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# “NO PLACE TO HIDE”

## WRIGHT MORRIS’S GREAT PLAINS

JOSEPH J. WYDEVEN

This desolate place, this rim of the world, had been God’s country to Adam Brady, but to his wife, Caroline Clayton, a godforsaken hole. Perhaps only Will Brady could combine these two points of view. He could leave it, that is, but he would never get over it.

—Wright Morris, *The Works of Love* (1952)<sup>1</sup>

People without this experience have missed an extraordinary handicap.

—Wright Morris, *The World in the Attic*, (1949)<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps echoing Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” Wright Morris begins his finest novel, *Ceremony in Lone Tree* (1960), with an invitation to the reader: “Come to the window,” we are beckoned, and then we are told what is there to be seen: *not much*. But what *is* there is a view of the Great Plains that is highly con-

ceptual and paradoxically suggestive in its emptiness. Outside the window, “[t]he view is to the west. There is no obstruction but the sky.” With us inside the hotel is an old man, Tom Scanlon, who, soured on experience and addicted to nostalgia, has turned his back on the modern world: everything about him is withered. Scanlon’s view is through a flaw in the glass, and what he sees is something like the sea—and like the sea, it offers “no place to hide.” It is an inauspicious picture, but from these arid materials Morris created a concentrated metaphor of vision, his central argument for the significance of human imagination. “Is it a flaw in the eye, or in the window, that transforms a dry place into a wet one?” he asks, and of course the question is rhetorical.<sup>3</sup> Morris’s vision permits no argument for the physical beauty of the Plains; rather, his aesthetic is founded on a compensatory logic in which inhospitable elements conspire to haunt the imagination. (Fig. 1.)

KEY WORDS: place in literature and photography, photography and imagination, Wright Morris

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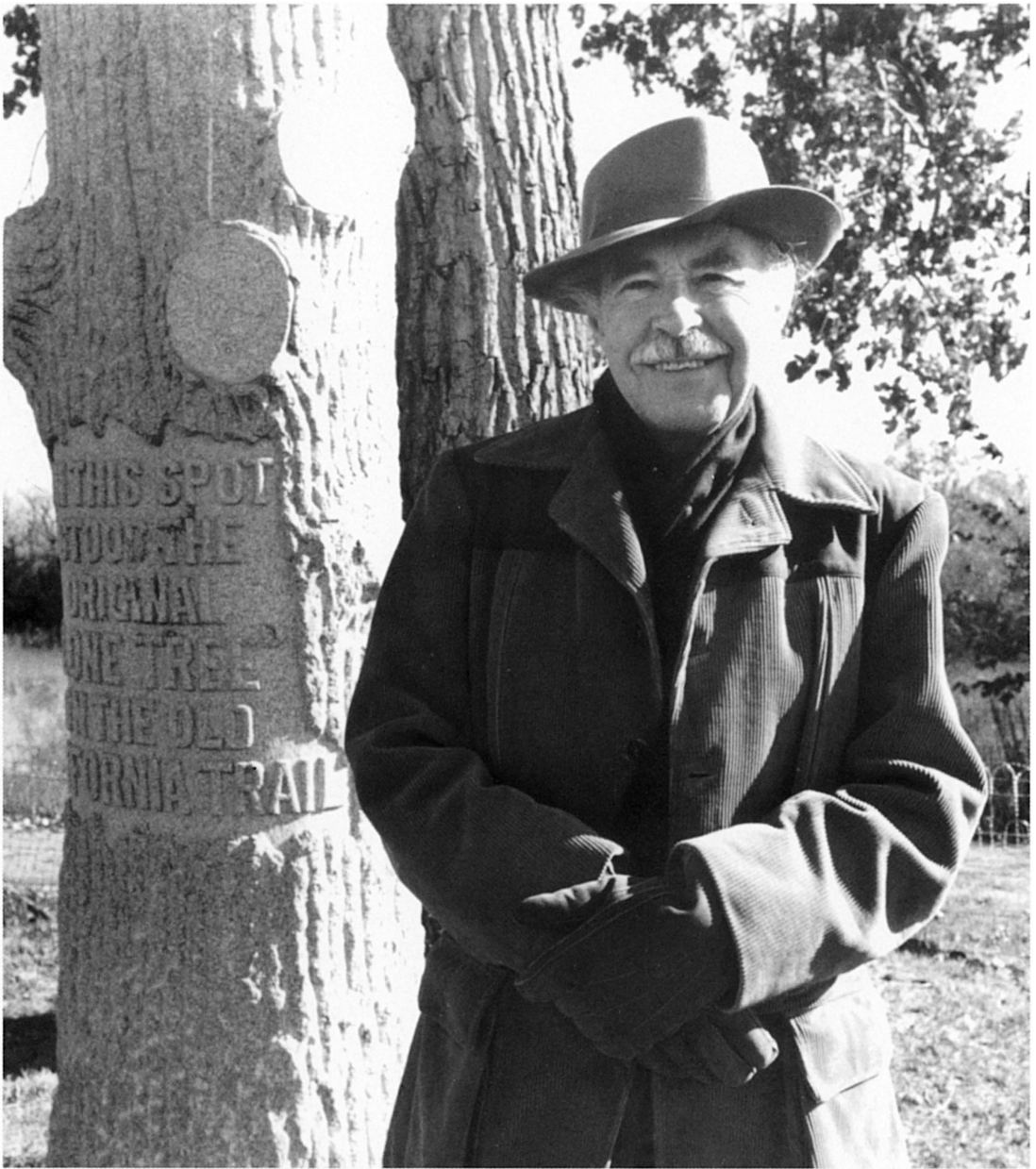


FIG. 1. Wright Morris. Photograph by Michael Farrell.

