Sinclair Lewis and the Mythology of the Pioneer

by
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Arrowsmith is typically read—if it is read at all—as a story of the scientist as hero.[1] Always implicit in the label of 'hero' is a rhetoric of the archetypal quest, according to which Martin Arrowsmith would be our knight-errant, facing the dragons that dwell in Winnemac College, Wheatsylvania, Nautilus, and the McGurk Institute as he pursues the grail of pure science. This sort of reading is apt in that it identifies in *Arrowsmith* a narrative structure motivated by an opposition between the ideal of pure science and the threatening forces of practicality, commercialism, boosterism, politics (and even, disturbingly, of humanitarianism, in the plague-episode). Yet latent in the narrative structure of this quest is a less 'heroic' movement- that of flight. Martin in the end flees to the Vermont woods to escape the society which interferes with his pursuit of pure science.

So it is with all explorers, questers, conquerers. To pursue the object of his quest, the knight leaves community to wander in the freedom of the wilderness. Quest and flight are inextricably interwoven; the thread common to both is the movement away from community into the unknown. Consider in this light the myth of the American pioneer which Lewis invokes at the opening of *Arrowsmith*:

> The driver of the wagon swaying through forest and swamp of the Ohio wilderness was a ragged girl of fourteen. Her mother they had buried near the Monongahela—the girl herself had heaped with torn sods the grave beside the river of the beautiful name. Her father lay shrinking with fever on the floor of the wagon-box, and about him played her brothers and sisters, dirty brats, tattered brats, hilarious brats.
>
> She halted at the fork in the grassy road, and the sick man quavered, "Emmy, ye better turn down towards Cincinatti. If we could find your Uncle Ed, I guess he'd take us in."
>
> "Nobody ain't going to take us in," she said. "We're going on jus' as long as we can. Going West! They's a whole lot of new things I aim to be seeing!"
>
> She cooked the supper, she put the children to bed, and sat by the fire, alone.
>
> That was the great-great grandmother of Martin Arrowsmith (3).

After this scene, the novel becomes and remains the story of Martin himself. But it seems that Lewis found it necessary in the first few paragraphs of *Arrowsmith* to establish a foundation on which to build. And while for the most part it remains buried, this foundation is exposed in a few places—for example when Lewis sets the scene for Martin's college days:

> The state of Winnemac is bounded by Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana, and like them is half Eastern, half Midwestern. . . . many counties were not settled till 1860 (9).

The date reminds us that the distance between Martin and Winnemac's original settlers is quite small.

The American pioneer myth can be read in two ways. In terms of a quest reading, the pioneers boldly strove westward, settling new lands and embodying the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. But the other reading—in terms of flight—is the one Lewis emphasizes ("Nobody ain't going to take us in"). In the move west, pioneers fled the settlements they had established, refusing community in favor of the lure of lands not yet contaminated by civilization. This passage also indicates why the movement westward continued (until the pioneers reached a physical barrier in the Pacific Ocean)—complete escape is difficult to accomplish, because the dirty, tattered, hilarious brats a pioneer brought with him were reminders of a former community and the start of a new one.

The opening invocation of the pioneer myth makes it clear that Martin is also to be regarded as a pioneer; and as such, there may be a natural tendency to read him as a hero, in spite of the later warning by the narrative voice that this is "a biography of a young man who is in no degree a hero" (47). Disregarding this statement, Mark Schorer and Charles Rosenberg have built their readings of the novel around the assumption that Martin *is* in fact a hero and that Lewis intended him to be one (Schorer 414, Rosenberg 447-449). To support that assumption Rosenberg cites a letter that Lewis wrote to his publisher late in 1921 saying, "I think I shall make my next novel after *Babbitt* not satiric at all; rebellious as ever, perhaps, but the central character *heroic*.."[2] But the relevance of this letter is questionable. Lewis wrote it while he was contemplating a novel about labor leader Eugene Debs (Schorer 326, 341), two years before he met Dr. Paul DeKruif, who finally inspired him to write a novel about a bacteriologist. And when *Arrowsmith* did appear in 1925, it was filled in places with the satire of *Babbitt*. In fact, George Babbitt and Chum Frink reappear very briefly, bringing with them the whole world of commercialism, boosterism, etc. portrayed in *Babbitt*; and from this world, Martin feels he must escape.

