To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Thomas Jackson Carter entitled "'Credos and Curios': James Thurber's Practice and Spadework on the Columbus *Dispatch*." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Communications.

Dr. Paul Ashdown, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of the Graduate School

"Credos and Curios":
James Thurber's Practice and Spadework on the Columbus *Dispatch*

A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the newspaper apprenticeship of James Thurber, tracing the development of various literary and humor devices in the 42 installments of his "Credos and Curios" column that appeared in the Columbus *Dispatch* in 1923. Thurber himself acknowledged the value of his newspaper apprenticeship, and this study looks at the evidence that the foundations of his literary career were laid in that apprenticeship work. In particular, the early writings show experimentation with various literary and humor devices that his later works either discard or develop. In addition to examining the themes and stylistic devices Thurber used in the column, this study pays particular attention to evidence that the column helped the young writer identify and define his literary values and match those values to appropriate literary techniques. The study finds Thurber developing his writer's voice, and it also identifies romanticism as the underlying philosophy of his later work.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Two years before his death in November 1961, Thurber told a reporter for the Columbus *Dispatch* that he still thought of himself as "a helluva good newspaperman," citing with pride the "17 steamer headlines" he got during his days as a *Dispatch* reporter (Vincent 1959). Clearly, Thurber did not see his newspaper days as incidental to his later career. Such stories as "Memoirs of a Drudge" and "Newspaperman, Head and Shoulders" show a fond nostalgia -- his "cackling with that glee known only to aging journalists" (Thurber 1945) -- concerning his newspaper work. But more importantly than that nostalgia, Thurber's newspaper career, from April 1920 to February 1927, served as an opportunity for him to study the human species. Part of the advantage of reporting is that it introduces the writer to a wide variety of people whose values, perspectives, and actions differ widely -- even wildly -- from those of the writer. Thurber's journalistic career accented that variety; he worked not only in Columbus, but also for almost two years in France (on the Paris and Riviera editions of the Chicago *Tribune)* and a little less than a year in New York (on the *Evening Post).*

Thurber's fame does not rest on his newspaper work but on the 25 books he published. The first, *Is Sex Necessary?,* was a parody of the self-help psychology books that had become popular; it was written in 1929 with E.B. White. Of the books that followed, thirteen were collections of his *New Yorker* stories, five were fantasy stories, two were collections of his drawings, two were collections of

fables, one was a "parable in pictures" (*The Last Flower),* and one was a biography (*The Years with Ross).* In addition, Thurber wrote a play (*The Male Animal,* with Elliott Nugent, in 1940) and a revue adapted from his drawings (*A Thurber Carnival* in 1960). Although his literary work never garnered a Pulitzer or a Nobel prize for literature, it did attract serious attention during his lifetime. His 1943 fantasy *Many Moons* won the Caldecott Medal for children's fiction, and his 1956 *Further Fables for Our Time* won the 1957 American Library Association's Liberty and Justice Award.

Also during his lifetime, Thurber gained critical acclaim from such noted literary critics as Peter de Vries and Malcolm Cowley, and in 1958 he became the first American since Mark Twain to be invited by the editors of the British humor magazine *Punch* to carve his initials into their editorial table. No less a figure in American humor than Groucho Marx considered him -- along with E.B. White, S.J. Perelmann, George Kaufman, Robert Benchley, and Ring Lardner -- one of the "six masters" (Hermann 1987), and Thurber found favor among the more noted literary artists of the day. As early in Thurber's career as 1935, Carl Sandburg wrote, "I keep reading what you write, and sometimes you seem just around the corner" (Sandburg 1935). The context of the letter does not indicate just what Thurber is "just around the corner" from, but the poet has clearly joined the ranks of Thurber's constant readers. Another poet, T.S. Eliot, considered Thurber a better humorist than Twain. "[Thurber's writing] is a form of humor which is also a way of saying something serious," Eliot said in a 1951 essay for *Time.* "Unlike so much of humor, it is not merely a criticism of manners -- that is, of the superficial aspects of society at a given moment -- but something more profound. His writings and also his illustrations are capable of surviving the immediate environment and time out of which they spring" (Bernstein 1975).

Since his death, Thurber's work has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, including a dozen or more book-length studies, and more than half of his 25 books have seen reprintings since the mid 1980s. Almost all studies of American humor, from Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill's *America's Humor* to the Dictionary of Literary Biography's *American Humorists,* pay more attention to Thurber than to most of the other humorists they discuss, usually surpassed only by Mark Twain. But throughout the literary acclaim and popularity that Thurber enjoyed, he continued to identify himself with his newspaper past in much the same way that Benjamin Franklin identified with his printing career. Moreover, Thurber often acknowledged the debt his literary success owed to his journalistic apprenticeship.

Thurber first expressed his determination (as opposed to desire) to follow a literary career in a March 1920 letter to his college friend Elliott Nugent, an actor and playwright who was later to collaborate with Thurber on *The Male Animal.* "Very soon I will start out as you have on the old road of life, which in my case can mean but one thing, writing. It must mean that, win or lose, fail or prosper. But I intend to hit it hard and consistently and go in for the big things, slowly, perhaps, but steadily" (Bernstein 1975). A few months after writing that letter, Thurber took a job as general assignment reporter on the Columbus *Evening Dispatch,* where he worked primarily on the city hall beat. When he could, he contributed play and movie reviews (in 1921 he took a working vacation to New York and wired back reviews and an interview with Nugent), occasional doggerel, and features. In 1923 he was given a Sunday half page to fill as he liked, and he titled it "Credos and Curios."

Thurber was joined in producing the column by *Dispatch* staff artist Ray Evans; Evans supplied only the illustrations, while Thurber wrote the text.

Although Thurber used the customary editorial "we" throughout the column (only two anecdotes are told from the "I" point of view), Evans asked on several occasions that Thurber state clearly that he was solely responsible for the text. At first Thurber modeled the column on Franklin Pierce Adams' "The Conning Tower," one of the most influential newspaper humor columns of the day, and filled the space available to him with a mixture of fiction, comment, parody, light verse, and -- the staple of columns in that day -- short paragraphs making some pithy statement or observation. The first "Credos and Curios" introduced two departments. The "Dad Dialogs" were actually monologues in which the character Dad spoke out with his Midwestern common sense on various fashions and pretenses of the day. And "The Adventures of Blue Ploermell" was a lengthy parody of the Sherlock Holmes series, presenting a bungling but occasionally successful "psycho-scientific detective." Evans' cartoons and illustrations, and various essays, poetry, and paragraphs by Thurber augmented those departments. The makeup of the column changed during the year, with the "Dad Dialogs" being replaced by "The Book-End," a department whose topic soon subsumed the entire column, and "The Adventures of Blue Ploermell" dropped out to provide more room for Thurber's essays and anecdotes.

"We want to be a literatus when we grow up," Thurber wrote in his November 11 "Credos and Curios." Although Thurber used the term "literatus" throughout the column to describe specifically sensitive writers and readers, the context indicates that he had in mind his desire to be a serious writer. What the line also indicates is that Thurber didn't consider himself, in that November of 1923, to have yet attained maturity as a writer; in fact, just two weeks later Thurber referred to himself as "a lowly mid-Western columnist." Such comments hint that even then, Thurber thought of "Credos and Curios" as apprenticeship

work for his inchoate literary career. Thurber's letters, spanning from 1920 to 1961, provide the best evidence of the importance he attributed to that newspaper apprenticeship. On January 22, 1921, six months after Thurber went to the *Dispatch,* he wrote Elliott Nugent a six-page letter set up like the typescript of a news story: "thurber" appears at the top left of the page, and the first paragraph explains that he's following the habits of his "sometimes dizzily rapid craft." The first part of the letter focuses on Thurber's and Nugent's sundry theatrical efforts. The last half of the letter recounts Thurber's adventure with the City Hall fire of January 12 and outlines Thurber's master plan for his literary career.

In the course of his telling the fire story, Thurber brags about how his journalistic efforts allowed the *Dispatch* to get an extra on the streets only an hour and a half after the fire alarm.

> I was complimented by both the Editor in Chief and managing editor for my story, and all in all it was a gala night for James. ... [The extra] was set up 2 column, 20 point I guess, and outside of the headlines it was all mine. Let us finish by quoting the telegraph editor who is an old newspaperman, a bit acrid, seldom enthusiastic, never effusive. He says to me says he, "That's a damn fine story." It was scarcely edited at all.

In the same letter, Thurber discussed his plans to use his newspaper work to launch his writing career.

> I expect to stick with the Dispatch for two years, that is to say until July 1923. During this interval I shall have got onto every hook and crook of the newspaper game, shall have tried my hand at every angle of reporting and shall have learned the game fully, unless I suddenly lose my mind or strength.

The letter also details how, after leaving the *Dispatch*, Thurber intended to concentrate on free-lancing articles to Sunday papers (including the *Dispatch)* and trade journals and movie magazines, interspersed with "inconsequent verse, short stories, and my great American novel, of course." Thurber followed his plan fairly closely. When his scheduled departure date rolled around in July 1923, he was in the middle of "Credos and Curios," but as soon as the Sunday half page was cancelled, Thurber took off to New York and thence France to begin free lancing. He ended up taking a job with the Paris and the the Riviera editions of the Chicago *Tribune*.

After Thurber had been with the *Dispatch* about a year, he wrote again to Nugent about how his plan was working out. In a letter dated July 10, 1921, Thurber mentioned several free-lance publicity projects he had going, and that led him back to his newspaper work.

> I am still turning out a lot of helpful and uplifting news for the Disp. The work has by no means begun to pall on me and I consider that it has been the most valuable training I have ever got, in school or out, for a life of literary crime in the future, if any.

How much more valuable that experience became in 1923, the year of "Credos and Curios," we can only speculate; no letters dating from that year have surfaced. However, many of his letters from later years refer to his newspaper days, and occasionally even to "Credos and Curios." The most important of these is the October 31, 1956, letter to Frank Gibney of *Newsweek*. It outlines Thurber's life and career for an article Gibney was writing, and it warrants quoting at some length:

> In 1923 I wrote forty half-page Sunday stuff for the *Dispatch* in a department called "Credos and Curios." All of these pages were recently

> photostated and I am reading them with alarm, disbelief, and some small pleasure here and there. You can glance at the whole bunch if you want to. It was practice and spadework by a man of 28 who sometimes sounds 19, praises "clean love" and such books as "Faint Perfume" and "If Winter Comes" and practically any play or movie I saw, and attacks Cabell, Joyce, Hecht, and Sherwood Anderson. I was a great Willa Cather man. ... I can see by "Credos and Curios" that I matured slowly. Until I learned discipline in writing from studying Andy White's stuff, I was a careless, nervous, headlong writer, trailing the phrases and rhythms of Henry James, Hergesheimer, Henley, and my favorite English literature teacher at Ohio State, Joe Taylor. ... I think I got most of my "clean love" dedication or complex or whatever from Joe Taylor's praise of beauty in life. ... The precision and clarity of White's writing helped me a lot, slowed me down from the dogtrot of newspaper tempo, and made me realize a writer turns on his mind, not a faucet.

Looking back on his column, Thurber clearly saw that his tastes and values had changed, and that newspaper writing had given him some bad habits that he needed White's help to overcome. Yet Thurber saw the column as important enough to mention in some detail to Gibney. Holmes (1972) suggests Thurber had been planning to use some of the "Credos and Curios" items in a collection, but scrapped the idea once he reviewed them.

Thurber's description of the "dogtrot newspaper tempo" of his early writing points to one of the skills he learned from newspaper writing. In a May 20, 1954, letter to critic Malcolm Cowley, Thurber wrote, "Most former newspapermen can write anywhere, since they learned to write in a crowded and noisy office, and I have never felt the difference between a villa in France and a hotel room in New

York." The newspaper taught him to write quickly and anywhere, and it gave him the chance to observe people in their natural habitat (a July 31, 1952, letter to Malcolm Cowley praises British journalists for their power of observation). But the ability to write wherever one happens to be, however helpful in simply producing copy, may not really help hone one's craft.

Thurber needed White's stylistic influence because what he learned about writing from his *Dispatch* experience he learned on his own. Despite Thurber's admiration of his city editor Norman Kuehner (see "Newspaperman, Head and Shoulders" in *The Thurber Album),* he never hesitated to blast the lack of support reporters got from the *Dispatch* management. While Thurber was researching the Kuehner piece and others for *The Thurber Album,* he wrote to his former *Dispatch* colleague George Smallsreed, who had become editor of the *Dispatch,* and to James Pollard, chair of the Department of Journalism at Ohio State. Smallsreed gave Thurber the anecdote about Kuehner's recipe for a good news story:

> I remember asking him how to write a good news story. Norman gave me his favorite formula.
>
> "Write a flowery introduction in the first paragraph," he said. "In the second paragraph tell who, when, where, what, and how. Then in as few paragraphs as possible, relate the most important details. Write an equally flourishing conclusion. Spend the next five minutes finding the sharpest pair of shears in the office and cut off the first and last paragraphs. You'll have a helluva good news story."
>
> (Smallsreed 1951)

Thurber's letters to Pollard show his bitterness toward the *Dispatch's* conservative, functional, business-like approach to news writing. Two incidents

surface repeatedly in Thurber's letters and in interviews: a news story Thurber wrote about an open-air KKK meeting, and a feature story about Halloween that Joel Sayre wrote for the *Journal* (the *Dispatch's* morning rival). Thurber tells the story of the Klan meeting fully in the "Loose Leaves" section of *The Thurber Album* -- how under Robert O. Ryder's editorship the *Journal* carried reporter George Bricker's full account of the event, but the timid *Dispatch* editors cut Thurber's story to "a single, cautious, emasculated paragraph." Sayre's article was an impressionistic account of Halloween festivities that got front-page play in the *Journal.* In a February 5, 1952, letter to Pollard, Thurber mentioned both incidents to show how editorial attitudes affected the writing on a newspaper:

> Every department of a paper is stamped and stained with the character and personality of its editor, especially if he is a great man like Ryder. Ryder had nothing to do, directly, with George Bricker's Sunday story about the open-air meeting of the Klan, but it got in the way he wrote it. [Arthur] Johnson, the character and personality of the Dispatch, murdered mine and showed his true colors. ... [Heine] Reiker and, usually, Kuehner, reflected Johnson's views. None of these three men would have printed the Hallowe'en stories you sent me, and Kuehner said of Joe's, "This goddam story is -- modernistic!" My story of the Klan meeting was the best newspaper story I ever wrote.

The Heine Reiker whom Thurber mentioned was the *Dispatch's* managing editor, and it was he who told Thurber that "Credos and Curios" was dropped to make room for more advertising. But Thurber told Pollard in a letter dated February 9, 1952, that H.E. Cherrington, the entertainment editor for the *Dispatch* who had a column on the top half of the page, had insulted the people of Urbana, Ohio. When some of them complained, *Dispatch* owner Bob Wolfe told Reiker

and Johnson to cancel the entire page. Apparently, no one championed Thurber's column.

Thurber's complaints about the oppressive editorial policies of the *Dispatch* run as a counterpoint to his praise of Ryder. In addition to Ryder's editorial policies, Thurber was impressed with his skill at the "paragraphing" style of contemporary humor columns -- the columns contained short, unrelated paragraphs rather than a single, cohesive essay. Masson (1966) recounts how that style, established by Bert Leston Taylor, was so refined in the early 20th century by Franklin Pierce Adams, Don Marquis, and Christopher Morley that columnists in Thurber's time were often called paragraphers. Ryder was the premier paragrapher in Columbus during Thurber's youth; Thurber told Pollard that Ryder was "the first influence on me as a humorist, and it still lasts" (letter of Jan. 8, 1952). In the chapter "Franklin Avenue, U.S.A." in *The Thurber Album,* Thurber writes that he thinks Ryder was the country's best newspaper paragrapher, but he was by nature a quiet and private man who shunned attention and thereby gained little national fame (he did allow a collection of his "The Young Lady Across the Way" items to be published in a book, but only as a showcase for illustrator Harry J. Westerman). Thurber includes several of Ryder's paragraphs:

> The fashion authorities seem to differ as to the exact position of the waist line, but we imagine it will be satisfactorily located as soon as it's warm enough to put up the porch swing.
>
> A hardened reformer never seems able to make up his mind which is the most beautiful word in the language, "compulsory" or "forbidden."

However, Thurber's impression of Ryder's skill paled a little after 40 years. In a letter to Pollard dated February 9, 1952, he wrote:

I find myself, to my surprise and dismay, a little disappointed in the Ryder paragraphs. ... I was crazy about his paragraphs as far back as 1910, and in 1914 I ran a column of paragraphs of my own in the East High X-Rays, in imitation of him, and sent Ryder a tear-sheet each month. He reprinted one during that winter.

His reputation as a paragrapher is as good as ever, and the old Sunday World [F.P. Adams' newspaper] reprinted more of his than of anybody else's. ... I realize the vast similarity of many of them, owing to his various recurring formulas -- "We have our moments of depression," "Our memory goes back to the time," and so on. ... Of course I can't quote many, and there are some excellent ones, but it would take two months solid work to dig up the paragraphs that he sent ricochetting down the corridors of time.

Thurber's friends knew his talents were not getting full encouragement on the *Dispatch*. In a 1975 interview with Lewis Branscomb, Joel Sayre said that Thurber was an excellent newspaperman who could write straight news and features. "It was a pity he wasn't on our paper because he would have been much more appreciated," Sayre said. And to Sayre, who knew both Thurber and Ryder well, Thurber showed Ryder's influence right up to the end. In the 1961 revue "A Thurber Carnival," Thurber put in a dance scene punctuated by the couples' exchanging quips. "These are all very Ryderian kinds of paragraphs," Sayre said. "He may have done it unconsciously, but it was pure Ryder."

Perhaps another indication of the importance Thurber attributed to his newspaper apprenticeship is the fact that he never distanced himself from that background. Not only does that background surface throughout his writing, but it's also a recurring theme in his letters. In 1927, while working for the New York

Evening Post, Thurber wrote to his family about meeting Harry Houdini's widow and getting to select several valuable books from the magician's library. Toward the end of the letter, he suggests that the local papers may want to do a story about the books. "It doesn't make any difference to me whether they use anything or not," he wrote, "but when I was a city hall reporter I would have considered it a nice little feature yarn, in view of the importance and interest in Houdini and his library." And throughout his 1950s correspondence with George Smallsreed he pitched stories and story ideas to the editor of his former paper. In 1951, while working on the *New Yorker* series that became *The Thurber Album,* he said the stories had generated so much interest from the people in Columbus that he wanted to do a short piece for the *Dispatch's* Sunday magazine section. Smallsreed said he would appreciate such a piece, but it never materialized.

Similarly, on July 3, 1953, Thurber wrote that he was coming to Columbus to receive various honors and would send an advance copy of his speech. "This doesn't mean I'm an egotistical writer, it just means I'm still a good newspaperman. Things said at a luncheon should be reported that afternoon and not in the little old Journal the next morning." And the next year (March 1, 1954) Thurber sent Smallsreed a letter he had received from John McNulty (a life-long friend whose name haunts the latter "Credos and Curios" columns). "I thought you and maybe your sports department would be interested in this urgent flash from McNulty," he wrote. "You can return the letter after showing it to the boys on the sports desk, who might like to make an item out of it, unless the facts are known to them already." Thurber made several other similar suggestions for stories, and he did send the *Dispatch* a story about his memories of the Sullivant school. It ran on October 1, 1961; three days later Thurber suffered a stroke,

developed complications, and died November 2. To paraphrase his 1921 letter to Nugent, newspaper work never did begin to pall on him.

Despite Thurber's numerous references to his newspaper work, scholars have either ignored it or at best given it only cursory attention. This study seeks to fill, partially, that gap in Thurber scholarship. His newspaper work offers opportunity to see him at many different writing tasks, from straight reporting on the *Dispatch* to feature writing on the New York *Evening Post.* However, given that Thurber earned his fame through his short and often first-person pieces for *The New Yorker* magazine, his most significant newspaper apprenticeship work is "Credos and Curios." In it, we see Thurber for the first time addressing his audience directly. In his news and feature stories, his voice was subsumed by that of the newspaper; he was not "James G. Thurber," but simply an unbylined producer of copy for the Columbus *Dispatch* or the New York *Evening Post.* Even in the smattering of play, movie, and book reviews he did for the *Dispatch,* he is not so much an independent voice as a part-time reviewer. Conversely, in "Credos and Curios," he is for the first time writing in, rather than for, the *Dispatch.* He is communicating *his* ideas to *his* audience, and he has the responsibility and freedom to determine how best to address that audience. Of course, much like news stories and reviews and features, humor columns are also a well established newspaper feature, and Thurber followed such noted columnists as Bert Leston Taylor, Franklin Pierce Adams, and Robert O. Ryder. But writing the column gave Thurber an important added dimension; for the first time his task was not simply to package facts and opinion in established journalistic forms, but also to create a voice -- a persona -- through which to present his ideas. If becoming a reporter was Thurber's first step toward a literary career, his work on "Credos and Curios" was his second.

Given Thurber's place among American literary figures, the lack of scholarly attention to that second step seems strange. As Eliot hints, the quality of a writer's art can be measured by his ability to adapt a writing style or genre (in this case humor) into an appropriate medium for expressing his values. Indeed, one theory of literary criticism holds that a writer's underlying values help determine the style that the writer uses (Booth 1983). The criticism of a writer's mature works can focus on the fit between values and style (or, to put it more basically, message and medium) in an effort to evaluate the quality of the writer's art, but the study of a writer's apprenticeship work shows an active interplay between his values and style as the writer works to find his voice (or literary persona). It is just that interplay -- Thurber's experimenting with various styles of writing in an effort to adapt them to his values -- that makes "Credos and Curios" an apt subject of study. In it, we see not Thurber's art, but Thurber creating and adapting the raw materials he would use later to build that art. It shows his early experimentation with themes and scenarios that would infuse much of his later work, his discovery and growing understanding of his values, and -- perhaps most importantly -- his matching of those themes and values to appropriate humor techniques. If all writing is a form of self-discovery (as E.M. Forster put it, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"), then surely the richest findings are to be gleaned from a writer's early work. In Thurber's case, that formative early work was his newspaper column "Credos and Curios."