As a novelist and photographer, Morris sought to position himself in meaningful relationship to the past, not so much looking for stories as for objects that had stories—and histories—imbedded in them. He wanted to reveal the ways in which profound experience

becomes organically lodged in cultural effects (hence his interest in folkways, elderly people as custodians of disappearing culture, and frontal approaches in photography). His evocations of Nebraska and Great Plains places are almost always *focused*, filtered through actions

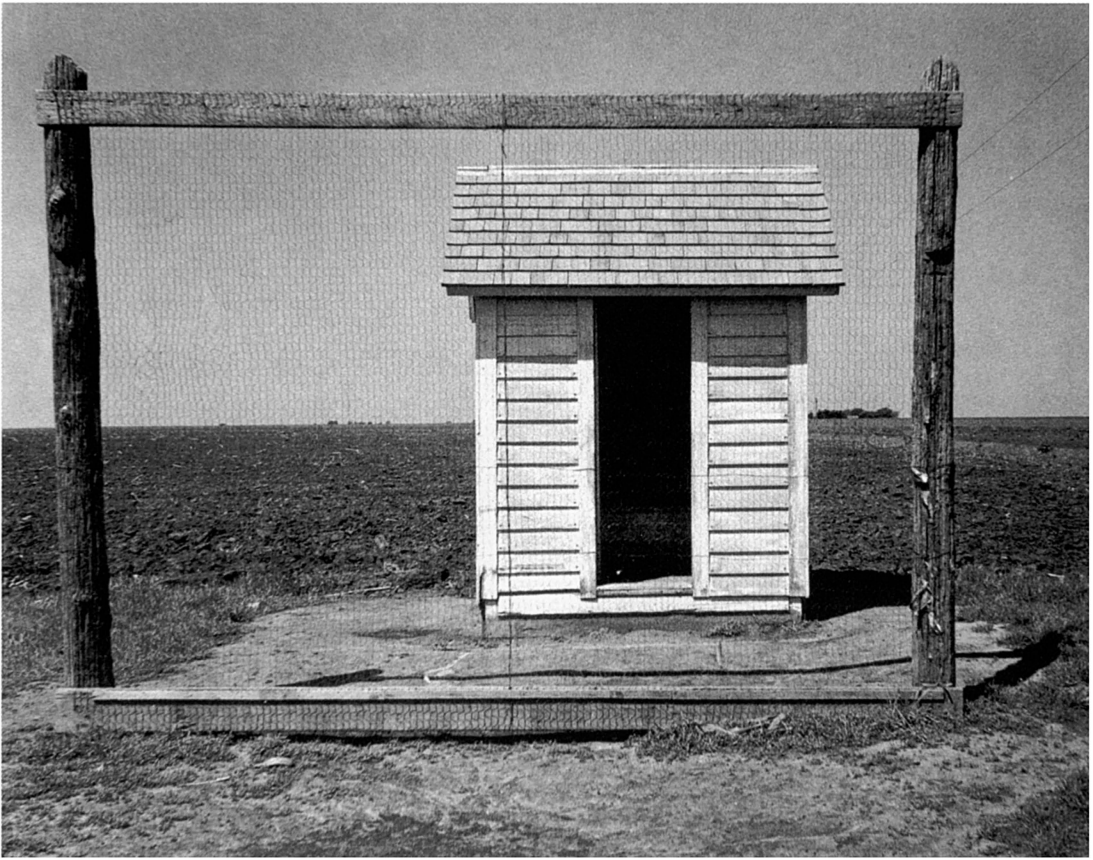


FIG. 2. *School Outhouse and Backstop, Nebraska, 1947*. Photograph reprinted by permission of Josephine Morris.

of consciousness—through optical devices or deliberately placed frames. In his photographs this quality is often determined by central placement and the implications of borders, in prose by devices that highlight not so much the things seen as the acts of perception in seeing them. These images are given to us with such ceremony that one begins to believe each one, if properly understood, might hold the key to all his work. (See Fig. 2.)

As Morris had a photographer's eye, it follows that his narrative method is extraordinarily visual, precise, and terse. Reading Morris's novels is often like viewing a photographic sequence; for him narrative movement is of secondary importance to still-life presence. His scenes are closely observed, but the juices he squeezes from them are not nostalgi-

cally sweet. His propensity for just the right expression—one delicately and ambiguously poised between reverence and chagrin—requires irony and an appropriately dry sense of humor. He provides for some readers and viewers a welcome shock of recognition, a weathered authority in melancholy matters of the Great Plains heart.

#### "THE HIGH PLAINS LIES WITHIN ME"

Wright Morris was born in Central City, Nebraska, in 1910; he died in Mill Valley, California, in 1998. In his long life he published some thirty books—novels, photo-texts, literary and cultural criticism. Two of his novels dedicated to Great Plains concerns, *The Field of Vision* (1956) and *Plains Song* (1980),



won national awards. He is respected as both novelist and photographer—but occasionally still there are admirers of his work in one medium who are oblivious of his reputation in the other. As a photographer, Morris had a short, active career of roughly a decade, but most of his memorable photographs, of Great Plains subjects, were made in the 1940s. As a writer he published his first novel in 1942, his final one in 1980.

Morris lived only his first nine years on the rural Plains, in Central City and other towns in the Platte River valley. At nine he moved with his father to Omaha, and at fourteen he left Nebraska permanently. For periods thereafter he was something of a nomad, traveling to California, to Europe, to Mexico—and perhaps most importantly, driving 15,000 miles around the United States in 1940, his intent to “salvage” with his camera those material things that evidenced profound human presence but were rapidly disappearing. (His motive for salvage is echoed in an expression from Samuel Beckett that he chose as the epigraph for *God’s Country and My People* [1968]: “Let me try and explain. From things about to disappear I turn away in time. To watch them out of sight, no, I can’t do it.”) Two returns to Nebraska (in 1942 and 1947), supported by Guggenheim Awards, solidified his intent to focus upon his Nebraska past.

