

Victims of Their Writing: Grove's "In Search of Myself" and Dreiser's "The 'Genius'"

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... this book is the record of a failure; and its explanation; a double failure, an economic and a spiritual one, for ultimately the one involved the other.

F. P. GROVE, *In Search of Myself*

But the artist, poor and proud, along with his endowment of creative power, is furnished with an aggressive egotism.

THEODORE DREISER, "Genius and Matrimony"

THIS JUXTAPOSITION of a Canadian and an American view of the early twentieth-century artist figure—the artist as victim versus the artist as egotist—is an attempt to throw new light on the status, function, and self-perception of the realist-naturalist artist, as it is an attempt to evaluate Frederick Philip Grove's somewhat vehement *j'accuse* against materialist "Americanism" and the rule of money, both of which Grove claims to be diametrically opposed to the arts.¹ Grove's and Theodore Dreiser's *Künstlerroman*, *In Search of Myself* (1946) and *The "Genius"* (1915), have both been categorized as "autobiographical fiction" (Pizer 133-52; Spettigue *FPG* 169-96). Both authors present artist figures who deal self-consciously with motifs and "tales from the margin" at the same time that they situate the artist figure in an emerging early twentieth-century consumer society. The authors focus on somewhat complementary figures in "complementary" countries: Grove on the artist as a "failure" in small-town Canada and Dreiser on the artist as an "egotistical" success story of urban American capitalism.²

Grove's *In Search of Myself* has ignited the interest of many critics because, in a narrative set up as an autobiography, Grove relegates his identity as a writer in Germany to the gaps in the text, to the "not to be seen" and "not to be read," thus fictionally reenacting his suicide as the German author Felix Paul Greve. At the same time, readers and critics have been lured into resurrecting different versions of the author by rewriting him back into the text. (After all, Grove leaves a whole network of clues behind that play off against his German identity.) If anything, Grove's *In Search of Myself* illustrates Michel Foucault's points that the author cannot be traced as a unified self in his or her work of art, and that the "author-function" is inevitably characterized by a "plurality of egos" (*Language* 130). Some readers have in fact recreated the author as an agency endowed with an immense power, an author who pulls all the strings and leads the reader successfully by the nose in a clever confidence man's game. Other critics have given the spiral of this power play between author and reader a further twist by taking their revenge for having been tricked: in a review, Michael Darling, for example, labels Grove "a rather pathetic clown, a poor actor, and a self-confessed liar" (53).³

To be sure, the death/resurrection or failure/creation pattern is woven as a ritualized play into the thematic fabric of *In Search of Myself*, replayed in the narrator's repeated *Verschwinden* and *Wiedererkommen*, his death and rebirth in the act of writing. It is always failure that gives the impetus to new creation. The narrator-novelist of *In Search of Myself* writes himself as a true *sparagmos* figure, who is ripped apart, mutilated, and has to die each time before he can come to life again, who is haunted by diseases, failures, and an oppressive sense of impotence.⁴

Yet here we are confronted with the first of the numerous contradictions in *In Search of Myself*. The artist's "death," the failure to reach the ideal of perfection, the sacrifice of personal life, are set up as that which gives the impetus to new creation, but at the same time the narrator presents what he claims has created his failure as an artist in Canada not so much in terms of renunciation as of pleasurable seduction, temptation, and "externalisation." In *In Search of Myself*, the narrator's indictment of

American materialism is based on the fact that "the material things had enslaved me" (456); he is seduced and subsequently enslaved by consumer items: his radio, his car, and his house. He also confesses that his tastes are expensive and thus he becomes a double of his rejected father, set up as a "waster of money," and a squanderer of several fortunes in the childhood chapter. Paradoxically, however, it is the awareness of his failure through "externalisation" that gives the ultimate impetus to write his autobiography, so that the role of money is given a complete twist in the text, in fact contradicting the narrator's overt commentary, as it becomes the source, not the death, of writing.

Economically surviving for most of his life in relative comfort—he works in turn as day-labourer, teacher, and editor, while writing novels—the narrator's true obsession is money, even to the point where money "overrides all other interests," as Margaret Stobie has put it (*Grove* 177). Grove's narrator meticulously calculates the shipping costs for his manuscripts and demonstrates that, as a writer in Canada, he can only write at a financial loss:

I sent them by mail, as second-class matter. Some of them had been lost that way, but even at that the mere shipping had cost me an average of close to a hundred dollars a year. In sixteen years that had amounted to over fifteen hundred dollars. And on writing materials I had spent at least another hundred, though I had no record.

If I had saved all that money and deposited it in some bank, at a bare two or three per cent, there would have been easily two thousand dollars. I had never received the slightest encouragement, to say nothing of an offer. That money had been a sheer waste. If I had saved it and, in addition, laid by ten dollars a month, the resultant capital would have amounted to what, by this time, seemed to me wealth incarnate.

