student for talking such gibberish.\(^{31}\)

Dickie Livingston's cliché "realer than life, old boy," is spoken in the preppy adolescent voice he has never grown out of; he never has overcome the impact Charles Lawrence's suicide had on him in the 1920s. Now, in the 1950s, clad in a Davy Crockett coonskin cap on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Lawrence's death, Dickie's actions show that, at least for him, the memory of Lawrence really is "realer than life." In fact, Dickie's life effectively stopped at the moment Lawrence shot himself. Peter Foley also has been in captivity ("Strange Captivity" is the title Morris gives to alternating sections of the book) to the brief, audacious life and sudden death of his former college roommate. Yet for Foley, reunion with Lawrence's friends frees him from the bondage which has so dominated his life. Rather than make the break from Dickie and his past painfully final, Foley self-consciously resorts to the cliché "We'll keep in touch," whose vagueness excuses him from being more definite about his plans for the future. Both Dickie and Foley hide behind the facade of the commonplace, but Morris's deliberate laying bare of Foley's use of cliché forces the reader to penetrate the hollow shell of overused diction. Once the surface is penetrated, the core of the cliché is shown to be profoundly revealing. As Earl Horter says in *Love Among the Cannibals*, "Every cliché in the world once had its moment of truth."\(^{32}\) The challenge is to recapture that moment or create for the cliché a new moment of truth.
This penetration of cliché is often as painful as Ahab's attempt
to break through the mask of the white whale to understand what he
really is. In One Day, Alec Cartwright's audacious act of leaving her
newborn baby at a pet adoption agency is upstaged by an even more
audacious act she struggles to understand:

"Where's somebody to say there's no use crying over spilt milk. Well, where's the milk? Or maybe it's all just
happened for the best. I like that one. Was there anything
that didn't happen for the best, if it wasn't to you? Why
doesn't somebody say the show must go on? As if it ever
stopped! Besides, poor Lee Harvey couldn't help it. Could he
really? The poor boy is just sick. Did anyone ever hear
of an American murderer who wasn't just sick? You know why?
It's not the crime that bugs us, it's the punishment. His
hands may be dirty, but our own lily-white hands are clean.
It lets us off the hook. All we have to do is have some
long talks with the murderer. God knows what a comfort
that must be to parents whose children have been raped and
thrown into ditches, and I'm sure it's going to be a great
comfort to Caroline. This poor boy killed her daddy and
maybe by then he can have written several best-selling books
about it, how unhappy he was, having lost his own daddy,
how the boys jeered when he didn't make the varsity football
team. After all that he could no more help shooting her
daddy than he could help being smiley Lee Harvey Oswald,
and how can you punish anybody for just naturally being
what he is? . . ."

Recognizing that her act against society places her in complicity with
Oswald's far more terrible crime, Alec refuses to hide behind clichés
of rationalization. Instead, she forces herself to participate in the
full horror of the assassination. When her mother says the killing
hasn't changed the world—"'It will pick up Monday morning right
where it stopped'"—Alec replies, "'Okay, the world hasn't changed,
but I have!'" That change is in part symbolized by Alec's developing
sensitivity to the absurdities of commonplace action and speech. When
Alec crumples into an anguished heap, Dr. Cowie says, "'Looks like she's shot the works,'" to which she immediately responds, "'Okay, I've shot the works. I wish to Christ that's all he'd shot!'"[^34]

Morris skillfully employs another kind of painful linguistic experience—the bewildering initiation of children into the world of commonplace speech—to defamiliarize cliché. For children, who have not constructed a shell of habit to protect them from the intensity of constantly heightened perception, all experience is defamiliarizing. This is particularly true, though, as their minds, which perceive primarily on the level of the literal, struggle with the metaphoric associations of commonplace expressions or the difficulties of unfamiliar polysyllabic words. When Clyde Muncy encounters the incomprehensible word *catastrophe* in his current events class in the fourth grade, he quite naturally renders it into speech as *cat-ass-trophy*.[^35] Coming to live with his great uncle Floyd Warner after the death of his parents in *Fire Sermon*, young Kermit Oelsligle takes time to become accustomed to the old man's usage:

> After fourteen months the boy understood this was just his way of talking. He did not talk just to hear himself talk, or spoil you with praise. "You hatching that egg?" he would say, when the boy fried one, or "You waiting for hell to freeze over?" He was full of expressions that made no sense whatsoever. How did hell freeze over? It was something he might have heard as a boy. Kermit had never seen anything frozen over larger than a milk can or a feed trough, although he understood everything froze up back on the plains. His Uncle and his mother both came from there... His father was from Texas, which he often said was cold as a witch's tit.^[36]
Besides illustrating the difficulty a young boy raised in California has assimilating an idea like hell freezing over, this scene shows the problem one generation has understanding the idiosyncrasies of another generation. Uncle Floyd's experience, so foreign to Kermit's own, constructs a barrier between them reflected in the difficulty Kermit has understanding Floyd's expressions. Desensitized by habit, Floyd cannot make connection with his grand-nephew. Kermit runs off with a couple of hippies, with whom he can identify yet whom Uncle Floyd does not understand at all.

Though Floyd's desensitized use of cliché makes it hard for him to communicate with his one remaining relative, there is a sense in which his commonplace speech is an admirable part of his life. Phrases like "You waiting for hell to freeze over?" flow naturally from his lips because he has made them his own. He would feel no more comfortable with a different set of speech habits than he would feel comfortable trading in his old Maxwell on a new car. Time and use have molded him to his speech and his speech to him. His speech takes on the quality of the vernacular artifact, the mattress molded through thousands of uses to the contours of the body. That artifact, irascible and insensitive though it may be, is worth preserving. That, at least in part, is why Wright Morris's fiction is full of characters--particularly old people--who assert their identity indelicately yet permanently. They pick their noses, scratch their privates, and butcher the king's English oblivious to the impression they make on more proper, yet yet ultimately less human, people.
Wright Morris does not judge his characters; he simply presents them. His disarmingly simple method has the effect of defamiliarizing his reader's concept of literary technique. Morris does not see himself as an innovator, nor does he find innovation entirely desirable. In About Fiction he says "The novel, like the novelist, needs ruts to keep it from wandering for years in the bush." Furthermore, the example of most great novelists "sustains the ruts of fiction and assures their extension into the future." Rather than go for the startlingly new, then, Morris sets out to freshen and individualize cliché.

The paradoxical yet ultimately creative tension produced by the contrast between Morris's insistence on sustaining "the ruts of fiction" and his equally strong commitment to the importance of imagination in art can be understood in terms of Marshall McLuhan's analysis of what he calls "hot" and "cool" media. As McLuhan defines it, "A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in high definition." A hot medium like radio is "low in participation," while a cool medium like the telephone is "high in participation or completion by the audience." A complex problem arises when people confront and attempt to understand "hot" experience:

Intensity or high definition engenders specialism and fragmentation in living as in entertainment, which explains why any intense experience must be "forgotten," "censored," and reduced to a very cool state before it can be "learned" or assimilated. The Freudian "censor" is less of a moral function than an indispensable condition of learning. Were we to accept fully and directly every shock to our various structures of awareness, we would soon be nervous wrecks, doing double-takes and pressing panic buttons every minute. The "censor" protects our central nervous system of values, as it does our physical nervous system by simply cooling off
the onset of experience a great deal. For many people, this cooling system brings on a life-long state of psychic rigor mortis, or of somnambulism...42

Wright Morris, interested in preserving the "cool" artifacts of the commonplace, nevertheless is keenly aware of the "lifelong state of psychic rigor mortis" that McLuhan identifies. Consequently, Morris the novelist attempts continually to mediate between the extremities of hot and cool. While he believes in "sustaining the ruts of fiction" (a cool activity), he does it in a way that emphasizes the importance of the self-conscious imagination of the writer (a hot medium). He invites his audience to join with him in the act of transforming raw material into art (cool), yet he insists on the primacy of the writer's consciousness in making that transformation (hot). His nostalgic attraction to commonplace artifacts of ordinary life (cool) is counterbalanced by his feelings of nausea (hot) toward the excesses of isolation, self-interest, and evasion which produce the psychic rigor mortis of a people who refuse to examine the ordinary as they inherit it. Rather than disregarding the ordinary he subjects it to a defamiliarizing series of heatings and coolings, bringing new life to cliché through continual reappraisal.

This revivification of the commonplace is not as simple as it may appear. Morris calls the use of cliché one of the "subtler crafts of fiction."43 The technique is not that of Holder, the newspaper editor in Morris's novel In Orbit. Listening to the sounds before a tornado, he thinks,
In the tops of the trees the wind is hollowly moaning. A better word would be coughing, but if Holder used it he would be considered too literary. The wind is hollowly moaning. The readers of the Pickett Courier will agree to that.44

Like Earl Horter, narrator of Love Among the Cannibals, Holder is a purveyor of clichés. He gives his readers the language they feel comfortable hearing, the language they do not have to think about to read. This Wright Morris staunchly refuses to do. Though it probably costs him a number of readers, Morris does not settle for the easy cliché in plot and style that would guarantee him a larger audience.

On the other hand, Morris dares to examine the commonplace. His style and his characters are as spare as the plains from which they originate. His technique is to take ordinary subjects and examine them so carefully that they become extraordinary. In Orbit takes a cliché most people have seen on television hundreds of times—the confused, unfeeling juvenile delinquent run amok—and transforms it into a character who is strangely attractive and repulsive at the same time. Love Among the Cannibals transforms the stereotyped Hollywood love story into an examination of the dangers of living for the fulfillment of fantasy. A fitting symbol for Morris's technique is the Lone Wolf print that hangs in the homes of so many of his characters. The Lone Wolf by itself is not great art; in fact, it is a commonplace akin to the Norman Rockwell prints that Morris abhors. Morris's gift is to take this commonplace object and scrutinize it so carefully and so completely that its repossession and transformation becomes art.

Walter McKee examines the Lone Wolf carefully because it rests "behind
a sheet of glass that made it hard to look at."\(^{45}\) Morris takes a
domestic scene that has been repeated millions of times over generations
and makes it strange ("hard to look at") in a way that demands his
attention, as well as that of his reader.

Gordon Boyd in Morris's *The Field of Vision* defines culture as a
"series of acceptable clichés."\(^{46}\) While cultural traditions smooth
passage through difficult times by providing a backdrop of familiar
concepts and ritual against which people confront trying experiences,
their familiarity also holds people back from a full awareness of what
happens to them. Morris incisively attacks this desensitizing element
of cultural tradition and ritual. The graveside funeral scene early in
*The Man Who Was There* forces reconsideration of the traditional notion
of resurrection:

"This is the Resurrection," he [the preacher] said,
"that man should die so that he might live, that he
should go so that thereby he might come again. For except
a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God."
At this moment, in a loud croaking voice, Private
Reagan said—"He has come again."\(^{47}\)

During the sermon, Private Reagan has been thinking of Agee Ward,
a boyhood friend missing in action in World War II. Agee's memory
is so powerful upon Grandmother Herkimer that in her senility she
mistakes Private Reagan, her close relative, for Agee Ward, a mere
acquaintance. While witnessing Grandmother Herkimer's burial and
while listening to the Reverend Horde's sermon, Private Reagan
makes the connection between himself and Agee Ward, recognizing
that although Agee is missing in action his memory so affects his
friends at home that in a real sense he has come again. This resurrection of influence, if not of physical presence, is later testified to by the transformation from recluse to bon vivant of Gussie Newcomb, Agee's landlady, who moves into his garage apartment when she hears he is missing. Again at the burial, Private Reagan's new concept of resurrection is reinforced when he pulls his young cousin Annie Mae out of Grandmother Herkimer's grave. Mute until this point in her life, Annie Mae comes out talking, prompting Reagan to say "She has come again!" As often happens in Morris novels, a dying older character passes his or her mantle of audacious vivacity to a much younger person, destined to preserve the memory of the passing generation in the actions of the rising generation. Thus Agee Ward can be there even though he is missing in action; he is there in the lives of the people who remember him. Similarly, his presence dominates the narrative, insinuating itself into the mind of the reader, through the attempts of Private Reagan, Gussie Newcomb, and others, to reassess the effects Agee Ward has on their lives.

Just as Reagan's defamiliarizing experience at the graveside service forces him to reconsider his concept of resurrection, so too do other Wright Morris characters confront situations which force them to reexamine their understanding of ritual and tradition. In Man and Boy, Mr. Ormsby acknowledges to himself that the only time he ever felt religious was "when he used to feed the birds." He finds nothing spiritual about church, but one day in the park he sees an old woman "feeding some sparrows, moistening the bread in her mouth before
offering it to them." Watching the old woman,

he realized that it was a religious ceremony, this spittle
she added was her flesh and the birds gave it wings. That
way she rose with them, like magic, like everybody dreams
of doing but only the old lady seemed to have learned how.
In the light of this knowledge he spent one summer feeding
the birds, all of the birds, and every Sunday there would
be this Eucharist.48

Ormsby's experience in the park defamiliarizes his concept of religious
ritual, enabling him to repossess and make privately significant a
ceremony he previously did not understand.

Because of the audacity of his wife, Virgil Ormsby has frequent
opportunity to reappraise traditional concepts. Mrs. Ormsby always
manages to use even the plainest of sayings "in a very original way."49
In New York to dedicate a ship named in honor of her son who died
heroically at Guadalcanal, Mrs. Ormsby manipulates the U. S. Navy as
effectively as she controls her own husband. Informed that tradition
forbids her from having another woman, her friend Mrs. Dinardo, on
board the ship, Mrs. Ormsby refuses to fulfill her commission and
turn the dedicated ship back over to the Navy until she gets her way.
Knowing that "traditions of the sea had been shattered,"50 the admiral
nevertheless allows the women to board. Mrs. Ormsby goes on, in her
dedication speech, to preach such a rousing sermon against war that
every man on the pier stands as she and her escort pass in review.
Mr. Ormsby and his companion, Private Lipido, "stood, as converted men
should, piously in their pew."51 Defamiliarizing a ritual consecrated
to the gods of war, Mrs. Ormsby transforms the dedication ceremony
into a service in praise of peace. As happens so often in Wright Morris's novels, the strong-willed matriarchal woman makes masculine obsessions such as war and military tradition appear to be nothing more than foolish children's games.

While few aspects of popular tradition and culture escape Wright Morris's defamiliarizing scrutiny, he is especially fond of punching through the mask of such sacred American institutions as the movie industry. Identifying as the goal of advertising the dissolution of "the distinction between ready-made fantasy and life," he attacks Hollywood for its similar habit of preyting upon the public's idealistic fantasies. In California with his second wife, who claims to have been awakened to love by Francis X. Bushman, Will Brady visits a movie studio, shattering whatever idealized notion he may have had of actors:

... they rode out in buses to watch the great lover, John Gilbert, make love. They saw him kneel, one knee on the floor, and make love to the woman whose eyes looked bruised and whose armpits were sore where she had just been shaved. In the sun a small boy walked an aging lion about the streets. Over a cardboard sea great towers fell, and men leaped from the windows of burning buildings to fall into nets held aloft on wooden spears. Half-naked women, in skirts of straw, lay about on a floor sprinkled with sand, their bodies wet from the heat of great smoking lamps. Thick custard pies, suspended on wires, made their way around corners, and curved around poles to catch the man—the villain, that is—full in the face.

In this "unreal world," Will goes to bed but not to sleep: "The eyes were closed, it seemed, the better to look at oneself." As always, Will turns his gaze inward, using the defamiliarizing experience of visiting the movie studios to provoke more introspection.
Enigmatic though his inward gazing remains, Will seems to benefit from his encounter with the movies more than do those Morris characters who confuse their own lives with the lives of actors on the silver screen. Jubal Gainer (In Orbit) gets movie images mixed up with reality. He is William Holden, with a mission to bomb the bridges of Toko-Ri.\textsuperscript{55} Alone and out of gas, he wreaks indiscriminate destruction over the Midwestern landscape, just as does the tornado which follows him:

At Scampi's Bar and Cafe the men seated at the bar had gone through the trapdoor in the floor behind it. Otherwise nothing remained but the gas pumps at the front. Five cars had been parked there: none had been found. Choice bottles of whiskey and brandy were strewn in adjoining fields of soybeans and alfalfa. Two women dead. Both had been in the ladies' room at the back.\textsuperscript{56}

But the scene

is too familiar a spectacle to be tragic. Debarked trees, fragments of buildings, chimneys that stand like grave markers have been seen by everybody in actual war, or in peace at the movies.\textsuperscript{57}

Desensitized to violence and destruction by mass media, survivors of the storm think "'What is it like? What does it remind me of?'" Holder, the newspaper editor, sees only one detail—a bicycle hanging "high on one of the trees, like a Christmas ornament"—that "belongs to this scene and not something he has seen in the movies."\textsuperscript{58}

Nothing seems capable of producing the shock of recognition which defamiliarizes: even given the violence and destruction unleashed in the world of In Orbit, there are "those who can take it in at a
While movies desensitize viewers to potentially defamiliarizing experience—controverting Shklovsky's edict that the effect of all art is to make strange, to slow down perception—they also construct a fantasy world in which troubled people can evade coming to grips with their problems. Unable to achieve a satisfactory self-image, Alec Cartwright, "Chickpea" in One Day, retreats for a time into a life dominated by her daily pilgrimage to see bad movies, precisely that same kind of movie she had spent half her life ridiculing. Escaping from life, "a performance that had no meaning: a script without an author, sound and fury and dull to boot," she opts for the "sur-real" movie world where "it was all nonsense that made sense." When Chickpea returns to the real world it is to perform an act—abandoning her baby at the dog pound—worthy of the silver screen. Only the shock of President Kennedy's assassination forces a reappraisal of her past which brings a keen sense of her guilt and immaturity.

With so much pressure from clichéd language, tradition, and fantasy to ingrain the habitual and to make the uncommon appear common, Wright Morris works particularly hard to recapture the sense of wonder and freshness that can accompany even the most habitual experience. He contrasts himself to such popular figures as Norman Rockwell, whose work limits itself to clichés. Rockwell's craft gives back to people the images they already have of themselves, comfortably reassuring them that self-scrutiny is unnecessary. In contrast, Morris subjects characters to defamiliarizing experience which forces them to rethink their entire relationship with the world. A good symbol for
Morris's technique is the fog at the beginning of One Day. Dramatic in the way that it "transforms the familiar things to strange ones," the fog compels a slowing down of perception to make out even the most commonplace objects. It combines with the extraordinary events of the day of President Kennedy's assassination to force a complete reappraisal.

Man, such a creature of habit that x-rays of unborn infants show them sucking their thumb in their mother's womb, will do almost anything to avoid confrontation with the unfamiliar. In "Since When Do They Charge Admission," Cliff Chalmers, staid Midwesterner unable to come to terms with the shock of the new represented by the nude bathers on the beach his family visits in California, forces himself to remember instead a trained crow which struts up and down the beach showing off the chicken bone Cliff gives it. More capable of understanding the actions of the bird than the appearance of the nude hippies, Cliff makes plain what he will remember about his visit to the beach: "'What's a few crazy people to one crow in a million?'"

Morris's books abound with people like Cliff Chalmers, whose lives are so dominated by their habitual way of seeing things that they are essentially dead. Morris calls such people fossils, often comparing them to insects preserved in amber, sealed off from all contact with humanity and the world in general. Like Gordon Boyd of The Field of Vision and Ceremony in Lone Tree, they are encased in an armor of cliché which preserves them from disheartening contact with the world. It is hard to tell whether they are dead or not quite alive. Like the father in Morris's story "Magic," they may possess power to control
the forces of nature—in this case to revive apparently drowned flies—but they are ironically unconscious of their own deathlike insensitivity to people around them. Indeed, the memory of Agee Ward in The Man Who Was There and Judge Porter in The Deep Sleep is much more alive than are the people these dead characters leave behind.

Preserved in the amber of the past, such people of Lois Scanlon McKee of The Field of Vision and Ceremony in Lone Tree must be shocked by a defamiliarizing experience back to contact with the present. Rather than indulge the passion which Gordon Boyd aroused in her with their first kiss, Lois wraps herself in a protective cocoon, marrying safely insensitive Walter McKee. The price she pays for her comfortable stasis is isolation from all feeling and from contact with the people around her; Lois wonders to herself whether she and Boyd ever got off the porch where they experienced their first kiss.

Gordon Boyd chooses his own brand of isolation. Afraid of failing to succeed as fully as he would like to, he opts instead to make a complete success of failure. A photograph of Boyd as a bum in Washington Square feeding the squirrels catches

every memorable cliché: the coat fastened with a pin, the cut suggesting better days, the sock there to call attention to the calloused heel, in one soiled hand a paper bag, now empty, and in the other a crust.

But the photograph is unconvincing because "of the man behind the face, the failure behind the man, there was no evidence." As a memento of his failure to succeed or fail, Boyd carries with him the memory of kissing Lois on the front porch. He also has, as his "piece of the
Cross, "the pocket he tore from Ty Cobb's baseball uniform; he got the pocket but did not succeed in getting the great star to sign the foul ball he caught. Gordon Boyd wanders through the Field of Vision and Ceremony in Lone Tree wondering whether anything ever will awaken him from the death in life created by his fixation on the past. The clerk in a motel in Nevada makes a notation to wake Boyd to see an atomic bomb test, but the test is cancelled and Boyd continues to wonder whether he will wake before the bomb. Recognizing Boyd's inability to take decisive action, the girl he picks up in Nevada wonders aloud how dark it would have to be for Boyd to have the courage to take Lois McKee to bed with him.  

It takes a big dose of the uncommon to shock people like Lois McKee and Gordon Boyd from their complacency. For Lois the shock comes, at least temporarily, with the mass murders committed near her home in Nebraska. Perhaps Gordon is awakened by his thoughts of the bomb. The residents of Escondido, California, are momentarily shocked into awareness by news of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, but chances are good, as Mrs. Cartwright says, that everything will get back to normal in a few days. What Americans want and what they live for is surface. They wish to be told what they are going to like, "they like it, then they all stand and applaud themselves."  

Because of the cloying effects of habit and mass media, Americans cannot share the kind of wonder the bushman feels at seeing a flying machine.  

Most people remain suspended in the amber of habit, unable to connect with others or the world around them, but Wright Morris does
not abandon his attempt to make them see things new. *In Orbit* studies the defamiliarizing effects of a tornado. *In Cause for Wonder*, the puckish George covers everything with a defamiliarizing blanket of snow in the winter and white paint in the summer. Morris even dares to defamiliarize the most sacred of American clichés—sex. This is most evident in his novel *Love Among the Cannibals*, a thoroughgoing parody of the Hollywood romance. Earl Horter, narrator of the story, and "Mac" Macgregor, his partner in composing clichéd popular songs, take two women with them to Acapulco to work on their musical, "Love Among the Cannibals." Earl and his beautiful girlfriend, Eva Baum, "the Greek," spend their time making love, while Mac is unable to seduce Billie Harcum, stereotypic Southern belle. Eventually, "the Greek," looking for a new "line of development," leaves Earl for a "friendly, disarming, ladybug-shaped, ridiculous" marine biologist. Mac agrees to marry Billie to be able to sleep with her, but their relationship is unsatisfying until Mac ties her to the bed and rubs excrement all over her body, initiating her into the world of the commonplace. Earl sees his time with Eva for what it is—the momentary fulfillment of fantasy—but he cannot promise himself that he will never succumb to the same temptation again. His experience here is parallel to his experience with language: he claims to avoid cliché scrupulously in his own speech, but he fills his song lyrics—and his narration—with triteness.

*Love Among the Cannibals* is a primer on the defamiliarization of sex because it self-consciously plays with sex as a topic. In this
the most overtly sexual of his novels, Morris ridicules American notions of sexuality. Just as the narrative is unreal in the extremity of its use of cliche, so is the sex in the book unrealistically stereotyped. Either it is so easy as to fulfill every imaginable fantasy, in the case of Earl Horter, or else, in Mac's case, it is utterly unattainable.

Eva appears to be the ideal mistress and Billie the ideal wife, but both characters are so unsatisfyingly extreme as to give the lie to such stereotyped conceptions as the ideal lover and the perfect wife. Reality lies somewhere in between the experiences of Earl and Mac, but that does not prevent Americans from desiring one extreme and feeling threatened by the other. Each extreme is jaded in its own way, but each is lionized by a segment of the population. In archetypal terms, Morris argues that both the siren and the earth mother are unattainable, though none the less the object of man's desire. In terms of the language of Love Among the Cannibals, Morris implies that nothing in real life is as burdened by cliche as Macgregor-Horter songs, yet at the same time no utterance (or experience) is entirely free from the insulating amber of the commonplace.

That Wright Morris self-consciously employs cliche and the commonplace to force his audience to re-view, re-appraise, and re-perceive habitual experience should be obvious by now. What may not be so obvious is the purpose which underlies this technique of defamiliarization. That purpose is made clear by a return to Morris's concept of art as raw material processed by imagination. Following this formulation, the commonplace can be seen as corresponding to
the raw material of experience. A mere description of the commonplace
would be no more interesting to Morris than the simple narration of a
story. To have value and meaning, the depiction of the commonplace
story) must be transformed through the artist's imagination into a
coherent, unified, and fully perceived view of the world (plot). 79
Thus, Morris assigns to the novelist the same kind of visionary,
quasi-prophetic role that Shelley and other Romantics gave to the poet.
To draw a more recent analogy, Morris shares with Wallace Stevens the
view that the artist, transforming reality through imagination, creates
a model for the reader to use in reperceiving his own world. 80
Moreover, Morris shares with Stevens another important view: the
artist's transformation of experience into a new vision of reality is
always tentative and forever subject to change. What matters is not
so much the product of the transformation as the act of transformation
itself. In terms of Yeats's famous line, art makes the dancer and the
dance indistinguishable; the dance is everything.

Against what he perceives to be the motto of modern America--
Let Nothing Stand--Morris practices his salvage operations. In a
time when "the new is obsolete on its appearance," 81 he performs
what he calls "a holding action" 82 to preserve what is disappearing.
Rather than replace the whole rug, Morris likes to see the figures in
the carpet worn into the bare floor beneath it. He finds himself in
profound agreement with Henry James's statement that "objects and
places, coherently grouped, disposed for human use and addressed to it,
must have a sense of their own, a mystic meaning proper to themselves
Along with his character Clyde Muncy, Morris sees holiness in ugly, commonplace things. In his fiction, as well as his photography, he works to transpose (and transform) the "actual over into a possessed object separate from a mirror reflection." The key word here is possessed. Morris does not argue for nostalgia; he argues for transformation in the mind and work of the artist. Responding to Peter Bunnell's comment that many photographers surround themselves with "collectable artifacts" while he does not, Morris says, "If I have the photograph, I can dispense with the artifact." Of his efforts to recapture his past, he says, "The Home Place, lock, stock, and barrel, was bulldozed out of existence in the late fifties. Nothing remains but what we have in the book, which does speak up for salvage."

The next chapter of this thesis makes a good deal more of Morris's private salvage operations on his past, but what is significant to the present discussion is Wright Morris's compulsion to repossess what he inherits as cliché. Just as Herr Perkheimer in Cause for Wonder finds Greece "Buried beneath a mass of photographic ash" awaiting rediscovery by someone capable of "penetrating the wearisome clichés," so too does Wright Morris find the meaningful artifact of his and his country's past buried beneath the rubble of the commonplace. He sets for himself the task of punching through the mask to lay bare the still vibrant core of the cliché. Herr Perkheimer's repossession is strictly personal; he travels through Greece snapping pictures of famous places with a camera containing no film. Morris is similarly self-conscious
about his reappraisals. Because of his concept that every person perceives the world differently, he offers no coherent system of myth in his novels. Instead, he elevates to the status of myth the very process of transformation: it is in the act of transformation in the face of a chaotic universe that man asserts his nobility.

Emblematic of Morris's interest in the power of transformation is an incident which occurs near the middle of *The Honeymoon*.