Crucial to his development was a fact of the utmost importance: shortly after giving birth to Morris, his mother, Grace Osborn Morris, died, leaving a vacuum at the core of Wright’s existence; he said at the end of his life that he still missed her,<sup>4</sup> and today he is buried next to her in the Chapman, Nebraska, cemetery. This void was exacerbated by his father’s disappearance for weeks on end, leaving Wright with various surrogate families. This peripatetic relationship with his father led ultimately to full estrangement. His responses to dead mother and reluctant father help explain his pervasive melancholy, the “nameless longing” he occasionally remarks, for example, and the “sweet sadness” and “longing touched with dread” that burden

Sharon Rose’s life in *Plains Song* (1980).<sup>5</sup> I suspect as well that his mother’s absence colored, from the beginning, his guarded responses to nature.

In his only essay devoted exclusively to the Great Plains, Morris noted his lasting attraction: “I have spent most of my life,” he wrote, “puzzling over the lines on the map of my childhood. In what sense, it might be asked, have I been away? The high plain lies within me. It is something I no longer try to escape.”<sup>6</sup> Morris insisted that he lived his formative years with a blithe unconsciousness. Only when he began to reflect critically on experience did he come to appreciate the impact of his childhood. This discovery might have been long in coming, but it fully surfaced during Morris’s first trip to Europe in 1933-34, when he began writing short autobiographical sketches of Nebraska people and places. Upon his return, he embarked on a long period of experimentation with photographs and words before his first publication, a photo-text entitled “The Inhabitants,” appeared in 1940. Two years later, he published his first of twenty novels, *My Uncle Dudley*. Thereafter, even in novels focused elsewhere, his Nebraska memories, bolstered by inventive imagination, provided infrastructure and subtext.

What Morris called “the map of [his] childhood” is a useful key, for much of his imagery of the Plains is cartographical in orientation: it might well serve as a case study for human geographers like Yi-Fu Tuan.<sup>7</sup> Contrasting past and present in *The World in the Attic* (1949), he wrote, “[T]hirty years ago we had our place, we knew the points of the compass, and arranged ourselves in an orderly manner around an unseen force”<sup>8</sup> To support his reinventions of person and place, Morris identified himself as a child perched on the border between West and Midwest, in the center of the country, at midpoint on an east-west line from ocean to ocean. He muses, for example, about “the hole somebody had poked at the exact center of the map on the wall of the railroad station. The hole was right where I was standing when I stood in the lobby

looking at the map. During the years I was looking at it the hole was at the center of the United States, at the navel of the world." He adds, with characteristic humor, "For most people I knew the navel of the world seemed to be wherever it was they came from, even after I had explained it to them."<sup>9</sup> This "navel" imagery is ubiquitous in his work, as are corollary metaphors of magnetic attraction and "still point of the turning world" imagery borrowed from T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton."

Morris is also insistent on the importance of the ninety-eighth meridian, perhaps most memorably in the first chapter of *The Works of Love* (1952): "In the dry places, men begin to dream. Where the rivers run sand, there is something in man that begins to flow. West of the 98th Meridian—where it sometimes rains and it sometimes doesn't—towns, like weeds, spring up when it rains, dry up when it stops. But in a dry climate the husk of the plant remains. The stranger might find, as if preserved in amber, something of the green life that was once lived there, and the ghosts of men who had gone on to a better place."<sup>10</sup> Morris's piquant descriptions of lives subject to the caprices of rainfall poetically augment Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* (1931), and they have just the right tone to suggest the shaky defiance one Morris character associates with "the state emblem, a stiffly pleated upper lip."<sup>11</sup>

Even more important to the life of the imagination in Morris's work is the town grid of Central City, his place of birth and early childhood—a factor Morris brings up occasionally as a determining force in his development. He says he spent a good deal of time "trying to figure out why the streets in our town seemed to run every which way, but were orderly, with square corners, in towns like Schuyler and Columbus. If the streets and tracks don't cross at right angles, how do you ever figure out where you're really at?"<sup>12</sup> The problem was the coexistence of two railroads that quartered the town: the local Chicago, Burlington & Quincy (on which "the butter-

flies rode free to Marquette"),<sup>13</sup> and the east-west Union Pacific. Morris describes his confusion: "[T]he Lincoln Highway made a dog-leg turn at the 'square,' an open space where five streets converged, in order that the main street would exit parallel to the Union Pacific Railroad as it followed the curve of the Platte Valley. This confusion of streets impinging on the square left me both perplexed and enlarged."<sup>14</sup>

Morris carried this puzzlement into *The Field of Vision*, where McKee contemplates his childhood in order to comprehend his old friend Gordon Boyd. McKee thinks Boyd's "wild streak" might have been caused by "the crazy pattern of the town itself." Boyd is aligned with the Union Pacific, where "the trains had a long whistle and a caboose," whereas McKee lived in "the Burlington town, where . . . the trains had bells and cowcatchers" and where "the far-away places were an hour or so [away], like Norfolk and Aurora, but people only went if somebody died, then hurried right back."<sup>15</sup> Boyd's east-west orientation ultimately led him to a career in New York, but it cost him the small-town anchor that provides McKee with the emotional order he so desperately needs.