Chapter 2

Reviewing the Background

Purpose

Establishing the context of Thurber's newspaper apprenticeship requires weaving together at least three strands of previous scholarship. The most important of these is the scholarship concerning Thurber and his work. Biographical studies tell us something about the man himself, and literary studies identify the important themes and techniques and other qualities of his writings. Knowing the major characteristics of Thurber's later works, the researcher can then better search the apprenticeship work for the vestiges of those inchoate characteristics. Secondly, the researcher should be familiar with the studies in the relatively new field of literary journalism. Researchers in that field have explored the influences of other writers' journalistic apprenticeships on their literary work, and they have also explored the connections between literature and journalism. And third, because Thurber's apprenticeship took the form of a humor column, some attention must be paid to the development of the humor column in American newspapers up to Thurber's time. Together, these strands provide clues not only to what a researcher should look for in "Credos and Curios," but they also give some hint as to the column's significance.

Thurber Scholarship

In *The Art of James Thurber,* Richard Tobias (1969) defends limiting his study to Thurber's books by saying that Thurber "springs to life full-grown in them

without any faltering juvenalia" (p. 8). Tobias never mentions "Credos and Curios," nor does he mention anything about the nature of Thurber's newspaper work -- not the *Dispatch* or the *Tribune* or the *Evening Post.* All he says is that "his experience as a reporter must have taught him a little about the English sentence" (p. 20) and that "one imagines him as a bright young newspaper man, possibly writing with just a little more brio than his fellows but still a man who has not quite caught a way of speaking" (pp. 18-19). Tobias almost casually disregards Thurber's newspaper work but then seems surprised when Thurber appears "full-grown" in his books. Apparently Tobias considers Thurber's first two years on the *New Yorker* staff (1927 and 1928) as his principal apprenticeship work, a reasonable assumption considering only 12 of the 47 pieces Thurber wrote in those years found their way into his books. However, as far back as 1923 (six years before his first book, and four years before his *New Yorker* work) Thurber was finding "a way of speaking" in his *Dispatch* half page. As a major body of Thurber's early work, the "Credos and Curios" columns show him exploring and developing many of the themes identified in his later works, but the columns also show him defining his literary values. And yet, as in Tobias, other Thurber scholarship scarcely investigates the influence of his newspaper work. Nor do his biographers dwell on that period.

Burton Bernstein (1975) is more interested in Thurber's relationships with other people than in his writing, and consequently he has little to say about Thurber's newspaper work. He recounts more fully the anecdotes Thurber gives in "Newspaperman, Head and Shoulders" and elsewhere, but he makes no mention of his development of writing skills during that time. He says only that "Credos and Curios" displays the many contradictions in Thurber's life:

> As literature, humor or opinion, the half-pages were, in the main, unimpressive, yet they plainly revealed the gnawing contradictions at work in Thurber's busy mind. Also, they provided space for the genesis of so much of his later writing, which developed into that original body of work known simply as Thurber. (p. 130)

Bernstein's discussion of Thurber's newspaper work remains on that same general level; for him, Thurber's contradictions "fairly leap from the half pages in bewildering inconsistency" (p. 130). Bernstein sees the young Thurber beset with conflicting values and literary attitudes. "The 'Credos and Curios' department was, in a way, a cheap psychoanalysis for Thurber. All the frustrations, doubts, and internal quarrels of twenty-eight troubled and bleak years had a chance to vent themselves" (p. 131).

In terms of guiding a study of the columns, Bernstein's comment holds promise; perhaps the column reveals some evidence of Thurber's interaction with those contradictions in an effort to achieve a resolution. He does not explore those "bewildering inconsistencies" but merely describes two of the more prominent ones. Bernstein says that on occasion Thurber champions "down-home" Midwestern values, but later decries the lack of "culture" in Columbus; similarly, he often attacks the realist novels of Anderson, Hecht and Lawrence, but then praises the Ohio State literary magazine. Bernstein is content simply to let those contradictions lie, without exploring whether the columns or Thurber's later work show any resolution of them.

Bernstein does say that the column provided Thurber with a "proving ground for various humor styles and ideas, many of which were recognizable in future pieces" (131). Among the most important of those styles was parody and anecdote, and to a lesser extent the humorous essay and short piece form ("which

read now as if a talented college sophomore were imitating James Thurber"). But in places Bernstein demonstrates an inaccurate grasp of the column. For example, he refers to the March 25 anecdote of Thurber's visit to an eye doctor's office as containing a reference to his partial blindness. However, Thurber never mentions what kind of doctor he's visiting (although that he's an eye doctor is a reasonable assumption; two of Thurber's fellow patients are blind and a third has been hit in the eye with a snowball), and Thurber does not mention his own ailment.

Charles Holmes (1972) has a ten-page discussion of "Credos and Curios" that is perhaps the most in-depth examination of the column previous to this study. Holmes describes Thurber's experimentation with various personae and humor devices, and he makes some effort at a literary evaluation of some of the items he finds interesting. He calls it Thurber's most significant writing for the *Dispatch*, and discusses its indebtedness to F.P.A.'s "The Conning Tower." Holmes says the column "is clearly the work of a young writer in the process of finding himself, but ... he shows a quality of comic imagination and a command of style which anticipate his best work." Holmes' discussion of several "Credos" pieces, however, does little more than provide snippets of the humor and the topics Thurber discussed.

For instance, in his discussion of the "Dad Dialogs" department, Holmes says that "Thurber's ear for the vocabulary and the rhythms of Midwestern speech is impressive in his early work" (p. 65). He also likens the character Dad to Seba Smith's Major Jack Downing, another "plain man questioning the values of intellectual culture" (p. 65). Holmes says that through Dad Thurber tapped into a rich tradition of American humor columnists, but that he also tapped into "a way of life and a set of values to which a part of Thurber was deeply committed throughout his life" (p. 65).

Holmes also discusses how Thurber used the column to hone his skill with two of the most successful forms of his later writing: the essay and the anecdote. The essays are especially interesting because they show "Thurber moving toward a character type, that of the nervous inadequate middle-aged man, which was soon to become one of his major comic resources" (p. 70). More specifically, that movement was away from fictional characters like Dad and toward "the literary personality that suited him best -- himself" (p.71). The anecdotes also help him develop that persona. As Holmes writes:

> In a number of comic anecdotes involving the little crises and frustrations of everyday life, he is James Thurber, victim or closely involved spectator. ... [These anecdotes are] a preliminary study for the anecdotes of domestic misadventure which make up *My Life and Hard Times*. (p. 71)

Holmes admits that "the overall impression of 'Credos and Curios' is of immaturity and uncertainty," but at the same time certain parts of it show Thurber "coming into his own as an artist" (p. 72).

As Bernstein does, Holmes mentions the contradictions and inconsistencies that show up in the column, but he acknowledges their importance as evidence of Thurber finding his writer's voice and therefore takes a slightly closer look at them:

> [The column] is full of the tastes and attitudes of the young man from Columbus whose horizons were limited by Midwestern Puritanism on the one hand and the aesthetic tastes of the Genteel Tradition on the other. But this same young man had read Henry James and lived in Paris and wanted to be a writer. It is the unresolved conflict between the provincial values of Columbus and the cosmopolitan values represented by Europe and the literary life which is the center of interest in 'Credos and Curios' and which

gives this early column a special importance in understanding Thurber. (p. 64).

Holmes sees the basic conflict at work in the column as that between the folksy common-sense values expressed in the early "Dad Dialogs" segment and the aesthetic literary values expressed in "The Book End" segment that replaced it. The "Dad Dialogs" segment featured a pipe-smoking, newspaper-reading middle class man who would surface from his newspaper long enough to pontificate about something he has read. Holmes says "its effect is generally reductive, redefining the complex, the pretentious or the fancy in terms of the simple, the familiar and ordinary" (p. 65).

"The Book End," on the other hand, shows Thurber joining forces with the "aesthetes against the Philistine mass" of the Columbus citizenry. That attitude is most clearly seen in the October 28 column in which he defends the new literary magazine *The Candle* against "the OSU college for football players, Boost Ohioers, and stock judging teams." Thurber also railed against the "sordid sex stuff" in many contemporary novels and praised Willa Cather, Joseph Hergesheimer, and Wallace Irwin (among others). Always the champion of romanticism, Thurber understood Pollyannaism was stupid but that the D.H. Lawrence brand of realism reduced sex to mere animal behavior. Much of the tension in "Credos and Curios" is Thurber's effort to balance his romanticism with his view that literature should portray a realistic image of life.

Although both Bernstein and Holmes mention those surface contradictions, neither spends time examining their interaction and Thurber's attempts to reconcile them. Bernstein does nothing more than point them out, and Holmes brushes them aside by saying the columns show an adolescent romanticism that Thurber soon outgrew. Undoubtedly writing out ideas and opinions based on one's values helps

define -- if not redefine -- those values, and that process seems to have occurred in Thurber's writing of the weekly column. Obviously, Thurber's values did not change in that one year -- barring dramatic experiences, it seems too short a time. The column contains so many themes and scenarios that appear in his later writings that probably his basic, underlying values did not really change until his eyesight failed completely in the 1940s, as several critics have noted. What Bernstein and Holmes see as contradictions may possibly be simply the result of Thurber's exploring the bounds of his values, defining how they apply to various interests and concerns. Even if, as Holmes suggests, the seeming contradictions arise as a result of Thurber's juggling of values absorbed from such sources as family, college friends, travel, newspaper colleagues, and his own reading in an effort to gain some consistency among them, a look at that dynamic would still provide insight into Thurber's values. And as we see those values being applied to his experimentation with themes and stylistic devices, we see Thurber developing the core of his mature work.

Apart from the two biographers, none of the students of Thurber's works pays much attention to Thurber's newspaper work. We have already seen Tobias' attitude toward it, but perhaps the most famous critic to make the mistake of casually disregarding the newspaper work was Walter Blair (1942):

> Mr. Thurber, born and reared in Columbus, Ohio, went to the Ohio State University for his formal education. His informal education included work as a code clerk in Washington in wartime, followed by drudgery on several newspapers -- in Columbus, in New York, and in Paris. (p. 283)

This passage touched off Thurber's familiar "Memoirs of a Drudge" (reprinted in *The Thurber Carnival,* 1945), in which Thurber defends his newspaper work as anything but drudgery. But despite that defense and the recurring image of

Thurber as newspaperman that appears frequently in his writing, the critics tend to ignore his newspaper background, or they give it only an obligatory sentence or paragraph. To adapt Tobias' phrase, though, if Thurber's work appears in his books already full-blown, then perhaps the previous scholarship on Thurber can describe for us the bloom and the mature leaf so that we may then better evaluate the seeds, stems, or buds that might show up in "Credos and Curios." Specifically, since this study looks at the column for evidence of Thurber's establishment of themes, his exploration and development of values, and his matching of those themes and values with various techniques, the previous scholarship can help identify the themes, values, and techniques of his later writing.

Perhaps the most important thematic element in an author's style is the persona through which the author speaks; that persona filters -- or mediates -- the events of the story and also affects how the author tells the story. In one of the first serious looks at Thurber's writing, Peter De Vries (1943) identified the classic Thurber male character -- the dominant persona -- as a "comic Prufrock." Like the title character in T.S. Eliot's 1917 poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the Thurber persona, whether speaker of the story or main character within it, is a man who is so preoccupied with the possible outcomes of his actions that he is ultimately afraid to act:

> It is hard to think of anyone who more closely resembles the Prufrock of Eliot than the middle aged man of the flying trapeze. ... There is, for instance, the same dominating sense of Predicament. The same painful and fastidious self-inventory, the same detailed anxiety; the same immersion in weary minutiae, ... the same fear, in summary, that someone will "drop a question on his plate." (p. 38)

De Vries points out that both Prufrock and the Thurber man find women distant and incomprehensible, but conversely the women find the men all too comprehensible. Prufrock hears the mermaids singing and says, "I do not think that they will sing to me"; Thurber, in his conclusion to *My Life and Hard Times,* says that the dark and mysterious native women of the West Indies "tried to sell me baskets."

De Vries wrote his study before the major event in Thurber's career -- the loss of his vision in the 1940s. Most Thurber scholars mention the major change in Thurber's work after that event, how his stories change from a basis of outward observance to a basis of inward contemplation. Norris Yates (1964) identifies two separate Thurber men: the Little Man "helpless in the grip of nature, his wife, and his own nature," and the militant progressive who speaks out against all forms of authoritarianism (p. 35). Yates says that although both types showed up throughout Thurber's career, the first was more common in Thurber's earlier (pre-1945) stories, and the second more common in the later stories. Other critics are more brusk in their evaluation of Thurber's later work. For instance, John Updike (1962) says simply that Thurber's later work devolves into puns and dismay and that the humor simply disappears. Gerald Weales (1957) compares the 1940 *Fables for Our Times* with the 1956 *Further Fables for Our Times* and finds that the later work is much harsher and more bitter. These comments show how the rise of Thurber's second persona -- the militant progressive -- affected the style and themes of his later work; no longer are they playful and observant, but grumpy and complaining.

A writer must also decide which themes or topics the persona will discuss. Charles S. Holmes (1974) lists Thurber's themes as the domestic scene, trivia, daydreamy men, aggressive women, the "war" between the sexes, the celebration

of the eccentric and natural over the formal and conventional, and the interplay between reality and fantasy. Obviously, Thurber did not treat these themes separately; such stories as "The Unicorn and the Garden" and "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" touch on all of them. And in a way, Holmes' list boils down to just two items: the war between the sexes and the interplay between fantasy and reality. Robert E. Morsberger (1964) adds to the list of Thurber themes: predicaments, romanticism, animals, society, politics, theatre, and literature (including language). Again, these themes do not divide neatly; in many of Thurber's fables, for instance, language and politics mingle inextricably (see especially "The Very Proper Gander" in *Fables for Our Time* and "What Happened to Charles" in *Further Fables for Our Time).* And again, the list tends to boil down to society (including politics), animals, and literature (including theatre); Morsberger distinguishes between war between the sexes and society, but his romanticism blends with fantasy. We are left, then, with five major Thurber themes: the war between the sexes (the plight of the individual), society (people against institutions), literature (theatre and language), animals (especially dogs), and fantasy versus reality (the creative imagination).

Those themes, of course, are the topics that touch on Thurber's values. As Robert D. Arner (1984) points out, many critics, especially those of the political Left such as Granville Hicks and Kyle Crichton, charged that Thurber's writing was essentially trivial and detached from life. The charge has tended to haunt Thurber's work and Thurber scholars. For instance, Melvin Maddocks (1985) says that Thurber's works are amusing but really do not warrant a second reading:

> Thurber's short stories share the same simple if not simplistic outline of his essays and autobiography. His most famous short story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," is a single joke ingeniously sustained. ... A second

> reading of "Walter Mitty" only makes Thurber seem excessively tender and indulgent toward the Small Boy he treasured in men -- and found threatened by Thurber women. (p. 598)

To be sure, many of Thurber's stories do focus on the trivial -- the day the dam didn't break or a man wandering around town daydreaming. But the trivial events in a person's life are often the more telling. Catherine Kenney (1984) argues that the trivial for Thurber led more naturally into fantasy -- the tension between appearance and reality:

> It is this terrible tension that gives Thurber's art its enduring brilliance, interest and energy. The clash between chaos and order, which is implied even in his early definition of humor as chaos recollected in tranquility, is the defining image in Thurber's mind and art. (p. 4)

Kenney says that Thurber became increasingly aware of the importance of the element of confusion in his work and what confusion tells us about appearances versus reality; for Kenney, Thurber's art culminated in his fairy tales and fantasies, especially *The Wonderful O* (pp. 167-172).

Richard C. Tobias (1969) also finds the element of fantasy or romance to be an important underpinning of Thurber's work. He compares Thurber's five fairy tales to the works of Sir Thomas Malory:

> In both Thurber and Malory the action takes place on a human scale completely before the reader's eyes and yet the action refers to larger issues and larger scenes than what we actually see. As in Malory's Romances, the reader recognizes the hero's struggle with his enemies as representative picture of civilization. Malory proposes the idea of *gentilesse* or *courtoisie* which allows his heros to triumph; Thurber proposes the creative imagination. (p. 120)

Although this passage refers specifically to Thurber's fairy tales, Tobias points out that Thurber's romanticism fuels almost all of his work. In fact, it is the one value that remains consistent all through Thurber's career. From his parody of the overly scientific study of sex in *Is Sex Necessary?* to the wordplay and diatribes in *Credos and Curios,* Thurber's stories always say that the human imagination has the power to transform the world, not politics or technology or even the realism of the Leftist writers. Robert H. Elias (1958) argues that in the fairy tales, Thurber makes the point that imaginative people (poets, musicians, toymakers) are the healers of society, not the materialists (politicians, scientists, hunters) (p. 96). As Thurber himself tells us in the last "Foreword" he wrote for one of his last books (*Lanterns and Lances,* 1961), his purpose is to get his readers not to "look back in anger, or forward in fear, but around in awareness" (p. xv). Clearly, then, Thurber's values stem from his romanticism, his view that the human imagination has the power to transform the trivia mundi into the gloria.

Given Thurber's romantic inclination, it's remarkable that not more of his works are fables and fantasies. Certainly Thurber's romances occupy a significant portion of the body of his work; Kenney, as mentioned earlier, see the romances as the culmination of his art, and Robert E. Long (1988) sees the element of fantasy in all of the Little Man stories (pp. 45-73). In fact, Robert Boyer and Kenneth Zahorski (1984) include Thurber with J.R.R. Tolkein, Peter Beagle, C.S. Lewis, Ursula le Guinn and other noted fantasists in their *Fantasists on Fantasy.* Although Thurber is often denigrated by critics as a humorist and a writer of short prose (see John E. Bassett [1985]), that view of his work tends to ignore the wide range of techniques he used. Perhaps Thurber is best known for his stories ("Walter Mitty" has become a standard term in the American vocabulary) and drawings, but he also built his literary reputation on parody (*Is Sex Necessary?,*

1929), anecdote (*My Life and Hard Times,* 1933), and the essay (*The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze,* 1935). These are, of course, broad categories that still do not encompass the full range of his work. For instance, we do not think of Thurber as a playwright, yet *The Male Animal* met with critical acclaim on Broadway and was made into a film starring Henry Fonda and Olivia de Haviland, and he wrote four plays in the 1920s for theatre groups at Ohio State. Also, we do not think of Thurber as a poet, yet De Vries says Thurber has more in common with symbolist poets like Eliot than with contemporary humorists, and Kenney says Thurber attains poetry in *The Wonderful O.*

Within those broad categories, Thurber uses a neutral, low-key writing style. Michael Burnett (1973) has taken a close look at Thurber's style:

> Thurber always regarded himself as a journalist, and much of his prose is written in the clear, flat, economical prose of the reporter; it is a style which does its best not to call attention to itself through any deviations from the norm. ... Yet Thurber ... was a connoisseur of chaos. To the journalist, then, Thurber improbably grafted the fantasist; and out of the collision of the two (out of the collision of two styles and, finally, of two world views) issued his humor. (pp. 75-76)

As a journalist, Burnett says, Thurber tended to fill his stories with specific detail, to underuse adjectives, to rely on strong active verbs, and to use orthodox syntax. Thurber's humor derived from the mock heroic tone created by his use of journalistic detachment to describe everyday events. Much of the humor, too, comes from Thurber's creation of onomatopoetic words ("the tires booped and whooshed, the fenders queeled and graked," or "she came flubbering up the cellar stairs"). As Thurber's eyesight failed and the emphasis of his writing changed, the

journalistic style that dominated his early work tended to give way to the fantasist (Burnett p. 76).

This one study of Thurber's style acknowledges the influence of his newspaper work, and yet no one other than his biographers seems to have taken a close look at that work. The omission seems particularly strange because the newspaper apprenticeships served by other literary figures have been the subject of study, and they have succeeded in helping us understand the writers' literary work. These studies have focused on novelists like Hemingway and Garcia Marquez, but they have also dealt with such other literary figures as James Agee and, of course, Mark Twain.

Literary Journalism

In 1931, Ernest Hemingway complained to Henry Cohn about the latter's digging into Hemingway's journalistic writings. "It is a hell of a trick on a man to dig it up and ... use it against the stuff you have written to write the best you can, " Hemingway said (Matthew Bruccoli 1970). Ironically, no writer's journalistic apprenticeship has been as thoroughly investigated as has Hemingway's, and the scholars examining his apprenticeship are the ones who make the best arguments for investigating a writer's newspaper work. Since those reasons apply to a greater or lesser extent to Thurber's newspaper work, it seems a logical place to begin.

Matthew J. Bruccoli (1970) says simply that "it is always instructive to observe a giant in the process of becoming a giant." Although Bruccoli's diction lends his work a tone of hero-worship rather than scholarly investigation, his point is well taken. Certainly such an investigation is not meant to unearth material to be used "against" a writer's reputation, as Hemingway seemed to fear, but to find the foundations upon which he built that reputation. Bruccoli argues that every

piece of a writer's work helps us to understand his career, especially in the case of a writer who, like Hemingway, wrote both fiction and nonfiction throughout that career. Unfortunately, Bruccoli makes no efforts to guide his readers to any of those insights but simply compiles Hemingway's very early apprentice work: the stories Hemingway wrote for his high school newspaper. Although investigations into "juvenalia" have had a certain amount of currency, examination of a writer's mature -- or at least maturing -- work would offer greater insights into the evolution of style and voice.

Precisely that kind of investigation was attempted by William White (1968). He argues that Hemingway's journalism is important because much of his fiction develops directly from his reporting. "In his more than forty years of writing, not only did Hemingway use the very same material for both news accounts and short stories: he took pieces he first filed with magazines and newspapers and published them with virtually no change in his own books as short stories." But like Bruccoli, White does nothing more than collect Hemingway's articles, in this case a selection of newspaper and magazine pieces published from 1920 to 1956. The chronicle shows that Hemingway never truly gave up journalism, but the items are offered with no criticism. The reader is left to decide whether the articles show literary merit of their own or are of interest simply because Hemingway wrote them.

Charles A. Fenton (1954) tries to weave Hemingway's apprenticeship into a larger framework, but his purpose is more biographical than critical. In a chapter devoted to Hemingway's experience on the Kansas City *Star*, Fenton focuses his attention on the influence of the celebrated style sheet ("Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative"), but his work is hampered by his not being able to identify any of Hemingway's *Star*

articles. His examination is built upon anecdotes from people who worked with Hemingway and comparisons of the style of *Star* front-page stories with some of Hemingway's work in the 1920s. But if the purpose is to show the development of a particular voice, Fenton's work would have been strengthened by an examination of Hemingway's articles themselves. Paul Ashdown (1992a) fills that void, arguing that Hemingway was interested in whether factual reporting could be written as interestingly as a work of fiction (p. 188). Frustrated by the limitations of deadline journalism, Hemingway often returned to events he had covered as a reporter so that he could tell the story of the event more fully. Ashdown writes, "As part of his 'public voice,' then, Hemingway's journalism might be seen as a rough draft for the 'private voice' of fiction. ... The second draft -- the fictional form -- pushed beyond the boundaries of time not only in its more leisurely creation but also in expanding the interior life of the characters and the narrator's repose to them" (1992a, p. 191). Ashdown's purpose is not to discuss Hemingway's journalism in terms of its apprenticeship value, but to argue that the work often served as the basis for his fiction, and that by combining his fiction and reporting techniques Hemingway attained "effective literary journalism" (p. 193) with his later non-fiction.