Walking outside one summer morning to rescue a bird caught in his window feeding box, Peter Foley notices that his cat has caught a chipmunk. Fearing the chipmunk already dead, Foley nevertheless stops to see what his cat plans to do. The cat deposits the chipmunk bottom side up on the flagstone:

His tiny paws were in the air—a very dead chipmunk in every respect. The cat settled down, in his customary sphinx-style, and, very casually, he reached out with a paw and gave the chipmunk a cuff. Very lightly, tenderly almost, and he did this once, twice more—when the chipmunk sprang up like spring-wind toy and began to dance. He danced, his little tail up like a banner, hopping back and forth on the cool flagstone, four, five times—then he suddenly scooted off. The cat, however, had been prepared for that. He was up, pounced on him, and brought him back in his mouth. He lowered him to the flagstone bottom side up, then relaxed once more. After stroking down a spot on his coat he reached out, tenderly, and cuffed the dead-looking chipmunk. Once, twice, and on the next stroke the chipmunk was up. The dance—the same dance precisely—took place again.

Watching these traditional enemies frolic in the same manner throughout the summer forces Foley to reassess his entire view of nature. After reading Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Foley devises "a creative evolution of his own. Founded on what? Well, founded on audacity. The
unpredictable behavior that lit up the darkness with something new." Given the violent, suicidal dead end that man seems intent on pursuing, Foley yearns for the origin of a species based, like "that chipmunk . . . on charm, on audacity, on the powers of the dance." 

Wright Morris's novels contain many characters who, like the cat and the chipmunk, transform the commonplace into the uncommon through audacious, unpredictable behavior. His very first novel ends with Uncle Dudley spitting in the eye of Cupid, a sadistic, red-neck deputy sheriff. In *The Man Who Was There*, the memory of the audacious Agee Ward is so powerful that he remains there—with his friends—even though he is missing in action in the South Pacific. Monsieur Dulac in *Cause for Wonder* acts out the cliché of the senile old man, indelibly planting his memory in the minds of his witnesses. Old Tom Scanlon, mentioned in several Morris novels, makes a legend of himself by dying sitting up in his bed with his chamberpot full of cigar butts worn like a helmet over his head. Each of these men in his own way captures the audacity of Charles Lindbergh, the Lone Eagle whose solo flight across the Atlantic Wright Morris admires so much.

Not all audacious transformations are as successful as these, but for Morris the act is more significant than its results. In his 1978 preface to *War Games*, Morris says, "Transformation of self . . . is surely one of my abiding obsessions." This obsession is evidenced in his continuing "absorption with mortals who were at once commonplace and bizarre." *War Games*, written early in the 1950s but not published until 1972, introduces Mrs. Tabori, who
reappears in *The Field of Vision* as Paula Kahler. Born Paul Kopfman and raised in the slums of Chicago, this person is so traumatized by the violence of life (when his brother dies in a snowstorm, Paul's uncle brings the brother's hand home in his lunch pail for the family to identify) that he engages in what Morris calls "the ultimate effort to change oneself." That is, Paul transforms himself psychologically from a man into a woman. Wearing his/her mother's clothes, Paul/Paula actually marries a man in *War Games*. In *The Field of Vision*, "she" is Dr. Lehmann's housekeeper and companion. The transformation ultimately is unsuccessful—in both books Paula has to kill to protect her secret—but that does not make her attempted transformation any less admirable. In a sense, the audacious self-imposed change of sex which Paul undergoes epitomizes Wright Morris's quest to transform raw material (in Paul's case the cliché of sexual identity) through imagination into art. The trick is to "beat the game," to turn fiction into fact, asserting masterful control over a chaos of raw material.

Along with the kind of transformation of self attempted by Paul Kopfman, Wright Morris lists "transcendence [sic] of time and place" as "one of my abiding obsessions." Perhaps beginning with Christ's admonition to his disciples to be in the world but not of the world, Morris constantly plays with such clichés as "out of it" and "in orbit." The image of the insect suspended in amber is relevant here, as is the image of the castle which dominates *Cause for Wonder* but which appears in many other Morris novels:
One of those castles—you don’t see them any more—that ornamented fishbowls or glass ball paperweights. When I [Warren Howe] was a kid, one always set [sic] on the sewing machine. When you gave it a shake the castle inside would disappear in a snowstorm. A minute perhaps—it seemed forever—before the storm passed and you could see it. The same with Riva. Both in and out of this world. Silence and snow. In and out of this world.

This transcendence of time is more than defamiliarization; it is transformation raised to the status of myth. In a more determinate universe, more certainty would be possible. But Wright Morris’s world view conforms to the feeling expressed in two lines which appear almost at random in In Orbit:

Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainty in this our life.

Amid the chaos of such an indeterminate universe, Morris settles for the affirmation of the existentialistic gesture of transformation. Since reality itself is indeterminate—perceived differently by every person—the act of ordering reality is more significant than the system which results from that ordering. Reviewing the devastation wrought by Jubal Gainer and a tornado,

It occurs to Holder that the events of this day, like the wreckage strewn by the twister, were already being assembled according to the needs of the survivors. Sense for Holder, nonsense for Haffner, for Pauline the way God’s cookie crumbles, for the man on the loose one more twist in the tail of the wind.

Significantly, Morris provokes his audience to admire most those characters from In Orbit who act: Charlotte for her uninhibited
dance, Holder for making sense of the day, and even Jubal for his destructive, yet honestly natural, behavior. The reader admires least those characters such as Professor Alan Haffner, who, lost in a fuzz of academic unreality, does not even bother to attempt to satisfy the needs of his passionate wife, Charlotte.

Almost all of Morris's many professors, artists, and writers struggle with the challenge of transforming the commonplace of their experience into art. Blessed with an abundance of raw material, Peter Foley (The Huge Season) nevertheless is unable to finish the book he is writing. Agee Ward and Clyde Muncy must return to the Home Place years after they leave it before they can transform their past into art. Gordon Boyd writes one successful play about his boyhood attempt to walk on water but fails to produce more. Even Earl Horter and his partner, Mac, recapitulate Wright Morris's struggle to transcend and transform cliché.

With appropriate irony, Morris often gives success at transformation to characters who seem least likely to achieve it. Will Brady, who lives a miserable life desperately yet ineptly searching for success in the works of love, achieves a mystical unity with all humanity at the moment of his drowning, clad in a Santa Claus costume, in a Chicago sewage canal. Floyd Warner, so crotchety and set in his ways that he alienates his grand-nephew Kermit, undergoes a defamiliarizing transformation after the death of his sister and the burning of their family home in Nebraska. Travelling from Nebraska toward a place he homesteaded years before near Roswell on the New Mexico-Texas border,
Floyd repeatedly has the sensation that

the commonplace seemed strange, and what he knew to be
bizarre seemed commonplace. . . . His impression had been
that his eyes, his own eyes, hovered above him like a
presence, seeing the things of this world about him for
the first time.  

Upon his return to the homestead, Floyd's life assumes a focus of
definition it never had before:

Gazing in the direction from which he had come, he seemed
to see his life mapped out before him, its beginning and
its end, its ups and its downs, its reassuring but
somewhat monotonous pattern like that of wallpaper he had
lived with, soiled with his habits, but never really
looked at.  

His awareness of the world around him is so heightened that the strange
seems "commonplace, . . . the commonplace miraculous." Floyd dies,
ritualistically murdered by an Indian named Blackbird, but his death
has the transcendent power of the demise of a Shakesperean hero, for
Floyd was one of those "chosen not merely to grow old, but to grow
ripe."  

_A Life_, ironically about a death whose approach brings with it
transcendent awareness of the possibilities of life, is one of Wright
Morris's most fully achieved explorations of the transformation of
cliché. Floyd Warner's story, begun in _Fire Sermon_ and concluded in
_A Life_, makes reference to three objects that effectively symbolize
Morris's use of the commonplace in his novels. The first is the
"Pecos diamond," a crystal
much like the stub of a pencil, only not so large. One end of it was sharpened to a very fine point, and it had six smooth polished sides. The other end was just a crude stump of dirt and sand, as if left unfinished. An engineer in Roswell explains to Floyd that "nobody had made them [the crystals], but in the nature of things they just made themselves." Warner carries a pouch of the crystals around with him as evidence to support his atheism. Unlike his sister Viola, he cannot see the hand of God operating in the universe. Undoubtedly, Wright Morris shares Floyd Warner's skepticism, but the Pecos diamonds stand nevertheless as marvelous symbols for what can be done in a world without God. Natural forces work to transform simple elements of the earth into perfect crystals. Similarly, the power of the imagination in art crystallizes the chaos of experience into a form that draws light from blackness.

The second object is a kitchen towel made from an old flour sack. Though the towel appears to be of one color, letters forming a brand name appear as the towel soaks up water. A flour sack towel is just the kind of commonplace object that appeals to Wright Morris's imagination: not the product of a throw-away world, it represents the frugality and simplicity of the Midwesterners who populate his novels. Moreover, the appearance of the label on the sack symbolizes the transformation Morris works upon the commonplace. Through skillful use of the techniques discussed in this chapter, he forces cliché to reveal a meaning hidden by generations of use. Once the towel dries, the label fades again, emphasizing the importance of repeated
transformations. This, in part, explains why Morris seems compelled to repeat scenes, characters, and actions in novel after novel: the act of transformation is more important than the transformation itself.

The third object is Floyd Warner's boyhood fancy, shared by many Morris characters, that "white hairs from a mare's tail would turn to snakes if put in a barrel of rain water." Of course, Floyd's experience could not confirm this superstition, but its grip on him is powerful enough to make him apprehensive, even as an old man, when he peers into a barrel of rain water. Such also is the power of the commonplace transformed by the art of Wright Morris. The same old mare's-tail clichés come to life with the vivacity and wonder of a barrel full of writhing snakes. Morris knows as well as his readers that his transformations are sleight of hand, tongue, and pen, but that does not make them any less captivating. The order his artistic vision brings to the chaos of experience makes no claim to permanence, but the act of transformation itself demands attention and admiration. This powerful gesture of transcendence is Wright Morris's personal version of the audacious chipmunk's dance.

While discussing Hermann Broch's novel The Sleepwalkers, Robert Alter says that the author's emphasis on symbols is a "bulwark against disintegration." Wright Morris erects no such bulwarks of symbols. In fact, he consistently disdains symbol-hunting critics and dislikes symbol-laden fiction. But he does self-consciously construct different kinds of bulwarks of his own. Agreeing as he does with Henry James that "objects and places, coherently grouped,
disposed for human use and addressed to it, must have a sense of
their own, a mystic meaning proper to themselves to give out,"\textsuperscript{110} he
carefully fashions his novels to make the commonplace radiate
uncommonness. As with the furniture in Ed's house in \textit{The Home Place},
Morris carefully arranges the places, objects, and characters in
his fiction, each in "its own place, with a frame of space around
it."\textsuperscript{111} Such deliberate arrangement of the commonplace defamiliarizes
cliché, transforming the ordinary into the uncommon. Struggling against
what he sees as the "diminishment of value in the artifact itself,"\textsuperscript{112}
Morris holds up the commonplace for reverential examination. But it
is a skeptical reverence, forever aware of the power of the habitual
to blunt perception and desensitize imagination. In part, it is this
two-edged use of cliché which marks Wright Morris as a self-conscious
novelist. His concomitant skepticism of and desire for order forces
him to chart a course marked by an awareness of the impossibility of
transcendence and, at the same time, the necessity of transformation.
Because Morris knows that the commonplace has just as much to reveal
as it has to hide, he leaves exploration of the sensational, of outer
space, to others. He chooses instead to explore the labyrinth of the
inner space of his own room. It is a room haunted by commonplace
objects made holy by use. Moreover, it is a place haunted by Wright
Morris's memory of his own past, the subject of the next chapter of
this dissertation.
Chapter 2

The Persistent Past

There never was a people who tried so hard—and left
so little behind as we do. There never was a people
who traveled to light—and carried so much.
-- The Inhabitants

Carl Parsons, handyman to the Porter family in Wright Morris's
The Deep Sleep, lives in a house that his father built with his own
hands from bricks of his own manufacture. That is, he built the
front half with "Parsons bricks" and attached it to the rear, frame-
constructed portion of the dwelling, making the whole thing resemble
"a garage to which a square frame house had been attached."¹ The
house, called "the Parsons monster" by some people,² is odd in other
respects. For one, it sits far back from the road, facing the woods.
What windows there are upstairs are level with the floor. Earl Parsons
planned a wide porch for the front of the house, but he never got
around to building it. When he nailed down the last floorboard
upstairs, he discovered that there was no connection whatsoever
between the upstairs and the downstairs. He had to "let himself out
through a window and drop to the ground." His son, Carl, who has
lived in the house for twenty-five years, "went to bed every night, if
the truth were known, through a hole that had been sawed in the
ceiling, like the entrance to a hayloft, and then dragged the ladder
up after him."³
This strange house is not unique in Morris's fiction; most of the houses his characters inhabit are abnormal in one way or another. Something is missing, something went wrong in the construction, or there is something strangely out of place about the house's location. Floyd Warner is born in the kitchen of his parents' new house because, in his haste to complete construction before the baby's birth, Floyd's father forgot to build steps between the first and second floors. The grandfather (perhaps Morris's own grandfather) in God's Country and My People also forgets to build stairs between the levels of his house. Uncle Harry and Aunt Clara's house in The Home Place has no front porch and has floor-level windows upstairs. Will Brady of The Works of Love builds a fine city house in a dying country town and finds it uninhabitable. Badgered by a domineering wife or mother, Morris's male characters often feel compelled to seek refuge in the basement, the attic, or even under the porch of their homes.

Wright Morris's own house of fiction lacks the symmetry and order associated with the metaphor as elaborated by Henry James. Morris frequently discusses his house of fiction: "the windows face in all directions," he says, and events insert new windows, but "time will pass before I get around to looking through them." The key to understanding the sense of struggle for completeness which characterizes his fiction is a recognition of what David Madden calls "the everlasting enigma" of Morris's Nebraska background. In Nebraska, water flows underground. The meaning of life channels mysteriously beneath the unrelenting monotony of the dry plains. Plainsmen silently turn
their gaze inward, seeing most where there is least to see. Enduring the repetitious commonplace of their daily existence, they plumb the depths of their memory for hints of their origins. Meanwhile, they make do with shards of recollection which somehow reverberate with meaning.

Morris himself has particular cause to grapple with the mysteries of his past. While he spent only the first nine years of his life in rural Nebraska, his childhood experience indelibly marks his fiction. His novels are, to a large degree, his attempt to "assemble the disparate and unrelated parts of my own past." Morris claims that "Raw material, an excess of both material and comparatively raw experience, has been the dominant factor in my own role as a novelist," but there are gaps in his memory that can be "safely, and measurably, narrowed" only "in the workshop of the imagination." Thus, "Early memories, although lacking in detail, may be so charged with emotion they function as icons." Each time these icons, or "tokens," are handled they "give off light."

From these seeds of perception often spring entire novels, yet because of the uncertainty of memory there is always room for imagination to reprocess the same emotion-charged particles of recollection again and again. This is particularly true of Morris's struggle to define his relationship with his parents. His mother died six days after his birth, and Morris never had a normal amount of contact with his father. He spends a large portion of his novelistic energy attempting to create imaginatively an understanding of his
parents that his past denied him. Considering and reconsidering a limited number of human relationships, he casts himself and his parents, as well as other relatives and early acquaintances, in different roles whose playing out provides hints of the meaning of his past. While Morris's compulsion to understand his own past energizes his imagination to the point that he has produced more than thirty books over the years, his urge to comprehend fully a past to which he has limited access also produces in his fiction the feeling of uneasiness and lack of completion exemplified by the imperfection of the houses that so often appear in his novels.

The same tension between experience and imagination which characterizes Morris's quest for understanding his past also places his fiction squarely in the tradition of the self-conscious novel, whose practitioners both imitate reality and call into question their depictions of experience and their renderings of history. "My fiction," Morris says, "has tampered with my own facts." That tampering derives from his need "to relate my private, imaginary preoccupations, with the actual world in which I am living." This compulsion to "ponder a mythic past of my own, gratifying to my own needs and imaginings" is closely related to the need Robert Alter sees in nineteenth-century novelists to "outdo a threatening or at least bewildering historical reality by remaking it imaginatively." Assembling characters and events into an order of their own devising, such novelists as Balzac, Stendahl, and Dickens asserted mastery over the chaos of history and experience which they saw as a threat to the integrity of their
consciousness. Dickens overcame the effects of his deprived childhood by constructing novels such as *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* in which the young hero finally discovers his real station in society and in his family. Similarly immersed in the problem of imaginatively creating believable origins for his father, Morris so successfully subverts reality to the purposes of his imagination that he loses "all sight of the fiction in my absorbed re-creation." From "overlapping, shifting memory impressions" he creates an image of his father that he sees clearly, but he is "no longer sure if what I see is a fact or a fiction." 

Although Morris shares nineteenth-century novelists' concern for mastering a threatening reality, there are major differences in his artistic vision and that of the masters of realism. For one thing, he does not share the literary optimism of a Dickens. His orphans remain orphans; his lovers seldom manage satisfying connections. After all, Morris lives and writes in the twentieth century from a perspective "too late for God and too early for the Farm Security Administration." It is an age in which most serious artists sense that "the stuff of reality, whether considered as personal history, cultural heritage, or metaphysical substratum, threatens to crumble into emptiness..." Perceiving a need for a "life that is more real than life," Morris gives his imagination freedom to play over the shifting sands of his memory, always aware that the order his consciousness imposes on the fragments of his recollection is as illusory as a mirage of water on the Nebraska plains.
As pointed out in the preceding chapter, the hopelessness of the task does not deter Morris from making an effort at transformation. He asserts his humanity by creating in the face of chaos, by imposing order where there is only confusion. He exemplifies Robert Alter's definition of the modern self-conscious novelist, who "would ingeniously contrive to have the mirror held to art show forth the face of history as well--even as history increasingly challenged the artist and any value his art might attain."28 This, then, is another difference between Morris and the nineteenth-century realists, for he never claims his novels to be accurate recreations of historical incidents. Because of the inevitable subjectivity of memory, he sees all history as a fiction imposed by memory on the past. And his novels continually call into question their own reconstructions of the past. Morris deals imaginatively with the threat represented by such historical realities as the arms race, mass murders, and presidential assassinations, but it is in his own past that he finds both the greatest possibility for artistic inspiration and the greatest challenge to his powers of mastery and transformation.

Thinking about Gordon Boyd's problems in The Field of Vision, Dr. Lehmann recognizes the difficulty most people have achieving a satisfactory relationship with their home place:

Small towns, most of them, where the lights burned over empty corners, the houses dark with the dreams they would ask Lehmann to analyze. As Boyd had cracked, they were all great places to be from. But that, of course, was the dilemma. They left, but they never got away. Trailing along behind them, like clouds of glory, were the umbilical cords. On his mind's eye Lehmann saw them like the
road lines on a map. Thousands stretched to reach Chicago. Millions stretched to reach New York.  

Morris, like many of his characters, felt a need to leave his home place, but he never could get away from it. Everything he has written, he says, has "the stamp of an object made on the plains." Yet he refuses to write as a local colorist or regionalist who never has attempted to gain a wider perspective than that provided by his native Nebraska: "If I had stayed in Lone Tree I might now enjoy a shady grove of premature entombment."  

Speaking in his own voice in God's Country and My People, Morris brilliantly summarizes the interplay of imagination and memory in his artistic reconstruction of his home place:  

God's country had a great variety of places, and yet some places proved to be missing. Lone Tree, for example. It will not be found on the map. It is assembled from the real and imaginary pieces that a prodigal drags into exile with him, parts of a jigsaw he hopes to reassemble in a better place. He adds to these parts whatever seems to be missing, and as it slowly takes shape he begins to see it clearly. For the first time. It is a ghost town, and the exile is one of the ghosts. Lone Tree is born of my need for such a place, and Tom Scanlon of the place's need for such people. If a fly is missing between the cracked blind and the window, I conjure it up. When it comes time (as it does) for me to salvage what I value, the salvage proves to be no more than what I had imagined. It's as simple as that.  

In another place, Morris says that the Lone Tree of his novels is not the Central City (at one time called Lone Tree) of his birth. All of the Lone Tree of the novels is a fiction,
an assemblage of roles, parts and missing pieces, saturated with sentiment and reminiscence, brought in at night, under the cover of darkness, and discovered casting real shadows in the morning. Some of this fabrication derived from fiction (over the years I had seen photographs and read frontier journals) but all of it had been processed by the emotion rooted in my boyhood experience. The emotion was what mattered. It would do with the shards of memory all that it could.

When we say, "How well I remember!" we invariably remember rather poorly. It is the emotion that is strong, not the details. The elusive details are incidental, since the emotion is what matters. In this deficiency of memory, in my opinion, we have the origins of imagination.34

Unlike Faulkner’s South, where families remain in the home place and attempt to reconstruct their past, Morris’s Midwesterners often move away, only to return in an effort at re-vision and re-possession.35 Nevertheless, as is the case with the Reverend Hightower in Light in August, the problem is not so much the place from which contemplation of the past occurs as the stifling captivity a preoccupation with the past can impose on a person in search of his origins. Morris often describes the captivity of what he calls the "mythic past" with Freudian images of regression and engulfment.36 Attempting to face difficult experiences in the present, his characters recall experiences from their childhood which were at once threatening and comforting. Returning home for the first time in twenty-five years, Clyde Muncy recollects that as a boy he often spent Sunday afternoons under his porch eating Hershey bars and drinking red pop until he was sick enough to throw up.37 Trying to account for the ambivalent influence of his father on his psychological development, Peter Foley remembers that his family’s house "was like a tunnel in some respects."38 When Einbaum
experiences contentment in his confinement in a Nazi concentration camp, his fellow prisoner Klugmann diagnoses it as a "return to the womb of the ghetto."\textsuperscript{39} Alec Cartwright, tormented by dreams that "swooped to devour her," asks, "Was not this the way one possessed an object, by eating it?" She thinks of the Eucharist and of the "gored matador's children, who had acquired the testicles of the bull that had destroyed their father and in a ritual of revenge and rebirth roasted and eaten them."\textsuperscript{40} The impulse often is one of flight--out of this world, in the "deep-freeze" of "adolescent dreams."\textsuperscript{41} It is an expression of what Morris sees as the American dream not to grow up,\textsuperscript{42} not to have to face an enigmatic past, a threatening present, and an unknown future.

In the face of such a threatening view of the past, it might seem that Wright Morris would argue for the benefits of evasion over confrontation. In fact, \textit{The Territory Ahead}, published in 1958, asserts that American novelists traditionally have been impeded by their crippling nostalgia dependence on the past. Morris calls for an increased concern with the problems of the "immediate present." Taking his own advice, he turned in the sixties from the plains to settings and themes more connected with the immediate present. But the excesses of the day convinced him that repudiation of the past is even more dangerous than obsession with it. Consequently, in his preface to the 1978 Bison edition of \textit{The Territory Ahead}, Morris confesses that he is "now more inclined to a nostalgic view of nostalgia itself":
What a passion it was for those possessed by it! Americans
did not invent this torment, but surely we have made the
most of its follies, a passion that was crippling to Thomas
Wolfe but liberating to the mind of Faulkner. Without a
mythic and alluring past American writers of genius, with
few exceptions, had little to fuel their imaginations.
It gave substance to their dreams of national purpose,
and faith to sustain their personal visions. On such
evidence, the virtues of nostalgia more than compensate
for its foibles. It would appear to have generated what
was essential to a young nation's boundless and soaring
expectations uninhibited by, and often indifferent to,
the obvious.

Potentially crippling though the activity may be, Morris
acknowledges the importance of dealing with the past—whether mythic,
national, regional, or personal—in his fiction. To evade confrontation
with the challenge of achieving a coherent view of history is to risk
failure of connection with other human beings. Stanley, the hippie
boy in Fire Sermon, tells Floyd Warner that he and his girlfriend are
"scared shitless of the dark." This fear of the dark, which Morris
associates with the past—something intangibly dark and remote from
perception—produces a selfish insensitivity in Stanley and his kind
which threatens the continuity of American culture. Stanley tells
eleven-year-old Kermit that "'all the non-fuckers are sick,'" including Kermit's eighty-year-old Uncle Floyd and perhaps Kermit
himself. Stanley and his girlfriend shamelessly copulate in front of
the old man and the young boy, and when the group reaches Floyd's
home place in Nebraska, Stanley takes his girlfriend to bed with him
in chaste Aunt Viola's room. Because of their fear of the dark, they
light a coal-oil lamp which catches the house on fire and destroys
Floyd's tangible past. Insensitive as a rutting animal, Stanley represents the threat of a generation which refuses all connection with the past. In contrast, Uncle Floyd, irascible and insensitive in his own way, nevertheless sees the importance of transferring his feelings for the past to a rising generation. Though burdened by his connections with the past, Floyd feels sorry for Kermit, who "brought so little to what he saw, he saw what was there."46

Ironically, the burning of his family home frees Floyd to make a satisfactory reconciliation with his memory. This liberates him from the burden of nostalgia he has borne throughout his life, but this burden is much less threatening than the problem facing Stanley, Kermit, and other members of rising generations who do not know "what to think, or how to act, not having been told, and lacking examples."47 Spellbinding though the past may be—capable of arresting psychological development and suspending a person as if in fossilizing amber—ignorance of tradition is even more stultifying. In Morris's view, people do not achieve Floyd Warner's ripeness without coming to terms with their past in a way that liberates them to act meaningfully in the present. However tentative and difficult that reconciliation may be to obtain, it is a necessary struggle, evasion of which produces isolation, sterility, and chaos. Attractive though Buck Finn's flight may appear, there comes a time when people must stop lighting out for the territory ahead. They must turn, face the past, and achieve some kind of satisfactory reconciliation between the threat of nostalgia and the necessity of maintaining continuity with tradition.
Wright Morris fills his books with characters struggling to make peace with their past. Floyd Warner returns to the home place in Fire Sermon, only to see his past go up in smoke in the burning of his sister's house. Faithful to the allusion to T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land contained in the title Fire Sermon, however, the burning is a ritual of purification and sanctification. As long as Floyd has a tangible past in the form of his sister and the home place, he does not come to terms imaginatively with his origins. Once the past remains only in his memory, he is forced to formulate a view of it which makes sense to him and frees him to act in the present. A Life, structured as a physical journey from Floyd's boyhood home in Nebraska to a place he homesteaded on the Texas-New Mexico border, is also a symbolic journey into Floyd's memory. The past comes toward him "like objects approaching on the highway" as the present mysteriously recedes "like the road visible in the rear-view mirror."48 By the end of his journey, the past is illuminated and the present rests in darkness. Grown ripe in awareness of the meaning of his past in relationship to his present, Floyd dies ritualistically at the hand of the Indian George Blackbird, a human embodiment of the forces of nature.

Like Floyd Warner, Agee Ward in The Man Who Was There feels compelled to return to the home place to attempt a reconciliation with his past. From Europe, Agee sends his friend Peter Spavic a "life-like drawing of a small-town privy. The door is ajar, and through the crack can be seen a small boy, meditating."49
A few months later, Peter receives another drawing of the privy, this time with more detail from the farm scene around it. Another month later, Agee sends Peter two newspaper clippings from Paris. The first is a photograph of what appears to be a sliced kidney, or a cross section of sweetbreads, but on examination certain objects can be identified. There are parts of a croquet game, a strip of hedge, a cream separator, a harrow seat, a white egg, a piece of soggy yard, and a pump. In the back, holding up the sky, is a row of topless trees. It is a painting, and the name of it is THE JOURNEY BACK.

The second clipping is entitled Through the Hole in the Palette, and is a column of short art reviews. The last review in the column is circled with a red line:

If you're a small-town boy—and who isn't—you better have lunch at Vathek's and see what he has on the walls. I think you'll find everything you've been trying hard to forget. Most of us are over here because we're trying to forget something, but I think Mr. Ward is trying to remember everything. I think you'll find that he does pretty well. If I didn't understand it so well I might think it was Dada, but it isn't; he's just homesick as hell. But this boy's home is really far, far away. I get the feeling from this stuff that what he'd like to remember happened sometime before he was born. It makes me wonder what he thinks he'll find over here. If Mr. Ward was me, he wouldn't paint THE JOURNEY BACK, he'd take it—they'd hurry back here and forget the whole damn thing.