The omnipresent railroads came to carry symbolic burdens in Morris's work, sometimes as questionable agents of escape into the larger world, sometimes as reflections of loneliness. "The romance of the railroad," he wrote, "is the romance of the plains, and the sound of the whistle, blown thin and wild on the wind, or the rocking bell of the idle switch engine, sum up, as nothing else can, the melancholy nature of plains life."<sup>16</sup> The trains support other accumulated and closely observed melancholy effects, like those in Scanlon's Lone Tree hotel: "Before the whistle of the train is heard the loose pane rattles like a simmering pot, then stops, as if pressed by a hand, as the train goes past. The blind sucks inward and the dangling cord drags in the dust on the sill."<sup>17</sup>

Worse yet is the railroad as agent of destruction, most memorably in the case of Emil

Bickel, here observed by the barber Eddie Cahow:

There was Emil Bickel, a Pennsylvania Dutchman, with everything to live for. . . . He drove a team of roan mares in their Sunday fly nets, hitched to a rubber-tired, red-wheeled buggy, from behind a slow, upgrade freight, moving west, into the path of the ten o'clock Flyer roaring east. Deliberate. He had to stand up in the buggy to keep the team from bolting. Cahow closed his eyes, and when he opened them the Flyer and the buggy were gone. Through the sucked-up cloud of dust, the turbulence of the air, he saw the team dragging their traces in the burned-over ditch grass. On the wires overhead, his arms dangling like a scarecrow, was Emil Bickel in the black suit he reserved for Sundays, the watch in his vest proving the Flyer had hit him right on time.<sup>18</sup>

From book to book, Morris notes Emil Bickel's deliberate act. The time of the train's expected arrival changes, as does the time recorded on Bickel's stopped watch, but the essential point remains, as put by Lois McKee: "In such an empty country, how was it possible? Where there had been so few teams, so few trains, why did they meet so often at that crossing, in plain daylight, where nothing blocked the view? It had made her doubt her own life."<sup>19</sup>

#### MORRIS'S NEBRASKA

Obviously, then, the impact of the unfinished business of Morris's childhood must not be underestimated. "Home is where you hang your childhood,"<sup>20</sup> his character Clyde Muncy says, and indeed Morris's work is permeated with that idea: having little sense of a real home, Morris needed to invent one, and he did so by recreating his childhood, adding imagined details when memory failed. Perhaps his best formulation of this appears in his first critical book, *The Territory Ahead* (1957):

Before coming of age—the formative years when the reservoir of raw material was filling—I had led, or rather had been led by, half a dozen separate lives. Each life had its own scene, its own milieu; it frequently appeared to have its own beginning and ending, the only connecting tissue being the narrow thread of my *self*. I had been *there*, but that, indeed, explained nothing. In an effort to come to terms with the experience, I processed it in fragments, collecting pieces of the puzzle. In time, a certain overall pattern *appeared* to be there. But this appearance was essentially a process—an imaginative act of apprehension—rather than a research into the artifacts of my life.<sup>21</sup>

That process of coming to terms with—of being able effectively to *use*—his past is often incorporated into his work, so that both the past and his reconstruction of it are elements in his novels. The repetition of images, scenes, and characters in his writing suggests he must tell it over and over again, adding variations as he goes along.

The first inkling of Morris's concern for place appears in his second novel, *The Man Who Was There* (1945), in which Agee Ward reconstructs his memories of childhood places in his notebooks. There is, for example, a puzzling sketch of a farmscape in which a pump has been drawn in and then erased a number of times—a problem that "may have more to do with the weight of a full pail of water—*fetched* water—than it has with the actual location of the pump. The only solution to this was to draw both pumps in, reconsider the matter, and then take one pump out."<sup>22</sup> It is noteworthy that Morris was already depicting his understanding of the difference between logical and experiential placement as a problem in representation.

The idea of place is at the center of Morris's *The Home Place* (1948), his first photo-text set in Nebraska. Clyde Muncy is a native who has returned, accompanied by wife and children, to the sorry farm of his Uncle Harry and

Aunt Clara, an edgy visit humorously recorded in the fictional text. What is endlessly fascinating about this book is its metafictional puzzle: the fictional uncle and aunt are Morris's *own* Uncle Harry and Aunt Clara, and the photographs (on pages facing the text) had been taken by Morris at their home in 1947. Obviously Morris is deliberately manipulating the boundaries between fact and fiction, photographic "illustration" and documentary photographic "truth." The photographs—nearly ninety of them—of objects and structures, interiors and exteriors, catalog some of the cultural ingredients of life on the Plains.

*The Home Place* is an essential book to a full appreciation of Morris. In it he relentlessly contrasts past and present, and he argues for the disappearing virtues of privacy; even his probing photographs urge restraint, purity of motive. The book also argues for the profundity of the pioneer experience in providing domestic depth, as in the story of the woman, who, forced to burn a chair for warmth along the wagon trail west, first unravels the cane bottom seat of the chair and wraps it around her body, preserving it for some future chair in a new land.<sup>23</sup> Morris also incorporates a "figure in the carpet" motif throughout: that figure wears into the fabric through repeated use, until on the last page, across from a well-known photograph of Uncle Harry, readers are told, "The carpet wears out, but the life of the carpet, the Figure, wears in." In the last line, "The figure on the front of the carpet had worn through to the back."<sup>24</sup> (See Fig. 3.)

The next book, the novel *The World in the Attic* (1949), continues Muncy's adventures in Nebraska, this one focused on his visit to a boyhood friend. Morris here deals for the first time with the problem of founding identity and meaning on *memories* of the past: through Muncy, Morris probes his own emotional responses founded on nostalgia. This passage constitutes his critique: too much nostalgia causes

Something I might call home-town nausea. I can get it in a lunch room like this, or

at the bend of a road, any country road, where a telephone pole tips out of a clutter of dust-heavy weeds. Or a track crossing, where you lean out to peer into nowhere, in both directions, the rails a long blur with the hot air, like smoke, flowing up. At such times it's hard to tell where the nostalgia stops, the nausea begins. While you're in the grip of one, the other one sets in. Before you know it you're whipped, you're down and out, you're sick with small-town-Sunday-afternoon. This sickness is in your blood, like a latent fever, a compound of all those summer afternoons, all those fly-cluttered screens, and all those Sunday papers scattered on the floor. The idle curtains at the open windows, the heat over the road like a band of light, and the man on the davenport, with his pants unbuttoned, the comics over his face. . . . Everything is there in the hot afternoon, there in the room and at the open window, everything is there, in abundance, to make life possible. But very little is there to make it tolerable. Any one of these things, at a time, is nostalgia—but taken together, in a single lump, it is home-town nausea—you are sicker than you think. You had better sit down.<sup>25</sup>

This passage exhibits Morris's typical humor, even when he describes the most dismal conditions: his is a humor that gives itself perfectly to mournful effects. Masterful in its comic resignation, the passage no doubt resonates most with those who have experienced similar symptoms.