Second to Hemingway in terms of research into his newspaper apprenticeship has been Samuel Clemens. Walter Blair (1962) wrote:

> Literature young Clemens set up for newspapers could have included anecdotes about authors and brief excerpts and poems. More useful to a budding native humorist were anecdotes, letters, monologues, and tales by Down East and Southwestern humorists also used as fillers. Since even humble newspapers received exchanges free, Sam saw periodicals that were leading purveyors of American humor -- the St. Louis *Reveille*, the

Carpet-Bag, Yankee Blade, Brother Jonathan, and *The Spirit of the Times.* Some were quoted by newspapers on which he worked. (pp. viii - ix)

As Blair shows, the reading matter offered by newspapers could have as strong an influence on the development of a writer's craft almost as the daily exercise of gathering and writing the news.

Shelley Fisher Fishkin (1985) has possibly one of the best examinations of the influence of his reporting experiences on Clemens' later fiction. Unlike the other researchers, Fishkin is not interested in establishing the biographical fact of the newspaper work nor in exploring the stylistic influences but with thematic connections between Clemens' reporting and his fiction. An example she gives is of a story Clemens wrote concerning the prejudicial treatment a Chinese man received from the San Francisco police. The editors killed the story to avoid offending the paper's readers; a similar event occurs in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.* As Fishkin says, "The racial prejudice he first covered in San Francisco -- particularly the ways in which such prejudice distorted American ideals of justice and equality -- was a subject which, with subtle transformations, would form the core of [*Huckleberry Finn*]" (p. 65).

The older examinations of the newspaper apprenticeships of literary figures tend to focus on thematic connections rather than on the development of style. Only lately have scholars begun to look at the stylistic influence of the newspaper work. For instance, Ronald Weber (1990) argues that although Fenton's contention that Hemingway's newspaper work was central to his development as a writer, the progression of that work did indeed guide the development of his style. Hemingway first learned clear, declarative sentences at the *Kansas City Star,* then learned discernment of subject matter from his work on the Toronto *Star Weekly,*

and then polished his style through his European dispatches for the Toronto newspaper and later for the North American Newspaper Alliance (pp. 11-17).

Much of that interest in style has come in conjunction with the recent interest in journalism as a genre. Thomas B. Connery (1992) argues that the interest in the "New Journalism" of the 1960s and later sparked much of that scholarly interest, but the qualities of "New Journalism" have always been a part of American journalism. Although Connery concedes that the genre is complicated enough to defy easy classification, he defines literary journalism as nonfiction writing that combines journalism's emphasis on facts and classical news gathering methods (interviews, document examinations, and observation) with literature's emphasis on form, structure, and the style and quality of the writing itself (p. 15). To date, most studies of literary journalism have centered on the artistic value of the non-fiction work of journeyman writers rather than the journalistic apprentice work of people who later gain fame as fiction writers. But the growing consensus is that the boundaries between journalism and literature are not as well defined as was once assumed.

Connery argues that those boundaries become blurred because literary journalism seeks to convey messages on a common level with fiction. "This means that it conveys impressions, ideas, and emotions and draws upon themes and motifs identified by the writer and revealed in the details of an event or in the manners, morals, and actions of people" (p. 6). Robert L. Sims (1992) says that in Gabriel Garcia-Marquez's writings, the boundaries between literature and journalism are so blurred that one cannot be studied without the other; he writes that a scholar must take a "bigeneric" approach to Marquez's work:

> Ultimately, it does not much matter that in many critical circles the novel is considered a "serious literary genre," and journalism a "popular" genre, a

kind of paraliterature not worthy of serious study, because journalism and the novel simply continue to interact. Journalism does possess literary qualities and many novels freely borrow from journalism. (p. 15)

In his introduction to James Agee's magazine journalism, Ashdown (1985) contends that Agee attained perhaps the most important level of journalism through his "sacramental" view of facts -- that the facts are not interesting or compelling for their own sake, but as a symbol or symptom of a more generalized human condition. Fishkin does perhaps the most thorough exploration of the boundaries between fact and fiction in her studies of Whitman, Clemens, Dreiser, Hemingway, and Dos Passos. However, as mentioned in the discussion of her treatment of Clemens, she is interested primarily in thematic connections between the earlier reporting and later fiction or poetry of the writer; she discusses topics covered in reporting, but she gives much less attention to the evolution of style and sentiment evident in the reporting.

In his discussion of the pedagogical benefits of studying literary journalism, David Abrahamson (1991) identifies three major fictive devices used in the journalism of Charles Dickens, Clemens, Richard Harding Davis, Stephen Crane, and Hemingway: symbolic detail, narrative voice, and sensory description. The first is what others call the "telling detail," a focus on a small detail that serves to provide insight into the subject. One of his examples is Davis' description of the execution of a Cuban insurgent, whose silent, stoic death becomes symbolic of the grim determination of the rebels. By "narrative voice," Abrahamson means the persona through which a story is told. This does not mean simply first-person reporting, but rather establishing the philosophy from which the story is told. Hemingway's "hero-persona" coupled with his blunt sentences is perhaps the best example. And sensory description tries to involve the reader's senses: sight,

certainly, but also hearing, smell, taste and touch. Although normally associated with fiction, these writing devices also appear in the best journalism, and it seems reasonable that a person who, like Thurber, sees newspaper work as an apprenticeship to a writing career would attempt to practice those devices as much as newspaper format restrictions permit.

Kathy Smith (1990) applies similar literary criteria to her discussion of John McPhee, one of the leading figures of literary journalism. Smith argues that whereas traditional nonfiction writers hold the event as more important than the story, McPhee desires "to control and make sense of the real in a conventionally novelistic way, where plot, character, setting, and mood develop in a framework based not on a traditionally historical model of temporal progression, like a chronicle or a list, but on a narrative one, where the author takes liberties with the order and structure of events so that the story advances strategically along thematic lines." None of that is to say that McPhee distorted the facts, but that he understood that the event does not exist for the reader apart from the story. The use of fiction techniques like theme, metaphor, and narrative voice helps the reader gain access to the complexities of an event in ways that traditional journalism cannot.

Norman Sims (1990) also discusses the connection between literary journalism and New Journalism in his look at the influence *The New Yorker* had upon literary journalism. Sims' study begins around 1940 with the second generation of *New Yorker* writers, mentioning Thurber, White and Ross almost in passing. Focusing on Joseph Mitchell and his influence on such writers as John McNulty, John Hersey, Lillian Ross, and A.J. Liebling, Sims apparently sides with Liebling's remark that "*The New Yorker's* reporting before we got on it was pretty shoddy." Like Smith and Abrahamson, Sims discusses the fiction techniques

Mitchell used in his reporting, especially his ability to show how a single event or the experience of an individual was symbolic or at least metaphorical for some larger issue. Given that criterion, his slighting of Thurber's nonfiction contributions to *The New Yorker* is perhaps understandable. Certainly Thurber's crime stories, such as "A Sort of Genius" and "Two O'Clock at the Metropole," combine his reporting and story telling skills, but Thurber made no particular effort to make his stories symbolic of the human condition.

Just as Thurber's fame as a humorist tends to preclude him from the discussion of literary journalists, studies of literary journalism also tend to exclude discussion of newspaper humor. In fact, Connery's definition of literary journalism as founded on news gathering techniques expressly separates it from other nonfiction techniques -- particularly the essay -- found in both newspapers and literature. Definitions such as Connery's tend to narrow the focus of literary journalism studies at the expense of many other journalistic forms -- such as the editorial and the column. That limitation also effectively excludes humor, despite the long relationship between American humor as a literary genre and American newspapers.

Humor Columns in American Newspapers

Historically, the connection between newspapers and American humorists has indeed been a literary tradition. An examination of Stephen H. Gale's *Encyclopedia of American Humorists,* Stanley Trachtenberg's *American Humorists , 1800-1950,* Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill's *America's Humor,* Blair's *Native American Humor,* Samuel Clemens, William Dean Howells, and Charles H. Clark's *Mark Twain's Library of Humor,* and E.B. and Katharine White's *Subtreasury of American Humor* identified 216 American writers from

colonial days to the 1980s who had gained fame primarily as humorists. Biographical sources like the Gale and the Trachtenberg works previously cited and *Contemporary American Authors* revealed that 114, slightly more than half, of those humorists had worked for a newspaper at one time or another. But that tradition seems to be weakening. During the last half of the 19th century, almost two thirds of the practising humorists were or had been journalists. By the latter half of the 20th century, that proportion has exactly reversed -- two thirds of contemporary humorists have not had newspaper experience. Starting with the likes of S.J. Perelman, Jack Douglas, Lenny Bruce and Woody Allen, more and more humorists began by writing for show business, developing a path begun by Thomas Chandler Haliburton and others in the early 19th century. But up to Thurber's time, most of America's humor was being written for the newspapers, appearing particularly in humor columns. Since this study looks at a newspaper column as the apprentice work of a major American humorist, it may be helpful to survey the development of the humor column in American newspapers from Benjamin Franklin to James Thurber.

Thomas L. Masson (1966) credits Franklin with being the first American humor columnist, citing the quips found in *Poor Richard's Almanac* as being quite similar in tone and structure to the work being turned out by the "paragraphers" of the turn of the century. However, Franklin's first newspaper "column" was probably the Silence Dogood letters he published in his brother's newspaper, the *New England Courant,* in 1722. Although later columnists would also write under an assumed name or even through a created persona, Franklin adopted his pen name simply as a way to circumvent his brother's refusal to print any of his work (Michael Kirkhorn 1985, p. 195). Through Silence, the widow of a minister, Franklin could communicate his observations of the people around him

while maintaining a persona that his readers would receive sympathetically. When Franklin started his own paper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette,* in 1729, he did not write a true column, but followed the standard practices of the day in filling his publication with essays and comments. Kirkhorn suggests that many of the letters from readers that appeared in the paper exhibited such clever writing that he suspects Franklin had a hand in them, either as editor or author.

The next major newspaper humor columnist, Seba Smith (1792-1868), structured his commentaries in much the same way that Franklin had -- through pseudonymously written letters. Smith created Major Jack Downing and his kin of Downingville, Maine, shortly after establishing the *Portland Courier* in 1829. Major Downing's letters, and those of his relatives, became so popular that in 1833 Smith published them in book form. Also that year, the Washington *National Intelligencer* reported that Major Downing received more than 20 votes from the Georgia legislature during an election to fill a post for brigadier general. Heavily dependent upon the down-East dialect of an unsophisticated narrator, Downing's letters are noted for their common sense view of the heavily partisan politics of the day. Downing's "folksy" voice allowed Smith a vehicle for personalizing larger issues; such is the case in "How They Drafted the Militia Company in Downingville." In this letter to General Jackson, Uncle Joshua Downing tells how his son Joel was mobilized during a border dispute with Canada.

> He's too young to go, I know. ... He won't be seventeen years old till the fifth day of next May, if he should live to see it. But the poor boy may not live to see that day now, for he's taken his life in his hands and gone to fight for his country like a man and a hero, live or die. It was a tryin' time for us, Gineral; it was a tryin' time. (Blair 1960, p. 214)

The short piece effectively showed the personal cost of the popular political bombast associated with settling the boundary between American and British territory.

A contemporary of Smith's, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (1790-1870), also presented his newspaper writings under a pseudonym, but he presented his work not as letters but as accounts of his personae's observations. The stories appeared in two newspapers, and they were collected and published as *Georgia Scenes,* a book that has won for Longstreet the recognition as the father of the humor of the Old Southwest. His stories reflect a combination of the learned observer of his experience as an itinerant judge and the "straightforward" narrative style of the newspapers of his day. Using a polished style, he describes the people and the events around him, directing his humor toward the "crackers." Unlike Smith, Longstreet does not rely on dialect to get his humor across (although he can use it to effect in his dialogue), but creates humorous situations through having one of his two sophisticated narrators (Baldwin and Hall) get caught up in the recreations or events of the common people. His aloof, almost disinterested tone cannot help but communicate, at least to a present-day reader, a gentle sarcasm. In the opening lines of "The Fight," for instance, Longstreet relates how the people used the term *best man* in the community to describe the one who "could flog any other two men in the county" (Blair 1960, p. 289).

Perhaps the most popular of the antebellum humorists was Charles Farrar Browne (1834-1867). He began newspaper work as a printer, but his work on the printing staff of *The Carpet Bag* brought him in contact with Benjamin P. Shillaber, a popular humorist and creator of Mrs. Partington (a prototype if not outright model for Tom Sawyer's Aunt Polly). Soon Browne began submitting stories to the weekly magazine, and the stories gained him enough local attention

that he gained editorial posts on the Toledo *Commercial* and then, in 1857, on the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* (Robert E. Abrams 1982, p. 61). At the *Plain Dealer*, Browne created Artemus Ward, showman and inveterate commentator. The character became so popular that Browne began a lecture tour that took him across the country and to England. Artemus Ward first appeared as an occasional "contributor" to Browne's "City Facts and Fancies" column. Like Smith's Major Downing, Ward had a naive view of worldly affairs and a heavily dialectical delivery. But through that persona, Browne learned to address many national and international issues. Perhaps the most enduring of these stories is Ward's meeting with the newly elected Abraham Lincoln. Ward empties Lincoln's house of a horde of office seekers, and when Lincoln offers him a cabinet post as a reward, he answers:

> "Fill it up with Showmen, Sir! Showmen is devoid of politics. They hain't got any principles. They know how to cater for the public. They know what the Public wants, North and South. Showmen, Sir, is honest men. ... A. Linkin, use the talents which Nature has put into you judishusly and firmly, and all will be well! A. Linkin, adoo!"
>
> He shook me cordyully by the hand -- we exchanged picters so we could gaze upon each others' liniments when far away from each other -- he at the hellum of the ship of state, and I at the hellum of the show bizniss -- admittance only 15 cents. (Blair 1960, p. 404)

Ward's naive observations work on several different levels, but through it we see Browne's astute perceptions of the political problems facing Lincoln and his apparent pessimism concerning the politicians' (showmen are honest in comparison to them) ability to cope with them. Browne developed the Ward persona into an act that he took around the country and eventually overseas.

During his visit to the West, he met a young newspaper writer who became quite influenced by Browne's low-key delivery -- Samuel Langhorne Clemens.

Samuel Clemens (1835-1910), like Browne, was apprenticed to a printer upon the death of his father. Indeed, although he is more famous for his apprenticeship on riverboats, that training did not begin until Clemens had almost ten years' experience as a printer/newspaperman: on the Hannibal *Gazette* and *Missouri Courier* from 1847-1850, the Hannibal *Journal* from 1850-1853, and the Muscatine *Journal* and St. Louis *Evening News* from 1853 to 1857. After his short stint on riverboats and an even shorter stint as a Confederate officer, Clemens spent a large part of the 1860s writing for various Nevada and San Francisco newspapers. In 1865, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" appeared in a New York newspaper (Browne wanted it for one of his books, but Clemens missed the deadline, so it was published independently [Stovall 1983, p. 37]), and after almost 20 years as a newspaper writer, Clemens became an overnight success. Like Franklin, Clemens was not really a columnist the way Browne or Smith or even Longstreet were, but he did his apprentice writings for various newspapers. Also like Franklin, Clemens learned the literary styles of the time through his work setting articles in type for the press, but Franklin's diet of Addisonian political discourse changed to frontier humor for Clemens. As Blair points out, Clemens' newspaper work ensured that he was inundated with Ward and Smith and Shillaber during the decade of the most formative period of his life:

> But most important of all was the influence in Mark's writing of the humor of the Old Southwest. ... It adorned the newspaper and periodical exchanges which came to his brother's newspaper, for which he set the type. He heard oral versions of it in Hannibal where he lived as a boy and on the river

steamboats where he worked as a young man. It followed him to the Pacific Coast, where it was published, sometimes in its old forms, sometimes in newly adapted forms, in the newspapers. (p. 153)

Of course, Clemens was also influenced by the Down East humor of Browne and Shillaber, as well as other humor traditions. But no discussion of the influences on Clemens can deny the comic and literary genius required to synthesize those disparate traditions into the distinctive voice of Mark Twain.

Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914?) is known not so much as a humorist as a curmudgeon. Before his experience in the Civil War, he was apprenticed to a printer. After the war, he wrote for several California newspapers before gaining some local fame with his "Town Crier" column in the San Francisco *News Letter.* He left that paper in 1872 for a trip abroad, but returned to newspaper work in 1877 as associate editor of the San Francisco *Argonaut.* He gained additional attention through his "Prattle" column (continued in 1881 in *The Wasp),* and in 1887 began his association with Hearst through the San Francisco *Examiner.* It was the "Prattle" column that gave Bierce the opportunity to refine the style of short, needle-sharp darts that became *The Devil's Dictionary* (Gale 1988, p. 46). Sometimes his sarcastic wit is pitiless (as when he calls a cabbage "a grocery vegetable about as large and wise as a man's head") and at other times wonderfully subtle (as when he calls philosophical musings "worth their weight in gold"). Douglas Fowler writes that Bierce's editor at the *News Letter* helped him reign in his natural tendency for the profane and vulgar by encouraging him to read 18th century satirists like Swift and Voltaire (Gale 1988, p. 45).

Like Bierce, Eugene Field (1850-1895) was also a career newspaperman. He began work as a reporter for the St. Louis *Journal* in 1873, and ten years later he had risen to the post of editorial columnist for the Chicago *Morning News.*

Widely regarded as the "best newspaper humorist in America" (Gale 1988, p. 150), Field is remembered now through his poetry written for and about children: "Little Boy Blue" and "Dutch Lullaby" (which gave us Wynken, Blynken, and Nod) are both his. However, he did gain his fame through his "Sharps and Flats" column in the Chicago *Morning News*. Field's columns lacked the venom of his contemporary Bierce, but they certainly did not shy away from having satirical fun at the expense of others. In "His First Day of Editing," for instance, Field tells the story of a man who has won the editorship of a newspaper through political favor rather than journalistic merit:

> "The minion is so bad we ought to put the paper in nonpareil," exclaimed the foreman.
>
> "It must be understood," thundered Major Hurlbut, "that no bad minions will be tolerated on the premises. If there is any minion here who is dissatisfied, let him quit at once."
>
> "Then am I to fire the minion?" asked the foreman.
>
> "No," said Major Hurlbut, "do not fire him, for that would be arson; discharge him, but use no violence." (Clemens 1969)

Field's reputation as a humorist rests largely on his newspaper writings. Whereas others used their journalistic careers to launch (as Clemens) or sustain (as Smith and Bierce) their literary endeavors, Field remains first and foremost a columnist, showing that being a newspaper humorist was a career in its own right. And there can be no doubt, as Gale says, that Field's work was the major influence on the humor columns that became so popular during the latter part of the 19th century. As Gale puts it, "Although he is not a major humorist, he is a national figure who influenced American humor on a national scale" (p. 153).

Although Field's work was instrumental in establishing the popularity of the newspaper humor column, Masson argues that Bert Leston Taylor (1866-1921) was the one who influenced the form of the column for such later writers as George Ade, Franklin Pierce Adams, H.L. Mencken, and Ring Lardner. His first column was for the Chicago *Journal* from 1899 to 1901, when he moved to the Chicago *Tribune* and started "A Line o' Type or Two." Like Field, Taylor built his column using short paragraphs and light verse, but he added contributions from readers. Soon, newspaper parlance used the term *column* to refer to the space reserved for a particular writer, and the *colyum* became a space filled with quips and clippings submitted by readers or written or collected by the colyum's editor (Norman Sims 1984, p. 292). Of course, Taylor's own writing carried the column and established its popularity. Sims describes how the column would begin with a short verse by Taylor, followed by several submissions from readers (sometimes commented upon by Taylor), and then the rest of the column would be a short essay or literary parody by Taylor (pp. 293-294). Ultimately, it was the form of his column which proved most influential.

After Taylor, Franklin P. Adams (1881-1960) was undoubtedly the most influential newspaper columnist of the early 20th century (Gale 1988, p. 1). Adams began his newspaper career in 1903 when he became feature writer for the Chicago *Journal.* "The Conning Tower" column appeared in the New York *Tribune* in 1913, and it ran there and in subsequent papers until 1941. Adams' writing helped establish the literary comedian tradition that flowered in the 1920s with such publications as Ross' *The New Yorker* (Blair 1960, p. 165). There is, for instance, his parody of Pepys' diary, which has the following entry for February 25, 1924:

> To Beatrice Kaufman's for dinner, and she asked me questions about H. Ross's tobogganing, the noise of it being bruited about for a radius of thirty miles. And did he look funny tobogganing? she asked. Well, quoth I, you know how he looks not tobogganing, which seems to answer her. (White and White 1941, p. 276)

It was this erudition, this aloofness, that kept Adams' work from attaining the stature of some of his proteges (Gale 1988, p. 2). As with Field and Taylor, it is ultimately Adams' light verse that survives today. But during the syndicated run of "The Conning Tower," F.P.A. was one of the most widely read newspaper humorists in the country. Like Taylor, F.P.A. published contributions from readers, and those contributors included such people as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Christopher Morley, George Kaufman, Dorothy Parker, Grouch Marx, and James Thurber.

Although people like Field and Taylor and Adams made lucrative and influential careers through their humor columns, their work tends to lack permanence because of the dated nature inherent with newspaper work. E.B. White eloquently described the plight of newspaper humor:

> Old newspaper stories have an odor all their own; they are extremely hard to run down, and after you find them you wish you hadn't. Something has happened to them in the meantime. ... This is not said in disparagement of the humor of the press, or of reporters, plenty of whom are first-class humorists and are daily performing a brilliant feat in gathering news and transmitting it somewhat humorously. It simply means that even the perfect newspaper story, by the most gifted and expert reporter, dies like a snake with the setting of the sun. The news goes out of it (though some humor

may remain), and when the news goes out of it the heart goes out of it. (p. xiii)

Perhaps, then, it is as well that Thurber's "Credos and Curios" did not become wildly successful and receive syndication and a national audience; had that happened, we might not hear of Thurber any more than we hear of Field and Taylor and Adams. Ultimately, then, Thurber's writing in the column is not important for its own merits, but in what it shows us of Thurber's fledgling talents and skills. As Ashdown (1985) writes, the best journalism strives for the symbolic, the sacramental, value of facts rather than the bare facts themselves. Perhaps too, a writer's early work has such sacramental value, being an outward and visible sign of an inward and as yet invisible artistry. And that is why we turn to "Credos and Curios."