If only I had not suffered from that curse of the desire to write!
(234)

Art, far from being outside the realm of money, is presented here as that which swallows money and thus involves the artist in an inevitable chase for money to feed the insatiable desire for artistic production. In fact, in his contemporary society, art inevitably enforces the narrator's "externalisation"; furthermore, his art is rooted in money in the sense that money, as one of the predominant themes of *In Search of Myself*, provides the subject

matter of his writing, a preoccupation that the narrator clearly shares with his author.⁵

Grove's projection of the artist figure who is enslaved and rendered impotent by money appears too vehement and obsessive to be taken at face value. Rather, it reveals the contradictions that capitalism creates in the artist figure, a figure both attracted and repulsed, seduced and entrapped, by this system which celebrates success as an ever-growing spiral but fails to satisfy the narrator's seemingly insatiable desire for recognition. Thus the problem is not primarily "the problem of the artist's isolation in a new and thoroughly bourgeois country," as A. J. M. Smith has put it in *Masks of Fiction* (14). Rather, it is a problem of the complexity and the contradictory nature of his involvement in a modern consumer culture.

Emile Zola was the first to theorize these changes in the position of the realist-naturalist artist: "L'argent a émancipé l'écrivain, l'argent a créé les lettres modernes," Zola writes somewhat provocatively in *Le Roman expérimental* (201). As a result, "L'idéal de l'écrivain, ce n'est plus le génie, la bohème, l'inspiration: c'est la régularité du labeur bien fait, *nulla dies sine linea*" (Chevrel 188). Although, on the surface, *In Search of Myself* echoes Flaubert's (rather than Zola's) position that "les honneurs déshonorent" (qtd. in Chevrel 194), for Grove (as for Zola), the writer becomes a producer, similar to the farmer or the industrial worker, and, like them, he or she deserves some social recognition.

Denouncing the bourgeoisie even as he turned bourgeois himself, Zola also presents a tradition that Dreiser's artist embraces. And yet, in Gerber's words, Dreiser's *Künstlerroman* presents "an enduring contest between art and business," which are depicted by Dreiser as "mutually exclusive" (114), or, as Pizer puts it, Dreiser's artist figure can only be successful if "he does not betray his talent to the false goals of wealth and position" (142). In this critical discourse, being a Dreiserian artist implies almost automatically being against materialism, capitalism, and consumerism. This assumption that art is automatically "subversive" is the target of Michel Foucault's satiric attack on what he calls the "sacralization" of literature: "Some people were even

able to say that literature in itself was so emancipated from all determinations that the very fact of writing was in itself subversive, that the writer, in the very gesture of writing, had an inalienable right to subversion" (*Politics* 309-10). Turning her back on this "sacralization" of art, Rachel Bowlby moves to the opposite extreme: she discusses Dreiser's artist as an "adman" and "businessman" who offers no resistance to capitalism whatsoever (118-33).

Rather than follow either the idealistic position that art is automatically subversive or the deterministic position that it is inevitably caught in the laws of the market place, I propose to address such qualifying questions as the extent to which modern artists are seduced by the power structures of their society and whether they can prevent their aesthetic product from becoming appropriated by the power structures it (perhaps) sets out to subvert. In this context, Foucault's suggestion to shift our attention to the politics of reception is very useful: "Where does [discourse] come from. How is it circulated; who controls it?" (*Language* 138). Foucault reminds us that in capitalism, discourses that carry an author's name are objects of appropriation, a possession, and thus part of a system of ownership. The name of the author is "not precisely a proper name among others," but "characterizes a particular manner of existence of discourse" (*Language* 122, 123), a point that is illustrated with very different emphases in Dreiser's and Grove's texts.

Unlike Grove's artist-hero, who aspires to being a "nameless" voice for a whole race (*Myself* 154), Witla's desire to become a voice for "the whole country" is fed by his ambition for fame, so that "his name would be like that of Doré in France or Verestchagin in Russia" (*Genius* 100). In the narrator's words, "fame" is the all-desirable, poetically endowed with the sensuality of "the odour of the rose, the feel of rich satin" (223), yet not really different in status or quality from the names of the big American men of business: "Here were Jay Gould and Russell Sage and the Vanderbilts and Morgan," Eugene Witla reflects when he arrives in New York, and asks yearningly, "Would the city ever acclaim him as it did some?" (101).⁶

As a young painter, Witla is painfully aware that his name and identity as an artist will be constructed by those who deal in art and have the money to buy and own it: "In the very hour of his triumph when the *Sun* had just praised his picture, there lurked the spectre of possible intrinsic weakness. Did the world wish this sort of thing? Would it ever buy of him? Was he of any real value?" (224). After his first important exhibition, the newspapers start a debate on how valuable his art is, some critics maintaining that Witla is not an "American Millet" (237), others eulogizing him as a true "artist" and promising that even financially "his turn will come" (238). After reading this public debate, Witla is filled with a new sense about the position of his name: "He was an artist in the true sense of the word—a great painter, ranking with Whistler, Sargent, Velasquez and Turner" (238). Witla's paintings have left his own hands and started their circulation through the hands of art dealers, critics, media, and buyers, a process that reproduces Witla's name—very much like Carrie's name in *Sister Carrie* (1900)—seemingly *ad infinitum* through exhibitions, newspapers, and party gossip, illustrating that it is not primarily production but reception which creates the artist's name and thus his identity.

