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"I TRY TO, BUT I KEEP THINKING OF OHIO"**

As the first representative of my gender ever to address this distinguished group, I can only paraphrase the words of the most acclaimed and reserved son of Wapakoneta: it's a small step, if not quite a giant leap, for womankind. Besides, it's an excuse to come back. Last week, when some friends in New York asked why I was coming yet again to Columbus, I said "to give an oral report." The schoolroom idiom sprang to mind because I was asked here at first, in the fall of '86, as a teacher, though of course I learned far more than I can have taught.

One thing I keep on learning, as I gather background for Lost In The Interior, as my fifth book may be called, is how incompletely the rest of the nation and the midwest perceive each other. Much of America feels about the midwest the way Truman Capote did when he first went to Garden City, Kansas, to research what became In Cold Blood. Gerald Clarke, in his newly-published biography of Capote, says "The Kansans spoke the same language, paid their bills in the same currency, and pledged allegiance to the same flag. Yet they seemed utterly different. If they thought that he had dropped from the moon, he may have wondered if that was where he had arrived."

Anyone who supposes Columbus is as barren as the moon will find out otherwise, come Ameriflora. Anyone who regards you as provincial has not heard about Ohio's branch office in Tokyo, or about the elaborate pre-Quincentenary exchange of gifts with your sister city, Genoa. "Columbus isn't just on a roll," your energetic mayor told me. "It's on fire!" He also held that there is mystery in this city, and in the rest of the midwest, and he has a point. "Don't try to make the midwest any less complicated than it is," I was warned by J. Irwin Miller, founder of Cummins Engineering in Columbus, Indiana, who made his town one of this country's great architectural showplaces.

"Tell them to stop patronizing us!" said my late mother's best friend Corinne Stocker of Springfield, Illinois. " When they ask 'what do you read?' they can't believe that I get the Wall Street Journal in my mailbox every morning." Over a lunch in this very club, Don Shackleford once told Donn Vickers and me that "midwesterners have a better concept of the absurd than southerners, who are too busy being southern, easterners, who are too busy rushing around dropping each other's names, and westerners, who are too busy inventing trends."

The midwest at its best has a fine concept of the absurd. It also asks its children - or at least I was asked, as the Illinois grandchild of Iowa Quakers - to "remember who you are and what you stand for." Living in Columbus brought that admonition to mind. Since the end of my term at Thurber House, I've been known at times to walk around New York City humming the hit duet from "Wonderful Town" - "Why, oh WHY, oh why oh, why did I EVer leave Ohio..." I'm very fond of the lead-in to that song, a bit of dialogue between the sisters, Ruth and Eileen:

"Try to get some sleep, dear," says Ruth, the older.
"I can't," frets Eileen.
"Now you've got to try -- make your mind a blank."
"I try to, but I keep thinking of Ohio."

I've been thinking about Ohio a lot more than I would have expected to as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, where we were taught a song whose chorus went "...but rather than Ohio State I'd see my boy in hell." I didn't believe anyone could take this Big Ten rivalry stuff all that seriously, having scarcely known or cared who Woody Hayes was. But Fred Exley, whose A Fan's Notes some of you may have read, and the third volume of whose 20-year trilogy, Last Notes From Home, will appear this September, warned me to try to get some grasp of sports when I was here, so I did my best.

It was fall, I was here. Okay, I'd take in some football. Luke Feck got me tickets to the Illinois game. Then a New England friend showed up the weekend of the Indiana game. Feck produced more tickets. It rained like mad, but I insisted we stay until the end, to see "Script Ohio." I was hooked. At an elegant luncheon given in my honor by my Michigan classmate Nancy Lund, the week before the Bucks met the Wolverines, I found myself begging for tickets to that spectacle, at which I waved actual pom-poms, contrived to wear both scarlet & gray and maize & blue, and belted out all the words to "Carmen Ohio."

I first arrived here with a lot of imperfectly suppressed misgivings. My friend Paul, whom I stopped to see in Pittsburgh, decided he'd better drive here with me, partly out of chivalry, to help unload my luggage, and partly, he admitted, because as he put it "your spending ten weeks in Columbus seems to me the reverse of an adventure."