Chapter 3

Finding His Voice

A major part of finding a "voice" or literary persona is, of course, discovering the topics or themes one wishes to discuss. As Thurber's letters indicate, he had a keen interest in using his newspaper writing to catapult himself into a literary career. Also, given that the first suggestion given to anyone who expresses an interest in writing is to read, we would expect Thurber to be reading widely in additional preparation for that career. Consequently, a natural theme for "Credos and Curios" is a discussion of literature. Indeed, such discussion in "Credos and Curios" becomes so increasingly prominent that "The Book-End" department very nearly subsumes the whole column toward the end of its run.

That emphasis on literature provides Thurber with a valuable basis on which to build. First, since literature touches on almost all aspects of the human experience, Thurber can use his reading material as a springboard into almost any topic he chooses. Also, a major development from that literary basis is Thurber's development of a persona -- his writer's voice. He begins to portray himself as a bookish, withdrawn, meek, slightly fumbling person. It is an old and a fairly standard persona. In the opening lines of *Parliament of Fowls,* Chaucer writes:

> For al be that I knowe nat Love in dede,
> Ne wot how that he quiteth folk here hyre,
> Yit happeth me ful ofte in bokes reede
> Of his myrakles and his crewel yre.
>
> (lines 8-11)

Thurber apparently is not consciously modeling himself after the medieval poet, but like Chaucer he is a bookish person who quite naturally falls into a bookish persona. Persona and theme are so inextricably linked, especially in Thurber's work, that the researcher cannot determine which influenced the other. Therefore, this discussion of the thematic material in "Credos and Curios" will focus on the persona Thurber used to discuss those topics.

Thurber's models for the personae of newspaper columnists ranged from the curmudgeonly Bierce and Mencken to the playful Field and Taylor. Although Thurber often said that one of his first major influences was *Ohio State Journal* columnist Robert O. Ryder, who followed the Field-Taylor school, he also praises Mencken. In fact, the layout of the first "Credos and Curios," which appeared on February 18, 1923, is almost iconographic of that diversity of influences, with no-nonsense Dad on the left and bumbling Ploermell on the right.

Like Mencken, Dad has an intolerance of fancy embellishments or anything else that is not stated or expressed with straight forward clarity. Dad appears in only the first nine "Credos and Curios" columns, but in all of them he comments on some form of pretentiousness. Dad's first appearance is called "Father Takes up the Literature of the South Seas." Responding to his son's question about why he doesn't read more books, he explains that all the books being written are either "balled up love affairs" or accounts of trips to the tropics. The first are incomprehensible because the women have one too many husbands and act in irrational ways, but at least the language is understandable. The South Sea books, however, are written in Islandese:

> "The writer and his companion (he always has one) sail out of New York in their yacht, and they sail out in English -- but from there on it's

Islandese. Just as soon as the yacht gets to the equator it becomes a skaroob."

"The equator does?" asked Mother.

"The yacht does," said Dad.

Dad gives several examples of the speech he's talking about, summing up with:

"He will say that shortly after noon he got into a spinorthk and brekked over to the chief's findba where they had elisia. Now I'll leave it to you whether he put on a morning suit and flew over to dine with the chief, or got into a motorboat and rowed over to fight with him. They're too much for me. I'll take my newspaper." And Dad settled back into his chair to read, in concise and simple English, the account of the latest hovering of war clouds over Europe.

In addition to the literature of the South Seas, Dad pontificates upon the older generation, theatrical technique, diplomatic language, modern dance, courtroom language, popular psychology, spiritualism, and performing children. Through all of these items, Thurber is able to maintain a consistent and fairly complicated persona (although in this instance it is really more of a character). On the one hand, Dad is clearly a man set in his ways who has no patience with anything on a different artistic or intellectual level from himself, but on the other hand we do see in his comments some insight into human nature and society. Although not as acerbic or cutting as Mencken, he is also not as absolutely innocent as Ryder's "Young Lady Across the Way."

Dad is at his best when he's speaking about literature and language, and it is there that we also see him most clearly as a persona for Thurber. His preface to his speech about the literature of the South Seas, concerning "this modern love stuff," is a faint precursor to Thurber's diatribes against the "sordid sex stuff" that

appear in the later columns. The Dad-Thurber connection is also apparent in the second item (February 25), wherein Dad defends the younger generation against the bad press it has gotten ("It's the men and women who have gray in their hair but none in their brains that we've got to look out for," Dad says). Here, Dad utters what is perhaps the first published word on the famous Thurber theme of the war between the sexes. The item starts with Dad flailing about in an effort to get the sections of his newspaper organized. Mother appears and "with a deft touch" arranges it properly. Once Dad starts his speech, he says it is the older generation that is "raising particular Holycat in every possible way," and that the women are the ones shooting the men:

> "Who is it, for instance, that does all the shooting, which is now so popular among the older set? Did you ever hear of a young woman, a flapper if you please, turning a gun on some man she was annoyed with? Tut, tut. ... It's the old girls, who were brought up with a one-man mind, that shoot off the family horse pistol when they lose their one chance at steady company, which is generally some one else's legal steady company, too. ... Who are the men who are getting shot in the vestibule and between the oar tracks and the hotel? ... It's the fellows who have got ahead a little and have leisure to play around. Strange thing they're not only wicked but dumb. You'll notice they always pick a nurse or lady lawyer to get shot by, two types of women who can shoot straighter than any others.

Here Dad slightly prefigures the character of Mr. Monroe of the "Mr. and Mrs. Monroe" series in *The Owl in the Attic*, who is always bragging or opining, but then is never able to act. Dad is not as bookish as Mr. Monroe, although we always see him with his newspaper, and Dad always delivers his speeches from his chair and is never in social or domestic situations as is Mr. Monroe. In Dad,

then, we see a gruff "man of the people," but he does show vestiges of the weaknesses of the more famous Thurber men. Through Dad Thurber was able to point out the silliness of people trying to assume virtues or sophistication they did not already possess, but Thurber had made the mistake of painting Dad early as a man who did not read widely. In fact, in "Dad Dialogs" Thurber simultaneously parodies the pretentiousness in art or fashion that is Dad's favorite target and the tendency toward parochialism that surfaces in Dad's idiom. Perhaps Thurber tired of the Dialogs because of its two-pronged nature; after nine appearances, "Dad Dialogs" gave way to "The Book-End," which lasted to the end of "Credos and Curios."

In opposition to Dad's no-nonsense straight forward approach to life, Blue Ploermell is a romantic character who has dedicated his life to observing the trivial details of life. Whereas Dad was a column-within-a-column, giving Thurber both a vehicle and a voice for discussing various topics, Ploermell is a fictional character who must sustain a story line through actions. But as in the "Dad Dialogs," the theme is largely, albeit implicitly, literary; the whole department is a parody of detective fiction, and much of its humor is carried through playing off the cliches of that genre. When we first see "the famous psycho-scientific detective," he is described as having "attractively crossed eyes" and as having only one vice -- animal crackers. Just as Sherlock Holmes wrote many useful criminology monographs on such topics as tobacco ash and London mud, Ploermell wrote tracts on detective cliches such as "Thuds." And when he's told that the victim was killed with a heavy, blunt instrument, he says, "Ah, that again! We detectives will some day find that instrument. It has caused far too many deaths already."

By the end of the series, Ploermell has become more like Mr. Martin than Mr. Monroe. In "The Catbird Seat," reprinted in *The Thurber Carnival* (1945), Mr. Martin is the typical meek and timid Thurber male, but he is able to defeat the loud and aggressive Ulgine Barrows. Similarly, Ploermell shows himself to be bungling and inefficient, but he is able to win his case (although he needs considerable help from his Chinese servant Gong Low). Through Dad, Thurber was able to discuss social issues and literary matters, but through Ploermell Thurber is able to explore the mysteries of human nature. As a "voice," then, Ploermell's intellectual mistakes balance Dad's uninformed opinions.

Thurber develops Ploermell's penchant for succeeding in spite of himself in the series' second installment, called "The Great Detective Divulges Some Deduction." When Gong Low brings in a client, Ploermell asks the newcomer to sit quietly while he divines the man's purpose for coming. To do so, he lays out the 12 face cards and asks the man to pick a card he feels drawn to. When the man picks the Jack of Clubs, Ploermell tells him:

> "You have come to see me about a man -- a young man or at least a chap in middle years -- not an old fellow, I mean. This man has wronged you -- or you conceive that he has. You wish redress -- for some reason you feel that I am the only person who can help you. Your feeling against the man in question is so great as to make you want to bash his head in at times."

When Ploermell tells the man that he learned all that not through fortune telling but through the "psychology of association," he tells Ploermell the true reason for his visit:

> "Now the man I would like to bash on the head is yourself. You are, I should say, in your middle years all right, but you are out of your senses. I live next door. I want you to take the rubbish barrel away from the front of

my house. I want to ask you if you will quit playing the typewriter at 3 a.m. and I want you to have that Chink of yours burn his heathen incense in some other room than the one just across from mine."

Ploermell is disappointed that he was not able to solve a crime, but he is surprised that he was able to make the correct deduction. In later episodes, Ploermell does not make the correct deductions, accusing one man of staging a crime for publicity when in fact he had been the victim of a college prank (March 4), and so badly misinterpreting one man's clues that he never learns why the man had come in the first place (March 18).

Through Ploermell, Thurber introduces another of his major themes -- that people are too complicated to reduce to a science. Ploermell fails because he works on the assumption that all people act according to the same motives and values. For instance, when Ploermell deduces from a man's repaired watch chain that the man is married and has small children, he learns that the man is actually single. "Fathers never let their own children play with their watches, anyway. They always set the children upon the watches of their bachelor friends who call," the man tells Ploermell (March 18). Each person has a unique set of experiences, strengths and weaknesses, and reducing individual characteristics to group generalities removes the wonder, the romance, from them. That is the same theme Thurber and White explored in *Is Sex Necessary?*

Although Dad and Ploermell are fictional characters, their voices are similar to the voices Thurber used for himself in other segments of the column. When speaking about literature or society, for instance, he used the learnedness of Ploermell combined with the no-nonsense attitude of Dad, but when speaking about everyday fantasy he was almost pure Ploermell, perplexed and pleasantly surprised at his discoveries. The voice associated with the war between the sexes

is almost pure Dad (as we saw earlier, that theme first appeared in the "Dad Dialogs") but with strong undercurrents of Ploermell's perplexity. Through the life of the column, Thurber combined those several voices into variations of the two basic personae Yates identified in Thurber's later work.

Because "Dad Dialogs" served as a precursor to "The Book-End," it is tempting to say that Thurber's voice as literary critic derives largely from Dad. However, the first extended literary essay appears in the fourth column (March 11) and has a much subtler voice than Dad's ridicule. It is a fairly long essay on Julia A. Moore, the "Sweet Singer of Michigan," and spoofs her sentimental poetry. Whereas Dad would have bluntly stated his views of Ms. Moore's work, Thurber writes as if he's genuinely fond of the work (the satire is, of course, obvious):

> As richly and as uniquely American as Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, Julia A. Moore should not be forgot. ... [She] was the epitome of all things that are neighbor-womanish. She was America's greatest neighbor-woman. She wrote with intense seriousness and she was enamored of death, particularly of the deaths of children, brides and soldier boys. ... She approached death, like the good neighbor woman she was, vague as to why such things should be, touched with the tragedy of it all, grimly confident of a life of beauty after death and more than likely with a word or two to make the bereaved feel even worse than before.

Thurber gives us seven snippets from Moore's verse, but only one is sufficient to show the satire of the essay; he tells us that the following is "one of the most delightful poems of the last days of a youngster":

> One little flower has withered and died,
> A bud near ready to bloom,
> Its life on earth is marked with pride;

Oh, sad that it should die so soon.

One morning in April, a short time ago,
Libbie was active and gay;
But she was called, she had to go;
Ere the close of that pleasant day.

While eating dinner, this dear little child
Was choked on a piece of beef.
Doctors came, tried their skill awhile,
But none could give relief.

Thurber tells us that these lines are only a portion of the complete poem, as indeed are all the other samples of her writing, "space being cruelly short." The speaker in this essay avoids hyperbole in his discussion of Moore's poetry, but even the muted praise for it has the effect of overstatement when juxtaposed with such dreadful rhyming. In several ways it has points in common with Ploermell. Because both this essay and the Ploermell series were parodies, the author's voice that comes across to the readers (as opposed to the speaker's persona whose words we read) is that of the parodist. But even the speakers' personae -- Ploermell on the one hand and the essayist on the other -- share certain traits. Ploermell states his deductions and is then shown the underlying truth. The essayist also states opinions, only to have the reader immediately see the fault in them. In both cases, the reader feels superior to the personae involved. Also, both Ploermell and the essayist, when faced with a set of facts, either draw incorrect conclusions from them or find their conclusions surprisingly correct. The tone of the pieces is also quite similar, with Ploermell's adventures being told and Moore's poetry being discussed in quiet, rational appreciation. In both, the tone conveys the satire, so that we see Thurber presenting himself beneath the text as a person with refined literary taste.

In the first "Book-End" department (April 22), Thurber sounds at first more like Dad than the spoofing parodist. Touting Zona Gale's *Faint Perfume,* he says that although it is not a perfectly constructed book, "it is flung like a rose among the sordid sex stuff that prevails in present day novels." In fact, Thurber comes close to making the Dad-ish point that the book is worth reading simply because it serves as an antidote for the fashionable works of Ben Hecht, D.H. Lawrence, or Sherwood Anderson. But Ploermell also appears in this first Book-End. Two paragraphs after the opening one about Zona Gale is a quotation from New York *Evening Post* book reviewer Kenelm Digby, who says:

> The greatest pleasures we have ever had in life have come to us through books; but now we have had our mental digestion ruined. We have gobbled up so many books that we really don't know what we do think of them any more and have written so many paragraphs that we sicken of literature.

Thurber's comment is that perhaps by his "essaying a column about books and writers and things" he may end up souring his love of literature. This sounds a bit like Ploermell, whose experiences almost soured him on detective work and whose attempts to impress clients with his daring deduction almost always left those clients nonplussed. The two personae blend smoothly during the course of the column. The result is a persona who speaks out forthrightly concerning his opinions, but who does so with self deprecation as if convinced, like the latter Ploermell, that he is as likely to be wrong as right.

This latter voice is perhaps best exemplified by the Book-End that appeared on September 16. The opening lines show a Thurber whose Dad-ish tendencies have been battered by criticism of his views:

> If the final proof of critical competence of literary sensitivity and of artistic good taste lies in one's ability to register deep satisfaction while reading the works of Carl Van Vechten, the doorkeeper must let us out. The exclusive circle of the elite is no place for us.

Thurber tells us that "everyone with any sense at all of the clever and the beautiful and the delightfully satirical" raved about Van Vechten's *Peter Whiffle,* but that he found it "dull and filled with attenuated blah." And when the next book, *The Blind Bow Boy,* threatened to be more of the same, Thurber says he "told the circle we had to telephone a man, and went out the back door." Here we still see vestiges of Dad. Thurber is not one to follow the latest literary fashion, but he does not have Dad's naive self-assurance. Instead, the Ploermell parodist tells us he realizes his views are unworthy and that he does not belong in the circle of elite literary critics, but the author's voice tells us that his views are indeed worthy -- he places them at the beginning of his column. Although the self-deprecating tone quietens a bit as he regains confidence, this voice continues for the rest of the column. In the last column he defends himself for liking Don Stewart's iconoclastic *Aunt Polly's Story of Mankind:*

> The seriousness of the book does not bother us in the least. ... This is strange, too, for we are all ready to be bothered, and have been for some time, by any book which attacks prevailing beliefs and prominent people and accepted principles. ... We feel our pendulum swinging back toward that kindly old normalcy of the gentle morons, when it was right to be virtuous and a man could raise a thirst for illicit loves and liquor, but would never think of doing it without feeling a little guilty, not knowing that it is all right to be wrong, and very bad indeed to be what he had been taught was good.

Thurber has clearly identified himself among the "gentle morons," an apt description of Ploermell. But remember that Ploermell was occasionally right and that he did solve his last case. A writer's characters are often caricatures of personality traits that he sees in himself or others. If Dad and Ploermell are caricatures of Thurber's traits, then in the course of his discussion of literature we see him shaking off those caricatures and coming closer to himself.

One theme did not require such synthesis. Thurber is at his most Dad-ish when he's speaking of animals. Thurber's love of animals, particularly dogs, can be seen in his fables and in his collection *Thurber's Dogs* (1955). Although animals became an important theme later in Thurber's career, they show up only rarely in "Credos and Curios." The major example is a short essay in the second column (February 25) condemning the use of animals in circuses:

> Occasionally there is a dog ... who appears to get a lot of real enjoyment out of performing. But we never saw the light of joy on the face of a tiger trying to roll a tri-colored sphere around a vaudeville stage with his hind feet; or a glance of eager expectation in the eye of a bull gnu being encouraged to swing by his knees from a chandelier; or heard a yelp of keen pleasure from a mamma horse taught to leap from a piano top through a papered hoop onto an up-ended bucket.

This Thurber essay is about the closest that his persona came to Dad's -- he is speaking out quite plainly against the use of animals as mere entertainment. Thurber says here that the circus shows are a form of pretentiousness; the acts are not a natural act for the animals, nor are they being used for any necessary activity, such as a draft horse is. He ends the piece by saying that the animals should be returned to the wild, and that he would enjoy seeing films of their return more than seeing them perform in captivity.

In Thurber's treatment of the other major themes in the column -- the war between the sexes, the individual against society or bureaucracy, and in fantasy -- he presents a synthesis of the traits of Dad and Ploermell. In particular, we see Thurber taking traits from both Dad and Ploermell to create the Prufrock character that De Vries identified. Ploermell himself, obviously, does not quite qualify as a Prufrock because he constantly tries to act in spite of the increasing body of evidence that he is indeed incompetent. Nor does Dad really qualify as a Prufrock because he has no doubt whatsoever in the veracity of his opinions. However, Ploermell's confidence is shaken as he finds himself in situations beyond his capabilities, and Dad never leaves his newspaper long enough to test his hypotheses and observations in a true social environment. So with those two characters, we do have some of the traits of Thurber's famous Prufrocks.

Thurber's Prufrock persona is usually most closely associated with his war between the sexes theme, but as we saw earlier one of the first -- if not the first -- appearances of that theme was in the second Dad Dialog. As we have also seen, Dad is himself as much a target of Thurber's humor as are the issues he addresses, but after Dad describes how it is the older women who are shooting the older men, he says that the papers call such stories a "Romance":

> They try to show that "Love" rises supreme to "Convention." The only convention love is actually supreme to, for all practical purposes, is a political convention. The rest have got the drop on it and it's got to behave or end in jail.

Many Thurber critics have attributed his war between the sexes theme to his stormy marriage to Althea Adams, which lasted from 1922 to 1938. But here we see Thurber writing about men suffering at the hands of women during the first

year of that marriage. Attributing the theme totally to the marriage seems much too simplistic.

But even as early as 1923, Thurber was clearly already interested in the differences between men and women. One interesting example appears three weeks later. In the March 18 column, a two-paragraph item titled "Memoirs of an Automobile Tour" divides its paragraphs into "What He Remembered" and "What She Remembered." He generally remembers more practical or pragmatic matters, such as "the excellent facilities of the service station in Addison, Pa." or "the number of miles per gallon they got on the road from Hagerstown to Washington." In contrast, she remembers more impressionistic or emotional matters, such as "the perfectly horrible wait in the service station in Addison, Pa." or "the field of cornflowers on the road from Hagerstown to Washington." He, of course, remembers "the blonde waitress in the hotel at Wheeling," and she remembers the "miserable marcel" she got; but then she remembers "the handsome proprietor of the garage in Cumberland," but all he remembers is "the bill for new brakebands in Cumberland." Nothing in the short item indicates that this couple is at war with one another, but Thurber is clearly interested in the differences in the perceptions of the two people of the same road trip. The next week (March 25), Thurber includes three short items that clearly indicate that he sees those differences as a point of friction and not just an interesting trait of human nature.

The first two are innocent enough. Thurber says, "There will always be an ineradicable line of differentiation between men and women" as long as men focus on the food itself while women emphasize the way it's served, and in the second one he says it's better to insult one's wife directly than not comment on her new hair style or room arrangements. The third item, though, recaptures the open warfare that Dad commented upon:

> The little girl whose mother has been elected United States senator or something will have to hold her nose pretty high in the air if she is to outdo in hauteur the little girl whose mother shot a man.

In all of these, the men suffer at the hands of women, but they are not necessarily Prufrocks. The second one may feel overwhelmed at having to notice and comment upon everything his wife does, but the first simply wants to eat, and the third is simply dead. The Prufrock character in these little paragraphs shows up a few weeks later in the April 22 "Credos and Curios." It is again only a one-sentence paragraph:

> No matter how many spring cleaning seasons he may go through, a man may never expect to learn the fine line of distinction between those things which go to the basement and those which go to the attic.

This is almost the plot of one of the episodes in the Mr. and Mrs. Monroe series. In "Mr. Monroe and the Moving Men," Mr. Monroe must supervise the movers who are packing up some things to go into storage and others to go to their summer home. Mrs. Monroe had given him explicit instructions, but they had seemed so logical that he paid little attention. When the time came, however, Mr. Monroe could not remember what his wife had said and, like a Prufrock, could not face deciding on his own and face the disdain of his wife. In the end, he simply allows the movers and packers to make the decisions for him.

All of those paragraphs, however, are in the third person. Thurber speaks of the war between the sexes as if he were somehow separated from it. But in the fifteenth "Credos and Curios" (May 27), he finally places himself in a paragraph and assumes for himself the Prufrock character:

> Every time we see the beginning of an advertising campaign for a new brand of butter, our heart sinks, for it gives us just one more name to

confuse with the kind our wife sends us after on those occasions when she forgot to order it in time.