Similarly, in his business career as newspaper illustrator, art director, and magazine publisher, Witla's meteoric rise is linked to his being able to attach himself to famous names, first Summerfield, then Kalvin, then Colfax, as it is linked to his own growing reputation. Repeatedly Dreiser stresses that it is his reputation, whether deserved or not, that moves Witla ahead. His spreading fame as a business genius is an important asset, which he nurtures and cherishes. Anticipating the style of another successful capitalist, Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, Witla entertains huge groups of people not because he enjoys parties but because "[i]t's building me up," that is, it builds up the representation of himself, his name. Those who are jealous of his success attack him where he can be hurt most: they "discredit his fame" (433) and practice the "delicate art of misrepresentation" to curb Eugene's power (511). Like the reputable saloon manager Charles Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie*, Witla, the reputable businessman, brings about his own downfall in typical Dreiserian fashion,

namely by allowing a scandal with a young woman to damage his public representation.⁷ "You are too much in the public eye" (665), he is told by his employer when asked to resign; the company has its own name to consider.

In contrast to Dreiser's almost journalistic accuracy with names, as well as his passion for cataloguing proper names and titles, Grove's text presents a play on names and a somewhat circular doubling of names, which is all the more tantalizing as it is complemented by important losses of names, memory failings, and seemingly arbitrary, unexplained gaps where names should be. As an old man, the narrator is prompted to write his life story when he encounters the name of a writer friend whom he knew well in his youth and whose biography he is now reading. This Frenchman's name is never communicated to the reader but magically multiplied and reproduced as a gap before the reader's eyes: "The bibliography was there; and it was put together with obvious care and completeness, filling eighteen pages. Translations of the works of this Frenchman had appeared in no less than sixteen countries" (*Myself* 4).⁸ The multiplication of absent names in *In Search of Myself* is all the more tantalizing as it continually refers us to works of art, in this case to the biography and the books of the French writer. Similarly, the narrator hardly ever mentions the name of his mother but links her to the winged *Victory of Samothrace* (29), not just a work of art but an anagram for the word "mother," who clearly functions as his Muse.

In lieu of his full name, the author puts only his initials on the book cover—FPG, which, as they correspond to the author's German initials, unify his Canadian with his German *oeuvre*. At the same time, however, these three initials—crawling into each other with the "P" completely overlapping the "F" and both superimposed on the "G"—form a somewhat enigmatic signifier, and thus become a representation of the author's name in an abbreviated, concealed and thus metaphorically "castrated" form.⁹ The author's name as a representation of his identity as an artist stands in extreme contrast to those names that the narrator conjures up as the ultimate signifiers of artistic success and eternal fame: Homer, Goethe, Beethoven, Baudelaire, whose

names, once introduced into his text, automatically assume a life and resonance of their own. These names in fact present the network of signifiers in which the narrator's name will receive its identity, through not so much its "sameness" with these names as its establishment as a signifier different from all the others.¹⁰

Just as Eugene Witla in *The "Genius"* discovers his identity as an artist in the seemingly infinite reproduction of his name, so Grove's narrator identifies himself as an artistic failure because he "had lived and worked in obscurity" (*Myself* 4):

I had never had an audience; for no matter what one may say, he says it to somebody; and if there is nobody to hear, it remains as though it had never been said; the tree falling in a forest where there is none to hear, produces no sound. (6)

Here the problem of his identity as an artist is not primarily a problem of production but one of reception and self-representation. *In Search of Myself* presents a long series of painfully created manuscripts, which, sent on their journey, inevitably return with a rejection, and thus turn into aborted art, into "spiritual self-abuse," as the narrator puts it. Manuscripts once accepted to be published do not sell when they reach the market.

The narrator's own explanations of the problem of reception—such as the cultural barrenness of Canada, the backwardness of his audience, his refusal to be a mere entertainer—explain only part of the problem and gloss over the contradictions between his overt claims and his text.¹¹ Like Eugene Witla, the narrator of *In Search of Myself* sees himself as introducing groundbreaking, national motifs into the New World culture and therefore risks being rejected by his contemporaries. In *The "Genius"*, it is M. Anatole Charles, a Frenchman, who is the ultimate "authority" on art and organizes the most prestigious exhibitions of the works of "the living successful" (226). M. Charles is convinced that "there was practically nothing of value in American art as yet—certainly not from the commercial point of view, and very little from the artistic" (226). But why are Eugene Witla's new national motifs accepted as "true art" by his contemporaries (including M. Charles) and why is the narrator's rejected? Or, to tackle the problem from a Foucauldian perspective: Why does Witla's contemporary America adopt Witla's art as

its form of representation, and why should the narrator's Canada be so reluctant to accept his as a representation of what it is and what it stands for? To whom does this art appeal and who rejects it and why?¹²

In *In Search of Myself*, the narrator's fictional universe centres on the pioneer world of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada and especially on its male, uncompromisingly strong heroes—Len Sterner, Niels Lindstedt, Ralph Patterson, whom he describes as his fictional sons. At the same time the narrator interprets his own fiction as re-creating the relations between the sexes by assigning the dominance to the male:

I have been told that, in my books, woman plays a subordinate part; that, in fact, woman is represented as the obstructress in the debate of life.

