

Representing Isabel Paterson

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One night about fifteen years ago, I found myself driving a rental car up and down the main street of a tiny Connecticut town, feverishly hunting for an address. I had gotten lost on my trip into the hinterland, and by the time my car turned hesitantly up the drive of an old house that seemed to match the numbers on my notepad, I was hours late for my appointment. When the thick door creaked open, I started my apologies, but the woman I had come to interview paid no attention. “Come out to the kitchen,” she said. Muriel Hall, former researcher for Time-Life, knew how to treat other researchers. She had kept the food warm and the drinks cold, and before the night was over, I saw her lift the top of an old wooden box and start laying out the treasure I had hoped to find—the papers of Isabel Paterson.

Paterson—novelist, critic, political theorist, columnist, wit—was one of the most distinctive literary figures of the 1930s. Contemporary reporters on the publishing industry believed that she had “more to say than any other critic in New York today as to which books shall be popular” (Cleaton and Cleaton 130). She was also the person who first assembled the constellation of ideas and attitudes that are called “libertarianism.” But even at the height of her fame, her life was shrouded in mystery. So good was she at concealing the big facts about herself by doling out tiny fragments of data that an interviewer predicted her biographers would end in Bedlam.¹ During her lifetime, would-be investigators were frightened away by her penchant for angrily disputing public references to her, even when they were friendly but (as she thought) misleading. Since her death, no one but Muriel Hall had read her papers. Looking at the yellow sheaves of letters in Muriel’s hands, I knew I had the chance to do something that critics of literature almost never get to do. I had the chance to reconstruct, from the ground up, the life of an important author.

By the time I completed my biography of Paterson, *The Woman and the Dynamo: Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America* (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction, 2004), I had learned more about her than I ever thought I could learn about a fellow human being.

I had also assembled a long list of questions that were difficult or impossible to answer. Some of them had to do with Paterson herself, but most of them were about the process of literary representation—how literature represents the world, and how literature and literary people are represented in what we think, say, and teach about them. Neither my own nor other people's theories helped me much, although the necessities of writing often taught me something. At last I began to wonder whether Paterson's own theories—not her theories about literature, but her theories about society—might be as helpful as any others in representing the ways in which writers and readers connect with one another, or fail to connect.

I first encountered Paterson in the form of her novel *Never Ask the End* (1933), which as a boy I found gathering dust on my parents' bookshelf, the inexplicable survivor of many changes of residence. I tried to read it, and failed. It appeared to be about the kind of adults who traveled and stayed in hotels, something that my family very rarely did. Much later, I discovered her book about politics and history, *The God of the Machine* (1943), and became interested in the person who could write such a peculiarly vivid work of theory. I was especially interested to learn that the same author wrote *Never Ask the End* and many other novels, and that for a quarter century (1924–1949) she was a columnist for *Herald Tribune* "Books," the nationally circulated literary supplement to the popular New York paper. But there wasn't much in print about her life. Even George Nash's authoritative account of libertarian and conservative history, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (1976), had no information on that. Obviously there was work to be done.

Intending to write an essay on the literary background of *The God of the Machine*, I tracked down Muriel Hall, Paterson's executor, and found, as I've said, that an essay wouldn't suffice. Working with Muriel, I organized Paterson's papers and arranged for their deposit in the Hoover Presidential Library. I started gathering her thousands of articles, columns, and reviews and interviewing her surviving acquaintances. I also started learning how little one understands one's own life until one embarks on the project of representing someone else's. I had never noticed my ruthless instinct for collecting things, or the fanatical enthusiasm I could generate for arcane information. I had never really felt my involvement in the skein of generations until I heard myself calling my subject "Pat," as her friends had called her, and heard my own, younger friends repeating the remarks that her friends had passed on to me: "Well, as Pat said..."

On the whole, I was glad that Paterson—whom the poet Elinor Wylie called "a woman of singularly pointed and ironical speech"

(1)—was not around to witness my attempt to re-create her life, although the person who emerged from my research was, luckily, someone whom I would have wanted to know. She was a small, determined, complicated woman, a lover of Swinburne and Woolf and *The Tale of Genji*, but also of Madison's sharp political prose; a woman who would wake in the night to watch a flower bloom, but also a woman who knew how to cook a bear and build a log cabin and who conducted political debate in a calm, firm, level tone that shriveled other people's guts.