This one sentence is a wonderfully rich example of Thurber-Prufrock, for in it we see a grown man defeated by the mere mention of a new brand of butter. He knows from the outset that this new brand will only increase his own confusion and the likelihood that he will suffer his wife's wrath for buying the wrong item, just as in Walter Mitty's search for puppy buscuits.

That paragraph is not the first time that Thurber assumed the Prufrock persona, but it is the first time that he applied it to himself in connection with the theme of the war between the sexes. Before that, he had presented himself often as a victim; usually he is the victim of officialdom, but at times he is the victim, like Ploermell, of attempting some activity beyond his capabilities, or just simply the victim of circumstance. In the first "Credos and Curios," Thurber writes:

> We never answer the telephone, when it is an undertaker calling in a death notice, that the name of the deceased isn't something like Anastasia Q. Lihodyz, whose fatal malady was incuriatus dedlius of the ductal tract or something. Whereupon the regular obit-taker returns from lunch to receive the news of the death of John Smith from flu.

In the third column (March 4) he has moved a little closer toward the victim of officialdom. The "officials" here, though, are Pullman porters. He starts the short piece by saying, "Some day we are going to kill a Pullman porter." He explains that the porters are never around when he needs some service, but once the time comes for the porters to perform their required duties, such as dusting off the passengers with a whisk broom, they are determined to accomplish their task:

> But it is absolutely unprecedented to refuse. ... If you refused you might be thrown off the train or reported to the general passenger agent in Pittsburgh.

> You might give the man his quarter and tell him to go 'way, but that would be weakly yielding. The thing to do is kill him. In fact, you are either going to kill him or else you are going to be whisked. As for us, we've been whisked for the last time.

Despite the implied violence in the piece, no one expects Thurber to be premeditating the murder of a Pullman porter. Instead, the reader sees through the Dad-ish bombast that Thurber is exasperated at an immutable system that he has no power to influence, and it is exactly that "man overwhelmed" image that lies at the heart of De Vries' description of Thurber's Prufrock characters.

When Thurber begins his extended anecdotes with the sixth "Credos and Curios" (March 25), he continues the thematic persona of a person helpless before the system. As in the Pullman porter piece, the first anecdote describes an unofficial system, this time the wait in the doctor's office. Although he arrives on time for his appointment, he finds that he must wait. After half an hour, he gets up to ask the nurse about the wait, but she looks at him "as one who might say 'how dared you to move?'" so he pretends to examine some artwork. After another half hour a nurse asks for Mr. Lloyd, but Thurber is the only man in the room. "'Mr. Thurber?' I suggested hopefully. She smiled sadly and went away." After still another half hour, Thurber goes outside to buy a paper, but when he gets back, the nurse says the doctor thought he had left and took another patient. "I fainted dead away on the floor." The fainting is an almost classic Prufrock reaction. Thurber does not become irate and demand that his appointment be honored, but he meekly gives in to the situation. Interestingly, Thurber links himself closely to the Prufrock persona in this item -- it is one of only two items written in first person singular (Thurber normally used the editorial "we"), and he even inserts

his name into the story (in some *New Yorker* stories, he used "Thurman" or "Thurberg" or some other approximation of his name).

Naturally, this Prufrock persona surfaces most often in the anecdotes; in the literary essays he wants to appear as if he knows his subject, even though he does at times belittle himself, and in the parodies he definitely shows his superiority over his target. But in the anecdotes, he is often a "man overwhelmed" by whatever normally trivial circumstance he finds himself. One of those anecdotes, on getting his telephone connected, exemplifies Thurber's use of this persona. The anecdote, in the April 8 column, is the other first person singular anecdote, and in it Thurber establishes the "man overwhelmed" persona in his first two sentences:

> Most people can go down to the telephone office, order a phone installed and have it put in, after the usual lapse of time, without a great deal of incident. I can't.

Thurber is promised that the phone will be "attended to at once" at least five times during the two-week event. Workmen come into the house, look at the phone or run the wire through their hands, and then disappear. At one point late in the incident, Thurber tries to be forceful:

> The next day another man came out. He had many tools and much wire. "Is here where you want a phone put in?" he asked. "Here is where I want one connected up," I said. He started away. I grabbed him. "Put 'at phone in!" I said. "I'm the installation man," he said. "I don't connect phones," and he was gone.

Here we see Thurber as a character being overwhelmed by the unassailable logic of a working man. No matter how forceful Thurber tries to be, the rules of that particular vocation prevail. It is reminiscent of his anecdotes about cars told in "Recollections of the Gas Buggy," reprinted in *The Thurber Carnival.* In one of

them, he describes driving a car in Britain when the battery dies. A garage mechanic arrives and says he will tow the car while Thurber lets the clutch in and out. But after the mechanic tows the car some few miles with no results, the mechanic asks Thurber what gear he has the car in. Thurber has it in neutral.

> Now, as any child or old lady knows, you have to have her in gear. If she is in neutral, it is like trying to turn on the electric lights when there are no bulbs in the sockets. The garage mechanic looked at me with the special look garage mechanics reserve for me. It is a mixture of incredulity, bewilderment, and distress. I put her in low gear, he gave me a short haul, and she started. I paid him and, as I drove off, I could see him in the rear-view mirror, standing in the road still staring after me with that look. (pp. 38-39)

Thurber does not try to be forceful with the mechanic as he had with the telephone repairman, but he does evoke the same professional disdain from both. In the "Credos and Curios" piece, Thurber is simply a person who is unfamiliar with the bureaucracy of the telephone company, but in the later piece he presents himself as truly inept in matters mechanical. However, the same basic persona is evident in both -- Thurber describes himself as a person who has little familiarity with everyday practical matters.

A late item that shows Thurber perpetuating that persona appears in the Sept. 16 "Credos and Curios." In it, he describes the people of his profession -- newspaper "colyumists":

> So it is coming about that people are looking upon colyumists as having the grace of a Lord Beaconsfield, the social amenities of a Pepys, the over-coffee repartee of a Voltaire and the parlor tricks of a Richard Harding Davis. Alas, such is not the case.

> The gentlemen who get out a daily column, or a weekly one, are, in truth, wearers of shiny pants, owners of tousled hair, losers of buttons from overcoats, carriers of umbrellas, with a tendency to spot their ties, neglect their shoes and ride up near the motorman so as not to be seen. They are notorious evaders of drawing rooms and tea parties. They haven't got a thing to wear, and they look funny in it.

The piece could almost be a rough draft of the introduction to *My Life and Hard Times* (1933, reprinted in *The Thurber Carnival,* 1945). In "Preface to a Life," Thurber again describes the members of his profession, but this time humor writers:

> The notion that such persons are gay of heart and carefree is curiously untrue. They lead, as a matter of fact, an existence of jumpiness and apprehension. ... Authors of such pieces have, nobody knows why, a genius for getting into minor difficulties: they walk into the wrong apartments, they drink furniture polish for stomach bitters, they drive their cars into the prize tulip beds of haughty neighbors, they playfully slap gangsters, mistaking them for old school friends. ... Such a writer moves about restlessly wherever he goes, ready to get the hell out at the drop of a pie pan or the lift of a skirt. (pp. 173-174)

The major differences are that the "colyumist" is perhaps merely shy, withdrawn, absent-minded and unstylish, whereas the "writers of light pieces" have exaggerated those traits to, if not beyond, the border of neurosis. But the "voice" here, if not the persona, is almost exactly the same. Blair (1942) points out that the "befuddled fool" character has been a standard in American humor since Artemus Ward (pp. 274 ff).

Related to this "befuddled fool" persona is Thurber's love of the fantastic in everyday life. The major difference is that whereas the fool finds himself overwhelmed by matters of daily living, the fantasist finds himself amused or even enchanted by common objects or occurrences. One of the first of these appears in the May 6 column, a paragraph entitled "Tongith, The Terrible":

> Tongith! What a name to conjure with! See it shoot hot sparks! Feel it drop on the consciousness like a bullet, and roll across the memory somberly like a round-handled kriss! It might have been the name of a murderer from Tartar land. It might have been a lieutenant of Tamerlaine. It reminds vaguely of Conrad and the Cameroons and the bell that tolled the massacre of Bartholomew's eve and the Boxer rebellion. It is, however, merely the way we spell Tonight when we are in a hurry, on the typewriter.

The paragraph illustrates Thurber's love of words and their associations. He takes a simple typographical error and transforms it into a mythological figure. The paragraph itself appears at the end of the column, suggesting that it was dashed off as a filler; that partially excuses such strange phrases as "roll across the memory somberly" or "it reminds vaguely." However, the tone is playful, as if the speaker is as delighted and surprised at the discovery as the reader is. It certainly has more of Ploermell than of Dad in it.

Thurber's interest in fantasy is apparent throughout the column. Two weeks after Tongith appeared (May 20), Thurber wrote an essay called "The Comic Urge" that discussed the comic strips then appearing in American newspapers. Thurber especially praises Walter C. Hoban and his "Jerry on the Job."

> He seems to us to come closest of any to a peculiar sort of fantasy, a rare quality in American artists of any medium. His humor is as delicious in its

way as the dramatic dialog of Clare Kummer. Who can deny the effectiveness of the extravagant naivete of the youthful Jerry who presides with such conscientious watchfulness over the trains out of New Monia?

Although some of Thurber's comparisons are now dated, he does link in this passage the qualities of fantasy and naivete. A person needs a certain amount of naivete to see the fantastic qualities of something so mundane as a misspelling. A practical-minded Dad character does not become enraptured with artistic pretentiousness, but then again such a character would not be able to see the connotations or possibilities of some everyday event. It takes a Ploermell to see family relationships (albeit the wrong ones) in a mended watch chain, but it takes a genius for fantasy to see a Tartar murderer in the jumbled letters of *tonight*. In "A Scandal in Bohemia," Sherlock Holmes tells Watson, "You see, but you do not observe" (p. 162); Thurber not only sees the words but also observes them, thinking of their connotations and associations. Like Ploermell, Thurber is able to see past the denotative meaning of the word to its emotional or symbolic value. And when such detective work yields a pleasant discovery, he presents it to his readers with the same child-like sense of wonder and delight as Ploermell presented his successful deductions.

Thurber applies his powers of fantastic observation to other things besides words. On October 14, he put together "Portrait of a Noon Edition: A Tone Poem" from lines and phrases that appeared (or might appear) in a newspaper. Space permits quoting only a few of the poem's 99 lines.

GUARDS ARE SLAIN
THE GUARDS ARE SLAIN
PRISONERS KILL THE GUARDS
BARRICADE BARRICADE
BARRICADE THE HALL
GUARDS DIE GUARD DIES GUARDS DIE SLAIN

...
We're shooting up the jail-house, rat-tat-tat
We're shooting up the jail-house, get your gat!
ONE KILLED
TEN HURT
Senator Hiram Doolittle
arrived at Hoboken today
on the S.S. Laurentia and told reporters he
was glad to be back in God's country
Crash kills 15 crash kills nine
Crash kills family bursts his spine

It is, to say the least, an odd poem, but it effectively parodies the content of front page stories. More importantly, however, it shows Thurber seeing these lines and phrases in the news pages, and also his observing that with only slight alteration and rearrangement they would fit together into something approximating an artistic form. There is an element of fantasy in all this -- it's as if he has found a newspaper from the far side of the looking glass.

Thurber uses this same fantasist voice in many of his later stories, particularly "The Black Magic of Barney Haller," reprinted in *The Thurber Carnival.* In it, Thurber has to deal with the equally strange language of his hired man, a person Thurber is convinced trafficks with the devil.

> "Dis morning bime by," said Barney, "I go hunt grotches in de voods." ... If you are susceptible to such things, it is not difficult to visualize grotches. They fluttered into my mind: ugly little creatures, about the size of whippoorwills, only covered with blood and honey and the scrapings of church bells. (p. 137)

Here, a word that is perfectly ordinary for the speaker ("crotches") incites flights of fantasy for Thurber. He explained this part of his nature in "The Secret Life of James Thurber" (also reprinted in *The Thurber Carnival)* as coming from his childhood "secret world of idiom." Thurber compares his early life with that

recounted in Salvador Dali, who reported that he had once bitten a bat in the presence of his aunts. Thurber's one escape was living in a world where idiomatic expressions were literally true. For instance, he reports that he and his wife were shopping for a house, and when one real estate agent couldn't find a key, the other said "It's a common lock. A skeleton will let you in."

> I was suddenly once again five years old, with wide eyes and open mouth. I pictured the Roxbury house as I would have pictured it as a small boy, a house of such dark and nameless horrors as have never crossed the mind of our little bat-biter. It was of sentences like that, nonchalantly tossed off by real-estate dealers, great-aunts, clergymen, and other such prosaic persons that the enchanted private world of my early boyhood was made. (p. 33)

In such passages as "Tongith, The Terrible" and "Portrait of a Noon Edition," and in such stories as "The Black Magic of Barney Haller," we see that Thurber never grew out of that enchanted land of idiom. And considering such major works as his five book-length fantasies and his drawings, we see that the fantasist was as important a voice for Thurber as the Prufrock we more often associate with him.

Although "Credos and Curios" does not show Thurber developing a single writer's voice, we do see Thurber experimenting with several different voices and refining them to suit his themes. As discussed earlier, Yates had identified two major Thurber's personae: the little man and the militant progressive. In his discussion, though, he saw the little man persona more commonly in the early Thurber and the militant progressive more common in the later Thurber. "Credos and Curios" hints that the little man persona was refined through the traits of Ploermell, and that the militant progressive persona was first embodied in Dad. Through the course of the column, however, Thurber continued to borrow traits from each of those character types, settling on a "little Dad" for his essays on

literature, dropping the Dad-ish aspects of his war between the sexes persona, but keeping a "little man" persona for his discussion of fantasy in everyday life. Of course, the personae also evolved as Thurber, through his writing and through his dealing with criticism of his comments, became more aware of his values.

Chapter 4

Probing for Values

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the appropriate matching of theme and voice is important to the establishment of a writer's art, and the column contains plenty of images, motifs, and themes that later became easily recognizable as Thurber trademarks. Those themes and voices in "Credos and Curios" reveal the young Thurber exploring his values. The process of writing has long been seen as a form of self-discovery that often transcends logic; in *Aspects of the Novel,* E.M. Forster illustrated his point that a writer should not overly prearrange a work by telling of a woman who showed her contempt for logic by asking "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" (p. 101). Thurber not only articulated his literary and social values in "Credos and Curios," but he also responded to criticisms of those views, and the combination allowed him to understand and refine those values.

For instance, the "Dad Dialogs" items often speak out against pretentiousness (in theatre, literature, dancing, and so on), which parallels his views of romanticism in literature (the "sordid sex stuff" pretentiously elevates biological urges to the level of art). And in the later "The Book End" pieces that respond to the criticism he drew from his earlier comments on romanticism, we see that he never repudiates those values, but he does discuss the limits of romanticism. His September 23 column on "The Curse of Contentment" repudiates Pollyannaism, saying there is a "majesty in melancholy" -- a statement that does not contradict a romantic point of view. Since romanticism is so

explicitly important to Thurber, it is useful both as a basic description of his values and as a starting place for a discussion of those values.

The classic Thrall, Hibbard and Holman *A Handbook to Literature* (1960) provides a brief definition of literary romanticism:

> The term designates a literary and philosophical theory which tends to see the individual at the very center of all life and all experience, and it places him, therefore, at the center of art, making literature most valuable as an expression of his unique feelings and particular attitudes. ... It places a high premium upon the creative function of the imagination, seeing art as a formulation of intuitive imaginative perceptions that tend to speak a nobler truth than that of fact, logic, or the here and now. ... Employing the commonplace, the natural, the simple as its materials, it seeks always to find the Absolute, the Ideal, by transcending the actual. (pp. 431-432)

The entry describes how romanticism supplanted neo-classicism in the 18th century, placing its emphasis on the imagination rather than on formal forms and rules that marked neo-classicism. In the late 19th century, romanticism gave way to realism, with its emphasis on the factual. At the time of "Credos and Curios," romanticism had not fully disappeared, and Thurber had been influenced by English professors who had studied before realism's advent. Thurber uses *romanticism* in a narrower sense to describe literature that focuses on the beauty of life, as opposed to literature that focuses on the base or the vile. In the first "The Book End" segment, on April 22, Thurber praised Zona Gale's *Faint Perfume* for its "note of idealistic love":

> Not that it is as convincingly handled or as subtly and perfectly accomplished as the more homely phrased story, but that it is flung like a fresh rose among the sordid sex stuff that prevails in present day novels. ...

> Much idealism of the "sweetness and light" school is to be found, but here is a first rate author finding a romantic point of departure. There is, of course, the runaway episode of Pearl, and the picture of Mr. Strong like a vignette from Edgar Lee Masters, but the purpose of the book is the fine fragrance of a sensitive, clean love that permeates and affects everything. It is a beautiful book.

In this first "Book End" paragraph, we see many of the values that Thurber built upon throughout the rest of column. The mainstream of contemporary literature -- D.H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, and Ben Hecht are his favorite targets -- runs to novels that have divorced sex and love and have indeed subordinated love to the basic sexual instincts. Thurber, however, is not yet ready to forgo the trappings of romantic love. As we saw in the previous chapter's discussion of fantasy, Thurber was fascinated by the imagination's power to transform mundane objects and occurrences into things of art and beauty. In this specific case, Thurber goes on record early as saying he much prefers books that transform an animal instinct into something more uniquely human, something enveloped in mystery and mystique. However, he is not so caught up in this value that he does not see that the book has its faults. It lacks subtlety and a degree of accomplishment and does not at times present its story convincingly, but Thurber champions it nevertheless simply because it matches his romantic tastes.

A month later, on May 27, Thurber wrote about Willa Cather's *One of Ours* in much the same tone, defending its receipt of the Pulitzer over Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*. He concedes Lewis' book may have been better, but at least Cather "is one of the few important novelists in this country who do not confine themselves altogether to realistic portrayals of Klux kleagles, morons, defectives, psychopaths, sex-starvelings, ... and miscellaneous wives and widows and other

women with grotesquely improper desiderata." Thurber also defends the Pulitzer committee's choice because they are limited by the terms of the award -- to select the book "that best presents the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood." Thurber revels in the fact that the Pulitzer committee holds to very much the same values as he does, writing that the criteria exclude almost everything written in the 1920s.

The clearest example of this attitude appears two weeks later, in the June 10 column. The week before, Thurber had begun the "Book-End" department with a short paragraph in which he called for "a birth of romanticism in American and British literature." He attenuates that desire by saying he simply wishes to read a novel about "fine people" without having to go back to Henry James' works. Thurber knew the piece would draw criticism, and he writes in the June 10 essay that "while waiting for the devotees of realism to accuse us of advocating the return of the open Pollyanna," he would excerpt quotes from an editorial in the Literature Review section of the New York *Evening Post.* What followed was more than just a series of quotes; Thurber devoted almost the entire column to a long essay about the resurgence of romanticism in American literature, especially in the writings of the younger generation; it requires quoting at length to avoid distorting Thurber's argument:

> This romantic fire breaks out ever and again in the novels of your most daring younger writers, Scott Fitzgerald and Dos Passos and Stephen Benet, for examples. What could be more romantic than the love episodes in the first part of Mr. Benet's "Beginning of Wisdom," where, with settings and properties and lighting for a typical sex debauch all in place, Mr. Benet touches the scene with the clear white fire of a transfiguring beauty? ... There are evidences here and there of the realism of Anderson and the

> melancholy of Eugene O'Neill, which, most certainly, is as it should be, for it would be fatal if Americans of the next generation are to disdain such influences altogether, influences which have given some importance to native American literature. The point we strive to make is that it would be just as fatal were the next generation -- the present younger generation -- to go over body and soul to realism and the exclusive study of common minded persons whose only ecstasy is the opium ecstasy of sex. ... Of course, it is harder to write fine stories about fine people than it is to write about bizarre folks. ... Realism is all right as far as it goes, but it has gone too far and left the "fine, sensitive gentlemen" -- and ladies -- of which Mr. James wrote without a chronicler to write of them in beauty and in charm, the two destroying lacks of the sex-obsessed novel.

Here Thurber most clearly champions romanticism over realism, although he admits the weaknesses of the first and the strengths of the second. We also here have the clearest link between his views of romanticism and fantasy -- romanticism provides the "clear white fire of a transfiguring beauty" that elevates the baser instincts, just as imagination and fantasy transfigure the mundane into the wondrous.

Interestingly, Thurber here does not object to the inclusion of sex in modern novels, but only to what he sees as the glorification of animalistic sex. As his comments about Benet indicate, sex in a novel is perfectly admissible as long as it is given in a higher, romantic context. Thurber's point that writing about fine people is more difficult than writing about "bizarre folks" is interesting. The first major difficulty that comes to mind is that a writer will indeed have trouble making a refined, normal human interesting to a reader, whereas a bizarre character will have inherent interest for the reader. Thurber argues that it is not art

simply to recount the actions of someone who does not follow conventions; art lies in the ability of the writer to transform a normal person into something of beauty and charm.

Almost all the lead items in "The Book End" have that tone. Thurber's arguments along those lines culminate in the November 4 column. The essay responds to Karl Brend, who had written a letter apologizing for "considering [Thurber] seriously interested in belle-lettres (sic)" and accusing him of having beer tastes that prevented him from liking champagne literature. Thurber says that the theme of his essay had been "the following out of the birth, in the very midst of a sex-psychology epoch, of several commendable if not highly important novels about the sort of people one knows and cares to hear about":

> The American novel, as we see it, must deal with cleaner, fresher, less complicated and certainly less "complexed" persons, souls, hearts and even bodies than the French or even the Russian novel. For, so far as we have been able to observe them, and we have observed them here and in France surrounded by the nationals of a score of other countries, Americans are, say what you will, cleaner, fresher, less complicated and less "complexed." Pollyannaism grew up in this country because of those facts. It could not even get a start anywhere else. Naturally, Pollyannaism will not do. ... Mr. Brend apparently discovered in our June essay ... some intimation that romanticism is replacing realism everywhere and for good and all. ... Realism, whether it be in the grand old manner he so loves, or in the modern sex manner, or in the Dreiser manner, or any other manner, is the lastingest thing in literature. We had only hoped, and still do, that this country, with the broadest fields in the world for "realism without dirt" -- if you will -- may yet produce a writer who will do it justice without stamping

his volume with characters all Babbitt or sex or Pollyanna to the exclusion of those interesting Americans, not strictly any one of those things and yet a little of each, whom you and I call friend.