Probably that is true; it is true because, for the most part, it is the fact in pioneer countries. There, woman is the slave; just as she is the slave in the uncivilized steppes of Siberia. A pioneering world, like the nomadic world of the steppes, is a man's world. (223-24)

Although the narrator emphasizes that his sympathies lie with women, his interpretation of what he sees as the "facts" of life relegates the roles of women in pioneer society at best to that of helpers in the "male" struggle to master the wilderness. We need only to look at Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil* (1920)—the narrator's much-admired model for his novel of the soil—to find a similar "masculine" or patriarchal perspective on the representations of the gender relations in pioneer society. If we look, however, at Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) for a woman's perspective on the same aspect, we find that the representations of this relationship are turned upside down, which calls attention to the arbitrariness of Grove's narrator's categorical gender divisions. In Cather's novel, the young immigrant woman Ántonia Shimerda takes pleasure in plowing the fields with her mother and brother, while the male narrator chooses to spend his life behind books.¹³

The ultimate contradiction of the narrator's position as an artist arises from the fact that the work on the soil and the reading of the novel of the soil seem to exclude each other. The farmers are workers, not readers, he claims: "The presence of

that book or magazine betrayed at a glance that someone in this family-group had his eyes bent on something other than the soil underfoot; and usually it was the woman" (226). These women, he concludes, do not belong on the prairie; temperamentally, emotionally, and intellectually, they are fitted for "the life in towns or cities" (225). Yet, at the same time, he claims to be incapable of writing the "life heroic" of his wife and of the female in general. Small wonder that the alleged customers—the Canadian women, to follow his own judgement—are not eager to buy this literature, so that, ironically, the narrator's failure to succeed as a writer in Canada re-inscribes the women's influence into his text, albeit into the gaps of his narration. Also, the narrator celebrates the pioneer motifs but at the same time tells us that he sees his general reading public in the town-dwellers, rather than workers of the soil, which creates another inevitable contradiction that serves to emphasize the inevitability (and thus, in his view, the tragic nature) of his failure as an artist in Canada.

In contrast to the prairie pioneer world of *In Search of Myself*, Eugene Witla's artistic motifs celebrate the expanding cities—especially Chicago, Paris, and New York. Street scenes, the Bowery, the railroad, factories and steel works, the working women, foreigners, labourers, washerwomen, and drunkards are the subject matter of his art, an art which deliberately stresses the realistic "commonplace":

Raw reds, raw greens, dirty grey paving stones—such faces! Why this thing fairly shouted its facts. It seemed to say: "I'm dirty, I am commonplace, I am grim, I am shabby, but I am life." (*Genius* 231)

Despite the differences in subject matter, Dreiser and Grove seem to agree on an aesthetics of beauty that includes ugliness: "An ugly thing may be described, a revolting scene may be presented in such a way as to give the treatment this element of beauty in the highest degree," Grove writes in *It Needs to Be Said* . . . (128).

On the surface, Witla's art may be seen as revolutionary because it turns the artistic tradition of his time on its head: he moves the motifs of the social outsider from the margins into the centre of his picture.¹⁴ As the "priest" of the new aesthetics of ugliness, Witla celebrates the city in his paintings as an oxy-

moron, as beauty in ugliness: "The paradox of a decaying drunkard placed against the vivid persistence of life gripped his fancy. Somehow it suggested himself hanging on, fighting on, accusing nature" (*Genius* 729). Witla's art expresses sadness about the victims inevitably produced by capitalism but underneath its motifs of the margins, Witla's painting also affirms progress, movement, change, and growth, in short, the very ingredients of capitalism. Also, the picture of the drunkard accuses an abstract "nature," not a unjust social system. Maybe shocking at first sight, the naturalistic art of Witla's pictures is by no means in radical opposition to or subversive of capitalism, but can be easily appropriated by the capitalist machinery, as *The "Genius"* demonstrates.

The customers of Dreiser's successful painter artist are almost inevitably businesses and corporations who use the new art as decorations, transforming them into signifiers of what they stand for and would like to promote. One of the first paintings Witla sells for the wholesome sum of five hundred dollars depicts three engines and a railroad yard and sells to the vice-president of one of the great railroads entering New York. The picture of the decaying drunkard sells for a record price of eighteen thousand dollars (729). At the pinnacle of his power, Witla is asked to decorate a great bank, as well as public buildings in Washington. In *A Gallery of Women* (1929), Dreiser presents a woman painter in the sketch of "Ellen Adams Wrynn," who marks her first success as a painter by having her exotic scenes of Paris, painted in daring raw reds, exhibited permanently on four huge panels on one of the large department stores of Philadelphia. Here, art is assigned the function of advertisement, and the boundaries between the consumption of art and that of other commodities become erased. At the same time, the panels are an advertisement for the artist herself—"And each panel signed: Ellen Adams Wrynn" (1, 145)—thus turning the artist's name into a representation of a capitalist success story, a signifier of an artist who has "made it."