Isabel Bowler Paterson, as I discovered, was born in 1886 on an island in Lake Huron, a backwoods that had only recently been opened to European occupation. Her parents' house burned in a forest fire, and the family migrated to other frontiers of settlement—the Lake Superior logging country, the deserts of Utah, the ranch lands of Alberta. Her youth, she said, was “rather dull, being spent in the Wild West” (Paterson, “Turns” 27 Nov. 1927). Her siblings were numerous, her father was shiftless, her youth was passed in poverty. She left home after two years of formal education; worked as a hotel waitress, a stenographer, and many other things; and turned down an employer's offer to help her become a lawyer. She wanted to be free.

In 1910, she married and immediately parted from Kenneth Birrell Paterson, a salesman. During the next few years she worked as a reporter, drama critic, and editorial writer for newspapers in Spokane, Vancouver, and New York. On 5 November 1912, she set a record for high-altitude flight by a woman, ascending to 5,000 feet in a biplane operated by the stunt pilot Harry Bingham Brown. Soon after, she began her long career as a novelist. Between 1916 and 1940 she published eight novels—two Bildungsromane about girls growing up in the Canadian West, as she had done; three works of historical fiction (ancient Germany, medieval Spain, Elizabethan England); and three novels centering on the inner lives of sophisticated modern women.

By the early 1930s, however, her public profile had changed from novelist and critic to political and social commentator. An advocate of minimal government, she opposed income taxes, conscription, foreign wars, all state regulation of the economy, and the full range of victimless crime laws. She believed she was the first person to do so. She attacked the Republican administrations of the 1920s for what she regarded as their big-government policies, and she was a vigorous antagonist of the New Deal. Her ideas were influential on a rising generation of right-wing intellectuals—conservatives, libertarians, and classical liberals. (Paterson considered herself a true liberal, as opposed to “phony liberals,” “pseudo-liberals,” “soi disant liberals,” and the like.) Several of the people she influenced (Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley, Jr., John Chamberlain,

Rose Wilder Lane, and the Right's perennial best-seller, Ayn Rand) were prominent in the reconstitution of the American Right that began in the mid-1950s. So prestigious was she among conservatives that Whittaker Chambers, another prestigious figure, protested angrily against the common notion that "Isabel Paterson is always right." He believed, in fact, that "almost anything she says is likely to be wrong" (94). Decrying the effect of radicals like her on the Republican Party, he said that if the party died, no one would ever visit its grave: "[P]eople will dread the spot because of the banshee screams, heard there even at noonday—Isabel Paterson, of course" (220).

Prestige does not imply success. In 1949, Paterson's uncompromising political positions led to her firing from the *Herald Tribune*. Unwelcome in the literary world with which she had once been on familiar, and often congenial, terms, she retired to her farm in New Jersey, writing an occasional article for Buckley's *National Review*, then quarreling with him as she had quarreled with other political allies. She refused to collect payments from Social Security; she had opposed its existence, and she was determined to show that she could live without its help. And she did live without it, modestly but comfortably. She was planning to write her memoirs when she suffered a brief, fatal illness in January 1961.

That was the basic plot of Paterson's life. It wasn't easy to put all the pieces together. Some of them came from predictable sources; some came by accident; others emerged from a dogged search for pattern. You do not know what pattern is until you have had to determine the dates of four hundred letters whose writers have labeled them "Thursday," "next morning," or "1932" (when they meant to write "1942"). The process gives one a new respect for the jigsaw-puzzle scenes in *Citizen Kane* (1941). And when all the papers have been dated that can be dated, when all the photographs have been gathered, when all the remembered conversations have been recorded, one is still haunted by the idea of Rosebud. A little thrill of guilt comes over you when you see, on a brittle sheet of cheap old paper, "I have written far too much and told much too much. Fortunately this paper will crumble away even if you try to keep it" (Paterson, Letter). You feel like a successful criminal. But you know that what has been preserved by accident may not be the crucial piece of evidence, after all.