Here we see Thurber expanding on his idea, expressed in the June 10 column, that "realism is all right as far as it goes, but it has gone too far." Coping with Brend's criticism, Thurber finds that he has perhaps overstated his case for romanticism and understated his appreciation (albeit distaste) for realism; this essay is an attempt to bring those values into proper balance. For literature to be any good, Thurber says, it must deal with real people in real situations. Taking any literary style to the extreme, whether it be romantisism or realism, leads to characters who are caricatures, having nothing in common with realistic people. Brend's comments did not necessarily temper Thurber's attitude toward romanticism, but they certainly forced him to tone down his comments. This essay, then, does not so much contradict or develop the earlier statements as simply clarify them. A large part of that clarification is Thurber's stress on the fact that he had been talking specifically about American literature. The earlier essay had not made that point explicitly, although Thurber had used the term "American literature" several times and had given only American writers as examples. Brend apparently mistook Thurber's narrow focus as an indicator of his unfamiliarity with international literature, leading to his extensive listing of French and Russian writers. Consequently, Thurber realized that he needed to specify his topic.

Thurber linked his romantic literary tastes to his view of the world around him. Expanded, then, the term *romanticism* can be used to describe Thurber's value of the romantic in daily life; he seems especially interested in focusing his romantic imagination upon seeking out elements of fantasy in the mundane occurrences around him. This value led to the inclusion of several anecdotes of

personal experience -- from buying a hat in Paris to battling a bat that flew into the house -- that shows Thurber refining the ore of everyday life for the golden adventures it contains. This value greatly influenced Thurber's mature writing, leading to some of his most famous stories (the series collected as *My Life and Hard Times* and the classic "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"). Many of the short items -- one-liners and paragraphs -- sprinkled throughout the column show Thurber reveling in the unexpected fantasies and beauties that turn up in the most mundane of places, or in the elements of romanticism in everyday life.

Among the first examples of Thurber's romantic view of life appear in the "Dad Dialogs." Certainly a kind of "romanticism" can be found in the Dad's diatribes against pretentiousness; life, Dad seems to say, has enough to offer without trying to abstract it or envelop it in exotic shrouds, despite the fact that Dad often retreats back into his non-romantic newspaper after making his comments. In fact, Thurber uses the image of the newspaper as a kind of foil for Dad's diatribes; on one level, it shows him grounded in some form of mundane reality, but on the other it shows him applying his imagination and Midwestern values to that reality. This can be seen somewhat in the first "Dad Dialog" about the literature of the South Seas discussed in the preceding chapter. There Dad seems to say that too much realism -- too much reliance on the local language -- makes the stories unintelligible. The South Seas are, of all places, romantic enough that a writer need not work overmuch to make them interesting to the readers. Along the same lines, in the March 4 column, Dad takes aim at "technique" in modern drama. Technique is a "sort of magnificent dodging of the question," Dad says. "Instead of Othello choking his wife to death, he does a dance with a batik scarf while a green light plays over the stage." Here, Thurber uses Dad to say that if the characters are well drawn to begin with, trying to

modernize them with "technique" ruins the effect of the play; however, "technique" in this discussion cannot be equated with realism. When it comes to matters of everyday life, Thurber seems to use Dad to speak out against the pretentiousness of certain fads because they rob life of its inherent mysteries. The primary example here appears in the April 8 "Credos and Curios," wherein Dad took on the current fad of spiritualism:

> "I rather liked the old fashioned ghost," mused Dad. "He was a very decent sort, seldom bothering anybody much, sticking to his route mostly, like walking up and down the back stairs a couple of times a week or such matter, and putting on no high-falutin' airs at all. The modern super-ghost is a different matter. He's got temperament."
>
> "Have you seen one?" asked Mother breathlessly.
>
> "Not yet. But I see by the paper that A. Conan Doyle is going to bring a troupe of 'em here. He used to write Sherlock Holmes stories when he was well. ... Now they claim they can photograph fire spirits. One medium even clipped a lock of hair from a female Ectoplasm that floated through the room. I didn't use to dread so much coming back and haunting a nice quiet attic, but this business of having to entertain the local branch of the Ectoplasmic Research and Photographic Society is too much."

Certainly very few things add a touch of the mysterious and the supernatural to life as do ghosts, and yet at the turn of the century spiritualism had been reduced to parlor tricks; a seance was as fashionable as a bridge game. Dad wants a return of the old fashioned, romantic kind of ghost, and through his discourse Thurber argues that ghosts are themselves fantastic and fascinating enough and need not be given the ectoplasmic trappings that spiritualism had imposed upon them. The discussion here has vestiges of the romanticism versus realism discussion taking

place in "The Book-End." In the first place, the old-fashioned ghosts, as Dad says, go about their own business and only occasionally intrude into the world of humans. When they do, those intrusions are a source of wonder and excitement on their own merits. Spiritualism, on the other hand, seeks to subordinate the ghosts to the whims and commands of humans, being little more than actors hired to entertain an audience (Dad says Doyle is bring a "troupe" of ghosts with him). Similarly, romanticism at its best seeks to transform what occurs naturally and imbue it with emotion and mystery, whereas realism seeks only to revel in those natural emotions and to use them as an excuse for the basest human behaviors. Certainly realism would have nothing to do with either ghosts or spiritualism, except perhaps to expose the silliness of the one or the fraud in the other, but the point here is simply that Thurber's attitudes toward romanticism and ghosts are not dissonant, for both call attention to the wonder inherent in life.

Another, clearer, example of Thurber's value of the romantic in life appears in the April 22 column. Here he devotes a few paragraphs in praise of the long skirt:

> [The return of the long skirt] is like the return of April sunlight to brown winter meadows, and the coming of deep green leaves to gaunt oak trees. The short skirt was Mechanicsburg or Gurkheimer Junction; the long skirt is Camelot and the Severn River. ... The long dress breathes of muted harpsichord music, of old colonnades under the moon, of lilacs at twilight, of romance on wide shining stairways. ... The skirts of Juno and Juliet and Guinevere and Nausicaa and Heloise. The dresses of poetry and dream and romance and desire.

Here is Thurber practising the elements of romanticism -- taking an ordinary article of clothing and bestowing upon it the qualities of mythology and medieval

gentilesse. In a sense, what we see here is pure Walter Mitty. To be sure, the dress does not initiate a full-blown fantasy as the sight of a hospital or the shout of a newsboy does for Mitty, but it definitely puts Thurber into a land of daydream. In view of Thurber's invectives against the "sordid sex stuff" in American literature, it is interesting that here Thurber lauds the long skirt for the feelings of romance it incites. The women Thurber names were not fine people in a Henry James sense (though perhaps we can excuse the child Juliet, and Guinevere was probably no worse that Mme. de Vionnet), but they certainly inhabited the lands of dream and romance. Thurber is more concerned with the emotional and mystical trappings than he is with the sex itself. The passage, then, shows that Thurber valued the romantic in life as he did in literature. Perhaps it can be argued that Thurber thereby exhibits a certain amount of immaturity, and that point will not be refuted here; however, the principal point is that Thurber shows consistency in his values.

A shorter example of how the value of romanticism also colored his views of everyday life appears in the August 26 "Credos and Curios." Here, Thurber wonders why people like to tour recently built houses -- even before the walls are painted or the rooms furnished. "We see nothing to exclaim about in plaster and new flooring, in staring windows and blank rooms," he says. "A house is worth going through only when it is completely furnished or when it is filled with dangerous rafters." In other words, Thurber thinks houses are interesting only after they have been stamped with human life -- some artifacts left behind by the people who lived there upon which Thurber's fancy can play. It is a romantic notion in that Thurber thinks things by themselves are not interesting until they are touched by the transforming power of the human imagination. Decorating and furnishing a house certainly require a certain amount of imagination, but perhaps

what Thurber is focusing on here, especially since he seems to concentrate on empty old houses, is his own imagination. An empty new house provides him with no clues whatsoever of the people who may one day live in the house, but an empty old house will always retain some faint echoes of the lives that have passed through it. Again Thurber has given us, in this short item, an example of his view that romanticism and fantasy were closely related.

As we saw in the last chapter, Thurber indeed valued fantasy's ability to enrich life (the "Tongith" passage is perhaps the clearest example). But of course those examples primarily show that Thurber valued the pleasure he got from his own imagination. Thurber's view that any person who lives without fantasy has a limited, if not barren, existence is clearly seen in the little story "The Plaguey Hundredth Chance" that appeared in the September 16 column. The story tells of a professor who has just finished his life's work composing the definitive refutation of the supernatural:

> Not only did Professor Van Dreddin expose the machinery of the cheap magic which called up these visitations; not only did he account for levitation and spirit messages and knockings upon walls; but he logically and scientifically and crisply shattered the whole fairy fabric of telekinesis, ectoplasm, and cryptesthesia -- the so-called forces behind these phenomena. It was a masterly work, leaving no leg for the mediums to stand upon, no loophole for the psychophiles, no dim corner in which a ghost could hide. ... Professor Van Dreddin sank luxuriously back into his chair, lighted a cigaret and blew out a puff of smoke. As he did so, he was amazed to see a man come quietly into the room by way of a side porch door seldom used. ... The newcomer advanced to the table with a mannerism of walk that struck Professor Van Dreddin as at once quite

> perfectly right and terribly incongruous. "Hello, George," said the man. Professor Van Dreddin's eyes lighted up -- and almost simultaneously his jaw dropped. It was Professor Hendrik Van Dreddin, George's father, who had been dead for ten years.

The story illustrates Thurber's preference for a world that has at least a one-in-a-hundred chance of ghosts in it. Professor Van Dreddin (who until that moment had nothing to dread) had seriously limited the extent of his world and had set out to limit everyone else's world as well. But of course, the boundaries of Van Dreddin's world were violently expanded when his father's ghost walked into the room. Medieval romanticism created (or reflected) a world in which the natural and supernatural were almost evenly mixed, and the romanticism of the 19th century focused on a world in which the natural and the mechanical were often at odds. In this short story, Thurber taps into both of those traditions. Not only does he give us a world populated by ghosts, but he also shows that the effort to reduce human experience to a set of scientific laws and principles is doomed to failure. His first book, *Is Sex Necessary?*, expresses that same value. The book spoofed the then-recent popularity of "scientific" sex psychology books, saying that science was ill-equipped to gain any understanding of human nature, especially emotionally driven behaviors like love and sex. That is not to say that Thurber was suspicious of science altogether, but he apparently did think that an overly scientific approach tended to limit the human spirit and, more importantly, imagination.

For Thurber, the chief function of fantasy and imagination and romanticism was to add beauty to life. Certainly early in the column Thurber had lauded literature and romanticism and fantasy at the expense of the more practical side of life, but later he learned to buffer his discussion, making the limits of his ideas

clearer to his readers. Such buffering can be seen in "So Shines a Good Dime in the Naughty World," which appeared in the October 28 "Credos and Curios." Earlier, in the June 10 "Credos and Curios," Thurber had announced the appearance of a new literary magazine, *The Candle,* produced by Ohio State students, and he has since learned that the magazine may fail because it did not generate sufficient support. In this piece, Thurber asks that Columbus citizens and OSU faculty and administrators support *The Candle* with the same enthusiasm they support football:

> On the one hand, there is $40,000 a Saturday spent for football, on the other there is about $12.13 spent for the excellent lyrics, the clever articles, and the really good stories of the magazine of the half hundred. Into the jaws of athletics ride the half hundred. ... In closing, friends, we ask you to lay down that brick. We give place to no man in our ardor for the game as it is played at Ohio State. ... But we refuse to join that rapidly swelling throng which is making football not an institution, but the institution. ... Almost every lover of literature that we know among university students or alumni also loves football. As much cannot be said for the other side.

Thurber makes it clear that he is not arguing against athletics, but that a balance be struck so that the bleachers can be filled with "rational, intelligent people who like both 'A Shropshire Lad' and Nick Altrock." That he asks his readers to put down their bricks hints that by this stage of his column writing experience he was prepared for the criticisms and rejoinders that his comments could generate, and he hopes to avert them by establishing the limits of his values. He tries to make plain to his readers that he does not think literary efforts should take precedence over athletics, but simply that the "Boost Ohioers" should consider expanding their lives to include, or at least support, *The Candle.*

Two other pieces written that autumn work together to show Thurber correcting his earlier over-handed praise for literature and romanticism. "A Classic Conversation," appearing in the September 2 "Credos and Curios," revives an almost Dad-ish attitude toward literary pretentiousness. Three weeks later, on September 23, he presented the essay "The Curse of Contentment," which tries to differentiate his romanticism and Pollyannaism in much the same way as the November 4 "Book-End" essay discussed earlier attempted to define more clearly his views of romanticism and realism. "A Classic Conversation" uses a play motif to ridicule literary pretentiousness, relating the dinner conversation of a middle class couple entertaining a man well read up on his Harvard Classics series:

> Mr. Bobbs: How about a little more of the lamb, Gregory?
>
> Mr. Gregory: Ah, no, thank you. But to get back to Descartes, Mrs. Bobbs ..
>
> Mrs. Bobbs: I think Descartes wrote some brilliant things.
>
> Mr. Bobbs: Oh, say, before I forget it, I heard today that Mrs. Wilkins is getting a divorce from old Wilk. It seems --
>
> Mrs. Bobbs: Do enlarge a bit on Descartes, Mr. Gregory.
>
> Mr. Gregory: Do you know, when he discusses, in his discourse on method, why the left cavity of the heart is larger than the right, he reminds me always of this statement of Darwin's: "the basal rhomboidal plates are thicker, nearly in the proportion of three to two, having a mean thickness, from 21 measurements, of one two-hundred-and-twenty-ninth of an inch."

The conversation goes on, with Mr. Bobbs excluded from joining in with everyday matters while his wife and Gregory go on with bookish drivel. Certainly Thurber is not saying here that literature should not be discussed, but that people who discuss it should have some real understanding of the works they discuss, and also

that literary discussions cannot be divorced from the lives of the people discussing it (the quote from Darwin has nothing to do with either Descartes or roast lamb). Thurber suggests that literature contains enough real beauty (romanticism) that people can discuss it in normal conversation without resorting to pompous nonsense. More important, this piece shows Thurber placing a limit on romanticism by calling for a certain measure of realism, or at least reality. Romanticism is often criticized for its failure to present realistic characters coping with realistic situations. The play makes the same point, that literature separated from the readers' lives -- either in its content or in the readers' response to it -- is gibberish.

Apparently, Thurber had also received enough criticisms equating his romanticism with Pollyannaism that on September 23 he included a long essay called "The Curse of Contentment." Here he speaks out against those who think romanticism means always thinking that all is well:

> Every day we seem to meet more and more people who are cursed with the delusion that it is the Christian and the gentlemanly thing to be at all times calm and contented. ... As a matter of fact, life is mainly depressing and anyone with any sense at all knows it. ... To caper about always smiling and quoting Edna Wheeler Wilcox and looking on the bright side of things is to admit that one is a moron. The greatest accomplishments, the most beautiful poems, the most important writings have been done by men and women who suffered and out of whose vast pain, or great unbelief or stupendous grief have come the fine things born of such conditions. Out of the cult of the contented has come nothing and nobody. ... The Pollyannas are stupid, the worst possible quality in a human being. ... There is a majesty in melancholy and a radiance in despair and a glory in sadness

which the idiotic tutti-frutti vending of the joy-shouters cannot begin to aspire to.

Although this may seem to contradict some of his comments about romanticism, such as his call for "fine stories about fine people," placing it beside his column about support for *The Candle* versus support for football shows that he is calling for a realistic balance. As he says later in his November 4 essay about romanticism, the realists have erred in the same way as the Pollyannas; they have made caricatures of their characters by focusing on their idiosyncrasies or instincts to the exclusion of their more ennobling qualities. Thurber defends romanticism by saying that it doesn't pretend that nothing bad happens in the world, but it does actively examine troubles in an effort to learn from them. That is what makes Hamlet and Abraham Lincoln "important, beautiful, [and] productive" figures. And whereas realism would do nothing more than present the suffering of these people, romanticism would present that suffering as a process of transformation. By itself, the essay shows Thurber drawing back from the extremes of his values. Romanticism pushed beyond realistic limits does indeed become Pollyannaism, he admits, but he is not lauding that extreme. But neither is he calling for a pragmatic realism that, in its extreme, ignores the human -- or any other -- spirit. Taken in connection with his other statements in the column, the essay hints that Thurber holds romanticism as the one approach to literature or to life that allows for the fullest possible human experience -- from the practical and intellectual to the imaginative and spiritual.

Given Thurber's romantic emphasis, he oddly does not explore very deeply the romanticism of human relationships. That value seems implicit in much of his discussion of romanticism in literature and of the fantastic elements in everyday life, but he rarely speaks directly about romance between men and women -- love,

marriage and all of that. That underrepresentation seems even odder given the fact that he had been married less than a year when the column appeared. Instead, Thurber seems more interested in the differences between men and women -- a theme, as we saw in the previous chapter, that forms the core of much of Thurber's later works. But even in the war between the sexes we see Thurber applying his romanticism; through imagination, he transforms the least enjoyable aspect of human relations into a successful motif for his humor.

Perhaps one of the best examples of Thurber's using a discussion of courtship in a literary context to illustrate the differences between men and women appears in the June 24 "Credos and Curios." "The Stranger Fascination" is a parody, Thurber tells us in an introductory note, of what would happen "if Booth Tarkington should come under the influence of D.H. Lawrence." It mixes what Thurber had called elsewhere Tarkington's "eternal adolescence" (June 10) with the "sordid sex stuff" (April 22) of D.H. Lawrence:

> "These things just come to you," said Richard vehemently, "and you got to follow your impulse or you'll probably go blind or crazy or something or hang your own children, so that it would be a terrible thing to stay married --"
>
> "Hang your own children; how perfectly dreadful!" cried young Mrs. Martin.
>
> "Of course, they don't always do that," said Richard more gently. "Personally I would never hang the children, but I'd certainly leave my wife. Anybody, man or woman, ought to leave their wife in a case like that. I mean when they absolutely meet their infinity."

The story goes on to describe how Richard convinces Mrs. Martin that they have reached their "psychological moment" and they must let themselves be carried

away by "the strange pagan outside force." Thurber's primary target for this parody is the modern novel that has expunged all vestiges of romanticism and replaced it with psychological or instinctual sexual motives. But in the background, we can also hear Thurber saying that whatever manner of courtship might be described in such novels could not possibly work between two real people -- at least not between two people in Columbus, Ohio. Just as romanticism transforms literary sex into art, Thurber seems to argue, romanticism can also transform human relationships into an enriching, beautiful experience that surpasses merely biological impulses. He also plays on his favorite theme of courtship (or marriage) as a war between the sexes, caused primarily by the difference in goals and expectations between men and women. In this story, the woman wants a conventional relationship that obeys the traditions of romance, but the man, under the influence of Lawrence, wants to over analyze and over rationalize his natural inclinations.

Summary

This chapter has focused primarily on the straight opinion pieces within the column for evidence of the value Thurber placed on romanticism. Obviously the opinion pieces provide the clearest statements of Thurber's values, but the fiction and anecdotes show the interplay between those values and the themes and motifs in his short fiction. The fantasy element in his fiction and in his paragraphs helps show the importance of romanticism to Thurber. As Thurber objectified his values by writing about them, and later by defending them against criticisms, he found himself defining the extent of those values. What started in the early instances of the column as unabashed praise of romanticism became more reasoned, defined and limited as he wrote more about his views.

Also, we see that whereas Bernstein and Holmes both saw the column as presenting a young Thurber beset with contradictory opinions and values, the column instead presents a basically consistent viewpoint, even though Thurber clearly has not yet fully reasoned out his values and tastes. He champions literary romanticism so earnestly, and so many of his other comments and ideas parallel his apparent definition of literary romanticism so closely, that in a sense it becomes the one underlying philosophy of the column and of much of his later work. The column shows Thurber developing his themes and defining his values, and it also shows him experimenting with different combinations of those themes and values with the wide variety of genres and techniques (essay, anecdote, fiction, poetry, etc.) found within the column. That experimentation is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Honing His Techniques

The themes discussed in Chapter Three show the topics that interested Thurber, and they also show him working with various literary personae. The underlying values discussed in Chapter Four show the basic philosophies and tastes of the young writer. But to become anything approximating art, those topics and values must be matched with appropriate narrative techniques. "Credos and Curios" shows Thurber experimenting with a wide range of writing techniques. Thurber's later work is remarkable for the variety of techniques he employed -- anecdote, comment, parody, fantasy, fairy tale, fable, biography and so on. The column shows that same eclectic approach to techniques, though certainly not the same mastery over them.

As we have seen, Thurber's "plan" for launching his literary career involved gaining as much experience as he could from his work with the *Dispatch,* and the column shows every evidence of his taking full advantage of the freedom of writing form and genre that doing the column allowed him. In "Credos and Curios," we see Thurber using the same basic techniques that he used in his later writing. The peculiar case here is drama. Although Thurber wrote several plays that had been produced by the Ohio State University Strollers, he only occasionally used a dramatic structure for items in the column. And despite that early interest in theatre, he completed only two of the many plays he started (*The Male Animal,* written with Elliott Nugent in 1940, and *A Thurber Carnival,* a revue built upon many of Thurber's already published cartoons and stories, 1960).

Conversely, Thurber's later work included several fine fables, fairy tales, and high fantasy, none of which appear in any choate form within the column, despite the clear evidence of Thurber's love of fantasy. But three techniques he used most often in the column -- anecdote, parody, and essay -- became staples of his later writing.

ANECDOTE

Apart from his cartoons and short stories such as "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," Thurber is probably best known for his use of the personal anecdote. Early stories like "The Night the Ghost Got In" and "The Day the Dam Broke" and the others collected in *My Life and Hard Times* helped establish Thurber's reputation as a humorist. Anecdote is a natural genre for a romanticist like Thurber, for it gives him an opportunity to let his creative imagination play on his experiences. The basic structure of the early "Credos and Curios," with the "Dad Dialogs" on the left two columns and "The Adventures of Blue Ploermell" on the right two columns, gave Thurber the center four columns to fill with one liners and paragraphs on sundry topics (the longest center-section item in the first "Credos and Curios" is a three-paragraph discussion of Airedales that takes up little over half of the fifth column). Many of those short items give anecdotes, but not until the sixth "Credos and Curios" (March 25) does Thurber provide extended anecdotes -- starting with the episodes about the doctor's office and getting the phone installed discussed in Chapter Three. Most of the extended anecdotes Thurber gives us are clustered in the columns that appeared that spring. A series of three roughly related anecdotes (they're all associated with Thurber's experiences in France) show the romantic nature of his anecdote-telling style.