A pattern of highly fluctuating prices for the same art indicates that the artistic value is continually constructed anew in the

process of reception and therefore is as unstable as the capitalist market itself. Dreiser's texts draw attention to the fact that the acceptance of a particular form of art is directly dependent on political and socio-economic circumstances. In war times, Ellen Adam Wrynn's formerly celebrated exotic paintings do not find a market. In contrast, Dreiser's sketch of "W.L.S." in *Twelve Men* presents an illustrator with a strong interest in modern machinery, for whom the war offers "a great rush" of war work: "I scarcely saw him for six weeks . . . but I saw his name" (358), the narrator comments on the artist's growing success. (Grove's narrator seems as dependent on, but much less aware of, socioeconomic circumstances. He only introduces the war as a symbol that foreshadows the doom of his marriage [*Myself* 285].) Also, when the artist's luck is down—when Witla becomes sick and is unable to paint for several years or when Ellen Adams Wrynn suffers a breakdown as a result of personal problems—their art almost automatically loses its "money making capacity." Ellen Wrynn's paintings remain unclaimed in storage, just as Witla, "temporarily incapacitated" as an artist, is not able to get more than ten dollars for his pictures and that only from third-rate art dealers.

Living in an economy that promotes the idea of success and fame but does not fulfill its "promise" of spreading his name *ad infinitum*, Grove's artist-hero retreats into a nostalgic dream of the artist as a romantic genius, who, like Goethe's Prometheus, "wrestled with the Lord, trying to force him to delegate to [him] His power of giving life" (374). In other passages, the narrator has a vision of himself as a godlike creator-patriarch who rules as an omnipotent, omniscient father-sovereign over his fictional characters and looks down "as though, from the summit of a mountain" (262) on the "empire" of his creation, a master over life and death. Small wonder that this dream of omniscience and omnipotence over his creation is complemented by a negative flipside—his vision of himself as an absolute failure, drained of his life-forces and then cast aside by his fictional characters, who claim their independence from the patriarchal creator-father: "The trouble was that, after all, I *had* given them birth in my mind and, therefore, power to dispose of my substance" (373).

In the title and in his middle and first names—often abbreviated to “Gene” or even “Geni”—Dreiser presents Eugene Tenyson Witla as the artist-genius. Given the Latin root of the word, Eugene and Phil’s identification with the role of the “genius” emphasizes their roles as creative producers. (The word is from Latin *gigno, genui, genitum*, which is equivalent “to beget, to bring forth, to produce.”)¹⁵

“Aujourd’hui, il nous faut produire et produire encore,” Emile Zola writes, emphasizing the artist’s role as a producer-labourer: “En outre, si l’écrivain s’arrête, le public l’oublie; il est forcé d’entasser volume sur volume, tout comme un ébéniste par exemple entasse meuble sur meuble” (203). The pressure to produce thus seems to be built into the capitalist machinery itself, subjecting the artist to serious “production” crises.

Just as a capitalist business has to be committed to eternal growth if it does not want to fall apart, so the artist in capitalism has to make his production grow if he does not want to fail, an idea that does not arise spontaneously in Witla but is mediated through his reading of a newspaper review about himself: “‘If he perseveres, if his art does not fail him.’ Why should his art fail him?—he asked himself” (*Genius* 240). And yet, it does fail him. The work on his second set of paintings on Parisian scenes throws him into a mental and emotional crisis, in which his fear of failure drives him into a nervous breakdown, from which he cures himself by giving up painting for several years.

For Grove’s narrator and Eugene, these production crises become saturated with sexuality and are “played out” in the artists’ marriages, thus highlighting the theme of the sexual politics of artistic creation. In both works marriage is set up as that which “castrates” the artist’s productive powers but from here Dreiser and Grove move their protagonists to different, if not diametrically opposed, directions. Eugene rejects marriage because his productive ideal is linked to sexual promiscuity and to a whole “gallery of women,” from Margaret Dunn and Ruby Kenny, to Angela Blue, Christina Channing, Frieda Roth, Carlotta Wilson, and Suzanne Dale—all of whom he desires to (and most of whom he does) possess. Eugene is obsessed with what he

claims to be physical overindulgence in his sexual relations with his wife Angela, a notion the narrator supports:

He had no knowledge of the effect of one's sexual life upon one's work, nor what such a life when badly arranged can do to a perfect art—how it can distort the sense of color, weaken that balanced judgment of character which is so essential to a normal interpretation of life. (*Genius* 246)

Among others it is the word "normal" that strikes a false note in this quotation, especially since earlier in the novel, Eugene's art is celebrated because of its disruption of "normal" perspectives and its emphasis on a deliberate foregrounding of Otherness. Similarly odd and contradictory is the narrator's claim that Eugene lacks "knowledge" of the pernicious effect of sexuality, since it is in fact Eugene himself who is obsessed with the negative influence of his sex life on his art.¹⁶ It appears that Eugene and the narrator are in secret communion with each other when it comes to convincing the reader of the pernicious influence of a sexuality that is initiated by a desiring woman.