Morris's task after *The World in the Attic* was to find his way between the nostalgia that so attracted him and the social reality of nostalgia that he believed falsified the national experience.<sup>26</sup> One of his themes—seen most poignantly in *Plains Song*—is the ambivalence of home: an intense youthful desire to leave, coupled with a compelling need to return. During one of her departures in *Plains Song*, Sharon Rose observes a young man saying farewell to his hometown—and she recognizes



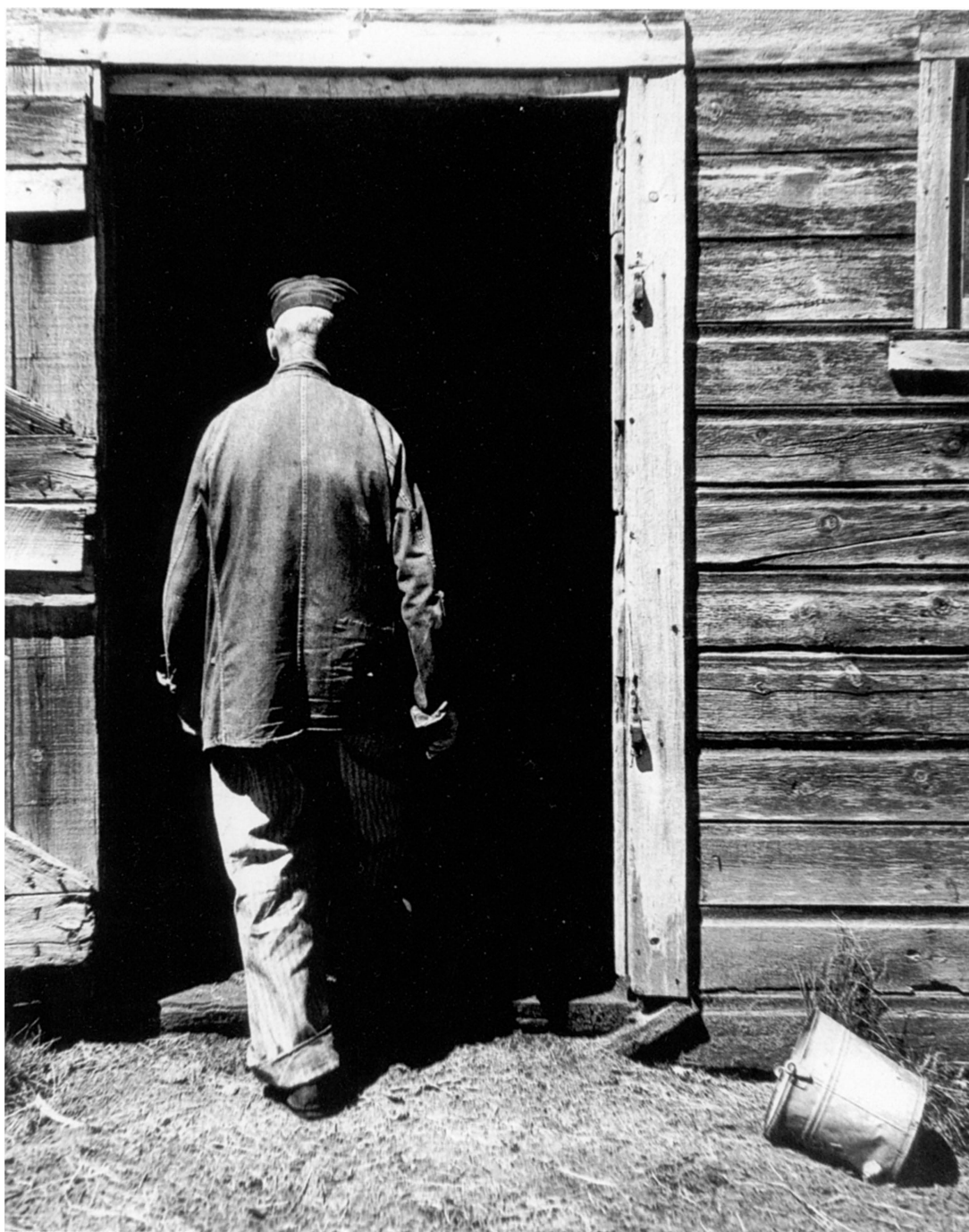


FIG. 3. Uncle Harry, Home Place, Norfolk, Nebraska, 1947. Photograph reprinted by permission of Josephine Morris.

herself. The young man is "happy in his freedom, in his expectations that whatever life held for him in the future, it would henceforth be his own life, it would not be the life of Battle Creek or Colby, it would not be the trauma of birth or burial, or mindless attachments to persons and places, to kinships, longings, crossing bells, the arc of streetlights, or the featureless faces on station platforms, all of which would recede into the past, into the darkness—wouldn't it?"<sup>27</sup> That sentiment, ending with that plaintive lapse in assured certainty, is for Morris archetypal Americana. Whenever characters in Morris say their hometown is a good place to be *from*, the reader can be sure the innuendo is intended, for all of these returns involve the bittersweet confusions of hometown nausea.