In *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Paterson's friend Thornton Wilder describes a biographer who "for all his diligence... never knew the central passion" of his subjects' lives. "And I, who claim to know so much more," Wilder adds, "isn't it possible that even I have missed the very spring within the spring?" (23). The "spring" metaphor doesn't work for me; it's too mechanical. But I can appreciate the idea that biographers and novelists use the same fallible

means of representation. You cannot tell a story without employing the pattern-making devices of the storyteller—dramatization of detail, development of plausible parallels and contrasts, alertness for the language of gesture and symbol, use of the part to suggest the whole. And these devices, I found, are not just expressive; they are also heuristic. They are the necessary tools of the investigator, especially the investigator of someone like Paterson. She pictured the human mind not as a spring responding to pressure but as a “dynamo” pouring out energy; and she did not feel in the least obliged to provide her friends with such mechanical details as the reason why she became “Mrs. Paterson,” or why Mr. Paterson was no longer around. Her private papers preserve a handful of pathetically brief messages from her husband, but these fall far short of an explanation. One looks, therefore, for symbols and parallels.

In three of Paterson’s novels, a woman leaves a husband who is weak and incompetent, feeling that she has sinned against them both for consenting to marry him. In my biography, I suggest that in these books Paterson is talking about herself. Any novelist would suggest the same thing. But there is no direct evidence. A friend remembered Paterson’s saying, on one of the rare occasions on which she mentioned her husband, that he played the guitar beautifully. I take that as a sarcastic reference to all the things that he did *not* do beautifully. And that may or may not be true, either. Readers can judge for themselves. When they do, they will find themselves using the same novelistic equipment that I used, the assessment of symbols and parallels.

Like a novel, a biography needs more than facts. It also needs more than explanations. Paterson said that Joseph Conrad had expressed “the whole purpose of fiction . . . ‘It is to make you see, to make you feel’ ” (Paterson, Rev. of *Such Is*). She could have said the same thing about biography: it needs to make its subjects stand up and cast a shadow, a shadow that you can see. But biographers of writers and intellectuals have a special problem. Action is easier to dramatize than thought, and that’s what writers and intellectuals do (at their best): they think. I knew that readers confronted with a chronological account of Paterson’s vast, unwieldy literary life would have trouble seeing a pattern that made it meaningful, especially if I conscientiously “explained” every detail. So I decided on a story-telling trick that goes back to Homer: I would begin in medias res, with an action that made the subject’s thinking visible. The action I chose was her record-setting flight.

It was helpful to me that the flight took place on election day, a day on which all four presidential candidates—Wilson, Taft, Roosevelt, Debs—offered “progressive” programs of greater state control of private enterprise. As a political thinker, Paterson advocated

a radically diminished role for the state and an enhanced role for personal initiative. When she sat down on the biplane's narrow wood-and-cloth wing, she was turning away from the presidential election. She was smiling (I have the photograph) in anticipation of a kind of progress that had nothing to do with government and everything to do with independent action. She was going to fly.

Connections could be drawn with other vivid incidents of her life, such as the time when she learned that a literary gathering was reserved for men—until she showed up, and it proved impossible to keep her out (Paterson, "Turns" 29 Sept. 1935). Of course, she recognized that individualism carries some heavy risks. Reports of fatal air crashes were routine in the newspapers of 1912. And although she survived her flight, some very unpleasant things happened to her later, as a result of the unpopular stands she took. But "freedom," she said, "is worth whatever it costs" (Paterson, "Turns" 25 June 1933). In any event, which was the authentic representation of American values—majority opinion, or the individualist point of view? From her own point of view, the pattern of life in a free society is formed by independent action and cooperation. So it was fitting, for my purposes, that she described the fields and homes she saw scattered beneath her ascending plane as a beautifully patterned work of art, and that, seeing it, she felt "triumphant, as if coming into a deferred heritage" (Paterson, "Girl's Flight").² The individual perspective on the spontaneous patterns of American life, the individual's triumphant appropriation of those patterns: that was precisely the image I wanted, an image that could serve for the pattern of Paterson's own life.

That image, I thought, might help me solve another problem of representation—making Paterson's libertarian ideas fully visible to my colleagues in the humanities. Libertarians are the one political minority that literary and cultural studies completely ignore, despite the fact that the American libertarian movement was largely the creation of literary figures. Libertarian ideas are well known in certain circles. They have been assimilated, in different ways, by the nation's two major parties. They have been advertised by the Nobel Prizes of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, James Buchanan, and others, and by the political prominence of such people as Alan Greenspan, the disciple of Paterson's disciple Rand. Through Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), these ideas have entered the standard curriculum of political science and political philosophy. But they are yet to gain any recognition whatever in the academic study of the humanities in general.