Of course, the reviewer is right: Agee, an orphan, is trying to remember things that happened even before he was born. In the next section of the novel he returns to Nebraska to find out more about his family. He discovers that the details of his painting are in minor respects inaccurate, but the emotion they convey is more important than fidelity of representation. His aunt and uncle identify him as the last of the Ward line, "but with the Osborn look."
When Agee visits Eddie Cahow, the town barber, Eddie says "'You be quiet a minute and I'll tell you who you are. . . . You're Grace and Hank's boy—mostly Grace.'".53 Strangely, though, Eddie says that he is Dwight, not Fayette Agee Ward, Dwight's little brother who "'lived only a few months.'".54 Returning to the home place, Agee finds both more and less than he seeks. He discovers that he is definitely a member of the Ward line, though he has the Osborn look, but he may not even be the person whose name he has been using throughout his life. People remember him and his parents, but their memories are like the faded photographs that fill Agee's album: it is impossible to make out individual faces. This is particularly true of Agee, whose countenance is blurred in virtually every photograph, no matter how clear the other faces may be. What Agee learns from his return to Nebraska, then, is that any satisfactory connection he makes with his past must ultimately be an imaginative one. His memory, the recollection of others, and even the historical record, provide only hints, iconic details that glow with the aura of powerful emotion. As always in Morris's fiction, some facts are there, but the facts by themselves don't "'seem to mean anything.'".55 The incompleteness of the record leaves the way open for the artist's imagination to bring its own order to the fragments of history, but there remains the uneasy feeling that, as Clyde Muncy says in *The World in the Attic*, "We didn't know much, but we knew we had missed something.".56

In contrast to the confident reconciliation with the past that Floyd Warner attains in *A Life*, Agee Ward's tentative, uncertain
repossession of his past is more representative of what happens in Morris novels in general, including those not set primarily on the plains. For instance, Dr. Cowie in *One Day* is subject to "quick backward glances at his life." An orphan like Agee Ward, Cowie's incomplete connection with his origins is symbolized by a chameleon he lost as a boy in a sandbox and by a "cigar box, once full of marbles, that turned up, twenty years later, empty." Cowie asks, "Why do we describe the inescapable things as lost?" showing the power which these fragments of memory have over his consciousness. When Cowie faces stressful experience in the present, such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, his mind wanders to enigmatic and incompletely recollected incidents from the past. Besides the chameleon and the cigar box there is Cowie's flight to Mexico to escape having to make a final commitment to marriage and to medical school. In Mexico, Cowie discovers that he does not have the courage to face human suffering or to give himself in a love relationship; he returns to the United States, becomes a veterinarian, and immerses himself in the problems of animals, at least in part to escape the trauma of facing difficult connections with human beings. Morris's implication here, as in many of his novels, is that Dr. Cowie cannot face the challenges of the immediate present because he never has successfully repossessed his past: he handles and rehandles the tokens of his past without bringing them into satisfactory relationship with each other or with himself.

In a sense, no matter what the setting or the characters, Wright Morris's novels repeat the same story over and over, and that story
is the author's own. Wayne Booth argues against using biographical
details in the interpretation of Morris's fiction, but his novels
are so full of the author's grappling with his own past that to ignore
this struggle is to remain unaware of the tension between imagination
and memory which is so much a force in his art. Circle overlapping
circle, the past and the present interpenetrate, linking the one
irrevocably to the other. Explaining why he does not revise his
recent novels so much as his earlier ones, Morris says,

Nothing is ever "the first time around." After the first
experiments, it's the fourth time around, or the seventh,
or the twelfth—finally, with these latest books, it's
the twenty-first or twenty-second time around, even though
I'm just writing them for the first time.

In *The Field of Vision*, the circle of the bullring brings twenty
thousand people together, each with his own circle of experience and
memory. Morris focuses his attention on a few—all with direct or
indirect ties to Lone Tree, Nebraska, Wright Morris's home place, the
navel of the world. Walter McKee remembers Gordon Boyd's attempt at
walking on water in the local sandpit. Lois McKee remembers Gordon
Boyd's passionate kiss. Boyd himself, whose circle of experience is
contacted by the circles of all the other central characters,
remembers the kiss and the walking on water, along with the pocket
he ripped from Ty Cobb's baseball uniform. Tom Scanlon, Lois's
father, hearing the word * agua*, remembers his father's bizarre
wagon-train trip through a dry western desert. Dr. Lehmann, Gordon
Boyd's psychological advisor, thinks of Boyd's failure to succeed or
fail. Lehmann also remembers his own quest to understand the origins of his "female" companion, Paula Kahler, whose childhood traumatized her to the point that she, born Paul Kahler, deliberately changed her consciousness from male to female. Benignly ignoring the violence of the bullfight, Paula turns her gaze inward, to a world of her own creation. Little Gordon McKee (Lois and Walter's grandson named for Gordon Boyd), too young to have a memory of the past, accepts the shaping influence of Gordon Boyd, whose antics around the ring assure young Gordon of at least one experience that will glow in his memory.

The matador in The Field of Vision stands in the center of the bullring, accepting the praise of the crowd, "a siphoning sound that swirled about him, creating a vortex, a still point where he stood alone with himself."61 This still point of transformation occurs at the intersection of all the circles of experience represented by the thousands of members of the crowd, their attention focused for an instant on a person who has the courage to take memorable action. While it is the matador who draws to himself the attention of the crowd at the bullfight, it is Wright Morris as novelist who stands at the vortex of the action and attention of all of his books. By populating his dozens of novels with characters who seem to have a life of their own, he masters the chaos of his personal memory, overcoming the threatening pressure of history with the courage of his imagination. Admitting uneasiness about characters like Gordon Boyd, who "has umbilical problems,"62 Morris reveals the self-conscious tentativeness of his transformations. As always, there is the hint
that Morris is too close to his characters, or that his characters are too close to him. Despite holding them at arm's length with his understated, detached style, Morris constantly fears that his fictional characters are too much a product of the raw material of his experience and not enough the manifestation of the creativity of his imagination. Recognizing his umbilical ties to many of his creations, he-withholds details of his own biography, insisting, as David Madden says, upon "maintaining the privacy of his personal life."63 In his latest novels, Morris appears to be more at ease with the connections between his memory of his own past and the personal histories of his characters. This willingness to deal openly with his past is exemplified by publication in 1981 of Will's Boy, a memoir of Morris's childhood and adolescence.

Though often protective of his personal life, Wright Morris could no more refrain from creating characters who in some way are manifestations of his own past than he could refrain from writing at all. Just as the characters in The Field of Vision come to the bullfight to remember, to attempt a repossession of their past, so also does Wright Morris craft his novels as salvage operations on his past, as ongoing efforts to get the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle—his recollection of the past—to fit together.64

Citing Marthe Robert's work on Balzac, Robert Alter points out that the technique of reappearance of the same characters in different novels "answers not so much a literary or formal need in the novels as a psychological need in the novelist."65 This is especially true of nineteenth-century writers, whose novels attempt to master a threatening
reality. Alter argues that Dickens, for instance, felt a need to believe his fantasies. 66 Wright Morris also creates fantasies about his past that are so real he can no longer distinguish the products of history and imagination, but his creations always are tempered by a self-conscious awareness of the workings of the process of transformation. Carrying incidents and characters from book to book in different disguises, 67 he recreates incidents from his own past in order to possess them imaginatively. 68

As pointed out in chapter 1 of this dissertation, Morris often focuses attention on the commonplace in a way that defamiliarizes it. There are certain experiences which naturally suggest themselves as worthy of defamiliarizing treatment; consequently, they reappear throughout his fiction. Such a luminous detail is the grain elevator from which Morris, as a youth, could see far out onto the plains in all directions. 69 This recollection is the seed for incidents which appear in such different novels as The Man Who Was There (p. 116), The Home Place (p. 76), and The Field of Vision (p. 46). Another luminous detail is Morris's recollection of his station-agent father's predilection for indelible pencils, a trait which becomes identified with father figures in The Home Place (p. 85), The World in the Attic (p. 39), Man and Boy (p. 11), and One Day (p. 73), among others. These details, like the basket of soiled diapers, the corn, and the figure in the carpet in The Home Place, are connections which link one generation to another and the author to his creations. Clyde Muncy's story of his grandmother's cane-bottom chair seat is representative of Morris's symbolic use of connecting details. As we read this account it is significant to remember that Wright Morris
is similar to Clyde Muney in important ways: both are writers who return from the East to attempt a repossessing of the home place in Nebraska. In addition, Morris's mother's maiden name was Osborn:

There's a story in the family, on my mother's side, that my Grandmother Osborn started west with her man, her Bible, and her cane-seated rocking chair. As things got bad she had to give up both her man and the Bible, and to keep from freezing to death she had to burn the chair. But first she unraveled the cane-bottom seat. She wrapped it around her waist, and when she got to where she was going she unwrapped it, put it in a new chair. Her kids grew up with their bottoms on it. That cane seat was the connection with all of the things, for one reason or another, she had to leave behind. Which was what these women were doing with me now. They were putting a cane seat, an approved one, in my bottomless chair. Making the connection. The rest would follow, naturally.

Naturally, and yet, in Wright Morris's fiction, the things which seem most natural, most simple, are usually the most difficult to attain. Such is the case with connections, whether they be between parents and children, between friends, between cultures, or between men and women. In fact, it is men and women's failure to achieve satisfying sexual connection which perhaps best illustrates Morris's self-conscious recognition of both the importance of achieving connections and the difficulty of making them. As in Morris houses, there is almost always something missing or out of place in the sexual relationships between characters in his novels. The father, probably Morris's own, quoted in God's Country and My People, expresses the dilemma perfectly:

"Boys and girls, when you pass a fire hydrant I want you to think of your beloved country. There's no place that has such a fine erection, so little seminal flow."
In America, which has enthroned sexual prowess as one of its ruling cultural myths, there is always the desire but seldom the ability to achieve life-enhancing sexual connection. Etoile perceptively comments that her Aunt Lois is "dying to be molested," yet this is the same Lois McKee who spends her whole life trying to efface the memory of Gordon Boyd's passionate kiss. She and her husband, Walter, sleep in separate beds, and the only passion she allows herself is a strangely displaced attachment to little Gordon McKee, her grandson. Warren Howe, central character in Cause for Wonder, and Kitty Brownell fall in love, though she never allows him even to kiss her. Holder, Kashperl, Sanford, and other men in the novel In Orbit may dream of being "a man on the loose," but experiencing Holly Stohrmeyer's rape vicariously causes them to suffer for a crime they failed to commit. Like Mrs. Porter in The Deep Sleep, almost all Morris characters are hermetically isolated, trapped as if in a diving bell, amber, or a goldfish bowl.

These people exhibit the trait that Gordon Boyd associates with Nebraska and Nebraskans: In a place where the state emblem is a "stiffly pleated upper lip," what "scares you pissaess is not the fear of death, but the fear of exposure. The open fly of your feelings. You know why? You might not have any. What can one do? Keep the upper lip firmly pleated."

The stiffly pleated upper lip, the carefully buttoned fly, is manifest in repressive sexual behavior. Will Brady's wife winds herself tightly in a sheet and Virgil Ormsby's wife wears her corset to bed until their husbands discover that sex has no role in their marriage.
Floyd Warner never sees so much of his future wife as on the day she is baptized. After the birth of a child or two, Morris's male characters generally retreat to the basement, or at least to a bed separate from their wives. Those women who, like Charlotte Hatfield of In Orbit, are creatures who have not "been fixed" generally find themselves paired with men like Bud Hibbard, who spent his honeymoon putting together a telescope.

Morris's sometimes frank, yet ultimately reserved, discussion in Will's Boy of his own developing sexuality shows the ambivalence with which he approaches this important subject. Though he often talks freely about his infatuations with some of his female teachers and fellow students, he just as often breaks off discussion of sexual memories at a crucial instant, as if deliberately suppressing painful or unpleasant experiences. At one point he recalls his classmates being presented a new baseball by their teacher, Mrs. Partridge. Instead of throwing the ball to them, she rolls it, beginning a frenzied, chaotic game in which "We ran around like crazy, rolling the ball until it was scuffed and dirty like an old one." Morris ends his description of this scene fraught with Freudian imagery with the following enigmatic sentence: "Something else had to have happened but I don't remember what it was, and I don't want to." It is as if Morris takes himself and his reader as far as he dares into his memory of a significant yet potentially threatening experience. At a crucial instant he deliberately refuses to push his recollection farther.
He exhibits a different kind of evasion in his narration of a frankly sexual scene that he once witnessed between his father and a girl named Hilda:

I ran up the stairs into the bedroom at the front, to see my father, his back to me, seated in a chair with a girl in his lap.... Her unblinking eyes, her head bobbing, stared into mine over my father's shoulder. Her head continued to bob, my father hoarsely breathing, as if unable to stop the machine he had started. I ran back down the stairs...

Fleeing psychologically as well as physically from what he perceived to be his father's repulsive "ways with women," Wright decided he would "go my own way." His father's "practice deepened what was prudish in my nature, a vein that ran deep." As one ramification of turning away from the ways of his father, Morris discovered that "My true feelings were precisely those that I would learn to conceal." Such impulses could only have been intensified when Morris's father made fun of his son's attempts at love-making, and Wright Morris the novelist inherited from Wright Morris the adolescent his ambivalent curiosity and cynicism toward sexuality. Just as his father was the talker of the family while Wright was the listener, so too was Will the man of action in matters sexual, while his son remains the interested observer, recording from a distance the foibles and proclivities of his characters. His self-consciously ambivalent interest in yet distance from the problems of sexuality is aptly symbolized by Morris's practice of "bundling" with Lois Baker in Chicago; young Wright would sneak into
Lois's room and the two would sleep together, but always with their clothes on. 87

In some ways a reflection of his own life, Morris's fictional world of unsuccessful sexual connections also mirrors his novelistic world of incompletesd dwellings. While men build houses and provide the family living, the home itself is the province of the mother. There is little common ground; as Dr. Cowie envisions it in One Day, "a greater distance separated . . . man from woman, than that which separated man from beast." 88 While men seek career challenges and love, women crave security. 89 Women carve out their niche in the immediate present, while men try to recapture the past. 90 This is not a comforting view of sexual relationships, but it helps to explain some of Wright Morris's lack of popular acceptance. Instead of using excesses of sexuality as a symptom of a troubled society as Faulkner does, Morris makes the same point by showing the repressiveness of his characters' sexuality. Aware of America's preoccupation with sex, he nevertheless chooses to explore the problems of reality rather than wish fulfillment. In this he is like Henry James, who chose to treat sex with technique rather than experience. 91

No Morris novel more thoroughly examines the problems of establishing sexual connections than does The Works of Love. Will Brady, the offspring of a mail-order marriage, spends his whole life attempting unsuccessfully to connect with other people, particularly women. Confused about his own identity, he invariably chooses partners who are either old enough to be his mother or young enough to be his daughter.
Opal Mason, an experience-hardened prostitute, takes him as her "lover," though "That might be an odd way to describe a man who brought nothing along, said nothing loving, and left a good deal up to the woman, to say the least."92 After Will and Opal make love, he generally falls asleep, while she lies awake crying, taking sad pleasure in her thoughts about "strong silent" men like Will Brady who are "scared to death" and who are really "like children."93 After Opal laughs at Will's marriage proposal, he eventually marries Ethel Bassett, his boss's widow. It is she who wraps herself tight in her sheet when they sleep in the same bed on their honeymoon. Will reconciles himself to her frigidity and they begin to enjoy one another's company, but by the time they reach home Ethel has become "a stranger again, his wife."94 They coexist, sleeping in separate rooms, until Ether discovers that Will has taken up with a cigar-counter girl in Omaha. Ethel leaves, freeing Will to marry the girl, whom many mistake as his daughter. (The girl's mother was a vaudeville performer and her father one of the five men who hid under her bed in their comedy act.) Will incongruously builds a fine city home in the country town of Murdock, lavishly furnishing it from a mail-order catalogue but forgetting to order a kitchen stove, making the place campishly fashionable yet uninhabitable. Because his wife knows nothing of domestic life, Will hires Anna Mason to take care of the family. Anna, an aging woman who never married, is another example of failure of sexual connections; she spent forty years taking care of a sick brother. Anna introduces Will to religion, which
"prepares you for a short flight from one world to a better one. From the real world, where nothing much ever happens, to the unreal world where anything might happen—and sometimes does."

Will, all too immersed in the real world where nothing much ever happens, tries desperately but ineptly to connect with his wife and his adopted son. Incapable of knowing how to treat them, he isolates himself in the basement while they pass their time playing records in the upstairs bedrooms. As is characteristic of most family relationships in Morris's novels, no one assumes traditional roles. Husbands and wives live together as chaste as brothers and sisters, though wives often play the role of domineering mother to their husbands. Parents either fail to communicate with children or else the child—there is a disproportionate number of only children in Morris's fiction—sides with one parent against the other. Will's second wife finally runs off with a Hawaiian. When they are reunited and take a second honeymoon to Hollywood, she tells Will about being awakened to love by watching Francis X. Bushman movies. She also talks about a Mr. Marshall, security guard for a large department store, who used to watch her undress and put on new clothes from the store; he never touched her and he never paid her, but he did let her keep all the clothes. In the fantasy world of Hollywood, Will parts from his wife for the final time. Moving on to Chicago, he sorts waybills at night until his apotheosis as Santa Claus and his death in a sewage canal. All of Will's attempts at making lasting connections fail. Only as Santa Claus, only in hotel lobbies, only in the unreal world of rented rooms can he and men like him find momentary success.
in the works of love:

Just as there are men who are never lovers until they meet their wives in the lobby, there are women who have never been loved anywhere but in a hotel room. Only there does the lover meet the beloved. In the rented room is where men exceed themselves.  

While Will Brady's story is Wright Morris's most fully sustained examination of the personal tragedy of one man's failure in the works of love, One Day explores in greatest detail what "might happen anywhere under the sign of impotence":  

In representing nothing bigger than himself, Lee Oswald represented more than enough. He did in Texas. He did in all of America. A free man, he testified to the horrible burden of freedom: how connect with something? How relate to someone? It was no accident that he singled out the man who represented the maximum of human connections, and displaced this man, this symbol of connections, with himself. Lee Oswald had merely deprived another man of what, in his opinion, he had been deprived: his right to the pursuit and possession of happiness. . . . So this senseless crime not only made history: it made American sense.  

The terrible recognition that comes to Dr. Cowie and to Alec Cartwright is that Lee Oswald's lack of connections is representative rather than unique in America. Unable to face marriage, Cowie flees America and his medical career for Mexico. There he encounters Concepcion, a strange demon lover whose openness chases him back to America where he establishes himself as a veterinarian and inveterate bachelor in Escondido ("hidden"), California. Alec flees Escondido for Paris, where she encounters Lyle "Protest" Jackson, a young Black who gets her pregnant and then returns to America to continue his career
as a freedom rider. Alec follows, attempting to reestablish the connection the two had in Paris. Failing that, she becomes absorbed with watching bad movies until her baby is born. Contemplating a protest of her own, she returns to Escondido, leaving her baby at Dr. Cowie's animal clinic on the morning of John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Both Cowie and Alec come to the conclusion that their own impotence makes them as responsible for the President's death as Lee Harvey Oswald. Indeed, their entire community, a microcosm of America, is characterized by impotence. Wendell Horlick marries a woman "who was like one of his older sisters," yet he is disdainful of the "faggy boys" from San Francisco who move into some of the newer homes in Escondido. Ignacio Chavez, father of a large family, nevertheless recognizes his wife as a world unto herself: "Left to her own devices Conchita would have found herself with child." Ruth Elyot, Alec's best friend in college, reads Norman Mailer and tries to flush her newborn baby down the toilet in a train. Mrs. Warren, Dr. Cowie's housekeeper, comes to him with "Connections all over . . . with the possible exception of her husband."  

To Wright Morris this plethora of meaningless connections and concomitant paucity of important ties is a peculiarly American malaise. Subconsciously sensing the emptiness of what should be their most intimate relationships, Americans scurry about Babbittlike, joining the Chamber of Commerce, setting up pet adoption centers, and boosting their community. Groping to compensate for a lack of
permanent connections, they give sexual performance mythic status. Glorification of the sex act substitutes for inability to make meaningful social actions. Ironically, though, as the father points out in God's Country and My People, erection does not guarantee seminal flow. Americans find themselves trapped, unable because of repression to fulfill their dreams of action, and this sexual impotence mirrors a more general cultural impotence.

Arnold Soby, in What a Way to Go, thinks to himself, "Was it not strange . . . that only lovers could compete with artists? Transform the object, that is, according to taste?" 103 As shown in the forgoing discussion, lovers' transformations are at best momentary and at worst illusory in Wright Morris's novels. Sheriff McNamara, brooding in One Day about the failure of his marriage, formulates his insight into a "law" that

sex was not reversible. In more concrete terms, this meant the night coming up was more important than all of the nights that were past. Never mind how many. Never mind how good. The night coming up would be more important than the ten thousand nights that were gone. It lay in the future. All the others lay in their graves.104

Carrying the frightening burden of his knowledge of this law, McNamara fails to sustain a satisfying relationship with his wife. Occasional successes stand not as monuments to achievement but as footprints along the path of a routine. Fear of failure freezes him into impotence, and McNamara joins the numerous other living fossils in his community incapable of sustaining connection.
Conscious of his role as artist, Wright Morris struggles continually with the novelistic equivalent of McNamara's law of sex. Because it is another demonstration of his artistic potency, each new novel is his most important. More than anything else, including lack of popular acceptance, he seems to fear the fate of so many American novelists, to "start well then peter out." Asserting and reasserting mastery over his own past, he uses the same characters and the same events again and again in his fiction. Sometimes he changes names from novel to novel; at other times he subjects widely different characters to the same experience. Often, as a part of his imaginative act of repossession, he formulates new versions of his past. Some of these versions are tentative; others gain such powerful hold on his consciousness that he can no longer distinguish memory from imagination. Fearful that his productions are more masturbatory than procreative, he always maintains tension between his desire to recollect his past and his need to transform it into an entirely new creation.

Frau Dorfman of Cause for Wonder has a theory that "events were stored, like films, in space." As Warren Howe understands it, comprehension of these events comes, "if at all, years later when it dripped, like a bright red fluid, from the tip of his brush or his pen." Such also is Morris's own technique. Ruminating on early experiences for years, he finally repossesses them by transforming remembered incidents and characters into novels. A cross-country automobile trip becomes My Uncle Dudley. A winter spent in a castle
in Austria becomes *Cause for Wonder*. College experience in California gives rise to *The Huge Season*. There are incidents and people, though, who have such a powerful effect on Morris's imagination that he brings them again and again into his novels. Emil Bickel, killed by an eastbound mailtrain while walking down the railroad tracks, appears in *The World in the Attic, The Field of Vision, Ceremony in Lone Tree*, and *God's Country and My People*. Sometimes the train is late, sometimes it is on time, but always it is the same Emil Bickel. Another character who reappears is the town barber, usually named Eddie Cahow but sometimes called Mr. Beggs. A kind of unofficial community historian, he can identify a person with local origins by the shape of his head and the texture of his hair. To Agee Ward he says, "'I'm the only one left around here who knows for sure where everybody is from.'"108 In a place from which most residents move away, it is Eddie who keeps them from being missing. When they return to the home place in search of their past, he often provides the most conclusive link.

Many other such characters populate Wright Morris's fiction, joining his novels into an interconnected whole with the same kind of feeling for place as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. Especially among characters closest to Morris's intimate past, though, there is not the consistency of characterization which makes it easy for readers to move from one Faulkner novel to another. The uncle who invented the Dust Bowl, the father, and the mother are ubiquitous in Morris's fiction, but there is a feeling that Morris has not fully settled on his view of these people. In spite of the uncertainties that may
characterize William Faulkner's repossessing of his past, the Sartorises, the Compsons, the McCaslins, the Sutpens, and even the Snopeses stand in such consistent relationship to each other throughout the Yoknapatawpha novels that genealogy charts can be drawn up to guide the reader through the intricacies of connections between families and among novels. Wright Morris's novels, with their Wards, Muncys, Hibbards, Osborns, McKees, Scanlons, and Boyds, give the appearance of the same kind of genealogical fullness, but upon careful inspection these vast family trees collapse into stunted bushes that do not extend deeper than three generations or wider than a few families. The apparent fullness of his collection of dramatis personae is illusory, just as his transformations are self-consciously tentative, experimental, and ambiguous. In many ways, Agee Ward is Clyde Muncy is Paul Webb is Peter Foley is Gordon Boyd is Warren Howe, and they all are Wright Morris. Uncle Dudley, Uncle Dwight, Uncle Fremont, and Floyd Warner are linked in the same way, as are the silent, undemonstrative fathers and the audacious mothers who die bearing the protagonist. Thus, enigmatic relationships between the hero and his uncle, father, and mother dominate much of Wright Morris's fiction, mirroring his struggle to come to terms with his own past.

During the summer of 1930, Wright Morris spent several months working on his Uncle Dwight Osborn's ranch in the Texas Panhandle. Those months and that uncle made such a powerful impression on him that both appear repeatedly in his novels. Typically, the narrator or central character of his novel looks back on the time he spent
working with his uncle who "invented" the Dust Bowl. The uncle and his wife work their farm day and night. The wind, stubborn force to match the uncle's own determination, blows the dust so hard and so consistently that it becomes caked to the roots of the uncle's teeth. While on the farm the young boy (or young girl in the case of Mrs. Ormsby in Man and Boy) gets introduced to the uncle's trenchant agnosticism. In addition, the young person undergoes initiation experiences which symbolize an awakening sexuality. Uncle Fremont and his wife tease Warren How in Cause for Wonder for wetting his bed, when he really has been having wet dreams. The dreams center around a trip to see the Gudgers, poverty-stricken tenant farmers with several daughters. They butcher a hog, but Warren remembers most his encounter with the Gudgers' oldest child, a girl named Georgia:

She liked to wrestle with boys. I was known to be a boy and a wrestler. The smell of Georgia had stayed with me like that of the pork. My dreams had been a boy's dreams, up until then, but they began to give me trouble after Georgia.

This scene is tinged with the same aura of awakening, yet threatening, sexuality as the hog-butcheringing incident early in Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure and Joe Christmas's initiation into the mysteries of menstruation in William Faulkner's Light in August. There is something terrifying, threatening, forbidding about the slaughter of the hog, and it is this terror which dominates Walter McKee's memory of the incident in The Field of Vision. McKee does not recognize the sexual
overtones of the experience, as Warren Howe does, but then McKee's staid propriety is even more repressive than Warren's.

Besides his contact with the protagonist at a crucial point in his adolescence, there are other reasons for the importance of the uncle in the lives of Morris heroes. Like their author, these characters tend to be either orphans or young men who have lost their mother and whose father has little contact with them. Consequently, the uncle is a surrogate father who sometimes takes upon himself the roles of both parents. For this reason, Uncle Dudley is much more important in the development of the boy's character than are his parents in My Uncle Dudley. By the same token, though he does not particularly like children, Floyd Warner takes very seriously his responsibility to raise his grand-nephew Kermit and transmit to him his family heritage in Fire Sermon.