In the decade following *The World in the Attic*, in addition to other works, Morris composed three major novels pertinent to the Great Plains. The first, *The Works of Love*, was based loosely on his father's life, a labor that took him seven years to complete: this novel, much of it taking place on the Plains, is written in a clipped, minimalist style reminiscent of a photograph album in words.<sup>28</sup> The other two works, *The Field of Vision* and its "sequel," *Ceremony in Lone Tree*, together comprise an examination of the middle class and its efforts to compensate for the loss of the pioneer values that had sustained their forbears.

With these novels Morris completed his most complex considerations of Nebraska—but he was not through yet. Nearly a decade later he put together the autobiographical photo-text *God's Country and My People*. Then in 1980 he published one more novel, *Plains Song*, a retrospective look at the lives of a family of Plains women. Finally, a year later, Morris published the first of three memoirs, *Will's Boy*, a richly extravagant account of his early life. Obviously, Nebraska was much on Morris's mind throughout his career. Like his character Will Brady, Morris "could leave it . . . but he would never get over it."<sup>29</sup>

## CULTURAL FORCES OF PLACE

Morris's mature view of the Great Plains derives in part from his own psychology, but of course there were cultural forces at work too—what he took from his environment and his location in time. By the time Morris reached adulthood, the pioneer era had ended, the Great Plains was fast becoming the Dust Bowl, and the dreams of the heroic past were being cruelly censored by Great Depression realities. Morris frequently expressed a lament that he (or one of his characters) had come "too late for" one historical phenomenon or another. Among other places, the phrase appears in a late essay Morris wrote on Willa Cather. Having remarked that "Cather came to the plains at the age of nine, the year that I left them," he says that it was not until much later that he experienced "the first tantalizing vicarious glimpses of the West I came too late for, and must therefore re-create."<sup>30</sup> This expression is pertinent to the terms of his response to the decline of Willa Cather's world.

In 1923 Cather wrote an essay entitled "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle." This is something of a jeremiad, in which Cather praised the European immigrants to the Plains while denigrating their "American" neighbors, and she rued the evidence of cultural decline. In a key passage, she wrote,

In Nebraska, as in so many other states, we must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished, and that no new story worthy to take its place has yet begun. The generation that subdued the wild land and broke up the virgin prairie is passing. . . . With these old men and women the attainment of material prosperity was a moral victory, because it was wrung from hard conditions, was the result of a struggle that tested character. . . . The sons, the generation now in middle life, were reared amid hardships, and it is perhaps natural that they should be very much interested in material comfort, in buying whatever is expensive and ugly. . . . The generation now

in the driver's seat hates to make anything, wants to live and die in an automobile. . . . Will the third generation—the full-blooded, joyous one just coming over the hill—will it be fooled? Will it believe that to live easily is to live happily?<sup>31</sup>

One can imagine Morris's response when he first came upon this essay. Although his career suggests his essential agreement with Cather, he might have had some misgivings about the details. After all, Morris's father was of that post-pioneer generation, the man who introduced Morris to the automobile as an agent of freedom and possibility.<sup>32</sup> When Cather published those words, Morris was thirteen years old, a member of Cather's "full-blooded, joyous" generation "just coming over the hill."

Morris was not fooled, but he needed to find fresh expression and new themes. He noted sympathetically that for Cather, "Not pioneer hardship but civilized progress, the westward course of the business empire, chilled her heart"; it was "a blight she must escape." But what if flight were not a viable option, because there were some "umbilical ties" to the Plains?<sup>33</sup> Before her world "broke in two," Cather had written of the angst and accomplishments of Nebraska pioneer homesteaders and of a sense of community formed by human sympathies and antagonisms. But in Morris's world the American Dream was in doubt, and he had to confront this reality or risk insignificance as a writer. It is interesting how in 1949 he echoed—although the intonations are his own—Cather's complaint, suggesting that the post-pioneer generation had been

victimized by the fact that abstinence, frugality, independence were not the seeds of heroes, but the roots of the great soft life. Out of frugality—in this rich land—what could come but abundance, and out of abundance different notions of a brave new world. For every man—as we now say—a full dinner pail. Another way to say that—the one I heard from my father, and per-

haps you heard it from your father—"I don't want my son to have to go through what I went through." What was that? What made men of them? What made that kind of man, anyhow, and perhaps there was more than a casual connection between that kind of man and what we call our way of life. It was his. He had earned it. Can you give such a life to anyone?<sup>34</sup>

Morris linked a critique of consumerism to a failure of emotional depth and a lack of cultural purpose in the new West. The pioneers had of necessity *experienced* purpose, but when the need for such experience declined, what motivations pertained?

Morris explored this issue directly in *The Field of Vision*, a novel set in Mexico, but the bullfight arena in which the characters come together is really an elaborate screen for reflections on contemporary Nebraska. Morris sets the large problem of the novel as a conflict among three cultural positions and their relevance to the future. The first position is represented by the average middle-class Nebraskans Walter and Lois McKee. The second position is represented by old Tom Scanlon, Lois's father, who had simply turned his back in disgust on the twentieth century; he is so addicted to nostalgia that all he has are memories—not even his own, but his father's—of the heroic pioneer era. The third position is that of Walter's boyhood friend, Gordon Boyd, who had fled Nebraska to make something of himself as an artist—and after early promise, failed. The three parties vie for the consciousness of the McKees's grandson, young Gordon, whose mind is still open to influence.