Some years ago, a modern liberal historian noted that the American Right has never "received anything like the amount of attention from historians that its role in twentieth-century politics

and culture suggests it should” (Brinkley 277). He cited a lack of “imagination” (296). His words had no effect. I know of no cultural history of twentieth-century America that clearly distinguishes the major strains of right-wing thought—religious, traditionalist, conservative, classical liberal, and libertarian—lists their chief proponents, and assesses their various effects. Even the libertarian politics of such A-list authors as Willa Cather, who startled literary friends by revealing that she was not a leftist like them, remain nearly invisible.³ James Woodress, Cather’s otherwise excellent biographer, notes that she “disapproved of” Franklin Roosevelt (448), but he doesn’t tell us why, although the reasons are clear enough in her published works.⁴

This cultural cloud of unknowing has covered the Right for a very long time. In 1950, Lionel Trilling in *Liberal Imagination* famously remarked that conservative ideas, by which he meant all ideas that were not left-liberal, had no existence in America, apart from “irritable mental gestures” (ix). Eighteen years before, Edmund Wilson had informed Paterson that she was “the last surviving person” who held her “quaint old” faith in limited government. “But is it true?” she asked (Paterson, “Turns” 13 Mar. 1932). It certainly was, as far as the humanists were concerned. By 1935, when Mary McCarthy reviewed the literary-critical establishment in a series of articles devoted especially to attacking Paterson, her ideas had stopped seeming quaint.⁵ Now they were stupid—quite unequal to the standards of “impartiality” set by people like Walter Duranty (later shown to have disgraced journalism by his cover-ups of Stalin’s atrocities). At the end of the decade, when the modern liberal historian Henry Steele Commager debated Paterson, her ideas were no longer simply stupid. They were sinister. In words dripping with contempt, Commager suggested that if she was not a liberal democrat she must be an advocate of fascism (Paterson, “Turns” 22 Dec. 1940).

For my purposes, however, Paterson’s most culturally symbolic conflict was her firing from the *Herald Tribune*, America’s most eminent “conservative” paper. Intellectuals on the Left often visualize the Right as a unified alliance of material and intellectual interests. Nevertheless, intellectuals on the Right have always bitterly complained about the indifference or hostility of capitalists to their own ideological well-being. This is a major issue in American cultural life. I wanted to make it seem as real as Paterson (and I) believed that it was, and show how it might develop in concrete circumstances. In her firing from the *Tribune* I found an episode that read like an Ibsen play, a drama in which several nice, intelligent, and apparently quite similar people tear one another to pieces in socially representative ways.

There were four characters in this drama: Paterson; Helen Rogers Reid, the *Herald Tribune's* proprietor; Irita Van Doren, its literary editor; and the ghost of Van Doren's lover, Wendell Willkie (died, 1944). As in any play that focuses on differences in character, the dramatis personae were much alike in social origins. They had started life in obscure, provincial, and, in the case of the three women, impoverished surroundings; then they had arrived in New York and become prominent and influential. All were identified in some way with the Republican Party: Paterson endorsed its candidates; Reid operated "a Republican paper"; Willkie ran for president on the Republican ticket in 1940; Van Doren was his chief advisor. All had literary and cultural interests; it was those interests, in fact, that drew Willkie, a Wall Street lawyer, to Van Doren. He was also a fan of Isabel Paterson's writing.

But—and this is where the drama moves toward its inevitable conflict—so lacking in political philosophy did Willkie and Van Doren prove to be that they had great difficulty finding issues on which he and President Roosevelt actually diverged. When, after the election, Roosevelt sent him on a goodwill mission around the globe, he returned as a dedicated proponent of friendship with Stalinist Russia, an idea that was anathema on the intellectual Right. Inspired by his travels, he and Van Doren produced the book that gave advanced internationalism its name: *One World* (1943). Paterson was not a sympathetic audience. She considered both of them fools. Intellectual differences were replicated by social ones. Paterson defined herself as a "proletarian," a woman who had to work for a living and who felt no responsibility to please anybody else, outside of doing her work. Van Doren, by contrast, was a charming person who increasingly defined herself as a socialite, taking the political tone of the people whom Paterson called "the leftish gentry." One of these gentry was Reid, who had married money and along with it the attitude of noblesse oblige. She considered it her duty to support the leftist members of her staff, even when they encountered strong public criticism. She did not consider it her duty to support Paterson, a difficult woman with an unfashionable ideology. Paterson was fired from the *Herald Tribune*.