In this flight, Martin of course seems heroic, or at least admirable, as he struggles to maintain the purity of his quest, while fighting dragons like Pickerbaugh (the health booster), carrying the blessing and prayer given to him by the high priest Gottlieb. The prayer, which ends, "God give me the strength not to trust in god," is essential because religion is a central element in any quest narrative (even though it may appear, as it does here, as the subject of an ironic inversion). In *Arrowsmith*, Lewis has set up science as the modern transformation of religion, the only object worthy of man's devotion. Mechanism has become transcendent.

Seen from this perspective, a dominant narrative structure appears, an up-down, almost wavelike pattern formed by Martin's repeated attempts to pursue his quasi-religious goal, and his repeated failures as the opposing forces of Main Street overpower him—until, in the end, it seems that he has succeeded. Lewis would in fact employ this sort of pattern again in his next novel, *Elmer Gantry*—the story of a preacher who

repeatedly achieves grace (or at any rate thinks he does) but immediately falls into sinful ways again. In *Arrowsmith* Lewis provides a clue to such a structure, saying that Martin "regarded himself as a seeker after truth yet . . . stumbled and slid back all his life and bogged himself in every obvious morass"(47). The morasses in which Elmer Gantry most often bogs himself are women—and the same thing is true to a lesser extent of Martin Arrowsmith. It is this feature—Martin's relationships with women—which pulls to the surface of *Arrowsmith* the structure of flight latent in every quest narrative; for Martin's attempts to isolate himself in order to pursue pure science often involve an escape from women and the community they are an integral part of, while his "failures" and frustrations seem to be at least indirectly attributable to women in many cases. In this sense, the structure of *Arrowsmith* is generated by the same "anti domestic myth" that Leslie Fiedler sees as central to so much of American literature.[3] Novels such as *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* all present the 'hero's' flight from the community, paternity, and responsibility represented by women. Fiedler's psychological reading of this narrative structure holds not only for these few novels, of course, but for any mythically similar narrative.

In *Arrowsmith*, Lewis demonstrates how closely aligned the pioneer myth and the anti-domestic myth are in the American consciousness. The pattern is set very early on, while Martin is still at Winnemac College. Note what becomes of the quest for pure science in the presence of Martin's first love, Madeline (daughter of a "Main Street dowager duchess"). Martin tells her

> "Oh. Well. Well, I would like to keep up *some* research. But thunder, I'm not just a lab-cat. Battle o' life. Smashing your way through. Competing with real men in real he-struggle. If I can't do that and do some scientific work too, I'm no good. Course while I'm with Gottlieb, I want to take advantage of it, but afterward— Oh Madeline!"
>
> Then all reasoning was lost in a blur of nearness to her (50).

The movement of the passage dramatizes Martin's struggle: he hesitatingly gives up science, at first, and attempts to rationalize the surrender by renaming science in the language of the Main Street enemies of the pure science. "He-struggle" and "lab-cat" belong to the discourse of Babbitt or Pickerbaugh; thus Martin's speech indicates that, influenced by his desire, he has momentarily identified himself with the values of that community. The last sentence of the passage, displaying the destruction of reason itself in the seductive presence of a woman, makes the conflict explicit. On that evening, Martin becomes engaged to Madeline, and promises her mother that he will become practical, but two pages later he is off to the North Woods with Cliff Clawson (in spite of Madeline's protests). This movement prefigures Martin's similar flight from Joyce at the end of the novel, and also reminds us of Babbitt's escape to the Maine fishing camp with Paul—although in *Babbitt*, the unwelcome wives and families intrude domesticity into the peaceful setting, showing Babbitt the futility of flight.

It might be argued that Martin does not want to leave Leora—that indeed he is quite happy with her. But in the Wheatsylvania section of the novel, he does need to flee the control of the community of which she is a part, a community where he is known only

as Andrew Tozer's son-in-law. He is drawn to Wheatsylvania, and forced into respectability both at medical school and as a practicing (practical) doctor, as a direct result of his desire for Leora—he cannot even consummate his marriage until he satisfies her father that he can support her. The inevitable flight from the community of Wheatsylvania moves the narrative to Nautilus, to Chicago and finally to New York, as the modern pioneer goes east. Of course Martin brings Leora with him (she has little voice in these matters); but even so he begins in these places to isolate himself more and more from her.