The first of these anecdotes appeared in the April 29 "Credos and Curios" and described the rush for war souvenirs that beset France after the Armistice. It is a long piece, filling up almost the entire column and leaving no space for what would have been the second "Book-End." In true romantic form, the anecdote begins with Thurber's coming across his one souvenir, an event that sparked an imaginative reminiscence:

> The relic was a service record of one Mr. Mokdad, an unfortunate Algerian soldier who, as the elegant contemporary phrase has it, was crocked off. We picked it up, with two bullet holes in it, near Vierzy. What wonderful memories and legends of the great American pastime of souvenir hunting it brings back! ... We shall never forget our own tremendous passion for a charming monk's head, used as a match holder on the wall of the famous Black Cat in Montmarte. Just as the lights would go off, for the showing of a brief screen pantomime, we would begin getting up our nerve to annex the monk, and just as we would be about to reach for it the lights would come on, for the singing of a song. Our feverish desire whetted the latent acquisitive instincts of a somber Australian infantryman, of sedentary habits and quiet pursuits, sitting beside us. ... And when we finally did make a grab for it in the transient darkness, we clutched his hand -- and his hand clutched the monk.

The monk's head match holder shows up again in *Is Sex Necessary?* in a list of items men collect for their dens -- many of them war relics like a shell from Chickamauga, wood from the U.S.S. Maine, and a picture of Admiral Winfield Scott Schley (p. 47). This anecdote, unlike the earlier ones of his wait in the doctor's office or getting the phone installed described in Chapter Three, does not focus on his actions but connects him to some larger historical event. Certainly

Thurber is bragging a little here, distancing himself from the image of the provincial Midwesterner who has never ventured outside Columbus, but still the focus of the anecdote is on the character of the American and other foreign servicemen he had observed while he worked as a code clerk in Paris right after the war. In effect, it is not so much an anecdote as it is a personal essay, writing about some event or phenomenon that he has had personal experience with. In tone and persona he is much the same as the speaker of the earlier anecdotes; he is as inept a souvenir hunter as he is a waiter in doctor's offices or a patron of the phone company. And also like those other early anecdotes, we see that he is interested in the events not only for their own potential for humorous embellishment, but also in what those events show about the character of the people involved.

The next two Paris anecdotes, appearing in the May 27 and June 3 "Credos and Curios," form a matched pair that describe his adventures trying to buy first a suit and then a hat in Paris. These two anecdotes return to a focus on the speaker, much as the column's first two extended anecdotes had. Since they are companion pieces, it may be helpful to look at them together. On May 27, Thurber explains that he wrote the item for the benefit of the "thousands of Columbus newspapermen and other well-to-do folks" who will visit Europe in the year and who hope to buy their clothes there. "Out of some little experience we feel impelled to present for their guidance a few pointers and don'ts on clothes buying," he says. He had lost his trunk on the way across and was compelled to buy new clothes in Paris, but he found that Paris tailors simply refuse to cut suits according to American fashions:

> Getting a slant at oneself in the [French] suit after it is made up may prove a shock one will never completely recover from. Our first surprise was to

find a large hollow section of trousers hanging loose, with apparently no more utility than the spleen. This was merely one pant leg. We had got both legs into the other one. The Paris trousers measure, like all eagles that farmers shoot, six feet from tip to tip.

After several trips he has managed to convince the tailor to reduce the size of the pants considerably, but they are still too large. He then takes them to "Jack, American Tailor," but Jack is "as French as Clemenceau" and returns the trousers to their original girth. At that, Thurber reports that he decided to follow French traditions and blend in with the natives, only to be accosted by tour guides.

The next week's anecdote begins with Thurber's entry into a haberdasher's shop and his attempt to communicate in broken French:

> "Jay vuzz an chapeau," we told the first haberdasher we were forced to seek in Paris after our American hat gave out. ...
>
> "Certainly, sir," said the haberdasher. "The gentleman requires a hat," he told a slick youth.
>
> "At your service, sir; What sort of hat do you wish?" asked the slick youth. ...
>
> "Oh, yeah," we said carelessly, jamming our French in our pocket nonchalantly as if it were a recalcitrant garter we had jerked off our sock because it was trailing on the asphalt. "Let's see what you have. Seven and a quarter."

He finds, however, that the Paris shops offer only two kinds of hats: ones that are too small, and ones that are too large. After visiting several shops, driving the haberdashers to tears at their failure to please him with their wares, he causes one shop keeper to light candles and explore his cellars. The keeper returns with what

he thinks is the perfect hat, places it triumphantly on Thurber's head and says "Voila!"

> "Voila, one's eye," we said. The manager pursued a glittering tear with his handkerchief. ... An assistant touched the hat. "Bon," he said. The word has an unfortunate pronunciation. We thought he alluded to our head. We stalked out.

Thurber spends the rest of his time in Paris with his worn-out American hat, and upon his return to New York he immediately found a new hat to his liking. But when he got home, he noticed the maker's tag: "Fabrique par Moissant et Amour, 25 Avenue de l'Opera, Paris." He ends by musing, "Eugene Sue never wrote down half the mysteries of Paris."

These two anecdotes show him concentrating on the humor of the situation; whatever characterization occurs purports to give some insight into the psyche of French clothiers, if not the French people in general. But more importantly, we see Thurber applying his imagination to relatively ordinary situations. Many people have noticed differences in clothing styles among nations, but Thurber is able to combine his imagination and his experience as a Midwestern reporter to describe the pants as being the size of "all eagles that farmers shoot." The second is the better of the pair, with Thurber combining his love of words and language. In the first scene of the anecdote we see Thurber the romanticist, if not the fantasist, stuffing his French into his pocket. He continues in that vein, waving aside the hats placed on his head "like Caesar when he was trying on crowns," or confusing the French "bon" referring to the hat as the American "bone" referring to his head. And it is the romanticist who finds it mysterious, rather than merely frustrating, that his perfect New York hat came from Paris. These three anecdotes must have maintained their fascination for Thurber, for toward the end of his

career he used all three of them in his lengthy piece "The First Time I saw Paris," reprinted in *Alarms and Diversions* (1957). The souvenir anecdote expands a bit on the visit to battlefields that resulted in his discovery of A. Mokdad's identification papers, and it repeats the propensity of American soldiers and sailors to concentrate on bulky items. It does not, however, relate anything about the monk's head. The anecdote about buying clothes becomes more of a running motif in the 1957 piece. And he reduces the hat buying episode to a single paragraph, but the story is essentially the same, and when he writes about his return to New York he quotes a few lines from his "Credos and Curios" anecdote about finding the manufacturer's tag.

Other anecdotes show him in conflict with Columbus culture, such as the May 6 anecdote of his attempts to spend a Saturday with his friends horseback riding ("We started at 9 o'clock, and after three hours of this ... it was still only 10 o'clock"). But perhaps one of the best of these anecdotes is Thurber's May 13 description of his father's battle with a bat that had flitted into the house. That anecdote was described in Chapter Three, but it does serve as an example of how Thurber's imagination refused to let go of images that have captured his fancy. Both Bernstein and Holmes discuss how closely in tone and style that anecdote anticipates the anecdotes in *My Life and Hard Times,* but Thurber used the same bat-battling scenario in one of his earlier *New Yorker* stories, "Mr. Monroe Outwits a Bat" reprinted in *The Owl in the Attic).* In both stories, the bat initiates the match by skimming the top of its opponent's head, but whereas in "Credos and Curios" the affront touches off a violent skirmish between Father and the bat, Mr. Monroe never fully challenges the bat's audacity. Father grabs a broom and begins swinging, while Thurber and his brothers become judges observing the match:

> Father rose and let him have it. But the bat didn't want it. He dodged. And besides, a broom, unless properly swung, will curve. It did, garnering a student lamp, six magazines, and an ash tray. "Bat's round!" cried the judges.

But the later bat drives Mr. Monroe underneath the bedcovers with his first swoop. "It was the bat's round," Thurber wrote.

The similarities in the stories are not terribly striking, but the contrasts show that somewhere along the way Thurber learned that anecdote is a window into a person's character, if imaginatively handled. The "Credos and Curios" piece clearly plays on the comedy of the situation; Thurber exaggerates (at the end, the judges "solemnly raised the bat's right wing in token of triumph") and catalogues in detail every item Father destroys. Through it all we get some insight into Father's reckless determination not to be bested, but Thurber clearly has set out to do little more than amuse us with his tale of the bat. But Mr. Monroe's inaction (he folds a newspaper into a club, marches out of his wife's bedroom, whacks the wall twice, and then goes to sleep on the sofa) gives us a clear picture of who he is; Thurber shows us those behaviors precisely because they tell us what Monroe's character is. This use of anecdote to show character is a lesson Thurber learned well. In November 1950, Thurber wrote a *Bermudian* piece about the death of his friend Carl van Doren. "It came to me," Thurber said, "sitting and listening to the warmly affectionate words of half a dozen of his closest friends and colleagues, that garments of praise must be inevitably cut in such a fashion as to fit several or even many individuals almost equally well, and that only the personal anecdote about a man is uniquely his own, and can be worn by no one else at all" (Rosen 1989). Thurber's experimentation with anecdotes in "Credos and Curios" hints that "it" came to him much earlier than that wake in 1950.

PARODY

Thurber's parodies played just as important a role as his anecdotes in establishing his reputation, even though he did tend to drift away from them in his later writing. His first book-length manuscript, *Why We Behave Like Microbe Hunters,* was a 25,000-word parody of de Kruif's *Microbe Hunters* and Dorsey's *Why We Behave Like Human Beings.* Thurber tried unsuccessfully to sell the book to several publishers in 1926. His first published book, *Is Sex Necessary?,* was also a parody, and his first collection of *New Yorker* articles (*The Owl in the Attic),* is filled with parodies whose targets range from newspaper advice columns ("The Pet Department") to Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* ("Ladies' and Gentlemen's Guide to Modern English Usage"). Stephen A. Black (1970) argues that parody becomes the single most important element in Thurber's humor, and Michael Reynolds' recent study of Ernest Hemingway (1992) suggests that a Thurber parody ("A Visit From Saint Nicholas [In the Ernest Hemingway Manner]" in the December 24, 1927, issue of *The New Yorker)* contributed to a dry spell in Hemingway's production that led him to scrap a novel he had started in September. Reynolds, of course, does not argue that Thurber's work specifically initiated Hemingway's writer's block but simply cites it as an example of the kind of attention Hemingway had attracted to his chagrin.

If anecdote, as Thurber said, captures the unique qualities of a person's character, then in a sense each of Thurber's parodies is also an anecdote. Holmes says that Thurber was famous for his imitations (especially of Harold Ross), and his clowning imitation of Carl Sandburg at a party in Columbus in 1936 gained the poet's lasting friendship. The Sandburg incident points out a crucial quality in Thurber's parodies; except for perhaps "Bateman Comes Home" (reprinted in *Let*

Your Mind Alone and again in *The Thurber Carnival),* Thurber's parodies do not satirize their targets. Rather, they are variations on themes wherein Thurber saw humorous potential (see especially Tobias 1969).

Parody is so prominent in "Credos and Curios" that many of the best examples of it have already been mentioned. Among them are the most extended work of parody in the column, the 13 installments of "The Cases of Blue Ploermell," and one of the best pieces of parody that appears in "Credos and Curios": "The Stranger Fascination." We also saw how early in the column Thurber began introducing parody with the March 11 "essay" on Julia A. Moore, "the Sweet Singer of Michigan." And as we saw in Chapter Three, it is impossible to discuss Thurber's attitudes toward literature without mentioning his parodies for he often, if not usually, presented his literary views in the form of parody. And we have also seen the wide sweep of his parodic styles -- his ability to parody poetic method and even his ability to combine styles, as in "The Stranger Fascination." It is not too much to say that Thurber's basic instinct as a humorist was toward parody. So many of Thurber's parodies appear in the form of fiction or poetry that it may be helpful to look at parodies that are cast in a couple of different forms.

The first item is a suggested modification of first grade primers. On April 22, Thurber gives us an example of how such primers will have to be revised to reflect the contemporary "patois" of the young people of Columbus. First he gives the following example of the way reading lessons appeared "when we went to school at a tender age":

Oh, see the dog!

Can the dog run?

Yes, the dog can run.

After explaining that the old style lacks the "proper sangfroid and sophistication" for present day children, Thurber gives several examples of how a modified primer should read, such as the following:

> Oh, see the dog!
>
> What's the idea?
>
> The nice dog will not fight.
>
> Bull.
>
> Can the dog run?
>
> He isn't paralyzed, is he?

In typical Thurber fashion, the parody here has at least two targets: the out-dated and unidiomatic language of primers, and the rude language with which Thurber had heard children address adults (children rarely appear in a favorable light in "Credos and Curios," and they fare little better in his later works). This short parody, though, prefigures "The Ladies' and Gentlemen's Guide to Modern English," which appeared in Thurber's first collection of his *New Yorker* pieces, *The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities* (1931).

Another of Thurber's parodies appears in the July 8 "Credos and Curios" as a conversation on literature in the manner of the ones between George Nathan and H.L. Mencken that appeared in *The Smart Set.* Thurber selects as his sparring partner a Mr. Gallagher, and their topic is James Branch Cabell. "Gallagher" begins the conversation by calling Thurber's remarks about Cabell in the June 10 "Credos and Curios" "crude and sophomoric":

> Tut, tut. I am almost middle aged and what I say and believe may be senile but it is not sophomoric. I tell you that the two books I have mentioned turned me against this man on the score of Romance, which I here use in

the sense of idealistic love, the 51 percent of Romance under whatever definition you capture it.

Thurber was 28 when he described himself as middle aged, and the immaturity of his ideas in "Credos and Curios" took him slightly aback when he reread them in the 1950s (as he describes in his letter to Frank Gibney, discussed in Chapter One). Here we see Thurber rallying to the banner of romanticism to tilt with Cabell's champion; expectedly, Thurber wins the tourney:

Mr. Thurber

I will say that Cabell writes perfectly, more perfectly than any other author in America; but he does not write half so beautifully as some, as, say, Joseph Hergesheimer or the late Henry James.

Mr. Gallagher

You can't take ten sentences without bumping into Henry James, hanging on his neck and praising him in the maudlin tone of an inebriate to whom every passerby is bes' fr'en' ev' had.

Mr. Thurber

The acidity of your ill-chosen innuendoes is no match for the truth of my deductions, but is the renowned refuge for one who is beaten at sheer logic.

Mr. Gallagher

Sheer bananas! Say, if I didn't --

Mr. Thurber

Shut up! I have scotched this man Cabell and now I mean to finish him off.

The piece goes on with Thurber refuting Cabell's claim as a romantic and fantasist, with Gallagher reduced to witless insults ("You are now seeking to bolster an untenable position with sandbags filled with the fluff of ineffective badinage") and finally to throwing a vase and leaving. The parody works on an interesting level

in this item. On the surface of it, Thurber is able to make his arguments against Cabell and to argue his own preference for romanticism and "idealistic love." But underneath Thurber is pointing out the weakness of such "conversation" formats -- they all too often devolve into personal arguments or showcases of witty remarks (reminiscent of Dorothy Parker's summary of the conversation around the Algonquin Round Table: "Did you hear the witty thing I said last night?"). Thurber also indulges in a little self-parody. He has already presented his own literary remarks in a self-deprecatory fashion, and here he allows Gallagher to call him sophomoric and stupid, but he does allow himself to overcome Gallagher's charges by his own forcefulness and logic; all his arguments restrict themselves to the texts in question and he provides evidence for and the reasoning of his remarks.

One other unique parody is a sort of parody essay, and stands alone in the column as an example of a form that Thurber later developed to great effect. Called "The Menace of Mystery," it starts as a discussion of detective plays but then, once Thurber begins to apply his imagination to the material, turns into a fantasy of parody:

> Mystery plays ... are rapidly destroying the mind of the great American Theater-going public. They have influenced play watchers to suspect every drama now produced of being a puzzle play. ... Revivals of old plays, even, are now treated to a searching scrutiny. From "Charlie's Aunt" to "Rosemary" to "She Stoops to Conquer," the ancient pieces, if re-presented nowadays, would be examined by rows of frowning lay sleuths, gripping their chair arms and trying to decide which of the characters is the murderer.

The piece then describes what would happen if such mentality were applied to Shakespeare's works. Horatio becomes the villain of Hamlet, having been insulted by the title character's remark about his limited philosophy. The Macbeth couple are too obvious, and therefore cannot have committed the crime, and "King Lear" becomes "The Woman with the Soft, Low Voice," and the climax of "Julius Caesar" is the scene wherein the police frisk the senators in search of knives. *Romeo and Juliet,* he says, presents a particularly enticing opportunity:

> It would take a great deal of revolutionary revamping, but it appears to us not too difficult for successful mysterization. We begin with the last scene first: Romeo has just killed himself, and Juliet comes to. Step right in with the new action before she has a chance to end her own life. The friar enters, also the apothecary. Hard on their heels comes the detective. Things look bad for Juliet, the friar and the apothecary. Poison and daggers lie all about. Who killed Romeo?

Here Thurber takes an opinion he finds ill-conceived and, applying his creative imagination, pushes it to a parodic extreme. Thurber returns to this topic in "The Macbeth Murder Mystery," reprinted in *My World, And Welcome to It* (1937). In that story, a woman who wants to read a murder mystery mistakenly picks up *Macbeth* in the hotel lobby. At breakfast the next day, she explains to Thurber, using the conventions of murder mysteries, why she suspects Macduff. Thurber also applies the same technique to other literary conceits, notably to Gertrude Stein's "Pigeons in the grass, alas" in "There's an Owl in My Room," reprinted in *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935). In that piece, Thurber builds his parodic fantasy on the idea that nothing is less alas than a pigeon. As in the "Credos and Curios" item, Thurber takes an attitude he disagrees with and shows its inherent flaws by pushing the idea to extremes. The technique differs

slightly from the normal mode of parody which caricatures its target in that it discusses its target directly rather than mimic it. And like the Julia A. Moore parodic essay it pretends to like the basic idea and lauds it in thinly disguised naivete or moderately heavy sarcasm.

In his parodies, then, we see Thurber matching his various personae with his literary values with considerable effect. His romanticism especially works on almost all levels of his parodies -- from the topic of discussion (as in "A Conversation on Cabell") to the use of his romantic creative imagination to generate the piece (as in "The Menace of Mystery"). These parodies are especially Dad-like for the most part, openly ridiculing their targets, but there is also the almost equal blend of the romantic Ploermell, searching for the clues that will lead him to the fantastic insight and daring deduction.

ESSAY

A third mainstay of Thurber's literary style was the essay. Indeed, as Thurber's fame grew, the essay became an increasingly common form for his writing. In "Credos and Curios," we see Thurber's comments developing from one liners and paragraphs in imitation of Robert O. Ryder and Franklin Pierce Adams to fully developed arguments in favor of increased romanticism in American literature and theatre. These essays develop more fully after Thurber introduced "The Book-End" department to his column, and they are an extension of the play and movie reviews he had done occasionally for the *Dispatch* (he filled in occasionally for the *Dispatch's* drama editor H.E. Cherrington and wrote short items for the entertainment pages).

As in the parodies, Thurber uses the comments and essays to help find the appropriate medium in which to combine his literary persona and his romanticism. At first, the one liners and paragraphs are mostly just jokes or witty comments:

> Patron (in a husky whisper) -- What have you got in the way of some real liquor?
>
> Proprietor (in a hoarse whisper) -- That dry agent standing behind you.
>
> ---
>
> A skeptic is a person who will not believe a thing is true until it is proved true; a cynic is a person who will not believe it then.
>
> (both from February 18)

Thurber retained these throw-away one liners throughout the column, basically as filler material (on November 11, he ended the column with the line "And if this last line doesn't fill out the page, the page won't be filled out"). The one liners did not materially improve.

At the same time, Thurber used longer paragraphs to comment on various observations or topics. In the first appearance of "Credos and Curios" (February 18) Thurber devotes a paragraph each to the psychology of laughter in the theatre ("Laughs are born and not made"), certain absolutes ("We have never been in a dairy lunch where they weren't swabbing up the floor"), and that people look like their work ("Sherlock Holmes overlooked a bet when he did not include among his other brochures a monograph on this subject"). He also devotes three paragraphs to Airedales ("We have a very special antipathy for Airedales"). These short items quickly gain in prominence in the column, so that by the fourth appearance (March 11) the center section of the column is taken up by a parody essay on sentimental poetry, and for the next several installments the center section is

dominated by anecdotes or series of long paragraphs. Thurber does not introduce full-blown essays until after he drops both "Dad Dialogs" and "The Cases of Blue Ploermell."

In the May 20 "Credos and Curios," Thurber has two fairly long essays -- one on "the language of hail and farewell" and one titled "The Comic Urge." The first is little more than a series of one liners on the same topic, framed by an introductory and a closing paragraph. In the body of this essay, Thurber simply lists and torpedoes various greetings and salutations:

> "How you comin'?" The natural reaction is to be tricked into saying "fine" or "all right, how you comin'?" showing the menace of acquiring the same language oneself. "I'm just going" is a deft way out.
>
> ...
>
> "See you in the morning." This most depressing phrase is used frequently by co-workers, distastefully reminding one that there is no escape from the deadly routine. Life imprisonment.

Thurber concludes that sticking with "hello" and "How are you?" is the best and most civil mode of greeting. Experimenting with "comment ca va?" would only "draw an immediate 'trays beans.'" The piece is amusing, and it does communicate an observation (however inastute) Thurber had made about American culture, but it does not discuss that observation as we would expect in a true essay.

"The Comic Urge" contains exactly that kind of discussion. He starts off with his thesis concerning the comic strip ("much of it outstrips the present American short story in value as a presentation of distinctive American humor"), and the following five paragraphs presents evidence to support that thesis. Thurber argues that in "Days of Real Sport," Clare Briggs "has struck a metier that

rivals the keen studies of adolescence in the works of Booth Tarkington"; that Walter C. Hoban's "Jerry on the Job" exhibits a "peculiar sort of fantasy, a rare quality in American artists of any medium"; that most of the other strips have "much too strong a flavor of burlesque"; and that many of Cliff Sterret's strips "are as neatly and solidly made as a good one-act play." He concludes by suggesting the topic is worthy of a book.