The uncle figure, drawn largely from life as a reappropriation of an important part of Wright Morris's past, substitutes for a father whom Wright Morris (and most of his protagonists) hardly knew. 'William H. Morris, Wright's father, was a railroad station agent and one of the first men in the Midwest to go into the egg business on a large scale. A "self-made" man, he moved with his son through the whistle stops in the Platte Valley. For five years they lived on the North Side of Chicago near Lincoln Park. These are the basic details, about all that Wright Morris ever said about his father before publication of Will's Boy in 1981. This memoir provides much revealing detail about Morris's relationship with his
father, but the very nature of that relationship left gaps that can be filled in only by the artist's imagination. In fact, *Will's Boy*, with its excerpts from Morris novels placed at key points in the narrative, serves both to emphasize the importance of his own past in Wright Morris's novels and to confirm the importance to Morris of artistic transformation of his past into fiction. Discussing with Wayne Booth the genesis of Will Brady in *The Works of Love*, he recalls,

I began to think about Brady in the mid-forties. . . . A few years before, my father had died, in Chicago, and I was pondering his life, and how little I knew him. This led me to think about origins. In point of fact I knew very little. I had no "family" life. I had left the plains as a boy of nine. That I knew so little surely encouraged me to ponder a mythic past of my own, gratifying to my own needs and imaginings.

Unlike nineteenth-century novelists such as Dickens, who at times felt compelled to compensate for their lack of family life by creating (at least in the end) pleasant situations for their protagonists, Morris's mythic past turns out to be remarkably true to his memory. In other words, it is an attempt at repossession of reality rather than a product of wish fulfillment. Morris heroes generally have trouble understanding their fathers; what connection they are able to make often comes as a defensive alliance to combat the threatening power of a domineering wife and mother. Those characters, like Tom Scanlon, who identify totally with their fathers do so at the sacrifice of their own identity. Scanlon, reliving his father's past, refuses to turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century and remains suspended in the fossilizing amber of his imagination.
A comparison of details from Morris's past with the depiction of Will Brady in *The Works of Love* shows the extent to which Morris's repossessing of his past is accurate to the facts as he knows them. Both Will Brady and Will Morris begin their career as railroad station agents. Both are characterized by sateen dusters, green visors, and indelible pencils,\textsuperscript{117} sensory details whose frequent appearance in Morris novels shows the extent to which they impress his memory and influence his imagination. Of course, Willy Brady is not Will's natural son in *The Works of Love*, but this, along with the detached tone and use of ironic humor, is necessary to give Morris some aesthetic distance from the story and to keep the book from being "a solemn bore."\textsuperscript{118} (Incidentally, it is this tension between detachment and emotional repossessing which characterizes Morris's best fiction.) Significantly, though, when Will Brady concocts fictions about his past to tell his friends in Chicago, he does not deny being Willy's real father, explaining that the boy's mother died when Willy was born.\textsuperscript{119} Both Wills go into the egg business and both drive forty miles in second gear in their new car to avoid having to shift gears.\textsuperscript{120} Both take as their second wife a girl named Gertrude they find behind a cigar counter in Omaha.\textsuperscript{121} Wright recalls that he and Gertrude "lived in the front bedroom upstairs... My father lived downstairs, in a room off the yard,"\textsuperscript{122} just as in *The Works of Love*. Similarly, Wright Morris remembers that he was allied with Gertrude against his father—"It was us against him"\textsuperscript{123}—precisely as is the relationship between Willy and Gertrude on the one hand and
Will Brady on the other hand in *The Works of Love*. Both Wills eventually move to a place near Lincoln Park in Chicago. While Morris was there with his father, they spent only Sunday mornings together, often in the big lobby of the train station on LaSalle Street, reminiscent of the fine hotel lobbies in *The Works of Love* where Will Brady has himself paged. In addition, Morris speaks of helping his real father to sort the waybills that both Wills work with in Chicago. Both Wills die in Chicago, probably in loneliness and isolation as depicted in *The Works of Love*. The seed for the final scene of the novel came from the time Wright Morris spent blowing up balloons for a department store Santa Claus and Montgomery Ward's in Chicago.

*The Works of Love*, which took seven drafts over several years to complete, is not just an accurate repossession; it is a powerful one. So powerful, in fact, Morris confides, that "I am remembering what I have written, or at least what I experienced, through the eyes of Brady. I was there, but it is now through his eyes that I see it." The artistic recreation takes such complete possession of the novelist's consciousness that he no longer is able to distinguish the products of memory and imagination. This, without question, is the kind of transformation that Morris strives for in his novels. It is wrong to assume that this most powerful repossession does away once and for all with imaginative preoccupations with the father, but later workings out of father-son relationships are in a sense variations on the theme struck in *The Works of Love*. 
There is no such confidence in Wright Morris's attempts to recreate the figure of his mother. To begin with, the whole operation is problematic because his mother died when he was born. He cannot remember her because she was not there, but her very absence represents the most important gap in his experience. That it is impossible to remember her is irrelevant since it is profoundly human to desire most powerfully that which is least attainable. Consequently, the absence of his mother is at once the most painful aspect of his personal life and the most potent stimulant to his imagination. While the quest for the mother is not the only theme Morris explores in his novels, it is seldom far from the center of concern. For an artist so absorbed in the problems of establishing connections, it is of crucial importance to remember that he lacked the most fundamental nurturing connection with his past, with his family, and with the entire world around him.

Wright Morris thinly disguises his own circumstances in the background of many of his main characters. Like the author himself, both Agee Ward in *The Man Who Was There* and Clyde Muncy in *The Home Place* and *The World in the Attic* are the sons of Grace Osborn. Furthermore, both Agee and Clyde, again like Morris himself, are artists who return to the home place in Nebraska to attempt a repossession. In *The Works of Love*, Will Brady's mother dies when he is young, leaving him an orphan. Warren Howe's mother, Grace Osborn, dies at his birth. In a reversal of the sexes, but with largely the same results, Alec Cartwright's father in *One Day* dies
when she is a baby. Floyd Warner's mother, also an Osborn, dies in childbirth. In *Fire Sermon* Floyd takes it upon himself to raise his grand-nephew, Kermit Oelsligle, who is orphaned as a boy. Paul Webb (another artist) of The *Deep Sleep* probably speaks for all of these characters, as well as their author, when he says

"Everything I am or hope to be... I owe to my mother--- I owe to the fact that she died when I was very young."

Because Webb makes this statement "in the voice of a radio announcer" and because he follows it with the comment

"She was a very beautiful woman, Parsegas. I'd have never had a chance. No doubt about that."

it is obvious that the statement is ambivalent. On the one hand, Webb owes his artistic drive to his quest to recover his relationship with his mother, the one thing most missing from his past. On the other hand, had she indeed lived to raise him, perhaps he would have lacked the impetus to create or perhaps his talent would wilt in the face of her dominating beauty. Remembering his audacious young sister Grace, who died bearing Warren Howe, Uncle Fremont Osborn says

"You're no more a match for her than Will, boy. That's your father. He was smart but he couldn't match her. If she lived his life would have turned out different, I can tell you."

It was known that my father's life turned out badly. How about mine?
"I don't say better, Warren, just different. So would yours."
"If my mother had lived, her life might have been of interest, but not mine."
Ambivalence about Warren's mother echoes the ambivalence in Wright Morris's own self-conscious efforts at repossession. Attempts to find out more about his mother seldom turn up much. He learns that he has her eyes, her hair, and her stubborn will. He also discovers that she audaciously shot electrical insulators off utility poles and that she even took a shot or two at the moon.\(^{136}\) Even when he sees photographs of her, he recognizes that "The mother's presence is more substantial than the mother's image."\(^{137}\) The physical features are obvious, but everything else is left up to the imagination. While his mother's death at his birth creates a sense of obligation in him—to allow her to experience the world through his eyes—it at the same time frees him to see things for himself, to attempt independent acts of re-vision and re-possession. In *Will's Boy* he says "Had Grace Osborn lived, my compass would have been set on a different course, and my sails full of more than the winds of fiction."\(^{138}\) Ironically, then, the greatest gap in his early experience also creates his greatest opportunity for independent expression, giving double meaning to the inscription on Agee Ward/Wright Morris's mother's headstone: "She died so that he might live."\(^{139}\)

The ambivalence of Morris's view of the mother is confirmed by the presence in his novels of what Leslie Fiedler calls "the anti-mother made flesh . . . the castrating mother wife."\(^{140}\) Fiedler refers specifically to Mrs. Ormsby in *Man and Boy*, who ostracizes her husband and her son because her husband buys the boy as a Christmas present an air rifle with which he shoots Mrs. Ormsby's beloved birds.
After that, there are no more Christmases, and the boy and his father are forced to seek refuge in the basement. Mrs. Ormsbys appear so frequently in Morris's novels as to become a stereotype of the threatening, domineering female. Male characters, to compensate for their own lack of a mother's influence, seem to choose women to marry who are strong enough to dominate them as if they were little children. Judge Porter, a nationally acclaimed jurist who dies at the beginning of *The Deep Sleep*, puts off getting back to the house because that is his wife's "'bailiwick.'" As Parsons reports it, the judge says "'he'd run the country if the Missus would run the home.'" Intimidated by his wife, Judge Porter hides his whiskey in the basement fruitroom and retreats to the attic to trim his fingernails and smoke cigars. His house is not as strange as his handyman Parsons', but his home, where he feels an intruder in the living areas, is just as abnormal in its own way as is "the Parsons monster." Thinking about Judge Porter's mother, who survives him, Paul Webb captures the terror many Morris males feel when they contemplate their mother:

"You can't do too much for your mother, Parsons, but if you kill yourself trying there's a pretty good chance the old girl will outlive you. There ought to be a black rose these mothers could wear for such loving sons. Or a satin pillow case, with blue and gold tatting, and in the mother's own loving stitch the motto—He Didn't Make It, But He Died Trying. No man can do enough for his mother, but he can always die."
In Wright Morris's world of fiction there seems to be no middle ground: either the mother dies while the son is young, leaving him to struggle throughout his life to repossess her, or else she outlives him, a constant reminder that he can never quite measure up. The absence of the mother helps to account for the darkness of the world view in Morris's novels, just as it helps to explain the yearning for completeness and connection. Nevertheless, true to the self-conscious ambivalence that is a hallmark of Wright Morris's fiction, the gap in his experience which gives his house of fiction the uneasy appearance of a plains dwelling with upstairs windows at floor level also serves to open up those same windows to his field of artistic vision.

Whatever difficulties Wright Morris has in defining his origins, his overarching objective remains the transformation of that raw material of experience through the power of his imagination. As Arnold Soby asks Cynthia in What a Way to Go,

"Isn't the artist's purpose to present us with something new? Something more life-like, if possible, than life itself? Nature might well imitate art but art has more to do than imitate nature. Wouldn't Miss Cynthia agree that the artist's purpose is to transform? Isn't he--like the lover--something of an alchemist? One who takes the ordinary stuff of life and makes it, presto, somehow more life-like."[44]

Beginning with the dross of his personal experience, the artist transforms base matter into a transcendentally permanent elixir. Soby argues that Henry James spent his whole life trying to prove that "the virus of suggestion, injected into the blood of the artist, resulted in
creatures more durable than themselves.\textsuperscript{145} Even if the creatures of the artist's creation do not prove to be as durable as Henry James hoped, the process of transformation is just as important as its products, giving purpose to the artist's repeated attempts at repossession.

Though Wright Morris came late to his career as a novelist, he learned early that "The line is not so clear between fiction and fact."\textsuperscript{146} He recalls, for instance,

\begin{quote}
when I was living with the Irish family in Omaha I had one memorable Christmas. My father was having difficulties with his marital life, among other things, and months might pass before I saw him. So I was anxious to convince the Mulligans that my father still loved me. I saved up money, made by selling papers, and bought myself a pawned gold watch—the case could be unscrewed, and the works examined—and then I wrapped this watch in a series of boxes, each one larger than the previous—you see we have here an embryo fiction writer—and gave this larger carton to myself at Christmas, with love from my father. There it was under the tree on Christmas morning. I do have a vague but palpable sense of guilt that I enjoyed the pathos of it. In this way writers are made, not born.
\end{quote}

Neglected as a boy even by Santa Claus, Wright Morris takes pride in saying as a novelist that his characters such as Tom Scanlon and Gordon Boyd answer "only to the man who conjures them up."\textsuperscript{148} Having enjoyed so little control over his past, he works to subdue a threatening realm by populating it with his own creations.\textsuperscript{149} This obsession he shares with the nineteenth-century realists—"The inclination is always to supersede,"\textsuperscript{150} he says—yet he is always self-conscious about his intrusions on his past, making them
tentative and mutable. Partly because the line between fiction and fact is indeterminate, the artist must "face and master" the facts of his past "in the name of his art. He must become that paradox, both a visionary and a realist."\textsuperscript{157}

Artistic transformation is a courageous gesture, bringing focus and meaning to a scene dominated by randomness. Mrs. Porter spends much of her energy in \textit{The Deep Sleep} looking for "the Golden Swiss Ticker," her dead husband's watch which symbolized to both of them the one time in their marriage when they successfully connected. When Paul Webb discovers the watch while rummaging through Judge Porter's hideout in the attic, instead of taking it directly to his mother-in-law, he indulges the artist in him, placing the watch "into the sideboard, behind the chest of silver, not a very safe place but one where Mrs. Porter might come upon it."\textsuperscript{152} He then lies awake in bed enjoying in his mind the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Porter discover the watch. He forgoes the public attention he might receive in order to have the private pleasure of the artist, the satisfaction he has in knowing that he has concerted the discovery. His act at once asserts artistic mastery over the situation and symbolizes the connection he has established with his wife's family and their past.

Because of the importance he places on the process of transformation, Wright Morris considers artistic mastery an act of real seriousness. In \textit{The Huge Season}, which David Madden calls "his most ambitious book,"\textsuperscript{153} he tells the story of a group of people who struggle for years to come to terms with something that happened to them in their college
days. That something is Charles Lawrence, roommate of Jesse Proctor and Peter Foley. Rich and audacious, Lawrence is a championship tennis player whose game is characterized by a refusal to use ground strokes. Facing a more skillful opponent in a college tournament, he wins by intimidation. Foley discovers that Lawrence has taken up tennis at least in part to compensate for the disability of his left arm. When Lawrence loses the strength in his good arm, he flees to Europe, where he dies from an emasculating goring in a bullfight.

All of this happens within the space of a year, but it has an impact which lasts for decades. Both Jesse Proctor and Peter Foley attempt to repossess the experience by writing a book about it. Proctor's novel, called "Querencia" or "Moment of Truth," follows Lawrence's career right up to his moment of truth, but Proctor cannot decide whether to kill off his hero or let him live. Reality provides a precedent when Lawrence dies, but Proctor remains frozen in his indecision. Finally, Dickie Livingston publishes Proctor's unfinished book without the author's name on it. Like Proctor, Peter Foley, who even has a contract from a publisher, cannot "make rain in the book."154 This phrase alludes to Morris's dedication of The Huge Season: "for/Henry Allen Moe/rainmaker/to many huge seasons." The dedication in turn alludes to the book's epigraph, from St. John Perse:

Those who lay naked in the huge season arise
all together and cry
that this world is mad!
For us who were there, we forced on the frontiers
exceptional accidents, and pushing ourselves in our
actions to the end of our strength, our joy amongst
you was a very great joy. . . .

It is one thing to experience a huge season—such as Foley, Lou
Baker, Jesse Proctor, and the others do in the novel—but it is an
totally different thing to make sense of that huge season, to record
it in a book, to make rain to that huge season. Foley's manuscript
sits for years without a final chapter. His experience on the twenty-fifth
anniversary of Lawrence's death probably gives Foley the control over
his past he needs to finish the book, but what is most important to see
is that Wright Morris has the power to make rain in his novel. He kills
Lawrence off, he writes the last chapter, and he has his name on the
book. Foley makes up his mind that what happens in The Huge Season is
"too crazy for anybody's book,"155 but Wright Morris has the audacity and
the mastery to put it all in his book. Unlike the character he creates,
Morris has the courage, the audacity, to master, to make rain to a huge
season by transforming it into a novel.

Besides showing how he asserts authorial mastery over the raw
material of memory, establishing "A span of art . . . between the dream
and the reality,"156 The Huge Season reveals Wright Morris at work to
assert another kind of mastery—over literary rivals. Unlike Hemingway,
whom Morris sees as working self-consciously to "clear the field of . . .
competition,"157 he prefers the more urbane, friendly methods of Henry
James.158 Even though he sees himself as being "Protected by neglect,"159
Morris nevertheless seems to suffer from the "anxiety of influence" which
Harold Bloom describes in his book with that title. In fact, much of Wright Morris's considerable amount of literary criticism takes the form of personal repossessions of the works of great American authors. Acknowledging criticism as "The art of appropriation," does not prevent him from practicing that art, in his novels as well as in his criticism. The Huge Season can be seen as his appropriation of the works of his two chief midwestern rivals—Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. In a passage that self-consciously echoes James Joyce's descriptions of Leopold Bloom in Dublin and T. S. Eliot's depiction of the unreal city of London in The Waste Land, Peter Foley thinks of his strange captivity:

A heartbreak dream, with the soundtrack by Chaplin, full of young men still fighting Hemingway's war, still loving and seducing Fitzgerald's women, and believing in perfection—a machine-made perfection—if anything at all. A witness to the power, the glory, and the terrible risks of art.

The sun was still rising, or not rising, but it would not stand still. Coitus interruptus now continuous, the sex life of male, the female, and the gall wasp, given the green light, the VD smear, the analytic and disarming candor that came from a close and detached observation of the erotogenic zones. The facts, as anyone would tell you, spoke for themselves. But not for Lawrence, not for Proctor and Lou Baker, not for those shadows on the streets of Hiroshima, and not for those shades sprouting on the graves where the radioactive corpses were buried. They did not speak for these things, nor in this language. They spoke for themselves. The new man, the cybernetic marvel, opened his plastic jaws and said, I am the fact finder, then smiled to show his teeth and gums coated with Nature's green. Under a cloud of unknowing, Foley arose, walked south across the square.

Charles Lawrence, rich as a Fitzgerald hero, is killed by a Hemingwaysque "lovely cornada, a horn wound." Jesse Proctor
sequesters himself in squalor in the Chicago slums to begin writing a novel deliberately imitating *The Sun Also Rises*.  

He later tells Foley of his plans to move to Paris, where he will visit Ezra Pound or D. H. Lawrence. Foley himself entertains Gatsbian dreams of his life's history. While Proctor and Foley's appropriations are phony and unsatisfying, a kind of coitus interruptus continuous with the past that lasts for decades, Morris's appropriations enhance his theme of captivity and assert his mastery over his literary heritage. 

Paradoxically, though, every author's career is in a sense coitus interruptus continuous between his memory and his imagination. Morris claims that he is the kind of writer who, "when he finishes something, he finishes with it," yet he also admits that "all my dealings result in unfinished business." Of Thomas Wolfe's quest to "truly possess" the "visible," Wright Morris says that "His artistic solution was to write the same book over and over again. Each time in the hope that his self-doubt would stop tormenting him" Substituting "truly possess" the "past" creates a formulation that effectively characterizes the genesis of much of Morris's fictive energy. Like Hyman Kopfman in *War Games*, 

He was apt to repeat certain things time and time again. .. [H]e went over the same material the way a wine press went over the pulp of grapes. But there was always something that refused to squeeze out. 

The same places, the same characters, the same incidents recur over and over in Wright Morris's fiction as he tries to get the repossession just right. But there always is something missing. The sense of loss of
control that overcomes an author as he finishes a book compels him to cover the same ground again and again.\footnote{171}

The sense of loss is particularly acute to someone like Morris, whose novels are personal salvage operations on a past full of gaps in memory. Painfully self-conscious about the privacy of his symbols, he has trouble transcending them in his fiction. Coming from a region which has no unified sense of its own history, Morris cannot succeed as Faulkner does in making his private repetitions into public myths. That, however, does not diminish his longing to repossess his past and to revitalize his culture's myths. Unable to construct a monumental, coherent, satisfying myth of origins and history, he elevates to the status of myth the operation of transformation itself. He goes on building novels filled with strangely incomplete houses and characters who long for connections denied them from birth. Mastering memory with imagination, he self-consciously overcomes a threatening reality with fictional worlds of his own fabrication. But there always remains a feeling that the house stands unfinished, that connections gain meaning only through constant repetition:

\begin{quote}
Time's unfinished business \ldots\ patiently waits on the commingling of memory, emotion and imagination. Time salvaged from lost time is less time recovered than reconstituted. Of the making of time and images there will be no end.\footnote{172}
\end{quote}
Chapter 3
Voices and Centers

There are too many centers, and the numberless circles are in constant agitation. What we seek is a whole in which these centers will be at rest. \---\textit{About Fiction}

Early in \textit{The Field of Vision} Gordon Boyd ponders the significance of the bullfight he is watching: "Gazing at this fleshy button" of the bullring, the "sanded navel of the world," each man has

the eyes to see only himself. This crisp sabbath afternoon forty thousand pairs of eyes would gaze down on forty thousand separate bullfights, see it all very clearly, missing only the one that was said to take place. Forty thousand latent heroes, as many gorings, so many artful dodges it beggared description, two hundred thousand bulls, horses, mules and monsters half man, half beast. In all this zoo, this bloody constellation, only two men and six bulls would be missing. Those in the bullring. Those they would see with their very own eyes. This golden eye would reflect, like a mirror, every gaze that was directed toward it. . . .

Because of the inherent subjectivity of human experience---because every viewer of the bullfight brings his own set of preconceptions and his own burden of the past to the ring with him---no two people see the bullfight in precisely the same way. While the circles of experience of some of the viewers interpenetrate, as do those of the small group of people around whom Wright Morris organizes the narrative of his novel, the circles do not coincide, and every spectator goes away from the bullring with a different vision of what happened there.
Riding in a cab through the unreal night scenes of New York to catch a train to attend his father-in-law's funeral at the beginning of *The Deep Sleep*, Paul Webb recognizes that

The painter Webb, the hack driver Steve, gazed through the same hole at the world, but it was clear that they did not see the same things. Webb had put his hand on the old man's shoulder... as he had felt their strange predicament as fellow mortals, each with two eyes in his head, each staring, but neither seeing the same thing.

Steve sees "only what was there," but Webb, imaginative and influenced by his special training, is reminded of "Bosch and Breughel, or any nightmare world rather than the actual scene." Their disparate pasts create a barrier between Steve and Webb, as they would between any two other people in the world, making it impossible to see "eye to eye," to have an identical vision of the same scene. The problem is further complicated by the fact that any attempt at communication of a shared experience involves the use of language, a system of reference so indeterminate that every utterance can be interpreted in any number of ways.

Wright Morris's use of language in his fiction mirrors his use of the commonplace and the past; it is a self-conscious struggle to transform the raw material of experience through the power of imagination. He remains as ambivalent about his linguistic transformations as about his appropriations of the commonplace and his own past. Wondering "To what extent does our need to explain an experience, in a clear and orderly manner, qualify or distort the actual experience?"
he cannot proceed with the confidence of a practitioner of the
contemporary non-fiction novel, who

must believe that what he sees, and what he knows, are
easily rendered into language. He must be free of the
doubt that this rendering is inescapably a process of
fiction, and that his solid-seeming words are merely
pictures of the facts.

Always aware of the fictive status of his renderings of experience into
language, Morris focuses attention on the process of rendering itself,
just as he shows more interest in the process of transformation of the
commonplace and the past than in the products of those transformations.
To him, "man is nature self-conscious, . . . art is his expanding
consciousness, and the creative act, in the deepest sense, is his
expanding universe." 6 Through imaginative transformations, the artist
courageously clears for himself a still point at which he can stand firm
amid the swirling chaos of experience. But the firm stance is temporary,
even illusory. Because of the power of the imagination to master
experience, each man can be said to be

his own bullfighter, with his own center, a circle overlapped
by countless other circles, like the pattern of expanding
rings rain made on the surface of a pond.

These centers, these circles overlapping each other, touch and
interpenetrate only because of words, both the words spoken between
characters and the words uttered by the author through the medium
of the printed page:
So many words. But words had brought them together, and words indicated what had happened. Words wheeling around the still point, the dance, the way the bull wheeled around the bullfighter, the way the mind wheeled around the still point on the sand.

This, then, is the dilemma: words are ambivalent wisps of nothingness. They seem to picture reality, yet their contact with real things is an illusion. They represent ideas and feelings with no scientifically perceivable existence. As Will Brady recognizes in *The Works of Love*,

> You can't take a notion into your hand, like a Leghorn egg, and judge the grade of it. You can't hold it to the light, give it a twist, and see that it is good. Nor is there any way to tell if it is what you are missing or not.

So it is with language in general and with the writer's enterprise in particular. A novel is a new addition to an author's house of fiction, yet at the same time it is a puff of air, a conglomeration of ink blots on a page. Each succeeding Wright Morris novel is at once an attempt at repossession of an enigmatic past and a self-conscious examination of the futility of all such attempts at revision. As he says in his essay entitled "Origins,"

> language has its own purpose, and distorts in the act of being lucid. To a measurable degree, the more convincing we find the new image the more it has departed from the one remembered.\(^\text{10}\)

This is a linguistic equivalent of the Heisenberg principle in science: no measurement can be completely accurate because the process of measuring itself interferes with the physical state of the object.
being measured. Similarly, no utterance can accurately represent reality because the system of signs called language, with its vagaries and infinitude of possible interpretations, imposes itself between the person attempting to represent experience and the person struggling to understand that representation. Returning to Morris's description of the bullfight, since no two witnesses of the spectacle have identical experiences with reality (or fields of vision), no two experiences at and interpretations of the bullfight can possibly be the same. When Morris constructs a whole novel around the thoughts of a handful of people witnessing the same experience, it achieves form not so much because the various narrators are sharing the same experience in the present as because their circles of experience touched at some time in the distant past on the Nebraska plains.