In terms of the structure of the narrative it is of little consequence whether Martin is conscious of any desire for isolation. For even if Martin does not want (or does not know he wants) to flee Leora, it almost seems if Lewis needs to write his way free of her. If there appears to be hope for Martin to pursue his goal while Leora is alive, this is because Leora is so often absent from the narrative—even when she is nominally present. Declining to narrate any but the briefest of domestic scenes involving Martin and Leora, Lewis concentrates instead on showing Martin working or studying. Lewis's particular way of manifesting the "anti-domestic myth" in *Arrowsmith* (and this differentiates the novel from works like *Babbitt* and *Main Street*) is to portray a marriage by ignoring domesticity. Thus in the few domestic scenes that are represented, Leora is a non-presence or a cancelled presence:

> She had a genius for keeping out of his way, for not demanding to be noticed....Sometimes, at midnight, just as he began to realize that he was hungry, he would find that a plate of sandwiches had by silent magic appeared at his elbow (114).

Such scenes imply that Leora—unlike Madeline or Orchid or Joyce—has sense enough to realize that the only important thing is Science, which has no place for a woman. So long as she allows Martin his retreats into his lab (and sews buttons on his shirts), they have a stable relationship. But this relationship threatens to halt the narrative movement; at least this may be Lewis's motivation for writing her out of the novel. If Martin perceives no explicit tension between his goals and his relationship with Leora, yet the fact that she meets her death as a result of Martin's science allows the reader to perceive such a tension. Although Mark Schorer claims that Leora was a character "whom contemporary readers could...love and admire"(414), Lewis's treatment of her is disturbing. The timing of her death, for example, is striking—coming as it does just seven pages after Martin first meets Joyce, who is a more powerful force, a more seductive presence than Leora could ever be.

Joyce will be the impetus for the final movement to the woods. Her appearance is structurally necessary because Leora is in effect too pliable to function any longer in the dynamic oppositions which energize the novel; after the Wheatsylvania section, she represents no obstacle—but *Arrowsmith* is a quest narrative, which cannot continue unless its hero is faced with obstacles. Joyce Lanyon is different from Leora, and gives Martin something to struggle against. She attempts to control Martin, to reform his dress, speech, and manners. She attempts to use his passion for his work as a means of control by buying him a complete home laboratory. Martin's reply is a demonstration of his feeling of entrapment: "And now, curse it, I'll *never* be able to get away by

myself!" (450). When Leora had taxed him about his antisocial habits, Martin had merely replied, "Very few people have the courage to be decently selfish . . . [and] demand the right to work," (317) and the matter was dropped. But Joyce is not put off as easily, so Martin's only solution is a conscious attempt to escape. We read at one point that "Joyce had become used to having him flee her" (449). Martin's desire to escape becomes more conscious as he perceives Joyce's demands on him becoming greater. When he makes her pregnant, within twenty two pages he is back in the woods with Terry.

Martin's desire to possess Madeline, Leora, and Joyce conflict with his quest—mythically, they become sirens. Even his desire for Orchid Pickerbaugh becomes a "compulsion to respectablity" (223) in Nautilus (for Lewis's sirens lure sailors back to land, instead of letting them remain at sea). And while on the surface it seems that Leora does not have this kind of control over Martin, recall that the opposition between the ideal of pure science and the practicality forced on him by Leora's family and community motivates the Wheatsylvania section of the novel. Attachment to a woman always brings with it some form of the obligations of community that make pure science impossible.

Two oppositional pairs motivate the narrative: community science and community-wilderness. These pairs are transformed into each other by means of equation—not only in the ending, where Martin's pursuit of science takes him into the woods, but throughout the novel. The connection between pairs of oppositions is metaphorical early on. A central metaphor associates science with mountain-climbing, which not only gives shape to the idea that science is a lofty pursuit, and aspires to sublime heights, but also emphasizes the isolation involved. The "unexplored mountains" (55) of science are filled with "unknown valleys, craggy tantalizing paths" (300). The narrative proceeds to literalize this metaphorical relation until at the end the pairs community-science and community-wilderness are unified, in that the wilderness has become necessary to the pursuit of science. Desire for the "tantalizing paths" into the unknown gains ascendancy over desire for women, community, and the known.

If we want to call Martin Arrowsmith a hero, we must come to terms with the cultural implications of that label. The American hero flees community, with its threat of paternity and responsibilty. 'Quest' and 'flight' are two labels for the same narrative structure, which is motivated by the denial of community. Here it is interesting to note that the pursuit of science depends on this community even in its denial. Oppositions require two terms. Community is a precondition for the revolt against community; it presents a background of impurity against which the figure of pure science stands out in its glory.