My right-wing readers will see this drama as a parable of the age-old war between the ideological Right and the people known as "country-club conservatives." I hope that left-wing readers will also be interested in its suggestion that politics on the Right are as rich a font of alienation as politics on the Left. But, taking my cue from Paterson, I wanted to keep the story of her life from being overwhelmed by purely political issues. Her response to being fired was more literary than political. She didn't complain; she thought that the *Trib* had a right to fire her if it wanted to. In her typescript notes

she calls it a “screwball outfit” but suggests that just because it was screwy—“if they were going to print such-and-such they *ought* to have fired me, to be honest, and I told them so”—she had “been allowed to get in print” much more than any other paper would have permitted (Paterson, “How Can I”). One of the big things I learned from writing her life is the importance of *getting things in print*. When, in 2002, I was informed that a cancer had taken up residence in my kidney, my first thought was, “Get the biography out.” What matters about a writer’s life is what he or she gets published.

Paterson clearly got a lot in print—millions of words. But how good is it, and what is its place in the larger pattern of American literature?

The first question was easy. Paterson was a very good writer. Nobody ever mistook a page of Paterson for a page of anybody else, and her way of expressing her ideas is invariably more striking than any paraphrase you can make of it—a serious problem for a biographer. I constantly competed with her, and she constantly won. She was one of America’s great aphorists. That’s what made her feared as a critic, and that’s what makes her writing most memorable for the people who read her now. She defined psychology as “a science which tells you what psychologists are like” (Paterson, *Rev. of Cheerfulness*). Bemused by Gertrude Stein’s form of modernism, she said that “babies are complete egotists, and they possess a naive charm. If a baby could write a book it would resemble *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*” (Paterson, “Turns” 1 Oct. 1933). Alluding to her own early work, she said, “The mere fact that a book does not sell is not a guarantee of literary quality” (Paterson, “Turns” 9 Nov. 1930).

She did not restrict herself to humor, or to small, intense effects. She wrote in several genres, and she wrote to a high standard in each. To cite one instance from her work in historical fiction: *The Road of the Gods* (1930), her novel about ancient Germany, is the rare story about premodern society in which the characters neither sound like modern people nor labor under the difficulty of not sounding that way. She makes no effort to prove that they are intelligent, despite their having been born before the modern age; she simply makes them intelligent, which is to say complex, unpredictable, unbound by stereotypes. Another type of achievement can be seen in her Bildungsromane, *The Shadow Riders* (1916) and *The Magpie’s Nest* (1917). These books were a hard sell. Publishers expected novels about Canada to be populated by heroic Mounties and ravening bears,⁶ but she was offering them modern young women in the modern towns that sprang up, fully formed, wherever the railways ran. She had another problem of representation. She was tired of the “red-hot mammas of the fiction field” who replaced

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sexuality with gentility (Paterson, "Turns" 26 Apr. 1942). In the face of almost incredibly hostile criticism (Anon., *New York Times*) she broadened the female Bildungsroman to include a frank view of sex.

Her best novel, in my opinion, is *The Golden Vanity* (1934), a story of the Great Depression. Few such stories have endured, because few find a perspective that puts them above the level of immediate social realism. *The Golden Vanity* establishes perspective—actually, a diversity of perspectives—by viewing events through the eyes of a variety of characters, each of whom brings some strong tendency in American life and memory to bear on the crisis. Is America resilient enough to survive, while retaining the pattern of its history? The book's diverse narratives provide a number of answers, but the beautifully balanced conclusion allows the question to remain open. It is a novel that is full of thought, and challenges further thought.

Paterson's other works of fiction, *Never Ask the End* (1933), *If It Prove Fair Weather* (1940), and the still unpublished *Joyous Gard* (1958), are very individual examples of a genre that might be called the modern meditative novel. They are reflections on human life, conducted in a number of modes, including a Woolfian stream-of-consciousness: reflections on the mysterious nature of reflection itself. They are distinguished by their vivid realization of characters who live in multiple worlds, the world of the exigent present, in which action must be taken, regardless of imperfect knowledge, and the world of the past, emerging like Atlantis from the mists of memory to demand that some final assessment of life be made. These late novels are subtle, poetic, refined, so refined that I found them difficult to summarize without damaging their intricate patterns.