Wright Morris's use of language squares well with Robert Alter's discussion of the ambivalence with which self-conscious novelists approach their task of representing reality with words, but it also gets him into trouble with critics and readers who fail to recognize the complexity of his vision. Morris sees language in the same light as Cervantes, for whom, Alter says, "the word simultaneously resonates with its old magical quality and turns back on itself, exposing its own emptiness as an arbitrary or conventional construct." An informing insight of Wright Morris's novels is much the same as the one Alter sees at the heart of Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist*: "language can never give us experience itself but must always transmute experience into . . . fiction." Recognizing that his use of language mirrors his belief that life flows
like the Platte River, "with all of its meaning under the ground,"\textsuperscript{13} that what men seek lies just beyond the reach of the headlights,\textsuperscript{14} perceptive critics see that Wright Morris's technique is in line with the view that "the task of the novelist was now to explore a chaotic multiplicity of meanings rather than to continue representing the surfaces of common experience."\textsuperscript{15}

Failing to recognize the ambivalence of Morris's view of the powers and the evasions of language, such critics as Robert Oliphant accuse him of adopting in his novels the voice of a "'wise guy'": "He gives his readers surface statements, distorted enough so that they cannot be taken seriously, and yet significant enough so that they cannot be dismissed as an elaborate joke."\textsuperscript{16} What Oliphant does not see is that Morris writes from a perspective which asserts that nothing besides life insurance policies can claim to make final sense out of life.\textsuperscript{17} Morris's artistic faithfulness to his vision forces him constantly to juxtapose seriousness and jokes, surface and significance. Attempting to find reality amid change,\textsuperscript{18} he turns his gaze inward. There is little action in many of his novels. As David Madden explains it, "most of the so-called dramatic events in Morris occur off the novelistic stage; onstage is enacted the drama of human consciousness."\textsuperscript{19} Because of his sensitivity to the indeterminacy of language and the difficulty of establishing meaningful connections between human beings, Morris's view is unavoidably pluralistic:\textsuperscript{20} however much he would like for his novels to mirror reality accurately, he sees that reality is different to every person. His novels are tentative, temporary repossessions to be repeated continually, just as
Miss Kollwitz in *What a Way to Go* consistently knits, unravels, and reknits the same sweater. 21

Wright Morris's ambivalent attitude toward language and meaning is revealed most obviously in the words he gives his characters to utter and, just as importantly, in the way he withholds speech from so many of them. Unlike Faulkner's Southerners, who always speak (even when they do not understand), Morris's plainsmen tend to be either inarticulate or speechless. When they do talk, there generally is something strange about their utterance or something makes it impossible for the speech to communicate. Mrs. Tabori (*War Games*) is deaf, but that does not keep Colonel Foss's wife from talking to her all day long. 22 Peter Foley in *The Huge Season* grows up in Chicago speaking Latin at the dinner table. 23 Professor Haffner of *In Orbit* speaks four languages fluently, "but he inclines to speak them all at once." 24 That is still not quite as bad as the Greek guide to the Parthenon in *What a Way to Go*; he conducts his tour entirely in French, a language none of the bus passengers understands. 25 Mrs. Ormsby, matriarch of *Man and Boy*, never talks to her husband face-to-face. Instead, she leaves him notes or talks to him between floors of their house or from one room to another. She "had never done a single thing" to "get even" with her husband and her son, "Except not to speak to them at all for two or three weeks." 26 Mrs. Ormsby lets down her barrier only over the telephone, where she even allows herself to laugh. 27

Will Brady, quintessential plainsman and Morris male character, wanders silently through *The Works of Love*, his inability to articulate
symbolic of his failure to establish satisfying connections with other people. He seldom speaks to anyone, yet after the failure of his two marriages he pays young girls on the street to talk to him.\textsuperscript{28} When he gets back together with his second wife and takes a vacation with her to Southern California, he recognizes that their relationship is doomed when he sees how quickly they run out of things to say to each other. Will keeps to himself, thinking about his strange wife:

> During the day he sometimes wondered if she saw anything very clearly, but during the night she seemed to have eyes like a cat. She saw everything. Even stranger, she had the words for it.\textsuperscript{29}

Ironically, Mrs. Brady sees clearly only in darkness and finds words to describe her feelings only when she is not conscious of what she says. The same thing is true in \textit{The Field of Vision}, a book filled with thoughts yet empty of communication between characters. Narrated from several points of view, the novel shows the extent to which shared experience produces different reactions. Witnessing a bullfight in the light of the present, most of the characters remain silent, thinking only of the past. Tom Scanlon, who has to learn to talk over again when his great-grandson comes along,\textsuperscript{30} thinks, as always, about his father's past. Paul Kahler, a man transformed into a woman, learns to do without speech\textsuperscript{31} and creates for herself an interior world without men or violence. Dr. Lehmann, whose profession as a psychological counselor should make him an expert listener, plays Mozart on his phonograph while his patients talk.\textsuperscript{32} Of the major characters only Gordon Boyd seems to enjoy speaking, but no one besides the McKees' grandson listens to his pontifications.\textsuperscript{33}
Many of the same characters reappear in *Ceremony in Lone Tree*, a book with even more narrative views than *The Field of Vision* yet characterized by the same lack of communication. Eileen McKee comments that her son Calvin is "more of a talker than his father. He can nod his head." When Calvin does talk, he stammers, a condition which mirrors his sexual hesitancy with his cousin Etoile, who practically has to rape him to get him to make love to her. As shown in the previous chapter of this study, Wright Morris is acutely aware of the symbolic link between verbal prowess and sexual potency. One of the voices in *The Inhabitants* says "maybe I'd rather make talk like this than a family," but for characters like Calvin it is not an either-or proposition; they have neither power.

Even the people who should have the power to talk fail to communicate in the world of *Ceremony in Lone Tree*. Gordon Boyd, so verbose most of the time, finds a letter he sent to Lois Scanlon after their first kiss more than twenty years before. Never delivered, it is a blank piece of paper, for the experience on Lois's porch left him speechless. Bud Momeyer, Maxine's husband and Etoile's father, is a mailman, a trade which should symbolize connection and communication. While Bud knows a good deal about the people in his community, he knows almost nothing about his own family, primarily because he doesn't talk to his wife. Even Will Jennings, a writer of western adventure stories who comes to Lone Tree to interview Tom Scanlon, fails to connect because Tom dies before they have a chance to talk. During the course of the narrative, Jennings reveals that he is Will Brady's son, establishing a link of silence between the worlds of

In all of these novels the author must get into the minds of his characters because they refuse to speak for themselves. Quoting Henry James, Morris says "'treacherous years' would serve as a title for the years of the modern . . . 'Too tragic for any words,'" and it is in these tragic, treacherous times that his plainsmen live in desperate silence. Yet "only words, for the writer, will come to terms" with the modern era, so Morris the novelist takes it upon himself to master a threatening reality, giving voice to the thoughts his fellow Nebraskans keep to themselves: "He has spent most of his life speaking up for people who would rather remain silent."  

When Morris's characters speak, they use a simple American vernacular, and when they write their style generally is characterized by a clipped, telegraphed diction that in Morris's father's case was "fashioned by the Morse code." Their letters generally are deceiving or evasive, reinforcing Morris's theme that language often does not communicate. Negotiating through the mail at the beginning of The Works of Love, Adam Brady and Caroline Clayton exchange a misleading series of letters that produces an unhappy marriage. When he is off to war, Colonel Foss in War Games receives from his wife and mother "letters" that consist of nothing more than newspaper clippings about cats (from his wife) or about the accomplishments of a boyhood rival (from his mother).  

Formal verbalizations are no more helpful; for instance, the newspaper article listing Agee Ward as missing in action in The Man Who Was There carries with it a photograph of someone other
than Agee Ward. 40 Even the professional writers among Morris's characters have trouble communicating. Either their utterances are as stodgy and constipated as Alec Cartwright's published poems mentioned in One Day—nine poems preceded by a fourteen-page introduction—41—or, as is more common, their books never get completed.

Amidst this wasteland of failed connections, Wright Morris crafts his own fictions, always conscious of the indeterminate relationship between language and reality. "If it's a matter of words," he says, "if it's a function of language, if it's concerned with what it's like or not like to be human, it will prove to be some sort of fiction."42 Admitting that language is, by definition, fictitious—not entirely faithful to reality—is no loss, however, for "Only fiction will accommodate the facts of life."43 Reality itself, for Morris, is "not a thing but a conception,"44 and being true to life means nothing more than being true to "the prevailing reality concept."45 Since he sees reality as a subjective construct peculiar to each person, Morris does not view the accurate representation of reality as the aim of the novelist. Instead, the facts themselves "plead" to the writer "to be released of the burden of concealed meaning."46 It is the concealed meaning—the reality just beyond the reach of the headlights, the stream of water running underground—that cries out to be understood.

Nowhere does Morris better exemplify his view of the indefinite relationship between reality and language than in his treatment of the city of Venice. The place itself has a powerful grasp on his
imagination. In addition to being enraptured by the Venetian scenery and people, Morris associates the place with Henry James and Thomas Mann, whom he views as his literary predecessors. He is particularly captivated by Mann's *Death in Venice*, with its exquisite treatment of the problematic relationship between fantasy and reality. When Arnold Soby, the central character in *What a Way to Go*, arrives in Venice, it is with some fear because he is not sure that he wants the facts of the place to disabuse him of the fictional Venice he has concocted in his mind over the years. Conditioned by his expectations, he finds himself disturbed by the "air of unreality" of the place. He makes the mistake of speaking of Mann's character Aschenbach as if he were a real person:

> Soby apologized. The slip was quite unintentional. Here in Venice it was hard—was it not—to distinguish in such matters? The real and the unreal? The fiction from the fact. Was not Henry James—with all due respects—obliged to be something of a fiction, and was not Aschenbach obliged to be something of a fact? Here in Venice, that is? He would not risk the statement anywhere else.

Of course, what Soby slips and says is more significant than what he may have meant to say. Because of the power of Mann's depiction of Aschenbach, the fictional character is more real—more present—to Soby than is the figure of Henry James, whose presence in Venice is confirmed only in historical accounts which lack the intensity of Mann's fictionalization. It is another instance of reality giving way to fiction, similar to the "centuries of nature imitating art" that had resulted in the "quattrocento profile" of Signor Pignata,
one of Soby's fellow travelers. Overcome by the defamiliarization of finally seeing a place that has lived for years in his mind, Soby says that he would risk making his statement about fiction and fact only in Venice, yet the place is not so significant as the state of mind that produces Soby's response to it. The same could be said of Omaha or Central City, Nebraska, places with equally powerful influence upon the mind of Wright Morris; in fact, every man has his own Venice and his own Lone Tree.

Arnold Soby becomes so disoriented in Venice that he cannot say where the real world is. The place appears to be another Bal Masque, concealing and revealing reality at the same time, just as happened in the Bal Masque on board Soby's ocean liner. In Love Affair—A Venetian Journal, an autobiographical repossessment of Venice in which Morris uses both photographs and text, he accompanies a photograph of a Venetian cat with the comment that "By the light of morning we examine saucers tongue-buffed to gleam like enamel. Cat tracks on the table, cat hairs on the chairs, cat smears on my papers, but no visible cats." No visible cats. Yet the traces of cats—the tongue-buffed saucers, the cat tracks, cat hairs, cat smears—are more significant than the visible cats, just as the images of cats Morris carries in his mind are more potent than the pictures he carries in his photographic portfolio. This is entirely consistent with Arnold Soby's conclusions about
the disturbing nature of what one called reality. Where, so to speak, did one draw the line? Not having personally known Henry James, Soby’s James, like Aschenbach, was a fiction, having derived from the assortment of books he had read. How say one was real, one was not? For the purposes of history, perhaps—but in time what was history? A fiction that prevailed over the facts. What man wanted to see was what he saw. If poor Aschenbach—as they had come to call him—had not brought the beauty he sought for to Venice, he would never have found it in the child Tadzio. To the others he was merely a thin somewhat unhealthy child. To Aschenbach a sublime marble faun. Under his gaze the marble became flesh and blood. A mere glance from the eyes was enough to freeze his blood. That was perhaps an exceptional instance, but take poor Aschenbach himself. The dreamer of the dream was a dream himself. Oddly enough, Soby found him more convincing—with his painted lips and bloodshot eyes, the strong scent of the barber about him, made into a fool by his absurd passion—than the actual compact figure of Henry James. And James. He would have bowed to it with a smile. What else had he spent his life trying to prove? That the virus of suggestion, injected into the blood of the artist, resulted in creatures more durable than themselves.

"The dreamer of the dream was a dream himself," yet that dream dreamer is in a sense more real than a historical personage. That is the magic of fiction. Robert Alter points out that "fictions are never real things," that "literary realism is a tantalizing contradiction in terms,"52 yet the reader of fiction willingly gives himself to that tantalizing contradiction: "we confess our willingness to drop real life in the very act of picking up a fictional work, yet insist on getting from fiction precisely what we were weary of to begin with, reality."53 Wright Morris, like other novelists in the self-conscious tradition, plays with the "magically real duplicity"54 of his fictions, holding up for scrutiny the unreality of the process of composition, at
the same time inviting his reader to accept his fictions as pictures of reality.

While some readers may accept Arnold Soby's learned dissertation, quoted above, as an impromptu utterance by a vacationing professor of literature, Morris promptly deflates it by having Cynthia, who plays Tadziu to Soby's Aschenbach in *What a Way to Go*, respond by saying "'He sounds like a real cool cat.'"55 She refuses to clarify her statement by saying whether it is Aschenbach or Soby who is the "cool cat"; it may even be Tadziu. Furthermore, since Soby's speech is not reported as dialogue but in a form that blurs the distinction between what Soby thinks and what the author thinks about Soby's thoughts, the real cool cat turns out to be Wright Morris himself, who brings Soby, Cynthia, and all of the others into existence and gives them utterance.

Wright Morris constantly gives to his characters words which force the reader to think about the enterprise of writing at the same time that Morris engages in it. Any "dam fool might write a book," Clyde Muncy admits in *The Home Place*.56 Muncy has written a few himself, but not nearly so many as Wright Morris, the dreamer who dreamed him up. "I'm not much of a story-teller,"57 Muncy says in *The World in the Attic*, yet he is the narrator of both this novel and *The Home Place*. Opening the door to Lou Baker's apartment, Dickie Livingston thinks "who but Foley, of all the people they knew, would have nothing to say, nothing really memorable, after all these years?"58 yet Peter Foley is narrator of alternating
chapters of The Huge Season and it is he who finally succeeds at making some sense of the experience. "Only in life, not in fiction, where something would have to relieve the horror," Morris says in One Day, "would a woman settle on a man and the man neither know nor care about it, having settled on such things as cats and dogs."

But this statement appears in a work of fiction, and Morris enjoys pointing out his own audacity at creating such characters as Miriam Horlick and Dr. Harold Cowie. His novels self-consciously flaunt their own existence as fiction as they explore the relationship between art and reality. Willingly admitting that "Image-making, quite frankly, is a form of magic," he gladly sides with the magical free play of art against the self-deceiving view that reality is determinate and manipulable: "In the looney bin of Newspeak and the same-old-jazz, the smart mind is the mind at play. The stupid mind is the one at laborious work. Serious-minded hooligans run the show," leaving the great minds to strive to "make the world possible in art."

The reader becomes aware of Wright Morris's self-conscious play with language from the moment he opens one of Morris's novels. Certainly," Wayne Booth says, "Morris tends to think of his openings less as promises to readers than as problems for the author to solve."

Indeed, Morris himself affirms that

What we choose to call "style" is the presence in the fiction of the power to choose and mold its reader. The sought-for reader, in this view, is the first of the fictions the writer must create, and it is why, for such a writer, the opening lines of a work are so important. There is the
voice that seeks to hold one reader enthralled, turn another away. From a vast surround of indifferent readers this reader has been shaped to be the true believer, or so the writer hopes.

Always conscious of the "vast surround of indifferent readers," Morris nevertheless crafts his beginnings in a way that commands the reader's interest in the process of unfolding that goes on before his eyes. Many of his openings are as direct and declarative as the beginning of his first novel, *My Uncle Dudley*:

> When it was cold we walked around. When it was morning the pigeons came and looked but when nothing happened walked away. When it was warm we sat in the sun. Cars came down Sunset and when the light was red we could see the good-looking women inside. When it was hot the pigeons left the square.

Subdued, understated, parallel in structure almost to the point of monotony, these lines ward off the reader seeking high adventure and stark revelations of character. Instead, they demand attention to such details as the way Dudley and the boy loiter about the square, watching the pigeons but not feeding them. They see the good-looking California women, but always at a distance, through the windows of cars stopped for red lights.

This deceptively understated, distanced treatment is characteristic of Morris's narrative style. The reader always seems to see the scenes of the novels as if from the steps of a rural Nebraska station, catching glimpses of life through the windows of speeding eastbound passenger trains. If the reader cares enough to stick with the narrative, he soon sees that Morris's distancing is a deliberate
defense against appearing to be too intimately involved in the lives of his characters. At the beginning of *The Works of Love*, for instance, he uses such disclaimers as "so the story would have it" and "according to the record,"66 as if he were narrating a story he ran across in a pioneer journal, when in fact he is beginning a novel based closely on the life of his own father. Defining his hero with negatives—"he grew to be a man who neither smoked, drank, gambled, nor swore"—he even says "it might be asked: why trouble with such a man at all?"67 Of course there are reasons for troubling with such a man—for one thing, his very ordinariness makes him a kind of American Everyman—but Morris does not want readers getting involved in this painful story unless they are willing to explore with the author the tension between interest and detachment which makes Will Brady's story tragic and comic at the same time.68

Morris begins *Cause for Wonder* with his narrator, Warren Howe, speculating on the problems of beginnings in general and the beginnings of books in particular:

What led you, just now, to glance at this page? To make a beginning, right? I've always liked such beginnings as "Once upon a time. . . ." Time might well be my subject. But how does one begin with time? If I knew it might help me to get on with it.

Are you sitting or standing? I'm always standing when I start a book. Ready to run if the clerk on duty catches my eye. As a rule I skip the jacket, try the first line or two on for size. A hazardous moment. What if this happened to be it? A beginning. One that might lead to God knows what end. But I'm no booklover.
Aware of the hazards of making beginnings, Howe starts several stories before he gets to the one at hand, yet he declares "You see that I speak with authority." This is Wright Morris at his self-conscious best, starting his narrative by calling into question the enterprise to which he is most committed—writing books. Howe says he is no booklover, yet he narrates the first part of *Cause for Wonder* and is working on a manuscript of his own, "Run for Your Life." Morris risks alienating his reader in the "hazardous moment" of the first lines of his book by using it to discuss the difficulty of deciding how to begin. Such a convoluted design, turning in upon itself, requires from the reader the same commitment to exploring the intricacies of the process of making fiction that Morris demands of himself as he sits down to write a novel.

It takes courage to begin writing another book, and Morris forces his reader to make a similar kind of investment in the reading of the novel. This is true even before the reader starts the first line of the book, as he contemplates its title. *Love Among the Cannibals, What a Way to Go, In Orbit,* and *The Fork River Space Project* do not appear to be the titles of serious novels, yet they are. *The Man Who Was There* turns out to be about a man who is missing in action in war, just as *A Life* is also about a death. *The Works of Love* tells the story of a man who knows neither how to give nor receive love.

Self-conscious play with the enterprise of using language to build fictions does not end with the beginnings of Wright Morris's novels. Every utterance carries the same opportunities for revelation
and the same dangers of concealment of meaning. The narrative line maintains constant tension between the author's assertion of authority in constructing a fictional world and the equally powerful certainty of that world's impermanence. For all these reasons, the voices that sound through the pages of the books are strange and at times indistinguishable blendings of the narrator's thoughts and the author's thinking about those thoughts.

Morris identifies voice as "the presence in the style of what is most personal to the writer." David Madden sees the "refinement of a unique 'voice'" as one of Morris's major achievements. Blending third-person narration with the thoughts of the people he creates, Morris is "never really out of, though never entirely in, the minds of his characters." He admires modern authors such as Mann, Joyce, and Camus who deliberately bait the reader with a narrative voice characterized by an overlapping of the thoughts of the author and his narrator:

The deliberate use of this overlapping is the modern contribution. What could better mirror, in so many ways, our indistinct impression of identity? Our uncertainty as to who it is who dramatizes the flux and relativity of our sensations?

In his book Joyce's Voices, Hugh Kenner calls this overlapping technique "the Uncle Charles Principle: the narrative idiom need not be the narrator's." As Joyce applies the principle, "the normally neutral narrative vocabulary" is "pervaded by a little cloud of idioms which a character might use if he were managing the narrative."
Joyce's

fictions tend not to have a detached narrator, though they seem to have. His words are in such delicate equilibrium, like the components of a sensitive piece of apparatus, that they detect the gravitational field of the nearest person. One reason the quiet little stories in *Dubliners* continue to fascinate is that the narrative point of view unobtrusively fluctuates. The illusion of dispassionate portrayal seems attended by an iridescence difficult to account for until we notice one person's sense of things inconspicuously giving place to another's.

In a discussion of *The Works of Love*, Wayne Booth has other names for "the Uncle Charles Principle," but whatever the designation, he sees Wright Morris as a consummate practitioner of the technique:

One of the fine achievements of the novel is the way in which Morris manages to convey Brady's [un]schooled imagination in words that Brady could never have mastered and yet that are as much his as Morris's. There's nothing new in this technique: it is simply one version of the erlebte Rede, or style indirect libre, or free indirect style that, as critics have recognized since early in this century, enables modern authors to convey a counterpoint of two or more voices at once. But no one, not even James Joyce in *Dubliners*, has ever used the technique with a more powerful combination of comedy and pathos than we find here. As in all erlebte Rede in which the protagonist is essentially sympathetic, the effect moves toward comedy when the character's voice moves furthest from the implied author, and toward pathos or poignancy when the distance is least.

At times rummaging through Will Brady's mind, while at other times deliberately maintaining distance from the consciousness of his central character, Wright Morris weaves a delicate net of language that maintains tension between Will's views and those of his creator.

In the following passage about Mr. Lockwood, champion miler turned
sporting goods salesman, it is impossible to distinguish Wright Morris's voice and Will Brady's:

The great mile runner, the baseball star, had accepted an offer from Spalding & Brothers to go out on the road and sell their guaranteed baseballs, their autographed bats. After a while he had married his childhood sweetheart, settled down, for a year or two he had kept his paper clippings just loose in his desk, where he could find them; then one day, one spring day more than likely, he took them out. After mulling them over he put them in his wallet—began to carry them around. Some time later maybe he noticed how dry and brittle they were getting, or maybe he didn't—maybe it was just a chance remark by his wife. Whatever it was, he made a little pile of the best of them. He put the best picture in the back of his watch, the best clipping in his vest. They were always with him, as if he couldn't part with them. Some writer of books might even say that these clippings poisoned him. That they were old, brittle, and fading, like the man himself. People will believe anything that they read, and if they happened to read, in a book somewhere, that a man was poisoned by some newspaper clippings, why they would swallow it. And a writer of books might even say that these people were right.

Are these Will Brady's speculations or Wright Morris's? Is Wright Morris the writer of books who might say that Lockwood was poisoned by newspaper clippings, or is Morris himself contemplating this possible interpretation of the scene? The voices of author and narrator are so carefully mixed here that the reader must enter into the authorial enterprise and formulate his own interpretation of the scene. Since the entire novel is filled with similar ambivalences, the view of Will Brady that a reader takes away from the novel must be as much his own fabrication as that of either the author or the character he describes. Unable to unravel the enigma of Will Brady's personality entirely to his satisfaction, Morris forces the reader to draw his
own conclusions—or admit his own uncertainty—about the meaning of
the life of this strange plainsman.

While Wright Morris's voice is not always so indistinguishable
from that of his narrator as in the passage from *The Works of Love*
just examined, he nevertheless often uses "the Uncle Charles Principle"
to draw his reader into a closer consideration of the minds of the
characters he creates. As Mrs. Porter slides into a chair to begin
writing a letter in *The Deep Sleep*, Morris slips into a kind of
shorthand notation that mirrors Mrs. Porter's mental processes and
her clipped writing style:

Mrs. Porter put her bag on the seat of the chair, took a
sheet of the paper, saw watermark, and placed sheet so
elbow remained on terra cotta pad. Dipped pen, then held
in such a manner that halo showed around four-leaf clover
like water bug skating on pool in shadowy glen. In not
quite upper right-hand corner she put *Monday PM*.

Sometimes Morris's intrusions are so direct as to call attention to
the process of narration itself, as in these sentences from the first
page of *One Day*: "At the bus station a man stands shivering under
the smoking light like a bun warming. The image is his own."81
Occurring as it does at the very beginning of the novel, this
passage impresses upon the reader's mind that, while the book may deal
with a historical subject—in this case the assassination of President
Kennedy—it is nevertheless under complete control of the author who
brought it into being. At times the style of *One Day* is distant and
restrained, as in this description of the trap-door entrance for
donations to the dog pound: "This convenience is often abused by
pranksters who have made some unusual donations. . . .\textsuperscript{82} At other times the style is cozily familiar, drawing the reader into conspiratorial union with the author who stands observing the scene: "That is where we left Cowie, still back there."\textsuperscript{83} Self-conscious about writing a historical novel, Morris uses such intrusions to remind his reader that this is a fiction, no matter how much it may seem to resemble a recreation of a real incident.

During the middle of his career Morris's interest in multiple voices led him to write several novels from more than one narrative point of view. In a retrospective discussion of these novels with Wayne Booth, he shows how he gradually moved away from using many distinctly separate voices to narrate his fiction:

\ldots I now find it hard to understand the great enthusiasm I brought to the multiple-voice fiction I was once so fond of. Such as in The Field of Vision and The Deep Sleep, continuing into Ceremony. It seemed to me that these many voices was my own appropriate voice. Why should I speak for them? Let them speak for themselves—and when the writing is good, this is not an illusion. Then it tapers off, like a romance. One Day would appear to be its full-throated swan song. I suppose that every new way of working impresses the writer with its possibilities, more than its limitations. Then he comes to recognize its limitations. When that recognition is full and assured he moves on to something else, or he stops writing.

Wright Morris could never stop writing, but he does move on. Most of his recent novels use the free indirect style that characterizes The Works of Love. Part of Morris's reason for returning to this voice has to be its ability to accept impressions from the minds of different characters without giving up the appearance that the author
is at the center of the narrative. Even when Morris uses the first person, as he does in *The Fork River Space Project*, it is in such a way as to force the reader to ponder the relationship between author and narrator:

... a sophisticated reader knows that no one is less trustworthy than an I. In all of fiction absolutely nothing is so ambiguous and so ambivalent. In fact the only time the I-voice is really useful in fiction is when it is deliberately used ambivalently, as Camus uses it in *The Fall*, and there you ponder the whole novel to discover who the I is. Is it the author? We take delight in the perplexity.

Morris employs the "I-voice" with effective ambivalence, but the versatility of "the Uncle Charles Principle" and its compatibility with Morris's philosophical approach to an indeterminate universe ensures for the ambivalent third-person narrator its place as his preferred narrative voice. A small scene near the middle of *A Life* shows Morris using the free indirect style to gather impressions from the minds of several characters at once. Stopping at a place called Minden for gas on his pilgrimage from Nebraska to his former homestead near Roswell, New Mexico, Floyd Warner decides to eat breakfast at a local café. The scene begins with the narrative voice vacillating between Floyd and Morris himself, but it soon expands to encompass the characters whom Floyd meets at the diner. Outside the café, Floyd has a conversation with a "canny old bum" dressed in city clothes:

This one was maybe twenty-five years Warner's junior, and from the way he acted he knew that. He resented Warner's having lived so long—never mind how he looked. The old man could judge that for himself in the way he was reflected in the café window.
So far, the view seems to be Floyd's own, but the remark about resenting Floyd's long life could come from the author or could even be a reflection of the bum's mind. Thinking about the bum thinking about him, Floyd decides that "old men were impostors: inside they were one thing, but outside they were man-size potato bugs." Now the reader knows that the "potato bugs" image is Warner's own, for he has been remembering that the children back at the school crossing in California called him a potato bug, but the word "impostors" may be beyond the reach of Floyd's vocabulary. What is important, though, is that Floyd conceives the idea of impostorship, whether the terminology is entirely his own or not.

As Floyd and the bum near speaking to each other, Morris shifts the point of view to the bum: "He spit out the toothpick he had been chewing, prepared to come on strong with this stranger, this feeble old fart." Morris moves quickly back to Floyd's mind to show the old man deciding how to answer the bum's inquiry about his car license plate. Then, as he walks through the door of the diner, Floyd sees the cook, "who stood with his back to the counter, frying bacon. He was the nervous type who couldn't let a strip of bacon lie there and cook." The "nervous type" comment may come from the author to quickly characterize the cook, but it also is representative of Floyd's thinking and mode of expression. Surveying the scene, Warner sees at the counter a young man and a "real Indian." The cook, who misjudges Warner throughout the scene, invites him to sit at a table instead of at the counter: "did he think Warner was one of those people who
wouldn't sit down to eat with an Indian? He seemed to." Here, Morris deliberately confines the perspective to what Warner is taking in at the moment, forcing the reader to share the disquieting agitation of Floyd's experience: "Of all the things in this world, or almost all of them, there was nothing that Warner disliked more than a day full of happenings like so many leaves blowing."

As the scene continues, the confusion intensifies, and Warner approaches losing his internal perspective, as he does later in the book when he seems to see things happening to him from a point outside his own body. Looking at the boy sitting at the counter, "Warner saw him through the eyes of the Indian. Clippers had worked around his ears and up the back of his neck, but below his ears he was a hippie." Morris gains ironic leverage in the scene by shifting almost immediately to the mind of the cook, who is "relieved to have somebody as old and prejudiced as Warner to talk to." Confident in his judgments the way Floyd was before the defamiliarizing experience of the past couple of days, the cook serves as a foil to reveal more fully the depth of the transformation Floyd Warner is undergoing.