Ironically, the Main Street community makes pure science possible in a more direct way by supplying the funds necessary for research. Martin's flight to the woods involves a further irony as well. Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, has shown that 'community' is in fact the basis of the possibility of science, its necessary precondition.[4] Scientific discoveries are only meaningful within a community of scientists. Thus if Martin finds the grail of pure science in the woods, he will have to return to face Main Street—an abhorrent prospect for him because he did not choose to

be a scientist in order to *apply* his scientific discoveries in any way. In fact, during the plague episode, he considered himself a failure because he had allowed the practical concern of saving lives to interfere with his experiment. In the wilderness, he can retreat not only from the practical application of science, but from the scientist's moral obligations as well.

But the narrative has been structured such that community will encroach on the wilderness. (The two are necessarily a pair—always opposed, but always joined.) It seems that Martin has managed to discourage Joyce from building a house near the camp, thereby keeping free the space where he and Terry intend to found a community of "maverick and undomestic researchers like themselves" (461). But like the pioneers, they see a threat implicit in this community as well, and have already made plans to move on:

> When this place becomes a shrine, and a lot of cranks begin to creep in, then you and I got to beat it, Slim. We'll move farther back in the woods, or if we feel too old for that, we'll take another shot at professorships or Dawson Hunziker [the pharmeceutical company] or even the Rev. Dr. Holabird [the director of McGurk] (461).

What is especially interesting about the way Lewis structures this narrative—as opposed to the way the nineteenth-century practitioners of the "anti-domestic myth" typically structure theirs—is that the structure of *Arrowsmith* foresees its own impossiblity. Community (in this case, Hunziker or McGurk) is inevitable in the twentieth century, and the quest/flight must prove futile.

By contrast, narrative structure in nineteenth-century novels about the solitary adventurer remained open-ended. Ishmael escapes to tell his tale, but remains (true to his namesake) a wanderer. Huck decides to "light out for the territories." Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that by the time Lewis was writing, the frontier had closed; whereas "the territories" represented in Twain's time an actual place, to which one could escape.[5] Thus the ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* could remain open, although even here the possibility of closure persists. There is no narrative of Huck's flight from the female influence that threatened to "sivilize" him, thus his fate remains uncertain. Twain started sequels twice, but abandoned both attempts.[6] One story was to have described the adventures of Huck, Tom, and Jim on the Oregon trail; the other involved Huck's return (from where, we cannot be sure) after fifty years. Perhaps in Twain's mind Huck really did manage to escape. But for us he remains frozen in that moment between flight and return, between civilization and the frontier. Twain's refusal or inability to complete a sequel implies that for some reason he could not take Huck out into the wilderness, nor could he bear to picture Huck returning from it. In the twentieth century, Lewis supplies a more determinate ending. At the end of the novel Martin tells Terry, "I feel as if I were really beginning to work now," but his last words are, "—and probably we'll fail" (464). If we do not acknowledge the failure, but instead put our faith in the more hopeful, 'heroic' quest reading, this is because the pioneer myth and the "anti domestic myth" remain pervasive in our culture, and we are not fully aware of their implications.

NOTES

[1]For a contemporary review that seems to have established the tone, see Sherman. Rosenberg, as his subtitle "The Scientist as Hero" suggests, reads the novel entirely in terms of heroism, while in a recent treatment of the novel by Mary Land, Martin's heroism is subordinated to that of Max Gottlieb (but a notion of the heroic still motivates the reading). Lewis criticism is so scarce that any summary of "typical" views must be based on relatively few accounts.

[2]Quoted in part by Rosenberg (447). I have given the full quotation, from Schorer (326).

[3]Fiedler, *What Was Literature?* (150). In *Love and Death* (337-366) the flight from female community is identified with a simultaneous homoerotic bonding. This element emerges in Arrowsmith as well in Martin's relationship with Terry.

[4]Kuhn's whole book is an often implicit but always persuasive argument for this claim. For a brief overview of Kuhn's ideas about how a scientific community functions, see pp. 10-22, 52-60, 176-181.

[5]Melville's equivalent of "the territories" is of course the sea. A comparison might be drawn here to one of Lewis's contemporaries, Eugene O'Neill, whose early plays such as "Bound East for Cardiff" and "The Moon of the Caribees" demonstrate that the sea can no longer be a place of escape, as it could for Melville.

[6]*Letters* vol.2, 496, 747-748. In his *Autobiography* (266) Twain says that he destroyed a half-finished story in which he tried to resurrect Huck, this time as a narrator of a tale about Tom and Jim; but apparently the story did survive in ms form as "Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy" (*Letters* vol. 2, 746n.2).

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