The real contest is between Boyd and Scanlon. Scanlon has splendid mythic tales of the past with which he allures the boy. Boyd, however, understands that Scanlon's version of the past is simply atrophied nostalgia; there is nothing viable there to carry forward. Better, Boyd believes, to have attempted something new and failed at it than to indulge in myths that are simply replays of the past and

thus void of real present and future meaning. Boyd believes that without a frontier to tame, Nebraskans had succumbed to the comforts of consumerism and conformity. Their human nature is stifled by mindless prudence and the unconscious costs of unfulfillment. Boyd's term for contemporary Nebraska is "the deep freeze along the Platte."<sup>35</sup> "The shield of the country," he insists, is "sky-blue at the top, with fleur de Mazola in a scroll at the bottom," and it "features a pleated upper lip on a field of shocked corn with golden sheaves of grain at the corners."<sup>36</sup>

*The Field of Vision* has too many complexities—including some philosophical ones involving human evolution and the possibilities for human transformation—to deal with here. It must suffice to say that at least for the moment Boyd succeeds, sending his young namesake over the railing and into the bullfight arena, where he has a thoroughly unforgettable *real* experience. Boyd, defying traditional responsibility, discomposes the McKees and momentarily deflates the emotional logic of Scanlon's nostalgia. After the book won the National Book Award, Leslie Fiedler claimed Morris as a writer who "has been trying to convince his readers that Nebraska is the absurd hell we all inhabit."<sup>37</sup>

But Fiedler stated his own case, not Morris's, for he ignored Morris's compassion for the characters he satirized. This compassion is most apparent in *Ceremony in Lone Tree*, in which Morris transported the key characters from *The Field of Vision* (along with some others) to Lone Tree, his most mythic Great Plains place. This book must be understood as a reconsideration: having allowed the outrageous Boyd to voice his author's gripes in *The Field of Vision*, Morris could now more closely examine the impact of social and cultural forces upon these characters—even upon Boyd. One such force is the James Dean-obsessed killer Charles Starkweather (renamed Charlie Munger in *Ceremony*) who in 1956 had rampaged across Nebraska and murdered a dozen people. Although Starkweather-Munger has been recently captured, the char-

acters congregating in Lone Tree are still spooked—and in their vulnerability they exhibit and examine their own idiosyncrasies, frustrations, and motives.

There are several ceremonies to which the title refers: first, the family reunion centered on Tom Scanlon's ninetieth birthday; second, the behind-the-scenes conniving by Scanlon's three daughters to help the cousins Calvin and Etoile successfully elope; third, the birthday gift the neo-nostalgic Calvin gives his grandfather by restaging a romantic scene from Scanlon's frontier days; and finally, the death of Scanlon, an event symbolizing for Boyd, and McKee too, an escape from the deadly weight of nostalgia. Much of this comedy is worked out under—and with copious references to—the full moon that floods the novel, signifying a temporary suspension of reality and allowing greater scope for "getting out of this world." Atmospheric effects are often important ingredients in Morris's depictions of place.

In addition, like some other Morris novels, *Ceremony in Lone Tree* ends in the early morning, suggesting both exhaustion of effort and possibilities for renewal—never mind that by noon things may revert to quotidian reality. The novel concludes with Scanlon's body wrapped in a sheet in a mule-drawn covered wagon, his head pointed west—with McKee and Boyd riding on the wagon behind him. McKee is ashamed to admit how good he feels; he thinks, "Tomorrow it would be different. Could anybody say in just what way?"<sup>38</sup> When he turns to confer with Boyd, he finds the usually vociferous Boyd asleep.

#### THE VISUAL NARRATIVE OF PLACE

Perhaps how Morris affects his reader-viewers the most profoundly is in a desire for transcendence that is close to mystical. In Morris this tendency focuses on individuals, rather than on society as a whole, for futility often rules in the real world, with social odds stacked heavily against useful change. The transcendence that counts most in Morris is





FIG. 4. *Metaphysical Landscape*. Photograph reprinted by permission of Josephine Morris.

an intense desire to escape this mundane world altogether, or to invest the things of this world with deeper significance. This final point requires a brief examination of Morris's photography.

As has often been remarked, Morris's photographs remind us of the documentary depression aesthetic in which poverty is seen to be deserving of pity—yet Morris's motive was dynamically different. Morris desired to use his camera to record, not material appearances but inner essences, proof of the spirit *within* the objects before his camera. As noted earlier, Morris carries this into his fiction as well, where his narratives are sometimes comparable to photographic sequences—most obviously in *The Works of Love* and *Plains Song*,

novels that gain their power from devices of fragmentation, close visual description, and verbal portraits of large casts of characters.

There appears to be an interesting habit of thought behind Morris's images. In *God's Country and My People*, an image that might be called "Metaphysical Landscape" (Fig. 4) is accompanied by the following text:

Some time before this landscape became a state, it was a state of mind. The land itself was tipped so the waters flowed eastward, and where they flowed underground they called it Nebraska. There were few records. There was no history. Time was reckoned according to the plagues and blizzards. The territory itself was not yet part of the Union

and only the hand of God had shaped it. That was what the grandfather found pleasing, if not his bride. . . . Many things would come to pass, but the nature of the place would remain a matter of opinion—a log drying in the sun or a dry bed of a river seen from space.<sup>39</sup>

This image of a drying log doubling as a map is pertinent to Morris's habit of representing reality by positing two readings of things spread out before the eye—a form of the typology found in American literature ever since the Puritans, one that seeks profound relationships between the things of this world and the world of the spirit.<sup>40</sup> Morris invests his geographical scene—this *place*—not only with historical but with cosmic significance. This view from space in “Metaphysical Landscape” incorporates a distant, ethereal perspective.