When Floyd responds sarcastically to one of the cook's comments, interest shifts to the Indian, who remains silent, eating his ice cream cone: "His attention was focused on doing one thing at a time." This observation could come from the author, from Floyd, or perhaps even from the Indian, but it is probably Floyd's, for he moves immediately on to think about a young Indian boy who once helped him to herd sheep. Furthermore, Warner's attention is attracted to the Indian's appearance:
"This Indian on his left had the smooth copper color of the one on the penny. On the right sleeve of his jacket he wore an emblem that looked newer than the jacket." This obviously comes from Warner's mind, but Morris cleverly uses his perspective as controller of the scene to advance the action. As if his attention were attracted to the patch at the same time as Floyd's, the cook says, "'What outfit's that one?' ... giving Warner a wink. 'The Cleveland Indians?'" Warner misses the humor in the remark, and Morris reports his confusion with innocent detachment, heightening the reader's sense of Floyd's bewildement: "Warner knew that was some sort of wisecrack, but he didn't get it. Were there Indians as far east as Cleveland?"

Were the point of view more strictly Warner's or Morris's in this scene, the author would miss an opportunity to intensify the confusion that swirls around Floyd. Warner's observations probably are more reliable than those of the cook and the city bum, but Morris does not miss the chance to point out the incompleteness of his hero's vision at this time:

Warner was thinking how the Pueblo-type Indians were a different kettle of fish from the Sioux and the Blackfeet, who lived in tents, and would as soon, or even sooner, kill a white man as look at him. This Pueblo-type Indian, a Navajo or a Hopi, turned on the stool to lick his fingers clean, like a cat.

Ironically, this "Pueblo-type Indian" soon kills Floyd Warner, for no apparent reason. At the moment, however, the Indian stares enigmatically "right at Warner without seeing him." When the cook says
at least George Blackbird should be glad to be back from Viet Nam, the Indian responds,

"Why be glad am back?" ... The cook had not expected him to answer that one. The old man was thinking there was nothing you could say to which somebody wouldn't take exception.

Combining the perspectives of several characters at once, as no novel with multiple—but separate—narrators ever could do, this short paragraph illustrates the versatility of "the Uncle Charles Principle" as Morris employs it. The conversation continues for a few minutes, then George Blackbird rides off with Floyd Warner, asking "'Old man ... what you want?"' The answer George gets turns out to be death, but for the moment both men appear confused. It takes the long ride toward Roswell for them to sort out and make sense of the voices ringing in their heads. In the indeterminate modern world in which he writes, Morris does not spare his readers the same sense of confusion, finding the indirect free style to be the perfect voice in which to narrate the puzzling yet revealing journey.

Addressing his readers in an aside at the beginning of the second section of *Love Among the Cannibals*, the narrator, Earl Horter, says,

Old lecher with a love on every wind, and you young ones too, running in pimpled packs after the teen-age bitch with her perfumed heat, and you, too, pretty matron, under the hair dryer, this is your book. The night is what you want, and you are waiting to hear what next.

Morris forces the reader to enter into the imaginative act of composition of the novel not so much to bring order from chaos as to perceive
actively the order imposed on chaos by the author. Discussing one of Morris's photo-texts, David Madden asks rhetorically,

Wherein lies the book's organization and form? It is created by the perceiving sensibility that makes relationships and finds meaning; the fusion occurs in the reader rather than on the page, and the various elements join together, as they do in Blake's illuminated printing, into a "supreme metaphor."  

While Morris's novels do not require so much synthesis on the part of the reader, they do force the audience to take some responsibility for perceiving unity in the story. Morris does not invite the free play of interpretation demanded by some contemporary novelists, but he does explore the indeterminacies of language in such a way as to force his reader to participate with him in the process of artistic transformation. "Writer and reader are part of a single imaginative act," he says, yet he consistently maintains that the writing, not the reading or the plot, is "at the heart of the matter" in the fictional process.  

Although on one level he insists on exercising the author's prerogative of control over the materials of his fiction, Wright Morris's view of reality forces that control to remain self-consciously tentative. Constantly aware of the indeterminate relationship between the language with which he works and the reality he attempts to represent with that language, he explores the multitudinous ways that man attempts to convey a sense of reality and meaning. As is obvious from the focus of this chapter and the discussions in the preceding chapters, his primary concern is with the way that the writer uses his imagination to construct linguistic re-visions and re-possessions
of powerful experiences from the past, but he remains interested in exploring other modes of mediating between imagination and reality, including dreams, movies, and photography.

"The first fiction of our lives is that of dreaming," he says: "in our dreams we are creators and consumers of fiction." Furthermore, "In dreams begin responsibilities: in fiction we find their implications and resolutions." Since dreams mirror the process of artistic transformation, their very occurrence is as significant as their meaning. The full-color dreams of Charlotte Hatfield, sensual and impulsive wife of Professor Alan Hatfield in the novel In Orbit, infuriate her introspective husband because they resist interpretation: vivacious, creative Charlotte "merely dreams to dream." Other dreams in Morris's novels are deliberately symbolic, as is the one at the beginning of Man and Boy:

In this dream Mr. Ormsby stood in the room—at the edge of the room where the floor was bare—and gazed at the figure that seemed to hover over the yard. This figure had the body of a man but a crown of bright, exotic plumage—the plumage visible, somehow, in spite of the dented gray helmet it wore. Long wisps of it appeared at the side, or shot up, like straw through a leaky pillow, to make a halo of shining, golden spears. Beneath the helmet was the face of a bird, a long face, indescribably solemn, with eyes so pale they were like openings to the summer sky. The figure was clothed in a soiled uniform, too big for the boy inside it, and slung over the left arm, casually, was a gun. On the barrel of the gun Mr. Ormsby could read—he had read it a thousand times—the word DAISY, and beneath this the words 1000 Shot. The right arm of the figure was extended, and above it hovered a procession of birds, an endless coming and going of all the birds he had ever seen. They formed a whirling cloud about his head, and seemed to grow like fingers from the extended hand, but the figure did not speak, nor did the
pale eyes turn to look at Mr. Ormsby; but from the parted lips came a sound of irresistible charm. A wooing call, it would seem, for the birds. So they came and went, thousands of them, and they looked so lovely and seemed so friendly that Mr. Ormsby, no bird lover to speak of, put out his hand. And the moment he did, one of the birds dived at his head. Not at his hand, no, but his head, and before he could duck or get away, all of these birds, like a stream of darts, were diving at him. To protect himself he would flail his arms like a man attacked by bees. That woke him up, sooner or later, and sometimes there was sweat all over his body, from either the fright or the violent exercise.

While the reader has no way of knowing it at the time, this passage brings together right at the beginning all of the important elements of conflict of the book. Above all, there is Mr. Ormsby struggling to come to terms with his memory of his son, who has just died heroically at Guadalcanal. The air rifle is the same one that Mr. Ormsby bought for his son years ago, creating a permanent schism in the family because of the boy’s use of the gun to kill the birds his mother loves so much. The birds themselves symbolize Mrs. Ormsby’s animosity, while at the same time representing the reconciliation the boy seems to have achieved with his past and toward which Mr. Ormsby struggles through the course of the novel.

Other dreams in Morris’s fiction carry the same burden of symbolic meaning, along with emphasizing another element of Mr. Ormsby’s dream: the frightening reality of his vision wakes him up, sweating and flailing his arms. After being kissed by Gordon Boyd, Lois Scanlon in The Field of Vision dreams that a man opens up her window and climbs into bed with her. Lois senses that she has been dreaming, but the only way she can account for her bed breaking is some mysterious
added weight. In One Day, Ignacio Chavez remembers going out on a hillside in Mexico to bury his first-born son, who dies in infancy. Pursued by dogs which seem determined to dig up and mutilate the corpse, Ignacio takes the body to the local church and places it in the arms of the statue of the Virgin Mary. Returning to the hillside to bury the doll Jesus in the shoebox intended as a coffin for his son, he sees no evidence of the dogs and is left wondering whether they were real or phantoms he dreamed up under the stress of the experience. Apart from their obvious symbolic value, these dreams all serve to show the problematic nature of all concepts of reality. The bird-boy, the phantom lover, and the dogs are as real to their dreamers as anything these people experience, showing that the line between the dream-world of the mind and the world of the commonplace is less clearly defined than anyone could have imagined. Because of their power, the dreams at once call into question the reliability of everyday experience and validate the verisimilitude of imaginative constructs.

Movies similarly blur the distinction between real and surreal. Alec Cartwright of One Day kills time watching bad movies, illusions of "life painted on the air by life itself." The films are powerful to her because "Every stupid semblance of real life had been shattered, this was what it professed to be, a House of Dreams." Many of Morris's characters have more trouble distinguishing the dream world of the silver screen from the confusing world in which they struggle for understanding and meaning. Warren Howe of Cause for Wonder, desperate for connection with his mother, who died at his birth, thinks he recognizes
her in a silent movie.\textsuperscript{95} Gathering his information from war newsreels, Colonel Foss in \textit{War Games} discusses battles in a way that often overshadows "the reports of men who had actually been there."\textsuperscript{96} Gordon Boyd and the girl he picks up in Nevada get the impression that the world of \textit{Ceremony in Lone Tree} is "'a friggin movie.'"\textsuperscript{97} And Jubal Gainer of \textit{In Orbit}, who likes to watch movies on television with the sound turned off, gets reality mixed up with movie images in his mind.\textsuperscript{98} Near Charlotte Hatfield's house, "He stands in the sheltering drip of the trees waiting for the play, watching the movement of the actors: the flames of the fire cast shadows like dancers on the walls."\textsuperscript{99} In his surrealistic vision, directly descended from the shadows on the walls of Plato's cave, what is real and what is not? The vision is more like a movie than real life, the shadows cast by the flames calling to mind the shadows projected onto the silver screen, enforcing a reality of their own. The dancer becomes indistinguishable from the dance, and the mental image lives in a way unattainable to mere flesh.

Wright Morris makes revealing use of the image of motion pictures, but he is a photographer, not a film maker,\textsuperscript{100} and it is in his manipulation of photographic images that he makes some of his most crucial comments on relationships among various modes of representing reality. At the time of its development in the nineteenth century, photography "provided the writer with the assurance of an objective, irreducible reality he needed merely the talent, and the candor, to describe."\textsuperscript{101} This assurance, however, proves to be an illusion.
Thinking about how the goring of a matador will be reported in the papers the next day, Gordon Boyd in *The Field of Vision* conjectures that

The headlines would read DA SILVE GORED, the photograph show him froglike, as if leaping the horns, or crumpled like a broken toy as they carted him off. The camera did not lie. A pity, since the lie mirrored the truth. The camera would report what no pair of eyes present had seen. Not two of the thirty thousand present, had seen the same thing.\textsuperscript{102}

The "final difficulty," as G. B. Crump describes it, is that "reality is never attained in art without being filtered through some subjective vision, and no art exists that does not mediate between the audience and the experience."\textsuperscript{103} While photography gives the impression of eliminating subjective vision, this just is not true. The lens and the film mediate between what the camera sees and what really is there, reducing three dimensions to two and imposing an artificial frame around the scene.

When Morris mixes his considerable talents as photographer and writer, then, it is to explore the problematic nature of all modes of representing reality. His technique is much the same as that of Cervantes, whose mixing of modes of representation Robert Alter discusses in the following comment on a scene from *Don Quixote*:

The poised ambiguity with which Cervantes conceives the representation of reality here suggests why he stands at the beginning of a Copernican revolution in the practice and theory of mimesis. The whole passage, of course, is a representation within a representation within a representation of what one finally hesitates to call reality—a picture
within a book within a narration by "the second author of this work." Its effect is like that of a mirror within a painting reflecting the subject of the painting, or the deployment of still photographs within a film: through a sudden glimpse of multiple possibilities of representation we are brought up short and thus moved to ponder the nature of representation and the presence of the artful representor.

By employing such techniques as interspersing photographs throughout some of his texts, introducing scenes as if he were describing photographs, and describing photographs that are not present in the novel, Wright Morris forces his reader continually to reassess the pictures—both verbal and photographic—of reality that the author creates. Many of the characters in his novels, content with the mental image they have formed of themselves, refuse to look into mirrors, but Morris will not allow his readers to pass them by with eyes closed. They must stop and ponder with him the scene, enticingly real yet infuriatingly out of focus.

Morris deliberately plays games with his readers' expectations from photographic texts. Picking up a copy of The Inhabitants, for instance, a reader probably anticipates a "journalistic relationship" between photos and text, whereas "the author intended a poetic one."

Instead of reinforcing a single view of reality, Morris's photo-texts employ a "problematic juxtaposition of two modes of seeing" where each mode of representation "casts doubts on the status of the other; the tension is mutually subversive." As Morris explains in a note at the beginning of Love Affair—A Venetian Journal, his photographs "illustrate nothing, they seek to demonstrate nothing." Refusing even to number the pages of most of his photo-texts, he leaves his reader
to ponder the relationship between the pictures and the words. This contemplation engages the reader in the process of synthesizing modes of representing reality, and if a unified vision arises, it is in large part a result of the reader's own working through carefully juxtaposed bits and pieces of verbal and visual experience.

Morris constantly focuses attention on the failure of photography to fulfill its promise of direct representation of reality. His characters expend considerable energy trying to put faces on blurred and fading photographs from their family albums. Often, the scene is in clear focus but the features of the people are indistinct: Peter Foley in The Huge Season notes in an old photo the "sharp contrast of the blurred hand and face but acid-etched detail." 107 Agee Ward, in The Man Who Was There, puts together an album of photographs that chronicle his life history. Ironically, though, his countenance is blurred in every one of the pictures, as in the photo of Agee and his Uncle Kermit in Chicago, yet "we seem to see how they look even better that way." 108

That, ultimately, is the point. Since the apparent clarity of photography is deceptive to begin with, it almost is better to look at pictures with blurred focus. That way, the appearance of direct representation of reality does not prevent the audience from perceiving the inevitable subjectivity of the camera lens. In What a Way to Go, impish Herr Perkheimer, maintaining that refinements in German photographic technique had made Greece into a fiction "exported from Weimar," sets out to "rediscover Greece" by photographing "the Greece
that had never been seen."¹⁰⁹ This he does by "shooting only blanks"—taking pictures with no film in his camera or leaving his camera lens hooded.¹¹⁰

Herr Perkheimer was the first to bring light to the camera obscura. His approach was simple. To take no picture rather than one that had been taken before. A hard saying, since it might well lead to the retirement of the camera. One saw it seemed, only what had been seen so many times before.

A hard saying indeed, but to someone as concerned as Wright Morris with the importance of leaving the imagination free to impose its own order on the raw material of experience, perhaps it is better to be left conjuring only with a mental image without the assistance of a photographic artifact.

While photography mirrors life, it is no more an unmediated representation of reality than the words on the pages of one of Wright Morris's books. The visual and the verbal are two of the axes along which reality may be represented, but neither can claim to usurp the value of the other, and both remain subordinate to the process of transformation that takes place in the imagination of the artist, as is delightfully shown in Love Affair—A Venetian Journal in the following passage which accompanies a color photograph of a Venetian alley without a cat in it:

Near San Giorgio Degli Schiavoni, made holy by Carpaccio, the alley we followed ended in a court where a piece of bent pipe provided a fountain. A big white and grey tomcat, indifferent to our intrusion, stood erect as if to snatch fish from the stream of water, his left paw delicately placed
on the bent pipe for balance. In that posture he took little bites of the water, as the dogs of my boyhood took it from sprinklers, or garden hoses. Between bites, showing his long pink tongue, he licked the drops from his cheeks and whiskers. His thirst sated, still indifferent to us, he took himself off.

"What a picture!" cried my wife, "did you get it?"

I got one, but not the other. I had settled for the blurred, vulnerable impression on my mind's eye. More basic than my impulse to capture the moment had been my instinct not to disturb it. My eyes were not so sharp as the lens of the camera but they would prove to have a wider field of vision. The cat that got away, of all the cats in Venice, would prove to be the most memorable. The camera confronts the traveller with a choice of impressions—a souvenir that is sharp, and goes into his album, or one that is unrecorded, fragmentary, doomed to fade, and inexhaustible.

In his conjurings with language and other modes of representing reality, as in his use of the commonplace and his repossessions of the past, Wright Morris always gives precedence to the transforming powers of the imagination. When confronted with the choice, he consistently gives up the dull, material artifact for the luminescent, transformed image. After all, as G. B. Crump explains, "Morris, the child of the empty plains, sees material reality as a chaotic void upon which must be projected some inner vision." Living in an age without centers of meaning, Morris places highest value on the courageous acts of transformation which bring focus, however temporary, to the raw material of human experience. "The imagination made us human," he says, but the trick is to become more human, a process that demands continuing effort at transformation. He acknowledges that "The creative act itself is self-sufficient, having served the artist's purpose," but
it lives only in those minds with the audacity to transform it. The classic, from such a point of view, is that characteristic statement that finds in each age an echoing response—echoing, but not the same. Hemingway's Huck Finn is not Mark Twain's, nor is my Huck Finn Hemingway's. Nor do I mean to suggest that art itself is atomized in an infinite series of personal impressions—but it survives, archetypally, in and through an endless series of transformations. Through the Huck Finns, that is—through each age's reappraisal—the young heart is reassured and the consciousness expands.

In this passage, as in his novels, Morris self-consciously creates tension between the artist's act of transformation and the need for the reader to make the transformation his own. Mixing modes of representation and calling attention to the inevitable subjectivity of all utterance, he demands of the reader a large effort at making sense of the text, yet at the same time he insists on the centrality of the artist's role in the process of transformation. Wayne Booth explains Morris's point of view this way:

"The novel requires reading," he says, and at first we might think that he is simply climbing on the bandwagon of recent reader-centered critics: Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Jonathan Culler, Roland Barthes, and many another. But he soon makes clear that his ideal is entirely different from the free invent of plural meanings that many are urging us to become—a kind of rival to the artist, completing his unfinished work. If we are to use the text as a stimulus for our own inventive play—the sort of ludismè that Derrida urges upon us—we are to do so only after the most rigorous kind of subjection to the author's own game plan.

Perhaps Booth states his point a little too strongly, for, as this dissertation has shown, Morris's "game plan" often contains a demand that the reader join the author in the process of transformation, of
establishing a center of meaning. Nevertheless, it is the novelist who shows the way.

The novelist, his characters, and his readers continually repeat the process of imaginatively giving a center to a centerless system. When Floyd Warner hears from his sister Viola that the postal service has declared the center of the country to be Osborne, Kansas, and not Kearney, Nebraska, as they grew up believing, Floyd writes a furious letter to the postmaster general, pointing out that the "center of anything" was where the people "thought it was," not where some fickle government agency declared it to be. Charles Lawrence is the magnet at the center of *The Huge Season*—attracting witnesses like "Iron filings gathered around the still point,"—not because of any inherent physical or mental superiority (he has one useless arm and lacks the skill even to compose his own freshman essays) but because he has the audacity to act decisively in a meaningless world. Similarly, Morris engenders admiration for people as deranged as Paula Kahler (who changes her psychological identity from male to female) and Tom Scanlon (who refuses to live in the twentieth century) because they have the courage to create a view of the world with which they can survive.

Crazy old Etienne Dulac in *Cause for Wonder* carefully chooses to pass his audacity on to the boy Brian because of the boy's self-sufficient ability to dominate any scene. Until the moment the boy enters the room, Warren Howe
had not questioned . . . that the center of the scene was himself, around which these other centers were arranged, and overlapped. Now he was not. This fat-assed boy, top and bottom heavy, with the hands and feet of a kewpie, neutralized with a glance the lines of force in the room. His center out-centered them all.¹¹⁹

Dulac orchestrates performances so that by the time of his death his power to master and transform has passed on to the boy, guaranteeing for himself the same kind of continuance after death that an author attains by creating characters who live on after him.

Sensual, young, beautiful Cynthia of What a Way to Go allows the men around her to play Pygmalion with her throughout the novel, but in the end it is she who must take responsibility for defining a course for her life. To Signor Pignata, she is Primavera, after Botticelli; to Professor Soby, she is Eve in patent leather shoes; to Dr. Holder, she is Nausicaa from Homer's Odyssey; to Herr Perkheimer, she is Liebfraumilch.¹²⁰ Juxtaposed against these idealizations, Morris presents his readers with the image of a spoiled, pouty young girl who likes "homogenized peanut butter on raisin toast."¹²¹ Just as the tourists must struggle to reconcile their idealizations of the Parthenon with what they find at the top of the Acropolis—"Miss Throop commented on the sensation of being within a picture she had so long known only from the outside"¹²²—so too must Cynthia choose a course for her life that mediates between her male admirers' idealized expectations of her and the mundane reality of her everyday existence. Finally, she abandons her ingenuous single life to marry staid Professor Soby, completing a "sea-change," as Miss Throop calls it,¹²³ for both
Soby and Cynthia, formerly more like Prufrock and Lolita than man and wife. The book leaves the reader wondering about the permanence of such an unlikely match, but in the world of Wright Morris's novels the very act of transformation is at least as important as assuring its permanence.

From Wright Morris's fictional perspective, the private transformation of Soby and Cynthia is every bit as significant as the public transformation that occurs at the center of the bullring in The Field of Vision. He begins that novel with an epigraph of two lines from Paradise Lost:

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.

No matter what the triviality or importance of the outward setting, the mind is always the stage of action of Morris's fiction. Even at the bullfight, the private transformations that occur in the minds of the observers are as important as the act of the matador, whose courage makes him, for an instant, the center of the universe of experience of all those watching him. The same is true of Wright Morris as an author; his audacious performances transform the chaos of the commonplace of experience and language for an evanescent instant into a new order of vision that has power over the minds of his readers, showing them the way to master the hellish chaos of unorganized experience. For that time his voice, and the voices he creates, out-center all other centers, confirming once again the power of the transforming imagination.
Chapter 4

Through a Flaw in the Window of Fiction

The experience of writing fiction—a way of redeeming time—is one way the writer opens windows in the time in which he is captive. — "Where the West Begins"

At the beginning of Ceremony in Lone Tree the narrator invites his reader to "Come to the window. The one at the rear of the Lone Tree Hotel":

At a child's level in the pane there is a flaw that is round, like an eye in the glass. An eye to that eye, a scud seems to blow on a sea of grass. Waves of plain seem to roll up, then break like a surf. Is it a flaw in the eye, or in the window, that transforms a dry place into a wet one? Above it towers a sky, like the sky at sea, a wind blows like the wind at sea, and like the sea it has no shade: there is no place to hide. One thing it is that the sea is not: it is dry, not wet.

Old Tom Scanlon, his horsehair sofa drawn close, spends most of his time looking out this window. Gazing through the flaw in the glass, "What he sees are the scenic props of his own mind." Because he looks with his imagination as much as with his eyes, Scanlon sees many things where there is nothing: he sees plenty of rain where there is none, and when he is at his daughter's home he can see three hundred miles across the plains to Lone Tree, because the mind is its own place, transforming all sights into a vision of the place most longed for.
To change the scenery, all Tom Scanlon needs to do is change slightly the position from which he looks out across the plains through the flaw in the window. In the same way, Wright Morris the novelist never needs to abandon Lone Tree, his Nebraskan equivalent to William Faulkner's "postage stamp of native soil," for, as G. B. Crump explains it, "Even if the raw material could be exhausted, the ways of seeing cannot." To this point, Morris's raw material has sustained him through twenty-one novels and almost a dozen other books. As this dissertation has shown, in a sense all of these books are a reprocessing of the same material. Each new novel represents a different view through the flaw in the glass. A slight change of perspective opens up new vistas of the plains, bringing some objects into focus and blurring others that seemed clear before. Defamiliarizing the commonplace, struggling for a better understanding of the enigma of his own past, and conjuring with the indeterminacy of language, Wright Morris re-views the same material, sustaining a continuous act of imaginative transformation.

Just as each novel—each framing of the view through the flaw in the window of fiction—distorts as well as clarifies, so too does each new critical perspective applied to the novels emphasize one interpretation at the risk of obscuring equally valid readings. For this reason, however lively and imaginative in its own right, no single discussion of a body of work of the stature of Wright Morris's fiction can hope to do more than add one new perspective to an accumulating number of critical repossessions. The strategy of this study has been to attempt
a series of readings whose effect is at once discrete and cumulative. On one level, each chapter, emphasizing a different artistic technique in Morris's fiction, is a separate utterance, and the effect is meant to resemble the tossing of several pebbles into a pond at the same time. Each pebble creates its own system of waves, likely to interact with the waves created by the other pebbles tossed synchronously into the water. On another level, the chapters, which all culminate in a discussion of the importance of the process of transformation in Wright Morris's fiction, are intended to build to a crescendo of meaning the way that pebbles tossed into a pond one after another in the same place create an ever-expanding, ever more powerful system of waves.

Acting simultaneously along diachronic and synchronic axes of meaning, this study therefore has attempted to imitate the effect of a reading of all of Wright Morris's novels. Held together by similarities of theme, setting, and technique, the novels can be seen as different pieces fitting into the jigsaw puzzle that is Wright Morris's fiction. Yet each novel is a discrete, whole puzzle, deserving attention as a separate creation, as can be illustrated by an examination of Morris's two most recent novels, The Fork River Space Project and Plains Song for Female Voices. Worlds apart in so many respects, the two books nevertheless reflect, each in its own way, Wright Morris's abiding concerns with commonplace, the past, and language.
Commenting on *The Fork River Space Project*, Morris asks whether the book represents "a new twist on the flaw in the glass through which dry places appeared to be wet ones?" The story is narrated by a writer named Kelcey whose "humorous, fantasy-type pieces" appear in "magazines sold on supermarket counters" under the pen name of Serenus Vogel (p. 2). Kelcey hires O. P. Dahlberg to paint his patio deck at three dollars an hour, only to learn that Dahlberg and his partner, a plumber named Harry Lorbeer, are the proprietors of the Fork River Space Project, an attempt at interplanetary travel and communion with aliens. Lorbeer and Dahlberg make their home in Fork River, Kansas, a community whose population declined from around seven hundred to three people soon after a tornado or some other phenomenon sucked up into space the town's three-acre Victory garden along with the fifteen or twenty people working in it at the time in 1943. Lorbeer and Dahlberg convert the town's abandoned schoolhouse, near the crater left after the disappearance of the Victory garden, into a chapel where they conduct weekly services featuring loud music and a space photography slide show before an audience of hippies and other visitors. The plot of the novel centers on Kelcey's attempts to understand Lorbeer, Dahlberg, and their strange project. By the end of the book, Kelcey is left alone to contemplate his experience, for his wife, Alice, runs off with Dahlberg to launch themselves into orbit.

Morris's concern for the indeterminate relationship between perception and reality saves the book from being merely a flirtation with science fiction. From the beginning, the novel shows Kelcey
passing through one defamiliarizing experience after another:

I have just discovered I can magnify objects by slight pressure on the lids of my eyes. My head lies on the pillow, a fold of the bedspread touches my nose. The weave is coarse. If I press lightly on the lids of my eyelids the material of the spread looks like a fishnet. If I lid my eyes and turn to face the light, I see a color glowing like heated metal. Across it motes flick, like water insects. The color changes to a smog-filtered sunset. If I give myself over to this impression, I am free-falling in space (that is my sensation), and only by an effort do I recover my bearings. (p. 1)

In Kelcey's world the commonplace is constantly juxtaposed against the surreal. Too fearful to fly in an airplane, he is nevertheless fascinated by the prospects of a view of the earth from space. At least for this one novel, Morris, through Kelcey, forces his reader to reevaluate his perception of the commonplace by looking at the ordinary from the defamiliarizing perspective of outer space.

Kelcey carries fresh in his mind the memory of his "first view from space"—the plains falling away to the east as he gazed from the window of a train climbing into the Rocky Mountains (p. 117). Admiring the ancients, whose cave paintings, sculptures on Easter Island, and rocks piled at Stonehenge "are not propped up there for people to see, but for avenging gods" (p. 23), Kelcey forces himself to look at the things around him as if he were a visitor from outer space. At one point he speculates on how his town's new shopping plaza must appear from space (p. 125). At another, he observes that the new carnival rides at the state fair are like "objects fallen from space and wrecked" (p. 136), but it is the game of football that he takes greatest pleasure in defamiliarizing. Conjecturing that the only man-made
objects visible from space are football stadiums (p. 107), he wonders how he could explain to a "spaceperson" this "peace-type game, played during periods of cold war" (p. 156). While there are few things less plausible than a football game, Kelcey watches as his neighbors and friends succumb to GO BIG RED mania. Were a grazing brontosaurus to poke its head through his bedroom window, Kelcey (and his creator behind him) would probably be no more shocked than he is when he contemplates the incongruity of the community in which he lives maintaining "a great institution of learning which trains and exhibits a football team" (p. 70).