Eugene's recourse of making a kind of mathematical balance of psychical energy, part of which is "wasted" in the sex act with Angela, mirrors the narrator in *In Search of Myself*, who is haunted by a more general idea of waste and is equally obsessed with saving up money and storing up "wealth" because only an overabundance of both will allow him to be a writer. In *In Search of Myself*, marriage is linked to internalization and transcendence of sexuality, indeed the sacrifice of sexuality in the name of art and thus the creation of the work of art with his "stored-up" sexual energy. Grove's narrator carries with him his mother's "Cassandra" warning that women "make a man weak" (*Myself* 94); and his becoming an artist is accompanied by a deliberate striving toward anti-sexuality in Canada, whereby he makes a conscious effort to leave his intensely sexual experiences behind in Europe.¹⁷

In both works, creation is linked to sacrifice and death. In *In Search of Myself*, the artist sacrifices his own life in the artistic process; in *The "Genius"*, the women are asked to sacrifice themselves for the artist's secularized god—his work of art. It is therefore not astonishing that Angela's giving birth—the dra-

matic climax of the novel and the ultimate image of production (and female prerogative)—ends in Angela's death, thus setting the artist free from the yoke of marriage.¹⁸ At the same time, Angela junior, Angela's and Eugene's child, becomes the new Muse inspiring Witla's art.

Witla's aesthetic ideal in art is the representation of a "masculine" beauty in ugliness as expressed in the drama of the daily struggles. This "masculine" ideal in art is complemented by the "feminine" aesthetic goal Witla pursues in his private life. His feminine ideal is the "beauty of the woman at eighteen," an ideal that freezes his view of the feminine into an absolute stasis, but which in turn involves the artist himself in a chase without end after the young woman, a chase that supposedly keeps him in eternal movement and thus in eternal youth. And yet, unlike that of Goethe's Faust, who transcends Mephisto's sensual temptations, Eugene's striving is a repetition, parodying rather than echoing Goethe's *Faust* to which *The "Genius"* alludes frequently.¹⁹

Just as Eugene's art is embraced by the critics because of its "virility" (e.g., 221, 231, 237), its directness, the rawness of its colours, the surface vitality, and the struggle underneath images of eagerness, hope, and desire, so Grove's narrator adopts a very masculine tone in his narration. In 1931, Grove himself makes a plea for what he calls a masculine "unmixed style" in art ("Apologia" 195).²⁰ As *In Search of Myself* is saturated with overt celebrations of the tragic spirit and tragic fate, so Grove argues in his "Apologia" that tragedy is "the proper food for men with masculine tastes," as is pure comedy (195). The mixture of the two, with its effects of irony and humour ("the tear in the eye and a smile on the lip" [195]), he describes as the food of a "feministic civilization." And he asserts that "the present age is trying to rid itself of the apotheosis of the 'eternally feminine'" (195). However, while Witla's "masculine" art is enthusiastically embraced by his contemporary America, the acceptance is depicted as much slower in the small-town Canada of *In Search of Myself*, which indicates that the narrator's contemporary Canada is perhaps more "feminine" than he (and Grove) want to admit.

In *It Needs to Be Said*. . . , Grove claims that a good novel has to have "power," and he proceeds to define power as the author's ability to "make others see," of reproducing in the reader's mental vision a thing, and "moving up the thing to be seen, so close that you cannot get away from it" (130). But the ultimate contradiction of *In Search of Myself* is that the all-powerful author-narrator is dependent on the approval of an external readership, which, in his view, fails to see, and accepts his art only reluctantly and slowly. The narrator solves this problem of his "missing" readership by turning himself into a *deus ex machina*, claiming that he writes for an imaginary audience, an audience which is, like his characters, the product of his creation.

Thus the narrator's theory of the artist becomes an incestuous relationship which turns even the process of reception back to the author himself. The narrative as a whole seems obsessed with creation as an incestuous doubling in the face of loss and death, and is propelled forward by the author-narrator's urge to find an illusory, undivided identity and origin which will tell him who he really is. The obsessive search for his magical origin takes the form of the search for the lost mother, who is doubled in numerous mother figures, from his physical mother and his nurse Annette to his maternal mistress Mrs. Broegler and his wife Catherine (who nurses him in sickness). The search for his origin is also replayed in the search for the lost home, also doubled in a number of homes, all of which he inevitably loses as he wanders throughout Europe and Canada. This obsessive desire for repetition is a striking feature of this fictionalized autobiography, and, as a rule, the repetitions mirror what is really absent.²¹

The narrator also obsessively doubles himself in his fictional protagonists; all of them are male and accompany him all his life, sharing his life blood (260-62). But self-creation in this form can only be an incestuous doubling of the narrator's absent self. The narrator seems to be obsessed with the loss of himself and the need to recreate himself in the face of this loss, or to put this desire for re-creation in the words of Foucault: "Headed toward death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it

possesses but a single power: that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits" (*Language* 54).