Almost as difficult, I found, was the problem of picturing the "place" that a complex author occupies in a larger cultural framework. The spatial image was suggestive, though dispiriting: I consider myself a "formalist," but Paterson's work spreads itself over too many genres and subgenres to be represented as a triumph of form. It just takes too many forms, and the dwindling band of critics who are primarily concerned with aesthetic criteria will regard far too many of them—the aphorism, the critical review, the historical essay, the historical novel—as peripheral. Paterson wasn't Emily Dickinson, an individualist who made good by focusing on one mode of self-representation. For the same reason, Paterson doesn't fit into any ordinary patterning of literary history. What were her "contributions" to the "novel form"? She never tried to make any; she simply tried, in a number of ways, to show life as she saw it.

Yet it would be pointless to represent her as marginal. First, she wasn't. She was a prominent writer, until she was "marginalized" by her political views. And scholars of marginalization would probably marginalize her further, once they discovered that she was

a programmatic individualist who rejected race, gender, and economic class as fundamental categories of thought. They would represent her as a patient who denied her illness. There seemed to be no academic context in which such qualities as *courage*, *vigor*, *individuality*, and *versatility*, qualities that mean something in literature as well as in life, would merit representation. The intellectual historians of the Left and Right might have interesting things to say about Paterson's political ideas, but people in my home discipline, and hers, would have a hard time communicating with her, unless I misrepresented her.

She was not alone in posing this kind of problem. Her thousands of critical columns and reviews are a compendium—perhaps our largest compendium—of the literary life of America in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Reading them, I found scores of other good authors who mean next to nothing to current scholarship and theory. There is, indeed, a whole literary generation that is approaching invisibility, the generation of the older American modernists (most of them Paterson's acquaintances): Sinclair Lewis, Edgar Lee Masters, H. L. Mencken, James Branch Cabell, Vachel Lindsay, Stephen Vincent Benét, Cather, and many others whose names are less recognizable today—Louis Bromfield, Robert Nathan, Burton Rascoe, Albert Jay Nock, Grace Zaring Stone, Rose Wilder Lane, Ruth Suckow, Elinor Wylie (yes, a large proportion of these authors are women). They had the modernist instinct for experiment and the modernist idea of reading America in new, often skeptical ways, but they were generally uninterested in the syntactic and symbolic experiments of the high modernists—Ezra Pound, William Faulkner, James Joyce, Stein. These authors often excelled in “minor” literary modes: realist satire (Lewis), reportage and commentary (Mencken), hymn (Lindsay's “General William Booth Enters into Heaven”), romantic fantasy and aesthetic speculation (Cabell's Poictesme novels and his *Beyond Life*), elegy and epitaph and polemical history (Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* and his *Lincoln, The Man*).

Even Cather, once upon a time, was condemned for writing in the mode of domestic fiction.⁷ She also wrote dramatic criticism, reportage, historical novels, and a richly researched and richly amusing life of Mary Baker Eddy (of all people). She earned her place in the canon, then lost it, then recovered it with the dawn of interest in literature by women.⁸ So much for Cather. But you will have to go a long way to find the college course that welcomes *Spoon River Anthology* or *Beyond Life* or Mencken's cultural criticism or Stone's historical fiction, however amusing or clever, bold or touching or true it may be. Nor are such contributions taken seriously in either of the two now-standard narratives of American literature, the narrative that lauds central figures or the narrative that defends the marginalized. It has been a very long time since I met a graduate

student who knew anything about any of them, or who thought that he or she should know. Representation of large territories of literature has largely ceased, together with the professional reproduction of critics who, like Edmund Wilson, considered it their job to find patterns in the largest possible landscapes. (And Paterson teased Wilson about his lack of literary knowledge!)