In *The Fork River Space Project* the view from outer space gives different focus to Wright Morris's technique of defamiliarizing the commonplace, and it also casts new light on his quest to capture the past. Here, the focus on the past is cosmic rather than personal. Contemplating the implications of relativity, Kelcey notes that

> If we are a few hundred miles in space, nothing visibly moves on the surface of the planet. Like shadows, we see that they move when we turn away. If one carried this impression to its conclusion, apparent movement would cease, apparent time would stop, at some point in space. From some point in space, that is, given the view, I might zoom in and see a huge leaf-eating monster, foraging in the swampy ravine of the Fork River. From another point I would zoom in and find it all covered with ice. In the full light of day, of course, I doubt that, I make a clear distinction between fact and fiction, but in the full bloom of night I zoom down to watch the Druids dragging their slabs of rock to Stonehenge. They wear pelts, but otherwise they look like a typical crowd at a football rally. (pp. 117-18)

Kelcey sees Fork River as the "miraculous and unforced overlapping of the past and the present" (p. 101), and he takes delight in knowing
that when the pressure on the eyelids is just right he can hold in his
mind at once the images of the place as habitat of dinosaurs, rendezvous
point for trappers and Indians, and landing pad for unidentified flying
objects. Thus, while the action of this novel does not tie in so
obviously with the details of his personal past as do others of Wright
Morris's fictions, he retains his preoccupation with recapturing the
past, this time in an expansive sense:

On seeing planet earth rise on the chaste moon's horizon,
the author is still subject to seizures of longing for how
things once were in Fork River. Really were, that is.
Assuming, of course, there was such a place.

As much as any of his novels, The Fork River Space Project shows
Wright Morris's self-conscious interest in man's numerous ways of
representing and coping with reality. In this book, the indeterminate
relationship between reality and modes of representing reality extends
to places as well as people. Kelcey can find the Fork River on his
map, but the map lists no town of that name (p. 14). When he finally
locates Fork River, it is a ghost town full of clapboard houses in
surprisingly good repair. He learns that people began leaving soon
after the strange "incident" that happened in 1943. Because of the
war, nobody outside the town cared enough about what happened to
investigate, so Kelcey is left to ponder what really occurred. The
evidence he finds in Fork River is a huge round hole from which tons
of earth have been scooped down to bedrock (p. 40). Kelcey at first
thinks that the local people had been digging for treasure, but he
learns that the hole in the ground was made by a tornado or some other
phenomenon that drew the area up through a hole in space. Fearing that
the river canyon might attract another twister that could "suck up the
whole town," people began to leave (p. 46). Lorbeer and Dahlberg make
Fork River the center of their operations, hoping that something will
happen to take them too into space.

At the end of the book, after Kelcey's wife has left him for
Dahlberg, Kelcey drives once more to Fork River, wondering whether the
place has been taken up, but he stops short of the town. He does not want
what he could see with his eyes to interfere with his imagination's
dealings with the place and what may have happened there, if indeed
Fork River ever existed. In this he imitates Dahlberg, who "imagines
what he pleases" (p. 95). In order to change the world, Dahlberg
believes that "You just renovate it, reassemble the parts to heart's
desire" (p. 195). This Dahlberg does at will, remaking his own life as
he goes along. He is Wright Morris's latest version of the audacity
embodied by Paula Kahler, who transforms her identity from male to
female. A writer himself, Dahlberg is another of Morris's incarnations
of the artist, transforming the raw materials of his life through the
powers of the imagination.

Soon after Dahlberg begins painting at Kelcey's house, Miss
Ingalls, the local librarian, shows Kelcey a book entitled *A Hole in
Space and Other Stories*, published in 1962 by O. P. Dahlberg (p. 15).
From a picture on the dust jacket of the book, Kelcey confirms that the
author is the same O. P. Dahlberg whom he has hired as a handyman for
three dollars an hour. The dust jacket says that Dahlberg was "'Born in
Provo, Utah, ... of a Swedish immigrant father and a Mormon mother" (p. 16). Kelcey takes the book home and begins reading the first story, "The Taste of Blood." It is an autobiographical piece about Dahlberg's experience at a religious school in Walla Walla, Washington. In it, Dahlberg comes to the conclusion that competition, not money, is the root of all evil, and his recognition that war is the ultimate contest makes him a confirmed pacifist (pp. 18-19).

Within the first twenty pages of his novel, Morris has established a net of relationships among reflections of reality worthy of Cervantes or Sterne. The novel is narrated by a writer of popular fiction who enjoys conjuring up new versions of reality by pressing on his eyelids. This writer, Kelcey, employs another writer, Dahlberg, to paint his patio deck. Kelcey summarizes the plot of one of Dahlberg's stories, making the retelling of "The Taste of Blood" the summary of a story within a story, placing it at least three removes from reality.

Ironically, however, Dahlberg's experience at the religious school in Walla Walla, Washington, closely parallels Wright Morris's three-week stay at a Seventh-Day Adventist college in California. The complications do not end here, however, for Miss Ingalls soon locates a story called "Waiting":

The author's name is Bergdahl, but ... the internal evidence is all for Dahlberg. It's the plain, unvarnished tale of a small town on its last legs. Most of the people have left or died. The others just sit around waiting. For what? For something to happen. They sit around on the porch of the general store looking at the sky, discussing the weather. Nothing happens. That would make a better title for the story up to that point than Waiting. But the waiting builds up. You get a wonderful sense of what is on their minds just
from the way they don't talk about it, the way you get a sense of great expectations from people who say the least about it. It seemed to be a straightforward, realistic type of a story, touching on an experience common to many people. Who wasn't waiting? Even the reader was waiting for the story to end. All of this was done so skillfully, so matter-of-factly, that when the UFO came skimming in like a Frisbee, and hovered over the square like a silent helicopter, I accepted it the way they did. Why not? Something had to happen. Why not something unusual? (pp. 29-30)

This summary of a story within a story depicts what Lorbeer and Dahlberg really are waiting for; they want to be scooped up and taken away by a UFO. Kelcey's comments on the "straightforward, realistic" style of the story also serve to characterize Wright Morris's technique in *The Fork River Space Project*, where the mundane and the bizarre are continually juxtaposed and described with matter-of-fact understatement. This deliberate blurring of the distinction between what could happen (fiction) and what really happened (history) forces the reader to reassess his own assumptions about the relationship between reality and his perception of reality, as well as between what a novel seems to be (a picture of reality) and what it really is (a fanciful product of its author's imagination).

Miss Ingalls soon finds a photograph which confirms what she and Kelcey suspected: Dahlberg and Bergdahl are the same person (p. 89). As it turns out, O. P. Dahlberg actually is Peter O. Bergdahl, raised in an "old soddy ... out near Burwell" (p. 56). His father, Ansell Bergdahl, a self-educated inventor, was one of the first men to experiment with rockets, an interest which led to his death when one of his models blew up in his face. In order to cover unpleasant memories of his childhood, P. O. Bergdahl changes his name to O. P.
Dahlberg and concocts an entirely revised set of circumstances for his birth and upbringing. A fictional character thus creates a fiction to compensate for the facts of his own fictional past. Able to make Dahlberg's story seem plausible, Wright Morris at once exhibits his own prowess as a conjurer and calls into question the assumptions of a society which accepts fiction in novels as if it were fact and yet refuses to believe in the existence of UFOs.

Finally, though, the debate over the existence of UFOs is of no great interest to Wright Morris in The Fork River Space Project. His central concern is the same one that has been emphasized throughout his career: the power of the imagination to transform the chaotic raw material of experience into a unified and acceptable vision of the world. In the case of Harry Lorbeer and O. P. Dahlberg the transformation is accomplished by a change in perspective which focuses attention on the view of earth from outer space, but, as always, the fact that the transformation is attempted is more significant than the form the transformation takes. For this reason, Morris places at the end of the novel Kelcey's recollections of a man whose actions epitomize the importance of the humanizing process of transformation. That man is a Jewish artist named Taubler, whom Kelcey meets in Paris just before the Nazi invasion of Poland. Kelcey first sees Taubler as an old man sitting on a park bench, but Taubler gets up and, with a piece of white chalk, pretends
to draw, on the air around me, the details of an invisible room. He put in the windows, the door, and hung pictures. On the bench at my side he added a figure. The large hat,
with fruit or flowers, indicated that it must be a woman. Then he stopped and on the gravel path at my feet he signed the picture

H. TAUBLER (p. 166)

Walking around Paris, Kelcey runs into more of Taubler's appropriations: he sees Taubler's name written on the wall of a cemetery, and "on two of the pissoirs, signed to strips of torn posters" (p. 168). He runs into Taubler's associate, Tuchman, who offers to sell him "a volume of Jules Verne, Voyage to the Moon, with tipped-in pornographic illustrations" (p. 168). Tuchman takes Kelcey to Taubler's flat, where they examine a map with faces (including Kelcey's) painted in at the Metro stops, but Taubler's masterpiece centers around

The French doors in the south wall. They were framed by bright lemon yellow drapes, the green shutters thrown open on a view of the sea. The drapes were real, but the wine dark sea was a wall painting, with Taubler's name on it. The color was so brilliant I squinted at it, half closing my eyes. Drawn up to face the view was a real canvas beach chair, the floor around it strewn with the hulls of painted peanuts. They were so real birds would have pecked them. . . . I saw a lopsided moon low in the sky. Peering closer I recognized planet earth and noted its resemblance to a human skull. (pp. 172-73)

The phrase "wine dark sea" is an allusion to Homer, one of the first—and greatest—shape-shifters. In addition, the image of the earth as a human skull, which appears in a prose poem Dahlberg reads to Kelcey and his wife (p. 145), symbolically links Taubler with Lorbeer, Dahlberg, and all other artists of the imagination who have the audacity to transform their bleak existence on a doomed planet into life in an
imaginative world of their own making. The war forces Kelcey to lose track of Taubler, just as he loses track of Lorbeer, Dahlberg, and his wife when they go off into their own orbit, but Kelcey is prepared to believe that, wherever Taubler might be, his system—"'You've got to make your own world, then live in it'" (p. 173)—works.

The Fork River Space Project works well as an homage to audacious transformations of the mundane into the enjoyable, but Wright Morris shares with Kelcey the recognition that even the freshness of the view from space can easily become jaded:

We sat facing, high in the north gable, the glass panel showing the planet earth rising above the moon's horizon. Spellbinding! Prodigious! Stupefying! and ordinary. It would soon be on T-shirts with Brahms and Beethoven. (p. 151)

Sated for the moment with his fanciful flights into space, Morris moves on in his most recent novel, Plains Song for Female Voices, to a fresh handling of some of his abiding themes. The narrative strategy of the book is suggested in a conversation between Miss Ingalls and Kelcey in The Fork River Space Project. Examining the photograph of Ansell Bergdahl, his wife, another woman, and the Bergdahls' son in front of their sod hut, Miss Ingalls says, "'I simply don't understand how the women endured it. . . . Some of them didn't. They went crazy.'" When Kelcey worries about the men, Miss Ingalls replies, "'Oh, they could do things. They could shoot at each other. They could shoot off rockets. . . . And some of them would grow up and write fiction'" (p. 59). After spending most of the energies of his long career examining how men
face the challenges of transforming commonplace, the past, and language, it is only fitting that Wright Morris should finally give center stage to female voices in a new view through the flaw in the window of fiction.

Because of the perspective from which the novel is narrated, the handling of the commonplace in *Plains Song for Female Voices* is much different from *The Fork River Space Project*. In *Fork River*, Morris defamiliarizes the ordinary by viewing it as if from outer space. In *Plains Song*, an "elegy to endurance,"11 he accomplishes defamiliarization by treating the ordinary with restraint and understatement. This is nowhere more evident than in the novel's handling of the problems of sexuality. The book begins with Cora Atkins, on her deathbed, thinking about her courtship and honeymoon. Originally from Salem, Massachusetts, Cora was sent west to Ohio by her widowed father to live with her Uncle Myron. She works in his hotel, where she meets Emerson Atkins, who has returned for supplies to Ohio from his homestead in Nebraska. After an acquaintance of a few days, Emerson proposes, Cora accepts, and they are married. The ceremony vaguely confuses Cora, but the minister's emotion "sealed her vows. She might, and she would, suffer from what was understood to be bondage, but she would never question that it had been sanctioned by God" (p. 11). After ten days' drive in their wagon the newlyweds reach a Mississippi River crossing and prepare themselves for what turns out to be the only sexual encounter of their long marriage:

In Burlington, after a heavy meal, she put herself to bed. He came back from his bath smelling of soap, his face nicked by the razor, his hair up wild from his scrubbed scalp, his
thick body tight in a suit of oatmeal-colored flannel. For some time, as if alone, he sat on the edge of the bed rubbing his scalp. His hair needed cutting; his head, seen from the back, was like that of a just plucked chicken. Nor was he in a hurry. Her heart pounded as he stooped to trim his nails. . . . Before he puffed the lamp out and rolled toward her, the bed creaking like the body of the wagon, her dismay had given way to a dread that paralyzed her will. When he moved on her, his groping hands confusing the sheet with her nightgown, she had already put her clenched fist into her mouth and stared sightlessly at the ceiling. What did she experience? It might be likened to an operation without the anaesthesia. Horror exceeded horror. The time required by her assailant to do what must be done left her in shock. In the dawn light she found that she had bitten through the flesh of her hand, exposing the bone. (p. 14)

Cora's horror and Emerson's ineptness epitomize the failure of men and women to make satisfactory connections at even the most intimate moments in this as in most of Wright Morris's novels. Characteristic of Morris, the commonplace of sexuality is handled with defamiliarizing realism rather than with the expected romanticism. When the local doctor asks Cora how she hurt herself, Emerson says "'Horse bit her" (p. 15). This remark, along with "a scar blue as gun metal between the first and second knuckle" (p. 2), becomes emblematic of a marriage, and a way of life, among couples who do "their talking with their eyes averted, as if collecting their thoughts" (p. 11). After setting up housekeeping on the homestead in Nebraska, Cora discovers she is pregnant:

Had Cora ever doubted that the nightmare she had survived would result in a child? The logic of it was clear and not to be questioned. The gift of life was holy, and one paid for it dearly. The drama of creation, as she now understood it, a coming together of unearthly forces, was not unlike the brute and blind disorder of her unthinkable experience. (p. 22)
Cora gets her wish for a hard delivery: she "was stretched on the rack, as if meant to be broken" (p. 25), but she refuses to cry out while bearing her daughter. Beulah Madge is the first of many girls in the Atkins line: "It is a curse in this family that the women bear only daughters, if anything at all" (p. 1). Because of the sympathetic treatment women receive in Plains Song, this statement, which begins the novel, must be seen largely as ironic, yet it aptly symbolizes the imbalance and sterility that characterize sexual relationships among these plainsmen.

After a good harvest, Emerson's brother, Orion, goes off hunting in the Ozarks and returns with a pregnant wife. Belle, sensuous, attractive, and vibrantly alive, is a foil to Cora's restrained stoicism. She bears two daughters in quick succession—Sharon Rose and Eula (who dies in infancy)—but she seems to lack Cora's mettle for enduring the deprivations of life on the plains, and she dies giving birth to her third daughter, Fayrene. Defamiliarizing experience by giving prominence to trivialities and understating momentous events, Morris gives extensive descriptions of such things as the way Emerson puckers and wipes his lips after spitting tobacco, yet describes Belle's death with detached matter-of-factness:

Two days before Christmas Orion was off somewhere, hunting, when Belle began her labor. Before Emerson could fetch anybody, she gave birth to a child with Orion's blond hair, a birthmark on the left forearm. It seemed so frail and lifeless Cora feared it might be dead. Dr. Geltmayer arrived, but nothing he could do would stop Belle's internal bleeding. She died peaceful, looking like a young girl with tangled hair and a deathly pallor. (p. 59)
Narrated from Cora's point of view—such terms as "fetch" and "died peaceful" are definitely hers—this passage shows Morris's strategy to let the most crucial events go unanalyzed, a reflection of Cora's endurance made possible by maintaining conscious detachment from life and emotion. What Kelcey says of Bergdahl's story in *Fork River* is true here: "You get a wonderful sense of what is on their minds just from the way they don't talk about it" (p. 29).

Family traits seem to alternate generations among the Atkins, for Cora's daughter, Madge, covertly enjoys sex as much as Belle seemed to, while Belle's eldest daughter, Sharon Rose, adopts Cora's view that there is nothing "so bizarre and so repugnant as the act of procreation" (p. 36). Even though Madge enjoys sex, she has inherited her mother's feeling that happiness is sinful, and she hides her pleasure even from her husband, Ned:

> The way they slept together was acceptable to Madge because it took place in the dark, and required no discussion, but her very consciousness quivered to think that he thought about it in the light of day. (p. 113)

Madge's emotions lead her to think about "it" in the light of day, but her upbringing will not allow her to feel comfortable in the knowledge that her husband may share her preoccupation.

In contrast to Madge, Sharon Rose turns completely away from men, sublimating her sexuality in a career as a music teacher. Offended by the sterility of the relationship between Cora and Emerson and deeply troubled by her perception that Madge sacrificed her friendship with Sharon to marry Ned Kibbee, Sharon avoids all male advances and family
attempts at matchmaking. When Blanche, Madge's eldest daughter, comes
to live with her in Chicago, Sharon is disturbed by the perception
that "this girl child would soon appeal to some loutish youth stimulated
by the seasonal fall of pollen, and be thick with child" (p. 148).
Sharon dresses Blanche in clothes that emphasize her youth, and when
Sharon catches Blance necking in a barn with a young man at the
Chicago zoo, she sends her back to Nebraska. Blanche never marries.
As her younger sister, Caroline, an aggressive feminist, later explains
to Sharon Rose: "we don't get married anymore unless we want to. We
all had your example!" (p. 196). In Caroline and Blanche, then, the
Atkins family comes full circle, from the matriarch, Cora, who endures
marriage because it is expected of her, to new women, who do exactly as
they please. Morris depicts women who respond to their experience in
ways acceptable to the times in which they live, but in so doing he
emphasizes the gulf that separates men from women in modern America.
Despite the "modernity" of Caroline's views and the apparent stupidity
of Cora's stoicism, Morris shows more admiration for her selfless
endurance than for her grand-daughter's self-indulgence.

Morris's treatment of the past in Plains Song is closely related to
his use of commonplace in the novel, for a good part of the book's
energy concerns itself with Sharon Rose's attempt to understand Cora's
past and her own heritage. Although Sharon does visit a museum at the
University of Nebraska where she thinks about man becoming as extinct
as the dinosaurs in the new world envisioned by the women's liberation
movement (p. 196), the perspective on the past is personal rather than
cosmic, as it is in *The Fork River Space Project*. Significantly, in *Plains Song* the attempt at repossession of the past is made by female rather than male characters, giving Wright Morris some needed distance from his materials. While Sharon's past is much like Morris's own—her mother dies while she is young, her father is preoccupied with matters other than his children, and Sharon soon moves away from the plains—the book is not dominated by the author's dredging of his own past. Casting the narrative in the minds of women gives Morris the ability to maintain productive tension between memory and imagination, making *Plains Song* one of his most mature and fully realized repossessions of the plains experience.

As in other Morris novels discussed in chapter 2 of this study, the need to struggle for a reconciliation with the past in *Plains Song* is symbolized by the incompletely and incongruous dwellings of the Atkins family. Because of a mistake in calculating the pitch of the roof, Emerson builds his house with second-story windows level with the floor. He plans a front porch for the place but never builds it, rendering the front entrance useless. When Orion builds his house, Emerson cannot accustom himself to looking at a building with a basement. Cora moves in and makes Emerson's house and the yard around it her own domain, raising chickens and using her egg money to buy a lawnmower for the yard, linoleum for the kitchen, and a generator for electric lights. Sharon, in contrast, cannot reconcile herself to the "partially conscious life" of the farm (p. 102). Forgetting that her own mother was a hillbilly from the Ozarks, she feels oppressed by the
loutishness of the men around her and by the willingness of their
girls to subject themselves to this kind of existence.

When Emerson swigs buttermilk and belches before sitting down
at the dinner table, Sharon implies that he "should eat with his
pigs" (p. 71). She is repulsed by the sight of her own father
urinating off the porch. Returning to the farm for her sister
Fayrene's wedding,

> It seemed incomprehensible to Sharon that people continued
to live in such places. Numbified by the cold, drugged by
the heat and the chores, they were more like beasts of the
field than people. (p. 124)

Epitomizing Sharon's view of farm life is Avery Dickel, the young man
who gets Fayrene pregnant and agrees to marry her. When Sharon first
sees him, she takes note of his protruding teeth. At the dinner table,
Avery picks up the family cat and chips tartar from its teeth, offering
the particles to Sharon for closer inspection. Throughout the meal,
Avery stares at Sharon and they finally exchange observations:

> Avery leaned on the table, his tongue probing for food
above the gumline. In that manner he had of being self-
unaware, he stared at Sharon, his head tilted like the dog
on the horn of the Victrola. His cheeks were like apples.
A snow of dandruff powdered his shoulders. In all her life
Sharon could not remember a young man, or a young woman, she
found so repugnant. In a mocking tone she asked, "Would you
like to be a farmer?"

> "I like animals," he replied. It had not yet crossed
his mind to say that animals liked him.

> "Then you'd just love farming," she said, "since
everybody on the farm is an animal. It just takes a little
time." (p. 129)
When her train moves out of the station, Sharon feels "an inexpressible relief" at her sensation that

The clang of the last crossing bell rang down the curtain on ceaseless humiliation, inadmissible longings, the perpetual chores and smoldering furies, the rites and kinships with half-conscious people so friendly and decent it shamed her to dislike them. (p. 136)

What Sharon fails to recognize at this point is that, while she can leave the plains, she cannot get away from her past. A young man sitting by her exclaims "'Boy, am I glad to see the last of that!'" as the train passes through his home town. What Sharon remembers of the experience is his "reflection in the window, his eyes moving as he searched the darkness" (p. 317). Sharon, as much as the young man, is glad to leave her home place, but both of them are in large measure a reflection of their origins. They can never hope to put their beginnings entirely out of their mind; they can only strive to come to some peace with their past.

Robert Knoll points out that the name "Sharon" is from the Hebrew for "the plains."¹³ Sharon can no more eliminate from her life her plains background than she can renounce her name. However much she may pity, or even despise, her Aunt Cora's aloofness, detachment from life, and patient endurance, Sharon recognizes those same traits in herself. The most important event of her life shows an ambivalence toward her heritage that takes her more than thirty years to reconcile:
The day Sharon Rose came back from Lincoln, where she had gone to enroll in the university, she was let off at the trail between the two houses while Ned and Madge sat in the buggy, spooning. Knowing they would hear her, knowing Cora would hear her, hoping the people in Battle Creek would hear her, she had screamed, "Is he looking for a wife or a housemaid?"

Cora had been on the screened-in porch, ironing; she had stood leaning on the iron, speechless. Nothing had prepared her to believe that Sharon Rose had such resentment, such bitterness, in her. Cora had followed her into Fayrene's room, off the kitchen, seized her by the wrist, and whacked her palm with the back of a hairbrush, sharply. How well they knew what Sharon Rose thought of her hands! "That will teach you!" Cora cried, knowing that it wouldn't even as she said it. Not Sharon Rose. She had turned from Cora and run up the stairs. (p. 75)

Could Sharon genuinely escape her past, this incident would not haunt her as it does, but she can no more renounce her heritage than she could dismiss her attachment to Madge, a slow, heavy, bovine housewife who is closer to her than a real sister. Sharon turns away from Cora, just as she turns away from men in revulsion against what she sees happening between Ned and Madge. She renounces rural Nebraska for the urbanity of music studies in Chicago and a career as an instructor at Wellesley, yet she never comes to terms with her past until she returns to the home place thirty-three years later for Cora's funeral.

This discussion of Sharon's struggle to understand her past will not be complete without an analysis of the final scenes of the book, where Sharon makes peace with her plains background in general and with her memory of her Aunt Cora in particular, but first it is useful to see how some of the other women of the novel construct for themselves an endurable version of reality. Unlike The Fork River Space Project, which is narrated in the first person, Plains Song features Morris's
use of free indirect style (the "Uncle Charles Principle" discussed in chapter 3 above) which enables him to move in and out of the minds of many different characters. At the center of the novel's narrative is the consciousness of Cora, thin, stern, silent, enduring. The passage of time is marked more by the occurrence of important events in her life than by any reference to the outside world. When Orion goes off to fight in World War I, Cora does not even know there is a war on. This is the first historical event that gives the reader some perspective of time in the novel. Cora later makes a foray into the outside world when she visits the Chicago World's Fair, but the trip is an unpleasant diversion from the routine of work that gives meaning to her life. Her greatest reassurance in life is that work is never done. She faces the bleak harshness of life on the plains by defining her own domain and then taking care of it (p. 56). She does things silently, by herself. As protection against the harshness and bitterness of her life, she erects a barrier of detachment that makes her insensitive to discomfort in herself and in others. Sharon notes that Cora has the "intense staring eyes" of icons (p. 88). Cora's greatest accomplishment is that she constructs for herself an identity that enables her to endure. Comfortable with her protective shell of indifference, she refuses to look at her image in mirrors or examine photographs of herself. Mistrustful of telephones and other means of communication, she holds her tongue. She is a perfect, if bizarre, adaptation to the requirements of the harsh life on the plains.
As mentioned earlier, Belle is not able to adapt as successfully as Cora. At once ignorant and alive, she likes to burn candles and go barefooted. She feels a need to break the silence around her with talk and singing. She loves to care for the girls and gives herself freely to her husband, but she does not have the toughness to endure. Madge has some of Belle's feeling for life and sexuality, but she is able to hide it behind a facade of fleshy contentment and ignorance. Two of her daughters, Blanche and Caroline, find very different solutions to the problem of constructing for themselves a bearable version of reality. Blanche, whose complexion and figure are reminiscent of Cora, withdraws into a world of silence. She "drinks in" movies (p. 156) and draws strange pictures which serve as personal attempts at repossession of the past, but for the most part she remains aloof, taking care of her collections of plants and animals. Her younger sister Caroline rebels against the harshness of her family heritage by aligning herself with the women's movement in an aggressive way that makes even Sharon Rose, her model, uncomfortable.

Each one of these women has to make her own kind of peace with the plains. Some are more successful than others, as measured by survival, but all are in some way a reflection of the archetypal endurance of the family matriarch, Cora. While Cora's personal version of the world may seem to have little in common with the flights of fancy of Taubler, Lorbeer, and Dahlberg in The Fork River Space Project, it is just as courageous and audacious in its own way. Most importantly, it works. However repugnant Cora's life appears to more contemporary
sensibilities, it must be admitted that her reserved indifference enables her to endure a long life on the plains. And while her house and garden are torn to pieces even before her funeral, she lives on in the minds of the people she leaves behind.