Well, there are adventures and adventures. My own have included altitude sickness in the Himalayas, heat stroke near the shores of the Red Sea, gridlock in Bangkok, 3 a.m. flights from the airport in Tashkent, being frisked at checkpoints in Belfast and Beirut, taking the waters at Esalen Institute, and setting up housekeeping at 77 Jefferson Avenue. Nice number, 77. "It's a relief to write to the midwest," a friend wrote me soon after I moved here. "You don't have to cross your sevens."

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You also don't have to avoid eye contact with strangers. Columbus's famous daughter the painter Alice Schille, I've heard, was warned by her parents never to talk to strangers, when she went off to Europe, but disregarded their advice and told them she was making a point of greeting every man, woman and child she encountered. That seems to me very much a Columbus attitude.

You don't have to worry about getting radio stations here - 89.7 comes in good and clear, much more reliably than the numerous but staticky classical stations in New York City. Nor need you worry, except downtown, about parking. Parking in Manhattan, as some of you know, is either expensive or crazy-making or both. On the streets of Manhattan there are signs in parked cars that say "NO RADIO." Some say "No radio -- any more." It's such a hassle that I try to keep my car out of New York City altogether, especially in the winter months. This past winter I left my car in Ohio, in the driveway of a cousin who teaches at Miami University in Oxford.

What I liked best of all about being here was that it was such an ego trip. Instead of writhing from terminal writers' block, as I sometimes do on West 78th Street, I was here addressed by a handful of Dispatch reporters as "Coach," and by some of my more intimidated students as "Professor." I came close to selling a rug to a rug dealer in Grandview. My most dramatic, Walter Mittyish role reversal of all involved some psychiatrists in Worthington. Having read my biography of Margaret Mead, they wanted to know more about how her profession connected with theirs, and they paid me to talk to them!

On some of my busier days here I felt like a flying nun, rushing around town telling people how to improve their vocabularies and fix up their paragraphs. Someone asked if I ever worried about the passage of time. One student said he had trouble with beginnings, middles, and ends. Funny, I told him, so do I. To come from far away - 555 miles, to be exact - is to appear to have answers, when what I really have are questions.

Early on I asked a new acquaintance where she was from. Hard to say, she answered; she'd been brought up as an army brat. "And what is so great," she went on, "about fromness?" That's a question that deserves a fuller answer than I've yet had time to give it. I heard another splendid question on my first full day as an Ohioan. At an all-day experiential workshop I was taken to, in the beautiful Hocking Hills, someone memorably asked "Does anyone know a good acupressurist for a horse?"

I never found out whether anybody did know, because soon I was distracted by the workshop leader, who was busily dividing us into teams and instructing us each, with our teammates' help, to act out our personal myths or rituals. When I said I wasn't sure

I had a personal myth or ritual, and didn't think in those terms, she was very consoling: "That's all right," she said. "There are many kinds of intelligence." There certainly are.

At a Thurber House gathering a few weeks later I heard Sylvia Westerman say "Thurber wasn't funny, Columbus is funny," and I think she's right. I met two little girls with names Thurber would have appreciated - Bicentennial Garcia (I'll bet you can guess what year she was born) and Senator Morris. Bicey, as the former child is called, is the daughter of the Peruvian proprietor of a lively Mexican restaurant on North High Street (her baby sister, by the way, is named Liberty), and Senator is the daughter of a cosmetologist in Whitehall whose license plate says "MR. HAIR."

Mr. Hair came up to me after my only previous speech here, at the Columbus School for Girls. He introduced himself as a single parent and his daughter, Senator, then eight, as someone who wanted to write. "Oh, Dad," she said. "Do you live around here?" I asked him. "Oh no," he said, "I'm a barber." I guess barbers don't live in Bexley. A while later Mr. Hair and Senator and I went to the Ohio Historical Society for a special program about Warren G. Harding. Senator said "I've been to several lectures about President Harding." (In New York, by the way, I've been pleased to make the acquaintance of the ragtime musician Terry Waldo, who is at work on a musical about the life of President Harding.)

After our evening Mr. Hair reported to me a conversation with a friend, whom he told about this visiting woman he had met from New York. His friend asked if he thought I was attractive. "Well," he said, "she's an author." His friend persisted: was I pretty? "Well," Mr. Hair told me he had replied, "she's kinda sharp looking."