Death and birth melt together in the artistic process, as the narrator demonstrates in his struggle with his fictional characters:

For those figures of mine will not stay down; they won't let me rest or sleep; they want to be born into death. For what my writing does for them, as far as I am concerned, whether that writing be successful or not, is not so much to give them birth as it is to give them burial.
(*Myself* 387)

Writing the story of his life, Grove's narrator confirms that in "this record, I know, I am dying to myself" (387). In choosing an autobiographical framework, Grove, like his narrator, creates words which are put into the service of his search for himself. However, his words can only create doubles, and doubles in turn can only be fragments, so that every word he creates echoes and reverberates at the same time the hollowness at the centre of his being. At the same time, it is this emptiness, the sense of failure and frustration, which keeps up the desire to continue the creative process.

The reception of *In Search of Myself* and *The "Genius"* provides a final ironic twist in the authors' struggle to create a name for themselves. The work that deplores the failure of the artist in Canadian society ironically became one of Grove's biggest successes; shortly after its publication, it won him the prestigious Governor General's Award for non-fiction. Depicting the success story of a naturalistic painter, *The "Genius"* ironically sold badly until it gained some notoriety in 1916, when it was banned for its "lewd" and "profane" passages.²² The critics' refusal to recognize Dreiser's vision of the artist as a successful money-maker may be an indication of his critics' nostalgic desire to see the arts outside, even somehow suspended above, the economic reality. Rather than admit that Dreiser's artist-protagonist is a typical American success story that raises very disturbing questions about the appropriation of art by capitalism, most critics preferred to read the work as "a confirmation of popular assumptions about the artist" (Pizer 142) and then quickly dismissed it as "Dreiser at his worst."²³ Dreiser deliberately moves the arts into the economic

centre and with this shift, the arts become a field on which are played out the tensions and struggles as well as the seductive games of American capitalism.

In contrast, in Grove's *In Search of Myself*, art and the artist's identity are created through the writer's involvement in and his (albeit failing) resistance against the omnipresent temptation of consumerism, materialism, and Americanism. Not despite, but because of, this ever-present temptation and continual struggle, he "creates" an identity which has a very modern ring to it—an identity that refuses to be "fixed" or static but which is forever *en procès*, forever on the threshold between integration and disintegration. Grove's text ultimately refuses to elevate literary creation into a falsely "liberated space," but instead insists on the ambiguities of the artist's involvement with the modern consumer culture, a facet that makes it possible to see the artist's struggle for identity as a metaphor for a Canadian struggle for self-creation.

NOTES

- 1 This argument that money and art exclude each other seems consistent in Grove's life. In his conversation with André Gide, the German Greve said: "just because I intend to live, I say that I am not an artist. The need for money makes me write. The work of art is only an excuse" (qtd. in Gide 241). In his essay "The Plight of Canadian Fiction?," the Canadian Grove writes much later: "success of a Canadian writer, especially if won in the United States, means almost certainly the ruin of that writer as a writer, though not, perhaps, as a business man" (246).
- 2 This paper is part of a larger study that examines the—so far critically unsubstantiated but often repeated—claims that Grove is the "Canadian Dreiser." For such claims see for example Robert Ayre's "A Solitary Giant," as well as Northrop Frye's obituary on Grove entitled "Canadian Dreiser"; see also Pacey, *Grove* 28, 87, 106-07, 125. Dreiser and Grove also share a German background.
- 3 For a discussion of the critics' obsession with Grove as a "congenital liar" and a "literary con-man," see Hjartarson's "Design and Truth."
- 4 For a discussion of *sparagmos*, see Frye, *Anatomy* 192-93. See Nadel for a discussion of Grove as "the autobiographer as victim" and "impotent rebel" and Heidenreich for a discussion of *Myself* in terms of the death/rebirth cycle (69).
- 5 We recall another book on money and greed in *A Search for America*, where the immigrant-protagonist Phil Branden turns his back on a country that has "betrayed the dream." In almost every single work, with the exception, perhaps, of *The Master of the Mill*, money is that which enslaves the producer figure, be he farmer-pioneer or creative artist.
- 6 Dreiser situates fame in the "here and now" of Witla's life, but in *It Needs to Be Said* . . . Grove makes a deliberate separation between "recognition," which belongs to the "here and now," and fame, which is "the recompense not of the living but the dead" (17), a definition that echoes Flaubert's disdain for popular literary success.