The permanence of Cora's influence—linking her to Monsieur Dulac, Uncle Dudley, Floyd Warner, Grandma Herkimer, Judge Porter, Aunt Viola, and other of Wright Morris's enduring old people—is shown in the transformation that Sharon Rose undergoes as she returns to Nebraska for Cora's funeral at the end of Plains Song. Waiting for her plane to Lincoln, Sharon meets Alexandra Selkirk, a big, conspicuous woman who somehow seems able to neutralize "Sharon's impulse to withdraw, to disengage, her most habitual and salient characteristic" (p. 187). Discovering that they are both on their way to Nebraska, the two women agree to travel together. Associating Alexandra's hands with Cora's, Sharon listens during the flight to her companion's discourse on women's bondage and emerging liberation. She discovers that Alexandra's background is a strange kind of mirror image of Cora's. The daughter of a widowed mining engineer from Casper, Wyoming, Alexandra was educated in Europe where she had the sense to escape early from an unwise marriage. Cora begins life in the East and moves west, choosing to remain silent and endure life, whereas Alexandra begins in the West and moves east, deciding to speak out and attempt to change society. Sharon is drawn to "aggressive, possessive" Alexandra and agrees to meet her at the Crossways Inn in Grand Island after Cora's funeral.
On their way to Madge's place, Caroline takes Sharon past Cora's home. A "pitted field of the stumps of dead trees was all that was left of Cora's farm" (p. 200), yet the feeling of emptiness about the place somehow evokes the presence of Cora Atkins, who had "been for silence. . . . When she felt the deep silence of her soul threatened she had struck out with her hairbrush" (pp. 200-01). Resting in Blanche's room at Madge's house, Sharon is haunted by her memory of Cora and even sees "a ghostly figure in the bureau mirror" (p. 206). At the dinner table, where the whole family is gathered in a scene mirroring her first confrontation with Avery Dickel, Fayrene offers Sharon a taste of some of Cora's last batch of pickle relish, displacing the fastidious Sharon to another place and time and robbing her of her appetite. Amid this swirling scene of confusion between the past and the present, the first hint of reconciliation comes when everyone at the table is "animated by a common, agreeable emotion" when Madge observes of the dessert, "'You know it's real ice cream . . . when it waxes the roof of your mouth'" (p. 211). The feeling of community films Sharon's eyes with tears, and she even seems to experience some feeling of kinship with Avery Dickel.

Sharon soon feels withdrawn from the scene, however, "as if she saw it through a window, or within the frame of a painting" (p. 213). The flight of Blanche's parakeet through the room reminds Sharon that

In something she had read, so long ago it seemed a memory, a bird had flown into a hall crowded with warriors, in a window at one end and out at the other, leading one of them to observe that its brief flight, out of darkness and back into darkness, was like life itself. (p. 213)
From this point on, Sharon's struggle to come to terms with her memory of Cora is linked to her larger quest to give some meaning to life and death. Listening to the words "Abide with me" in the music at Cora's funeral, Sharon asks,

what, indeed, had abided? The liberation from her burdens, the works and meager effects of Cora had been erased from the earth. If she had guessed, Sharon would have felt her speechless humiliation. Others could, and would, grasp it painlessly as a metaphor. Cora would not have grasped it. The violation, like a shaking of the earth, was too profound. Her death was an incident of small importance compared with this ultimate rejection. Works and days. Her soul had made its peace with things. (pp. 214-15)

Stifled by the "half-submerged life," Sharon had fled, but at this moment, recalling the young man who sat by her on the train those many years before, she wonders,

Had he led his own life, as she had, only to find that it led back to where he had started, his eyes fastened on the darkness where he hoped to see a glimpse of familiar light? Had they both grown up and old in order to recover what had escaped them as children? (p. 215)

At this still point of transformation, Sharon completes her acceptance of and identification with Cora: "As much as or more than the child she had borne, Sharon had been Cora's girl. Abstinence was something she understood; indulgence she did not" (p. 216). That afternoon, Sharon is driven to the Crossways Inn, where she symbolically overcomes her lifelong rejection of sexuality by becoming entranced with an obscene song whose performance she recognizes as "a simulated orgasm" (p. 219). After sleeping through part of the night she
finds Alexandra Selkirk, who asks enigmatically, "Of the six days of creation, which one had it been?" (p. 227). Sharon, looking at Alexandra, completes the identification of her new friend with Cora: "Against the light of the bathroom her flat, skeletal figure appeared to be a resurrection of Cora" (p. 228). On this Sunday morning, celebrated as the sabbath, the day God rested from His labors of creation, the two women go out to admire the sunrise, a sight Sharon says she has not seen since she was a child. Reconciled at last with her childhood and her memory of Cora, Sharon is free to enjoy her status as a new woman in what for her is a new world.

While the scene at the motel culminates the transformation that Sharon undergoes, it is a crucial allusion to Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" which epitomizes Sharon's rebirth and the process of artistic transformation to which Wright Morris commits his energies as a writer. Riding toward the Crossways Inn, Sharon stares out the window of the pickup truck, thinking about her home place, remembering even her long-dead infant sister:

On the darkening plain her eyes searched for lights in the farmhouse windows. A sweet sadness, a longing touched with dread, filled her with a tender, pleasurable self-pity. Whatever life held in the future for her, it would prove to reside in this rimless past, approaching and then fading like the gong of a crossing bell. In Blanche's muteness, in her elusive presence, Sharon felt their mutual kinship with the child buried in the grave without a marker, nameless as the flowers pressed between the pages of Cora's Bible. Houses and barn, the living and the dead, into thin air. In the cab of the pickup, the blacktop flowing soundlessly beneath them, Sharon was at once incredulous and believing, at one with the world and fearlessly detached. Did the young orbiting in space feel a similar bafflement and elevation? (pp. 216-17)
On "a darkling plain/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/Where ignorant armies clash by night," the narrator of "Dover Beach" sees recourse only in connection between human beings: "Ah, love, let us be true/To one another." Of course, the allusion to the poem is fraught with irony, for "Dover Beach" speaks of a "world, which seems/To lie before us like a land of dreams,/So various, so beautiful, so new," yet it "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,/Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." Similarly, Sharon's vision of a new world, tinged with a "sweet sadness, a longing touched with dread, filled . . . with a tender, pleasurable self-pity," may prove to be nothing more than a comforting illusion. As always is the case in Wright Morris's fiction, the transformation is self-consciously tentative and mutable. The process of transformation is more important than its product, yet any imaginative vision is worthwhile so long as it transforms, however temporarily, the chaotic raw material of experience into a coherent picture of reality. Her "bafflement and elevation" links Sharon Atkins both to real spacemen and to such imaginary travellers as Harry Lorbeer and O. P. Dahlberg. She is "incredulous and believing, at one with the world and fearlessly detached," and this description serves perfectly to characterize the philosophy and fictional technique of her creator, who is forever aware that the constructing of novels is a pleasant, yet deceptive, game playing off the unyielding raw materials of the commonplace, history, and language against the magical transforming powers of the artist's imagination. Each new novel is nothing more, yet nothing less, than a new view through a flaw in the
window of fiction. Each succeeding book adds a new room to an expanding house of fiction. In the case of Wright Morris, the house is a substantial one, yet he would be the first to admit that it is made entirely of words.
Notes

The following is a chronological list of book-length works by Wright Morris. Because of their ready availability and because they generally reprint first editions, University of Nebraska Bison Books editions are used whenever possible. Throughout the notes, references to Wright Morris books are made by title only.


Notes to Introduction


2 "Photography and Reality: A Conversation between Peter C. Bunnell and Wright Morris," in Conversations with Wright Morris, p. 146.

4 Bunnell, p. 124.

5 "The Dictates of Style: A Conversation between David Madden and Wright Morris," in Conversations with Wright Morris, p. 108.

6 For a discussion of Morris's ability to tell a captivating story, see Wayne C. Booth, "Form in The Works of Love," in Conversations with Wright Morris, pp. 35-73.


8 "The Dictates of Style," p. 102. See also David Madden, Wright Morris, Twayne's United States Authors Series (New York: Twayne, 1964), passim throughout.


10 The Territory Ahead, p. 3. Morris does not identify the edition from which he takes this translation.

11 Ibid., pp. 3, 4.

12 A Bill of Rites, p. 8.

13 The Territory Ahead, p. 6.


15 Ibid., p. 102.

16 "The Dictates of Style," pp. 111-12.

17 The Territory Ahead, p. 15.


19 About Fiction, p. 1.


22 See Alter, Partial Magic, chapters 4 and 5; and Alter, "History and Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Novel," Georgia Review 29 (Spring 1975), 42-60.
23 Alter, "History and Imagination," 60.

24 Because there have been several useful examinations of Morris's novels in sequence, my approach here will be intensive rather than extensive. While I deal in some way with all of the novels, my strategy is thematic rather than chronological. The first extensive treatment of Morris's works appeared in David Madden's Wright Morris. Leon Howard's Wright Morris (University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, no. 69 [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968]) provides a brief, perceptive survey of Morris's career. The most recent discussion of all of the novels through A Life is G. B. Crump's The Novels of Wright Morris. The final chapter of this dissertation includes a detailed analysis of Morris's two most recent novels, The Fork River Space Project and Plains Song for Female Voices.

25 About Fiction, p. 74.

26 The Territory Ahead, p. xiv.

27 Quoted in Madden, Wright Morris, p. 17.

28 The Territory Ahead, p. 127.

29 About Fiction, p. 55.


31 Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments, p. 11.


33 A Bill of Rites, p. 88.

34 Madden, Wright Morris, p. 25.

35 Alter, Partial Magic, p. 55.

36 Ibid., p. 97.

37 About Fiction, p. 41.
Notes to Chapter 1

1 The Works of Love, back cover.

2 Ibid., p. 137.

3 Ibid.

4 See David Madden, Wright Morris, Twayne's United States Authors Series (New York: Twayne, 1964), chapter 4.


8 Ibid., p. 11.

9 Ibid., p. 12.

10 Ibid., p. 4.


12 War Games, pp. 55-56.

13 Most notably, Virgil Ormsby in Man and Boy and Judge Porter in The Deep Sleep.

14 David Madden, Wright Morris, pp. 81-82, discusses Morris's concern for transformation of cliché, though with different emphasis than I give it in this chapter.


16 See About Fiction, pp. 79-84.
17 The Home Place, p. 141.

18 "Drdla," Real Losses, Imaginary Gains, p. 78.


20 The Works of Love, p. 47.


22 Cause for Wonder, p. 79.

23 Ibid., p. 272.


26 In Orbit, p. 10.

27 Man and Boy, p. 10.

28 Will's Boy, pp. 77, 113.

29 The Field of Vision, p. 64.

30 Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 88.

31 The Huge Season, p. 280.

32 Love Among the Cannibals, pp. 70-71.

33 One Day, pp. 295-96.

34 Ibid., p. 297.

35 The World in the Attic, p. 21. See also Will's Boy, p. 85, for a discussion of a similar incident in Wright Morris's boyhood.

36 Fire Sermon, p. 12.

37 "The American Novelist and the Contemporary Scene: A Conversation between John W. Aldridge and Wright Morris," in Conversations with Wright Morris, p. 17.

38 About Fiction, pp. 115-16.
39 See "The American Novelist and the Contemporary Scene," p. 31; and Madden, *Wright Morris*, p. 81.


41 Ibid., p. 36.

42 Ibid., p. 37.

43 *About Fiction*, p. 55.

44 *In Orbit*, p. 126.

45 *Ceremony in Lone Tree*, p. 244.

46 *The Field of Vision*, pp. 70-71.

47 *The Man Who Was There*, p. 56.


49 Ibid., p. 45.

50 Ibid., p. 205.

51 Ibid., p. 212.

52 *A Bill of Rites*, p. 49.


54 Ibid., p. 193.

55 *In Orbit*, p. 22.

56 Ibid., p. 144.

57 Ibid., pp. 144-45.

58 Ibid., pp. 145-46.

59 Ibid., p. 152.

60 *One Day*, p. 424.

63 In Orbit, p. 139.
64 "Since When Do They Charge Admission," Real Losses, Imaginary Gains, p. 23.
65 The Field of Vision, p. 54.
66 For instance, see The Deep Sleep, p. 150. The title of the novel also is relevant to this point.
67 The Field of Vision, p. 72.
68 Man and Boy, p. 70.
70 Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 32.
71 Ibid., p. 234.
72 The Field of Vision, pp. 69-70.
73 Ibid., p. 70.
74 Ibid., p. 68.
75 Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 255.
76 Love Among the Cannibals, p. 45.
78 Love Among the Cannibals, p. 204.
79 Boris Tomashevsky, "Thematics," in Russian Formalist Criticism, p. 68.
81 The Territory Ahead, p. 212.
83 Quoted from The American Scene in The Territory Ahead, pp. 58-59.
Morris explains, "The writing went smoothly, as I remember, but the reading was another matter. My friend and editor at the time found it unusual but somewhat disturbing, and with my interests—and the publisher's—at heart, he thought I might advisably postpone its publication until my readers, such as they were, were more at ease with my fiction" (War Games, preface, pp. v-vi).
Ibid., p. 57.

108 In Will's Boy, Morris, remembering his early childhood, states flatly, "The white hairs of a mare's tail, put into the barrel, will turn to garter snakes" (p. 9).

109 Partial Magic, p. 143.

110 Quoted from The American Scene in The Territory Ahead, pp. 59-60.

111 The Home Place, p. 41.

112 "Photography and Reality," p. 150.

Notes to Chapter 2

1 The Deep Sleep, p. 157.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 160.

4 A Life, p. 28.

5 God's Country and My People, unnumbered page opposite fifth plate (old house with sand on porch).

6 The Home Place, pp. 15, 20.

7 About Fiction, p. 83.

8 "Where the West Begins," Prairie Schooner 54 (Summer 1980), 11.


10 God's Country and My People, unnumbered page opposite third plate (weather-worn log).

11 Ibid., unnumbered page opposite twenty-sixth plate (grass field). In Will's Boy, Morris admits "I, too, was given to seeing things where there was little to see, or to seeing them as other than what they were" (p. 151).
12 "Where the West Begins," 12. In his essay entitled "The Problem with Jigsaw Puzzles: Form in the Fiction of Wright Morris," Roger J. Guettenger argues that Morris "attempts to become one of the few who... create and discover the meanings veiled in the facts of man's experience" (Texas Quarterly 11 [Spring 1968], 220). Leon Howard describes Ceremony in Lone Tree as Morris's attempt to "gather up the durable fragments of his experience and come to imaginative terms with them" (Wright Morris, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, no. 69 [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968], p. 31). John W. Hunt, Jr., says that Morris struggles to discover "how meaning can be dislodged from the past and transformed for use in the present" (Critique 5 [Spring-Summer 1962], 59). And Frederic I. Carpenter identifies "the persistence of the past in the present" as Morris's "chief theme" ("Wright Morris and the Territory Ahead," College English 21 [December 1959], 152).

14 Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments, p. 12.
15 Ibid., p. 11.
17 Will's Boy, p. 4.
18 Robert E. Knoll, introduction to Conversations with Wright Morris, p. xi.
19 As quoted in David Madden, Wright Morris, p. 32.
20 "Where the West Begins," 13.
24 Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments, pp. 10-11.
26 Alter, Partial Magic, p. 142.
27 The Territory Ahead, p. 228.


29 The Field of Vision, p. 118.

30 A Bill of Rites, p. 90.

31 "Where the West Begins," 13.


33 God's Country and My People, unnumbered page opposite sixty-seventh plate (old screened porch).


35 Morris returned to Nebraska "with the idea of seeing, after a long absence, the life I remembered, but saw very poorly as a boy. I wanted really to see this life, so to speak for the first time" ("Privacy as a Subject for Photography," Magazine of Art 44 [February 1951], 51-55, as quoted in Madden, Wright Morris, p. 48). Raymond L. Neinstein speaks perceptively of Wright Morris's "effort to repose Nebraska imaginatively as a territory for his fiction," in "Wright Morris: The Metaphysics of Home," Prairie Schooner 53 (Summer 1979), 121-54.

36 The Territory Ahead, preface, p. xiii.

37 The World in the Attic, p. 20. Similar recollections appear in God's Country and My People; Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 10; and The Works of Love, p. 72. In My Uncle Dudley, pop fizz makes a girl throw up, and in The Field of Vision, Gordon Boyd squirts strawberry pop fizz in the bull's face at a bullfight in Mexico.

38 The Huge Season, p. 7.


40 One Day, p. 427.

41 The Field of Vision, p. 109.

42 A Bill of Rites, p. 57.

43 The Territory Ahead, preface, p. vii.

44 Fire Sermon, p. 147.
46 Ibid., p. 137.
47 A Life, p. 116.
49 The Man Who Was There, p. 78.
50 Ibid., p. 81.
51 Ibid., pp. 82-83.
52 Ibid., p. 94.
53 Ibid., p. 125.
54 Ibid. Wright Morris himself had a brother named Fayette Mitchell. Born in 1904 (six years before Wright), Fayette lived for only a few days (Will's Boy, p. 5).
55 The Man Who Was There, p. 79.
56 The World in the Attic, p. 172.
57 One Day, p. 65.
59 See Cause for Wonder, p. 265.
60 "The Dictates of Style: A Conversation between David Madden and Wright Morris," in Conversations with Wright Morris, p. 102.
61 The Field of Vision, p. 111.
63 David Madden, Wright Morris, p. 8.
64 The term "jigsaw puzzle" is Morris's own, but it has been picked up by the critics, most notably David Madden (Wright Morris, p. 12) and Roger J. Guettlinger ("The Problem With Jigsaw Puzzles"). For a stimulating discussion of fiction as authorial assertion of authority over raw material and the critics, see Edward Said, Beginnings: Intention and Method (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1975).
"History and Imagination," 55.

Madden, Wright Morris, p. 19.

Roger J. Guetfinger's "The Problem with Jigsaw Puzzles" argues that Morris's repetition in slightly different forms of characters and incidents from novel to novel asserts the primacy of imagination over experience in his literature. I agree but would point out that this does not diminish the significance of the seeds of experience upon which Morris allows his imagination to operate.

"Where the West Begins," 7.

The Home Place, p. 59.

God's Country and My People, unnumbered page facing seventy-eighth plate (fire hydrant).

In The Territory Ahead (p. 48), Morris speaks of the myths of sex and Nature as overwhelming American preoccupations. See chapter 1 of this study for a discussion of Morris's defamiliarizing treatment of sex, particularly in Love Among the Cannibals.

Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 89.

In Orbit, pp. 105, 57.

The Deep Sleep, pp. 149-50.

Ceremony in Lone Tree, pp. 179, 181.

A Life, p. 29.

In Orbit, p. 35.

Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 75.

Will's Boy, p. 46.


Ibid., p. 120.

Ibid., p. 115.

Ibid., p. 120.

Ibid., p. 152.

Ibid., p. 34.
Ibid., p. 195.

One Day, p. 169.

Leon Howard, Wright Morris, p. 19.

Madden, Wright Morris, p. 85.

The Territory Ahead, p. 102.


Ibid., pp. 21-22.

Ibid., p. 57.

Ibid., p. 173.

Ibid., p. 174.

One Day, p. 367.

Ibid., pp. 365-66.

Ibid., p. 56.

Ibid., p. 369.

Ibid., p. 283.

Ibid., p. 364.

What a Way to Go, p. 137.

One Day, p. 324.

The Territory Ahead, preface, p. xiii.

Cause for Wonder, p. 96.

Ibid., p. 173.

The Man Who Was There, p. 129. In Will's Boy, Morris says that his parents met in Eddie Cahow's barber shop (p. 3).

Howard, Wright Morris, p. 6. See also Will's Boy, pp. 167-91.

Roger J. Guettinger ("The Problem With Jigsaw Puzzles") focuses his discussion of the uncle on differences among versions of the story, his thesis being that Morris uses the same reservoir of
experience for different artistic purposes. While Guettinger's point
is well made, my focus in this chapter makes me naturally more
interested in similarities among the visits.

111 Cause for Wonder, p. 40.

112 Ibid., p. 41. See Will's Boy, pp. 187, 189, for Morris's
reollections of his own encounter with Georgia Gudger.

113 Leon Howard discusses the extent to which Uncle Dudley is a
product of Morris's personal experience (Wright Morris, p. 7). See
also A Bill of Rites, p. 109; and "Where the West Begins," 5. Morris
tells David Madden ("The Dictates of Style," p. 105) that the voice
of the narrator of My Uncle Dudley is "that of the boy I had been in
the mid-twenties."

114 Madden, Wright Morris, p. 174 (n. 1 to chapter 4).


120 The Works of Love, p. 85; "Where the West Begins," 9; and
Will's Boy, p. 17.

121 The Works of Love, pp. 79-109 passim; A Bill of Rites, p. 101;
and Will's Boy, p. 27.

122 Will's Boy, p. 22.

123 Ibid., p. 25.


125 "The Writing of Organic Fiction," p. 82, and Will's Boy,
p. 119.

126 Will's Boy, p. 105.


128 The Man Who Was There, p. 127; The Home Place, p. 75; and
and Will's Boy, p. 5.

130 Cause for Wonder, pp. 5, 45.

131 One Day, p. 274.

132 A Life, pp. 23, 137.

133 Fire Sermon, p. 4.

134 The Deep Sleep, p. 131.

135 Cause for Wonder, pp. 45-46.

136 See, for instance, God's Country and My People, unnumbered page opposite seventy-ninth plate (white grain elevator).

137 Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments, p. 9.

138 Will's Boy, p. 6.

139 The Man Who Was There, p. 132. Speaking of the birth of his brother, Fayette Mitchell, in Will's Boy, Morris says, "Six years will pass before I am born, and a few days later Grace Osborn Morris is dead, having given her life that I might live" (p. 5).


141 Man and Boy, p. 69.

142 The Deep Sleep, p. 85.

143 Ibid., p. 125.

144 What a Way to Go, p. 109.

145 Ibid., p. 136.

146 Ibid., p. 137.

147 "The Writing of Organic Fiction," p. 79. See also Will's Boy, p. 42. Morris discusses his time with the Mulligans, which seeded large sections of One Day, in Will's Boy, pp. 40-90 passim.

148 God's Country and My People, unnumbered page opposite seventy-third plate (old wooden church across the fence from a big old wooden house).

149 See Alter, "History and Imagination," 53.

151 *The Territory Ahead*, p. 218.
152 *The Deep Sleep*, p. 133.
154 *The Huge Season*, p. 128.
155 Ibid., p. 205.
156 Ibid., p. 191.
157 *The Territory Ahead*, p. 238.
158 Ibid., pp. 93-112.
159 *A Bill of Rites*, p. 86.
161 *A Bill of Rites*, p. 18.
162 *The Huge Season*, p. 189.
163 Ibid., p. 56.
164 Ibid., p. 178.
165 Ibid., p. 230.
166 Ibid., pp. 130, 188.
168 "Where the West Begins," 13.
169 *The Territory Ahead*, p. 32.
170 *War Games*, p. 8.
172 *Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments*, p. 12.
Notes to Chapter 3

1 The Field of Vision, p. 193.
2 The Deep Sleep, p. 11.
3 Ibid., pp. 11, 10.
4 About Fiction, p. 68.
5 Ibid., p. 41.
6 The Territory Ahead, p. 229.
7 The Field of Vision, p. 193.
8 Ibid.
9 The Works of Love, pp. 167-68.
12 Ibid., p. 64.
14 See In Orbit, p. 126.
17 See Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 247.
18 See Leon Howard, Wright Morris, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, no. 69 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), pp. 30-31.


21 What a Way to Go, p. 31.

22 War Games, p. 82.

23 The Huge Season, p. 4.

24 In Orbit, p. 34.

25 What a Way to Go, p. 247.


27 Ibid., p. 65.


29 Ibid., pp. 192-93.

30 The Field of Vision, p. 49.

31 Ibid., p. 72.

32 Ibid., p. 66.

33 Ibid., p. 61.

34 Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 204.

35 The Inhabitants, unnumbered page opposite thirty-sixth plate (old wooden church across fence from two-story wooden house).

36 The Territory Ahead, p. 111.

37 God's Country and My People, unnumbered page opposite seventy-seventh plate (rural mailboxes).

38 Ibid., unnumbered page opposite twelfth plate (fire hydrant and barber pole). See also Will's Boy, p. 126.

39 War Games, p. 49.


41 One Day, p. 380.
About Fiction, p. 2.

Ibid., p. 1.

As quoted in Madden, Wright Morris, p. 51.

About Fiction, p. 30.

Ibid., p. 20.

What a Way to Go, p. 84.

Ibid., p. 75.

See ibid., pp. 91, 73, 56.

Love Affair--A Venetian Journal, unnumbered page opposite third color plate.

What a Way to Go, pp. 135-36.

Partial Magic, p. x.

Ibid., p. 130.

Ibid., p. 29.

What a Way to Go, p. 136.

The Home Place, p. 50.

The World in the Attic, p. 185.


Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments, p. 8.

A Bill of Rites, p. 124.

"Form in The Works of Love," p. 49.

About Fiction, p. 104.

My Uncle Dudley, p. 3.

67 Ibid., p. 4.

68 Raymond L. Neinstein points out that Henry James's interest and detachment is Morris's narrative ideal ("Wright Morris: The Metaphysics of Home," Prairie Schooner 53 [Summer 1979], 122).

69 Cause for Wonder, p. 3.

70 Ibid., p. 4.

71 About Fiction, p. 127.

72 Wright Morris, p. 8.

73 Ibid., p. 77.

74 About Fiction, p. 91.


76 Ibid., p. 17.

77 Ibid., p. 16.

78 "Form in The Works of Love," p. 56.


80 The Deep Sleep, p. 176.

81 One Day, p. 3.

82 Ibid., p. 16.

83 Ibid., p. 199.


86 A Life, pp. 69-79.

87 Love Among the Cannibals, p. 139.
88 Wright Morris, p. 50.
89 About Fiction, pp. 105, 111.
90 Ibid., p. 32.
91 In Orbit, p. 32.
92 Man and Boy, pp. 3-5.
93 The Field of Vision, p. 181.
94 One Day, p. 424.
95 Cause for Wonder, p. 92.
96 War Games, p. 59.
97 Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 43.
98 In Orbit, p. 129.
100 See "The American Novelist and the Contemporary Scene," p. 25.
101 About Fiction, p. 53.
102 The Field of Vision, p. 154.
104 Partial Magic, p. 8.
105 Madden, Wright Morris, p. 49.
106 Neinstein, 125, 126.
108 The Man Who Was There, p. 75.
109 What a Way to Go, pp. 159-60.
110 Ibid., pp. 254, 265.
111 Ibid., p. 201.
Love Affair--A Venetian Journal, unnumbered page opposite twenty-fourth color plate.

The Novels of Wright Morris, p. 221.

About Fiction, p. 182.

The Territory Ahead, preface, pp. xv-xvi.

"Form in The Works of Love," p. 43.

A Life, p. 46.

The Huge Season, p. 186.

Cause for Wonder, p. 155.

What a Way to Go, pp. 81, 85, 163, 239.

Ibid., p. 179.

Ibid., pp. 249-50.

Ibid., p. 308.

Notes to Chapter 4

1 Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 3.

2 Ibid., p. 4.

3 The Field of Vision, p. 220.

4 Ceremony in Lone Tree, p. 5.

5 Ibid., pp. 13-14.


7 "Where the West Begins," Prairie Schooner 54 (Summer 1980), 11.

8 Page numbers in parentheses in the first section of the chapter refer to the 1977 Harper & Row first edition of The Fork River Space Project; in the second section, references are to the 1980 Harper & Row first edition of Plains Song for Female Voices.
"Where the West Begins," 12.


Robert E. Knoll, "A Doubled Vision of Reality," review of Plains Song for Female Voices, Prairie Schooner 54 (Summer 1980), 84.

Of course, there are a number of similarities between characters in Plains Song and people in Wright Morris's past. Like Emerson and Orion in Plains Song, Wright Morris's father, Will, and his older brother, Harry, moved west to Nebraska from Zanesville, Ohio (Will's Boy, p. 4). Harry, whom Morris visited for a summer on his ranch in Norfolk, Nebraska, had many of the same mannerisms—such as twisting his lips after spitting—as Emerson. In addition, Morris describes Harry's wife, Clara, in the same terms he uses to characterize Cora in Plains Song: Clara "was a tall, lath-flat woman with a high-pitched voice, who liked to work" (Will's Boy, pp. 68-69). Emerson's brother, Orion, is based loosely on the character of Morris's uncle Verne, who, like Orion, came from Zanesville, Ohio, and was gassed in World War I (Will's Boy, p. 75).

Knoll, 83.
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For a list of books by Wright Morris, see the beginning of the "Notes" section above.


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