Looking for an image of this failure of representation, I thought again of Paterson's social theory. In *The God of the Machine*, she describes civilization as a "long circuit" of transactions aimed at the achievement of individual happiness. People exchange goods, material and immaterial, expecting to gain something they would not otherwise possess. They extend the circuit of trade as far as they can, searching for new sources of profit and pleasure. "Energy" moves along the circuit as one product of human ingenuity is exchanged for another, to the benefit of both buyer and seller. The pattern of exchange—of communication, acknowledgment, and mutual profit—extends itself as long as energy is not "short-circuited" by force or custom. Ralph Ellison, I remembered, had a related idea. He likened American civilization to a computer with every kind of "cultural information" (8) stored in its circuits, "simultaneously accessible at any point in... society" (10): the resources of representation and self-representation are endless; every individual can make profitable connections. It's not romanticism but mere realism to suggest that when we read and write about an author—Ellison, Paterson, Cabell, Masters, Wylie—we are communicating with another personality, and if the exchange goes well, the value of both our lives is enhanced. Astonishingly, modern American academics are actually paid to access the most diverse sources of value we can find.

Where, then, was the short circuit? It wasn't produced by Paterson's old enemy, government censorship, or Ellison's enemy, class and racial bigotry. In some cases, there was a good deal of politics involved, but most of the difficulty seemed to result from a faulty use of certain tools of representation, tools that can easily short people out. One short circuit was the overuse of the two standard narratives I just mentioned, narratives in which there are often remarkably few active characters. Another was the overuse of certain oratorical modes of inquiry. While I was writing about Paterson, academic friends asked me, "What thesis do you want to prove?" I learned to answer, "None." A thesis is expected to be "cutting-edge," but I didn't want to cut anything. I wanted access to the longest circuit of books and ideas. I began to think that we might learn more about literature if we spent less time using literature to prove a point.

Of course, you may have a real point to prove. But if your list of Works Cited is generated only by the recent history of theoretical debate, then you're short-circuiting your access to everything else,

even if your thesis is meant to assert “the pleasure of the text.” Theories of representation stop being helpful at the point where the tools start choosing the work to be done. If you read only what’s amenable to your theory, or embarrassing to someone else’s, you may be reading such a narrow range of literature that your theory is, basically, just representing itself—an obvious short circuit. You need to do more browsing in the stacks. I should have been enjoying the exquisite realism of Ruth Suckow’s stories long before I encountered her in Paterson’s columns, but as a professional student of literature I was no longer aimlessly browsing, as I was when I found *Never Ask the End* on my parents’ bookshelf. I entered the library already knowing what to look for. And too often I was simply looking for a fight with someone else’s theory. That’s what my professional position encouraged me to do. But a walk through the neighborhood is generally more informative than a police report.

These reflections led me to notice that although our job as teachers and writers is to represent books and authors in some way, nowhere in the MLA Job List does one find “a wide acquaintance with literature” stated as a qualification. Yet even Pound, blessed and cursed with a highly individual point of view, whispered to the shade of Walt Whitman, “I have detested you long enough / . . . Let there be commerce between us” (269). Paterson would have liked the word *commerce*. People engage in commerce to find new pleasures, not to obliterate the strange and unpredictable sources of pleasure.

John Chamberlain, who spent much of his long critical and journalistic career debating with Paterson, said that he had “some caustic interchanges” with her but that “arguing with Isabel had a way of clarifying issues” (35). That’s a good statement. But one of Paterson’s other friends, Garreta Busey, a teacher of college English, left a better one: “I never could argue with Pat,” she wrote. “I could only enjoy her.”

Notes

All unpublished works cited in this essay are available in the Isabel Paterson Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

1. See Elsie McCormick, “She Had To Be a Writer,” *New York Herald Tribune “Books”* 12 Feb. 1933: 7, 23.
2. There is no chance that the title of that article was chosen by the 26-year-old “girl.”
3. See Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1953): 35–37, 261.

4. Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) offers a nearly complete exposition of her politics, emphasizing the connections among free enterprise, private property, and women's rights. Her essay "Nebraska" provides a vigorous defense of the capitalist system, warts and all. *O Pioneers!* and "Two Friends" are remarkable for their unsparing satire of the critics of capitalism. See "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," *The Nation* 117 (5 Sept. 1923): 236–38 and "Two Friends" in *Obscure Destinies*, (New York: Knopf, 1932) 193–230.
5. See Mary McCarthy and Margaret Marshall, "Our Critics, Right or Wrong," *The Nation* 141 (1935): 468–69, 472, 542–44, 595–96, 598, 653–55, 717–19.
6. See Paterson, "The Absentee Novelists of Canada," *Bookman* 55 (1922): 133–38.
7. See Lionel Trilling, "Willa Cather," *Willa Cather and Her Critics*, ed. James Schroeter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967): 148–55.
8. See Joan Ross Acocella, *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2000).

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