In Wapakoneta, where I went after a visit to Pickrelltown, to try to track down the ghost of some ancestors, I met a retired banker. Having heard that I was from New York, he was surprised at how I looked. "I thought you'd have your hair in a bun," he said, "and be wearing a tweed suit and high spike heels." I'm not sure who gets more misunderstood: New Yorkers or midwesterners. At the Fairway, the Upper West Side's most spectacular produce market, a sign stuck into a hunk of blue cheese from the state of my birth reads "From Illinois - the most boring state in the Union." (Inquiring about this outrage, I was told that the proprietor, who put the sign there, is a native of Missouri.)

A bookstore window slogan in Rock Island, Illinois, I'm told, reads: "The Moral Center of the Intellectual World." That claim may be challenged now that Reverend Jeb Stuart Magruder (whom I heard refer in a sermon here to "the famous writer and poet, William Shakespeare") is, as someone put it, your ethics

czar. I'm proud of Columbus for being on the cutting edge ethically. Way to go, Columbus! I'm proud of you for being, as your own mayor told me, the heart and perhaps the conscience of the nation.

I've recently been given a book called How To Talk Minnesotan, which I put next to pamphlets on Iowa-Minnesota jokes and Michigan-Ohio jokes. The state where Nancy Lund and I went to college has been ridiculed for nearly two centuries. A poem in the early 1800s cautioned its readers: "Don't go to Michigan, that land of ills ... the word means ague, fever and chills." Bumper stickers are available here with tasteful sentiments like "Directions to Ann Arbor - north until you smell it, west until you step in it." and "The best part of Michigan is under water."

I made so many side trips in my time here that I felt like a political candidate. In Marion I heard Harding's tomb described as one of the three most impressive presidential shrines. In Cleveland I went to the Case-Western Reserve genealogical library and a rock concert at Nautica. In Uniopolis, charmed by a sign that said "Caribbean Tanning and Styling Center," I went to talk to the proprietors. (Ohio, I recently read, is the only state that regulates tanning parlors. I noticed more of them in Iowa City than anyplace else I've been.)

I took a detour south of I-70 to have a look at a Guernsey County hamlet called Temperanceville, in honor of my great-great-great grandmother Talitha Ann Covington Howard, who goaded her husband to move from Belmont County to Iowa, in 1853, on grounds that however dangerous the Indians of Iowa might be, they couldn't be worse than the saloons of Ohio. Ohio, to my branch of the Howards, is the old country; we think of it the way some people do of Bessarabia. Talitha and James R. and their numerous children traveled by flatboat and steamer down the Ohio River and up the Mississippi to join relatives in West Branch, Iowa.

Two years later they built a shack in Liberty Township, in Marshall County, from which my ancestor wrote to a brother back here, reporting that "...we are all well only I have a bile on the side of my neck that I expect will feel good when it quits hurting ... I would get the blues only I have a cure for them and carry it with me and that is just to think of the hard times our fore fathers had in Ohio and then think how much easier it is to begin here than it was from them there ..."

James R., it is also said, literally fell off the wagon when he got to Iowa. If he'd been born a century later he could have joined Alcoholics Anonymous, which was founded in Akron. (I think it's striking how much the rest of the nation turns to the midwest for succor and healing). My own discovery along these lines, in Ohio, was that beer suits me better than wine does. I also had, in St. Clairsville, my first and last Long Island Iced

Tea - a truly lethal drink I never heard of in all the time I've spent on Long Island itself. This concoction was served to me at the Belmont Hills Country Club on Pearl Harbor Day, 1986. I was taken there by a redoubtable horticulturist known to her friends as Hilda The Hosta Lady, who urged me to order any drink I liked. The waitress suggested Fuzzy Navels, made from peach schnapps.