After that, the entire column begins to take on a decidedly literary flavor, almost to the point that the title "The Book-End" could have been substituted for "Credos and Curios." When the department appeared, Thurber generally began with a paragraph-long book review or comment on some literary topic (the second "Book-End," May 6, starts with a paragraph decrying the exclusion of recent American writers like Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Benet in high school English classes). But on June 10, "The Book-End" essay fills almost the entire column with a discussion of one of Thurber's favorite subjects: romance in American literature. From then on, the central material in the column alternated among essays and anecdotes and parodies and doggerel, but it almost always had a decidedly literary flavor to them. And toward the end, the essay became the dominant genre within the column.

An interesting example of Thurber's extended literary essays is "The Second Invasion of America," a lengthy play review that appeared September 9. The play under scrutiny is "Robert E. Lee," by the English playwright John Drinkwater; Thurber had read the script while the play was still in its London production. His basic thesis is that the play suffers from naivete concerning Americans in general and the American Civil War in particular:

> Compared with most wars the Civil War was lovely. The difficulties of the Sixties were gentlemen's difficulties, settled courteously and graciously.

"My compliments to General Blank and inform him that I regret I must shoot his gallant division to pieces." That sort of thing. The deaths were unavoidable rather than malicious.

The basic point of Thurber's essay is that Drinkwater spends too much time on this romantic presentation of the war, showing Lee mingling his directions for the battle with personal comments to his men:

> One can almost imagine Mr. Drinkwater battling against the desire to add this touch:
>
> Lee: They are cutting in upon Magruder's right. Bad. Cowell, go tell Thorne to move to that bridge and support Tomlinson's brigade.
>
> Cowell: Yes, sir.
>
> Lee (turning to look off left): Oh, Cowell, when you write home ask Mrs. Cowell if she will be so good as to send a slip off that rose begonia which Mrs. Lee admired, to me here.

Thurber especially decries Drinkwater's failure to do more with Stonewall Jackson, "one of the most interesting officers in American history." Thurber complains that Jackson appears for too short a time and has only one line that differs significantly from those of any other officer; when Colonel Hewitt protests that Jackson's orders mean the destruction of his unit, Jackson tells him, "I always endeavor to take care of my wounded and bury my dead. You have heard my order -- obey it." But despite those criticisms, the play's romanticism finally wins Thurber's favor:

> Along toward the end Lee says "Everybody is fine." It strikes the keynote of the new Drinkwater play. Everybody is splendid. We do not sneer at this. It is our conviction, Civil-war-phile that we are, that everything was lovely. But it's such a far cry from the blankety-blank captain-shooting,

> crap-shooting, and mouth-shooting soldiers of Dos Passos that a lot of people who have come to worship at the shrine of horrible realism will be shocked by the gentleness of these old warriors. ... Or, if it works the other way, they may understand that the much-criticized soldiers of Willa Cather's "One of Ours" come by their inheritance of fineness naturally. ... We shall probably see it twice when it plays Columbus.

The structure of this essay is unremarkable -- it begins with a basic impression (thesis) and then pulls examples from various parts of the play to support that thesis. What is interesting, though, is that even in this straight-forward essay we see Thurber's instinct for employing parody to make his arguments. The essay is also interesting because it provides a clear example of Thurber's love of romanticism and theater clouding his judgment. He admits in the essay that he is a "Civil-war-phile" and points out several instances where the play distorts history or borrows character types from boys' adventure stories, but despite all those flaws he still declares the play "an admirably sincere and careful study of its time and its persons," in the tradition of Willa Cather.

A pair of essays that appear in the October 21 and November 11 columns are especially interesting in their discussion of the connections between literature and newspaper work. The first essay, "Chicago's Literary Tradition," is sparked by two articles by Frank M. Morris in *The Christian Science Monitor* that discuss Chicago's increasing literary importance. Thurber's essay is largely quotations from Morris, but he does say that "reporting, in fact, is nowhere on earth so closely linked with literature as in Chicago, and particularly in the office of the Chicago News." The rest of that paragraph is a catalog of writers who have made their mark in Chicago, beginning with the generations of Eugene Field, Peter Finley Dunne, George Ade and John T. McCutcheon and continuing with the

present generation of Carl Sandburg and Ben Hecht, among others. Thurber concludes the essay by saying "California with its Wallace and Will Irwin and its tradition of Jack London and Frank Norris and a few others seems like the very far fringe of writing when compared to the creative category of Chicago." Given the plan Thurber outlined in his letters to Elliott Nugent (discussed in Chapter One), it is easy to see why Thurber would be so enthralled by Chicago's literary successes, especially those of its newspapermen. It is also interesting that although Thurber had criticized Hecht's works as among the "sordid sex stuff" of the modern realists, here he has no hesitation listing him among the reporters who have made successful transitions into literature. One does not have to read between the lines very much to see Thurber pointing these people out to his readers and saying, "Soon I will be one of them."

The second essay is a bit shorter, but it is mostly Thurber's work (as opposed to the heavy use of quotations in the first one). Although this essay is sparked by comments about his essay in support of the Ohio State University *Candle* ("So Shines a Good Dime in the Naughty World," October 28), it quickly picks up the topic of newspapers and literature. Bill Mylander, the editor of the Ohio State Lantern, wrote an editorial that suggested the college literary writers would do well to spend a few nights at the police station:

> His general argument, of course, is that police reporting brings one in contact with life as she is lived and hence with the very meat of creative writing. The legend that service in the hoosegow gets a reporter all set for literary endeavors is an old one. It has been set up and knocked down a couple of dozen times in the past 50 years. We can meet Bill on his own ground, because we have spent those couple of nights at the bullshed, too. We didn't even get enough out of them for a loosely contrived shocker for

> Detective Tales. We merely wanted to go home. We would hand in our suit tomorrow if we were sentenced to the badgeshack permanently, even though we want to be a literatus when we grow up. ... We haven't any figures at hand on how many writers now living or long dead got their start or their inspiration at the lockup, but we offer a prize of $10 in gold to anyone who can name us one writer of important stuff who did so. They must submit a signed statement from the writer in which he states that his success was on account of, and not in spite of, his service at the copbarn.

It is interesting that in this passage Thurber writes specifically about police reporting and not reporting in general. Chapter One discussed Thurber's letters in which he said his work at the *Dispatch* was specifically designed to be his apprenticeship work, and that his first forays into free-lancing would include reporting. And in this passage Thurber specifically tells his readers what he had hinted a few weeks earlier -- that he intends to become a writer. At first glance this essay seems strange in its lack of romanticism; surely Thurber's creative imagination, which sees villains of mythological proportions in "tonight" misspelled, could work to effect on the typical crimes of 1920s Columbus. Thurber says that what he remembers about his nights at the police station are the lieutenant who complained about policemen who steal the guns they confiscate during raids, the policeman who slapped a 16-year-old "culprit" in the face, and a woman begging the police to get her clothes because she was afraid of her violently drunk husband.

In short, what police reporting does is introduce a person to the darker side of human nature, not to the beautiful and fine Jamesian people that Thurber thought were worth writing about. And given the heavy use of such slang as "badgeshack" and "copbarn," Thurber thought the heavy use of jargon one

encounters while police reporting cannot improve one's expressive skills. Thurber says he offers his prize to anyone who can identify a writer "of important stuff" whose career flourished as a direct result of his police reporting, and we have already seen enough of Thurber's values to know that he would exclude writers of detective fiction and even most realists like Ben Hecht, whom he had earlier identified as a reporter turned literatus. Anyway, the column ended only three weeks after his offer, so we do not know if anyone made a serious bid for his "$10 in gold."

CONCLUSION

Thurber experimented with many other techniques within the column, including poetry, fiction, letters, and so on. Of those techniques, the one that has not received much attention previously is poetry. We have looked at a few examples of his doggerel and several pieces of his light verse, including his parody of modern verse (the tone poem "Portrait of a Noon Edition"). But the column also contains two extended humorous poems. Perhaps the better of these poems is "The Captain's Dominoes" that appears in the August 5 column. In an introductory note, Thurber tells us that the poem was inspired by the one line spoken by the Swede Wamibo in Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the Narcissus;* during the rescue of a shipmate, Wamibo shouts "Hoo! Hoo strook 'im!" The following are typical of the poem's nine verses:

> Now there aint a man what sails but knows
> When your crew is gone your good ship goes: --
> But the captain he stuck to his dominoes.
> Hoo, strook 'im, mateys, strook 'im!
>
> Some place where the ocean joins up with the sand
> The captain's corpse lies stark and bland

But he clutches the dominoes in his hand.
Hoo, strook 'im, mateys, strook 'im!

The other poem, "A Song of the Sea," tells of Captain Drinkblood Morganheim and his raid on Tamerlaine Town. The 88-line poem appears in the August 19 column and tells how the tough but grand Morganheim was defeated by the innkeeper Nettie McGurk.

And further she knew that never no more
Would this heathenish gentleman darken her door,
To bellow for blood and stick knives in her floor,
Or she'd fathom the reason why.

So she took off her apron and picked up a gun
And fired before Drinky could say Robinson;
And his twenty year search was ended and done,
And she threw him outdoors to die.

Although Thurber is not known as a poet, his fledgling career as a free-lancer was borne up by timely acceptance of his light verse -- F.P.A. accepted for "The Conning Tower" in September 1926 a "poem" consisting of tabloid headlines chronicling the Hero and Leander story, reminiscent of the "poem" Thurber created out of first lines that appeared in the July 1 column. Bowden's bibliography of Thurber's work shows that the first two pieces Thurber published in *The New Yorker* were light verse. Also, many of Thurber's later fairy tales (such as *The Wonderful O)* are poetic in nature if not in structure.

With poetry, then, anecdote, parody and essay make up the bulk of Thurber's writing techniques, with his many other writing styles subsumed under them. For instance, short fiction and drama appear in the column primarily as tools of parody, as in "The Stranger Fascination" and in "A Classic Conversation." The nine "Dad Dialogs" are unique, presenting a fictional character through which to discuss various topics, but even those rely heavily on parody. It is also interesting that Thurber dropped the "Dad Dialogs" fairly early in the column's

run, but he did return to a similar technique at *The New Yorker* when he spoke through the character Eustace Tilley for the "Talk of the Town" items. But in that latter case, the character was highly abstracted; Thurber and White could and did adapt the column to their own styles.

It is also interesting to see Thurber moving from one technique to the other. Although certainly all the various techniques show up throughout the life of the column, the major anecdotes show up in the spring months, the major parodies are most common in the summer, and the essays become the dominant form in the fall. Holmes suggested that with the column Thurber was able to move away from third-person reporting toward developing himself as a worthy topic. But this study suggests that while Thurber certainly became more comfortable with first-person writing (although he retained the editorial "we"), the major third-person material appeared toward the middle, not the beginning, of the column's life. More likely what we see happening is the column taking on more of Thurber's bookish personality as the whole column takes on the characteristics of the "Book-End" department. Also, if we think of the column as Thurber's way to experiment with various combinations of his personae, values, and techniques, we see a natural progression. At first, the anecdotes appear sandwiched between Dad and Ploermell as "Thurber" the character is simply another voice he wishes to try out. As first Dad and then Ploermell disappear, the parodies provide a medium for Dad's voice to remain in contact with Thurber's readers while offering them the humor of Ploermell. And then the essay becomes the dominant form once Thurber decides what he really wants is to talk about books and other literary matters. As Holmes says, we do see him gaining confidence in himself, but perhaps more importantly we see him gaining experience in various forms of his

chosen craft. "We want to be a literatus when we grow up" Thurber had said, and by the end of the column we see him at least at the end of his adolescence.

Chapter 6

Pondering the Conclusions

"Credos and Curios" is significant in that it represents Thurber's debut as a professional humorist. The term needs some qualification, because he did not receive an increase in his salary as a result of the column, nor was he hired by the newspaper primarily as a columnist; he was simply a general assignment reporter who had been granted permission to do a Sunday half-page. But once granted that permission, it did become a part of his job, and he was able to call himself not just a reporter, but a newspaper columnist. Certainly "Credos and Curios" is not the beginning of James Thurber's literary career, nor even the beginning of his career as a professional writer. Bowden and others have identified a large body of juvenalia, written while Thurber was in high school and college, that show the true beginnings of his work -- both his writings and his drawings. Thurber's career as a professional writer must be dated with his employment with the Columbus *Dispatch* and with his scripts for the Ohio State University Strollers and the Scarlet Mask Club, which earned him as much as $300 a production. With those qualifications in mind, we see that this study of Thurber's first professional humor writing has provided several important insights into Thurber's later work and to his development as a major American humorist.

Perhaps the most significant of this study's findings is the underlying foundation of Thurber's romanticism. Working with his later writings, all Thurber scholars (but particularly Catherine Kenney, Robert Long, and Robert Morsberger) have noted the importance of romanticism as an element in the body

of Thurber's work. However, "Credos and Curios" provides a look at the infant form of that body, and in its nascent state we can see that romanticism is not just an element but the foundational philosophy -- the driving force. As such, it provides the unifying spirit of Thurber's work. Both Bernstein and Holmes write that "Credos and Curios" shows a confusion of values and contradictions of attitudes. But this study has shown that, while Thurber's attitudes and values clearly had not matured, all can be traced to that romanticism. Thurber may have given up his quest to bring idealistic love back into literature, but in his mature writing he incorporates the essence of romanticism -- the creative imagination. His mature works show this romanticism most clearly in the fairy tales *Many Moons, The White Deer, The Wonderful O, The Thirteen Clocks, The Great Quillow,* and *The Last Flower,* but it also is a major component of such stories as "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" and also of his last essays that decried the lack of imagination on the part of writers and readers alike. The stories Norris Yates cites as examples of Thurber's militant progressive persona are almost all drawn from *Further Fables For Our Time,* and even the play *The Male Animal* has a strong element of romanticism in its portrayal of a typical Thurber male turned champion. Any study seeking to explore the unifying values of Thurber's mature work would clearly need to start with "Credos and Curios" rather than *Is Sex Necessary?*

Although Thurber's romanticism does unify "Credos and Curios," the column still shows the young writer in conflict with the limits and precise meaning of his values. Holmes and Bernstein point these out as contradictions among his values, but a closer look shows that these are really more akin to growing pains. Dad's championing of Midwestern values and diatribes against artistic pretensions do not fundamentally contradict Thurber's later essays supporting the literary arts

at Ohio State University. The column shows, particularly in the piece "A Classic Conversation," that Thurber saw art taken to such an extreme that it ignored real people was ultimately little more than blither. Certainly pragmatism had its limits, but pretentiousness is no better. Of course, the young Thurber had not fully articulated such a value before "Credos and Curios," and the column shows him in conflict as he explores the limits and proper balances of his ideals.

This study has also shown that "Credos and Curios" was the medium in which Thurber mixed his romanticism and his journalism. In his study of Thurber's style, Michael Burnett wrote that Thurber's genius lay in his "improbable" grafting of the journalist and the fantasist. The process here is almost more akin to classicism than to romanticism, for Thurber restricts himself to working within the established form of the newspaper humor column. Classicism valued what the artistic imagination could achieve within a given form, such as the sonnet, whereas romanticism valued the unfettered imagination that created form as well as content. The column format had been established by Bert Leston Taylor and developed by Franklin Pierce Adams, and Thurber really added nothing to that form. Instead, within that form Thurber brought his powerful genius for fantasy into full play. That is not to argue that Thurber was the first, or even the last, newspaper romantic; newspaper humor columns by their very nature have a strong element of romanticism. The point, rather, is that Thurber saw that the form itself was capable of being transformed into art, as in "Portrait of a Noon Edition."

That is particularly remarkable given the lack of artistic support Thurber got from the editors of the *Dispatch*. As his letters clearly indicate, that newspaper was particularly uninventive and unimaginative. The values of Norman Kuehner and the other editors were clearly pragmatic -- get the news out

as concisely and as straight-forwardly as possible. Perhaps something of Thurber's indomitable genius can be seen in his ability to develop his romantic talents within the strict forms and artistic wastelands of the *Dispatch.* We normally think of an apprenticeship as the time an aspiring artist studies under the guiding influence of a master -- the term *masterpiece* originally referred not to an artist's greatest work but to the work that marked the end of the apprenticeship. In that sense, "Credos and Curios" marks an odd apprenticeship, for Thurber acts as his own tutor. Journalism did not *teach* Thurber much of anything except perhaps how to meet deadlines and how not to wait on the muse. However, journalism offered him such a varied selection of forms that he was indeed able to exploit them to develop his craft. He wrote toward the end of "Credos and Curios" that most reporters turned literati succeed despite rather than because of their police reporting experiences; it is tempting to say that his statement is an accurate description of his experience with the *Dispatch,* but the paper did at least expose him to the various forms. But still it must be said that the work of the apprenticeship was primarily Thurber's. The paper provided only the opportunity; Thurber himself had to seize it and exploit it.

This study has also shown Thurber using the column to find his writer's voice -- his "way of speaking," as Richard Tobias put it. The various personae and themes that are so readily identified with Thurber's later work have their genesis, or at least the beginnings of their development, in "Credos and Curios." The timid man who becomes Mr. Monroe and later Walter Mitty and the speaker in almost all the early first person stories manifests himself first in Ploermell and his bungling detective work. He moves from there to the character helpless in the face of the immutable bureaucracy of the doctor's office or the phone company. And he is seen in the person who finds wonder and myth in the simple misspelling

of a word. The "militant progressive" who speaks out against the abuses of language or the decline of comedy has his first utterances in the discourses of Dad, in the parodist who takes on sentimental poetry and modern realism, and in the essayist who champions romanticism against the ravages of realism. And by the time of "Credos and Curios," Thurber had settled on most of his major themes -- language and literature, fantasy springing from the mundane, and the war between the sexes. To ignore the source of these major qualities of Thurber's work is to risk misapprehending that work altogether.

As mentioned earlier, "Credos and Curios" clearly shows the unifying spirit of romanticism, and that same spirit shows up in these several voices. The voice of the fantasist and the voice of the parodist and the voice of the essayist are all, ultimately, one. In Thurber's later works, those voices have developed to the point that they appear more discrete, but in their early forms they clearly exhibit their common traits. As a fantasist, Thurber applied his creative imagination to the most trivial of human experiences -- misspelled words, doctor's waiting rooms, or newspaper language. Similarly, as a parodist he observes the humorous potential of sentimental poetry or the novels generated by realism and applies his creative imagination to realize that potential. And as the essayist, he does not apply his creative imagination but urges others to use theirs. Even in such Dad-ish essays as the one about circus animals, Thurber encourages his readers to see the beauty and mystery of things the way they are rather than mutate them into something unnatural or forced. On the surface, that last may seem to be more aligned with realism -- calling for the factual rather than the manufactured. However, as in Dad's discourse on ghosts, Thurber sees that the natural and unfettered has sufficient wonder of its own; the artificial robs it of that wonder, just as Conan Doyle's "troupe" of ghosts had been reduced to the level of a vaudeville show.

And "Credos and Curios" is clearly the place Thurber honed the mainstays of his techniques -- anecdote and parody and essay. Perhaps the one book that established Thurber's reputation as a major humorist was *My Life and Hard Times* (1933), a series of anecdotes about his life in Columbus. Those anecdotes are clearly the progeny of the ones Thurber presented in "Credos and Curios" -- the wait in the doctor's office, the battle with the bat, and the weeks spent getting a phone installed could all have been included in the later book. Certainly the later anecdotes have a more refined tone and style, but they are all the products of a life lived slightly out of phase with pragmatism -- romantically, if you will. The parodies in the column are sometimes so close to Thurber's later parodies that they are practically early drafts -- "The Menace of Mystery" is clearly the ancestor to "The Macbeth Murder Mystery." And such early pieces as "The Stranger Fascination" anticipate a large segment of Thurber's later work: "Bateman Comes Home," "If Grant had Been Drinking at Appomattox," and "The Ladies' and Gentlemen's Guide to Modern English." And his essays on language and literature became a standard genre for the works of his later (post 1945) career, incorporating his parody and anecdotal styles so that the lines separating the genres tend to blur.

Further Research

This study, of course, is only an introductory overview of Thurber's column. Much can still be done with the column itself and with the massive body of Thurber's journalism that this study left untouched. Although some attempt has been made here to show that "Credos and Curios" lays the foundations of much of Thurber's later works, a much closer comparison of the column and the books would undoubtedly uncover many informative connections such as that between

"The Menace of Mystery" and "The Macbeth Murder Mystery" mentioned earlier. A much more in-depth study could also be made of each of the divisions of this study -- themes, values, and techniques -- especially if it incorporated a closer comparison of the column and the books to show the full development of those qualities in Thurber's writing. And a comparison of "Credos and Curios" to "If You Ask Me," the column he wrote in 1940-41 for the liberal newspaper *PM*, might show some interesting development of his essay style and his maturing values (although the researcher would have to bear in mind that "Credos and Curios" was written by a healthy and enthusiastic young Thurber, whereas the middle-aged Thurber of "If You Ask Me" was suffering serious health and mental problems).

And although "Credos and Curios" represents perhaps the most significant of Thurber's journalistic apprenticeship, it is certainly not the whole of it. The months he spent as a feature writer on the New York *Evening Post* needs some investigation, if those features can be identified, if for no other reason than that they immediately preceded his *New Yorker* work. The news stories and features he wrote for the Columbus *Dispatch* during the three years before "Credos and Curios" may also provide useful insights. The problem, again, is one of identifying that work -- newspapers of the 1920s did not usually provide by-lines for routine stories. Thurber provides several clues in "Credos and Curios," his letters, and in his later work so that a researcher may be able to identify a large portion of that routine journalism, but generating a bibliography of it would itself constitute a monumental research task. The various pieces that make up the puzzle of the early Thurber are as complex as they are fascinating.

And that brings up one final point. "Credos and Curios" did not launch Thurber into fame and a thriving career. After the column ended, Thurber spent a

hard year at free-lancing with meager success and another year and a half with various newspapers. Not until 1927, four years after the column, did he find steady work as a writer (with *The New Yorker),* and another two years would pass before he began to build his fame with the publication of *Is Sex Necessary?* But Thurber had determined early to follow a literary career, and as his letters indicate his first purposeful step toward that goal was to take a job as a newspaper reporter. When "Credos and Curios" was cancelled at the end of 1923, Thurber saw that the *Dispatch* was of no more use to him, and he left for New York. Whereas Thurber saw the *Dispatch* as an apprenticeship, his later newspaper work was really more along the lines of odd jobs -- something to pay the bills while building his career as a writer. "Credos and Curios," then, marks the end of Thurber's intentional apprenticeship, and in that sense it is his masterpiece.

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