- 7 This social fall is similar to Charles Hurstwood's downfall after he elopes with Carrie Meeber. Also, Frank Cowperwood's social failure is partly explained with the scandal surrounding his extramarital relationship with Aileen Butler in *The Financier* and *The Titan*. See also Pizer on Dreiser's own "downfall" in the Butterick Publishing Company as a result of his extramarital involvement with Thelma Cudlipp (151).
- 8 This mysterious Frenchman is probably André Gide. See Spettigue, *FPG* 53-55 and Gide, "Conversation."
- 9 In *Twelve Men* (1919), a collection of twelve semi-fictionalized sketches, Dreiser presents the sketch of the painter and illustrator W[illiam] L[ouis] S[onntag, Jr.], whose promising career is cut short by his sudden death (344-60). Dreiser's title presents nothing but the initials of this artist, "W.L.S.," emphasizing the artist's failure to establish his name: "His name was in the perfunctory death lists of the papers the next morning. No other notice of any sort. Only a half-dozen seemed to know that he had ever lived" (359).
- 10 Grove has a passion for cataloguing artists' names; see, for example, the narrator's stress on his reading list: "Add to that, as I grew up, such divers fare as Montaigne, Pascal, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Hoelderlin, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Verga, Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Calderon, Lesage, Corneille, Racine, Molière, and countless others of lighter weight" (*Myself* 92). Page 92 alone enumerates forty names of famous authors (some of them repeated). Stich criticizes Grove's "name dropping" negatively (158), interpreting it as an indicator of Grove's "overdependence on great authors and their books" (157) and draws the conclusion that Grove is parasitically attached to his masters, that he is essentially a "follower," "an epigone" rather than a "master" himself (163).
- 11 In "The Plight of Canadian Fiction?," Grove dismisses the Canadian public as "ignorant, cowardly, and snobbish" because "The money standard, being the only one which it knows, is the only one by which it judges" (249).
- 12 In "'Frederick Philip Grove' and the Canadianism Movement," Stobie, however, demonstrates very convincingly that Grove's (and his narrator's) judgements are hardly fair. She shows that after the publication of *A Search for America* (1927) Grove was hailed and embraced as the "New Canadian" (179) and drawn into the "spiritual ferment" of the Canadianism movement throughout the twenties and thirties (175). Pache also argues that the upswing of Grove's career coincided with the general literary optimism in Canada, his downswing with the economic and spiritual depression of the late thirties (128). Considering these insights with relation to *Myself*, the narrator's insistence on his "failure" can safely be seen as a partly fictionalized account of Grove's own role as a Canadian writer. My own concern in this article is with the fictionalized text.
- 13 Cather even satirizes the shortsightedness of the male narrator who tells us that Antonia's grandmother "saved" Antonia from field work by getting her a place in the household of neighbours. His gender preconceptions keep him from recognizing how much Antonia loves the work on the fields.
- 14 Kwiat demonstrates that *The "Genius"* is modelled on the career of Everett Shinn, a painter of the notorious Ash-Can School, a group of painters who gained some notoriety as the "apostles of ugliness" with their motifs of the violence, brutality, and beauty of city life.
- 15 Wila is often referred to as a genius by other characters in the novel. Putting the "genius" in the book title in inverted commas, Dreiser, however, warns the reader not to take this title too seriously.
- 16 Some readers have been quick to note these contradictions. See for example Gerber's reaction to this passage: "To ask a reader to accept this nonsense, in the face of Cowperwood, to whom sex was an essential spur to full living, is asking a

- good deal indeed. But it is asking much more to swallow it in the face of Dreiser's own life which, if we are to believe the legends he himself inspired, directly refutes everything he says about Eugene" (*Dreiser* 119).
- 17 This notion of anti-sexuality is very evocative of Grove's contemporary Otto Rank who writes in 1914: "The creator impulse is not sexuality, as Freud assumed, but expresses the antisexual tendency in human beings, which we may describe as the deliberate control of the impulsive life" (140). For the narrator's sexual awakening in Europe, see *Myself* 121-122, 126, 128, 131f; for his sexual relationship with Mrs. Broegler, see 135-143; for his reflections on homo- and heterosexuality, see 161-62. For his striving toward anti-sexuality in Canada, see for example 229.
 - 18 For an intriguing psychoanalytic reading of *The "Genius"*, see Hovey's and Ralph's argument that Witla pursues the pleasure principle "at the same time [that] he regularly tries to gain acceptance by a matriarchal superego" (171), whereby Angela functions as "the censuring mother figure" (175).
 - 19 Hochman traces the allusions to Goethe's *Faust* in *The "Genius"* but ignores Dreiser's parodic treatment of the motif.
 - 20 Also, reviewing Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh*, S. Morgan-Powell celebrates the work as "virile and daring achievement in fiction" (qtd. in Pacey, *Grove* 169).
 - 21 The narrator, for example, creates seven older sisters, all of whom die. He makes much of his father's multiple fortunes, but his father dies a bankrupt man. The narrator speaks numerous languages, but as a writer he bemoans the fact that he lacked "the profound penetration of the soul" of any of them (338).
 - 22 Hamlin Garland refused to sign H.L. Mencken's petition against the ban, calling the entire campaign surrounding the ban "a piece of very shrewd advertising" (Gerber, *Dreiser* 125).
 - 23 See, for example, H.L. Mencken's early critical analysis: "*The 'Genius'* coming after *The Titan*, marks the high tide of his bad writing" (87). Also, Pizer writes that "Dreiser's portrait of the artist is not only hackneyed but inept" (142). Or, as Gerber puts it: "In any estimation of Dreiser's accomplishment, *The 'Genius'* must rank among the weaker novels" (111).

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