I did have peach liqueur on Rosh Hashanah in Aberdeen, South Dakota, served me by a charming elderly lady whose mother had known my grandmother, and who produced from her desk my grandmother's recipe for Mac Pie, mac being macaroni. (My grandmother, who stood 5' and weighed as much as 176 pounds, died at age 44 in 1917 of "inflammation of the tissues," which I recently heard was a euphemism -- a midwestern one, I wonder? -- for cancer). I went to Aberdeen, after a look at a Polka Festival at the World's Only Corn Palace in Mitchell, South Dakota, because that's where my mother met my father. I thought I might get some mystical sense of my origins. That didn't happen, but I had a great time with the old lady and at the Alexander Mitchell Library, where I read about L. Frank Baum, who edited a weekly in Aberdeen until it failed in 1891, and who apparently had South Dakota in mind, instead of Kansas, when he wrote The Wizard Of Oz.

I've paid several visits to Minnesota, where my mother was born. Her grandfather, a newspaper editor born in upstate New York, wrote a Montevideo Leader editorial in 1910 claiming that he lived in the best town in the best county of the best state of the best country on earth --a view he apparently held until 1920, when he went on to Pomona, California. (I keep wondering to what extent nomadism is a midwestern characteristic. I suspect that like demonstrativeness, it both is and is not.)

I've been rereading Main Street, Sister Carrie, Mrs. Bridge, Main-Traveled Roads, and the diaries and recipes and papers of my ancestors. I've been to a cranberry harvest in Wisconsin, a country club in Bloomfield Hills, and I've seen two identical statues honoring the "MADONNA OF THE TRAIL," one in Richmond, Indiana and the other in Council Grove, Kansas. I've just agreed to join a friend on his houseboat on the Missouri River for a few days in early fall. I've been to reunions of my high school class outside Chicago, my mother's mother's Minnesota people outside Los Angeles, my father's father's people in central Iowa, and of the Writers' Workshop in Iowa City.

From several Iowa revisits my notes remind me to investigate an ordinance making it illegal "to ogle with intent to gawk" (which calls to mind the recent trials of Brother Swaggart), and a quintessentially midwestern sentiment uttered by my late Aunt Janet, when she heard about someone's new living arrangements: "Shack up if you must," she said, "but don't flaunt it."

Aunt Janet introduced me to the survivors of Corporal Darwin Judge, one of the last two servicemen to be killed in Vietnam. In Iowa I have also made attempts, unsuccessful so far, to visit Marva Drew of Waterloo, in 1974 typed all the numbers from one to one million and who now assists her husband, a laid-off factory employe, in his new career of doing needlepoint. I still hope to see her, and I hope to learn more about Governor Terry Branstad's efforts at diversification as a remedy for stress.

In Iowa alone, in 1914, no one was more than twelve miles away from a train. I cheered when I read in this morning's Dispatch about the bullet train that might link this city with Cincinnati and with Cleveland. Trains were what made the midwest possible. Some of my ancestors moved to a certain Wisconsin town because they'd been told the train was going to stop there. When it didn't, they moved. I wish we could bring back passenger trains, and I wish we could think of ways to repopulate forlorn small towns in Iowa and Nebraska (and indeed in Ohio) where once there once flourished such a sense of community.

In Nebraska last summer I went to a seminar on Willa Cather's work, based on a sentiment Sarah Orne Jewett gave to Cather: "know the world but find your parish." Finding your parish means knowing something of fromness, which is or at least used to be a very midwestern and a very reassuring thing. There are a lot of midwestern parishes I've glimpsed briefly, if at all, and would like to go back to. In North Dakota, I stopped for advice on which of two towns to go to next. "Don't go to Enderlin," I was told, "they're way too nosy in Enderlin." That sounded good to me, but I couldn't find it -- that was one of the times when I was literally lost in the interior.

In recent visits to Indiana I did not meet the world's tallest woman or the woman who set a record for pole-sitting, but did go to a basketball game with Mayor Rinehart's counterpart, and met a kid named Ernest in a town called Gnawbone, and a Syrian couple in a town called Noblesville. In Terre Haute stopped to see the house where Eugene V. Debs used to consort with his pal James Whitcomb Riley. In one madcap afternoon in St. Louis I went to the home of Eugene Field, the National Bowling Hall of Fame, a museum under the arch honoring the Lewis & Clark Expedition, the Budweiser brewery, and a brilliantly planned Japanese garden. The midwest is indeed a wondrous place.

At a restaurant in Omaha I met three Hindu waiters who confessed that they had fallen away from their ancestral diet: "it's hard," they said, "to be a vegetarian in Nebraska." Immigration patterns now in the midwest are as interesting as they were when this part of the country was the far western frontier. Detroit has a vast Arab community, and here in Columbus I've heard about the Honda employees, imported from Japan by the hundreds for three- and five-year periods, are

bewildered and then beguiled by the flatlands of Ohio. Sociologists are paid to ponder why their kids can't make best friends. When first their children enroll in Columbus schools, I was told during an interview in the "chattering room" set aside for Honda wives not yet acclimatized to Ohio, they encounter "very much hardness."

Since my Thurber House period I've experienced a fair amount of hardness myself in collecting I don't know how many megabytes of data. In my hard disk and my file cabinet and a bunch of new ring binders I bought for myself as a birthday present are notes from my travels and from my reading. What I'm mostly doing now is hovering over all these notes trying to discover the order I have to take on faith is in there somewhere.

On my wall is a sentiment someone here in Columbus suggested: "order is found, not imposed." I keep thinking of different ways I might organize my material. Ideally each of my chapters should report on a contemporary drama, with a lot of dialogue: I like the look of dialogue on a page. It should also have reference to a historical drama, preferably one connected with and if possible taken part in by an ancestor. It should have a vivid sense of landscape, and evoke the way things look, smell, sound, move and feel. It should have literary allusions, and refer whenever possible to food and sex. The tone should be funny or ironic or somehow passionate -- the aim, as a newspaper friend of mine put it, should be to "make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em say 'sonofabitch!'

As this effort continues, I remain convinced that the midwest <u>is</u> an adventure. Maybe I <u>do</u> have a personal ritual, if not a personal myth, the way we were supposed to at the all-day experiential workshop in the Hocking Hills. Though I have lived since the fall of 1956 in or near New York City, I have no yen or cause, as I wrote long ago, to deny my midwestern origins. My personal ritual, until this book is done, is to take up arms against coastal provinciality, and show in as many ways as I can how the midwest is the most overlooked, underrated, overflown, apologized-for, and, to quote His Honor Mr. Rinehart, the most mysterious part of the United States.

That which was once mundane is now exotic, that which once we belittled we now extol, that over which we once flew condescendingly now lures us back. The midwest bombards us with surprises. It's more hospitable and more open than California, which I recently heard described as "a suburb of Japan." The rest of us need the midwest, not just because it's the most important industrial and agricultural production of the world, but because it reminds us who we are and what we stand for.

This past St. Patrick's night, at a Chinese place on Second Avenue in the 70s, I had dinner with Nora Sayre, one of my

predecessors as Thurber Writer in Residence, and Paula diPerna, who holds that post now. Paula was about to pack up and drive to 77 Jefferson Avenue, and she called Nora and me, neither of whom she'd ever met before, to ask for a little orientation. After commiserating about the shameful way women's magazines treat free-lancers, we laughed a great deal about life in general and Columbus in particular.

Two women at an adjoining table, who finished their meal before we did ours, came up to us to say they couldn't help overhearing our talk. They turned out to be nuns in mufti, teachers now at some Catholic girls' school on the east side of Manhattan but previously in Upper Arlington. They had taught, among others, a young woman named Feck, whom they held in high esteem, as they did all Columbus. As they left I believe we said something along the lines of "Go Bucks!"

In my time in Ohio I not only heard some good questions but some good statements of sense. So far I have three favorite quotes that help explain how you people manage to shoulder the burden of being the nation's conscience. One rainy evening I was riding in a car with a kid who looked out the window and said "I'm so glad it's drizzling." On a snowy December afternoon my de facto cousin Dorothy Gill Barnes, the Worthington basket maker, took me to a gathering of quilt makers and other folk artists, one of whom declared: "Before I grow old I want to learn to deal calmly and reasonably with unreasonableness."

My other favorite line, so far, is said to have been spoken at a trial in Lima, by a very impassioned prosecutor summing up his final argument to the jury. "Remember," he told them, "we can't look at the world through rosary colored glasses." We cannot indeed, and in Ohio we don't. Thanks very much for asking me here, and keep on having female speakers!

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