Add to this a pleasantly startling passage from a late Morris essay on the cultural impact of photography. Near the desk where he daily worked, Morris faced a reproduction of a NASA photograph of Earth from space. Contemplating this photograph, he writes,

For fleeting moments my mind's eye zoomed in to an unearthly double vision. Through rents in the cloud cover I saw the Great Plains, the pattern of fields and right angles, the dry bed of a river as it snaked its way eastward, and where flecks of green indicated a village, I strained to see who it was that returned my gaze. A child, clothed in rompers, sat in the talcum-like dust beneath the porch of a house. Wide-eyed and entranced, he dreamily gazed through the porch side slats in my direction. Between us shimmered a cloud of dust motes in which time's substance seemed suspended. If I would peer at this child from far enough in space, where earthly time was in abeyance, would not the child who sat there, recognizably myself, return my gaze?<sup>41</sup>

That memorable image condenses several of Morris's artistic interests—and codifies a vast

desire. Most important is his notion of time as spatial and fluid (making possible the conceit that man and child may contemplate one another through cosmic space and across the years). In this image Morris appears to be striving for an imaginative unity, attempting both to tie the two ends of his life together and to combine the world of real experience with a desire for an imaginative path to another.

The first critic to observe that Morris's work led him and his characters “out of this world” was Wayne Booth, who found “a highly sophisticated dialectic that flows throughout Morris's works. The real world, gruesome as it is, is not as real as it looks.”<sup>42</sup> Booth focused on *The Works of Love* as a key document, for there Morris seeks ways for his character Will Brady to escape the shackles of this world. There the expression “out of this world” receives extensive treatment, connected to the idea of the hotel lobby as a place where identity might be flexibly affirmed—for “the purpose of every lobby is the same. To be both in, that is, and out of this world.”<sup>43</sup> Bound physically to the world, Brady attempts—usually unsuccessfully—to transcend his flawed earth-bound condition by seeking to give the love he is incompetent to receive.

But perhaps Morris's photographs provide the most accessible examples of his “typological” habit. In his prefatory note to “The Inhabitants,” he explained his reasons for combining words and photographs: “Two separate mediums are employed for two distinct views. Only when refocussed in the mind's eye will the third view result.”<sup>44</sup> What he was seeking was a new mode of representation, one founded on depression photo-text technique but with the motive to reveal—albeit with some nudging—the human experience.<sup>45</sup>

He later found his instincts confirmed by a powerful passage from Henry James's *The American Scene*. Morris borrowed it for use as an epigraph to *The Home Place*:

To be at all critically, or as we have been fond of calling it, analytically, minded—over and beyond an inherent love of the

many-colored picture of things—is to be subject to the superstition that objects and places, coherently grouped, disposed for human use and addressed to it, must have a sense of their own, a mystic meaning proper to themselves to give out: to give out, that is, to the participant at once so interested and so detached as to be moved to a report of the matter.

According to this “superstition,” time-worn human artifacts found in their settings might have secret meanings—meanings that might be revealed by a patient and fully engaged “participant.” This was an extremely useful statement for Morris, for it allowed him the freedom both to interpret mystic meanings and to hold in the back of his mind the rationalization that these visions *might* merely be products of “superstition.” This sentiment gave room for play even in the midst of modern skepticism.

Morris used his camera as a means to reveal both the object and its relevance to a history of human utility: objects have their own being *and* they contribute to the imaginative constitution of place. The result is that some of his photographs reveal objects—and meanings—perched on a threshold, having a *between-ness* or a *both-ness* about them; they picture a fluidity across borders—what Sandra Phillips calls, in a slightly different context, a “passageway,” a place “of imaginary crossing.”<sup>46</sup> Like some examples of his prose, Morris’s photographs often incorporate suggestions of a permeable wall between earthly reality and “unearthly” desire. The resultant images serve as ritual enactments that provide comfort and create order by testifying to the power of time-worn objects in their human places.

In his prose, Morris often emphasizes atmospheric qualities—“clouds of dust motes,” blurred or shimmering heat waves, or “walls of light”—that block, distort, or ultimately channel vision. In his photographs there is a similar kind of image, one that pictures a screenlike device that separates interior from exterior—and then immediately transcends this separation. This can be seen, for example, in

“Screened Window with Curtains, Home Place, 1947” (Fig. 5). Framing effects push our eyes through screen and gauze to the dark center, but we can see little within the room. More important is the reflection of the natural exterior—trees and sky are prominent—that appears organically to mesh with the interior. The viewer strains to see more clearly, but it is the merging of inner and outer, nature mediated by culture, that appears to be the real subject.

A similar barrier between exterior and interior is emphasized in “Through the Lace Curtain, Home Place, 1947” (Fig. 6). Here the interior contents are more accessible and the image even more compelling. The lace curtain serves as a veil, slightly distorting our perception of the room within—does Uncle Harry, for example, have a pipe in his mouth?—but its patterned transparency adds an element of mystery, and it suggests that the scene is a dramatic tableau: we may visually enter, but only with the understanding that in doing so we must renounce any intent to violate the inhabitants’ sacred privacy. To enter in this way we find ourselves in a dreamlike medium that defeats voyeuristic inclinations.

Another photograph, “Rocker, Home Place, 1947” (Fig. 7), makes this point almost too overtly. At first glance the light source might be either a window or a mirror—but it is most assuredly a nearly religious light; examining the image viewers pause to consider relations between inner and outer, presence and absence, secular and sacred. Who could see this image without reflecting on the life of the person who customarily sat in the chair?—it might have been Scanlon. That it is a chair for viewing—and therefore in Morris’s terms, for imaginative reflection—is obvious from its position drawn up to the window. Falling where it does, the lighting deliberately highlights the absent dreamer.

A more immediately familiar photograph is “Straightback Chair, Home Place, 1947” (Fig. 8). This is one of several photographs Morris felt free to print from both front and back of the negative. That means that the





FIG. 5. *Screened Window with Curtains, Home Place, 1947*. Photograph reprinted by permission of Josephine Morris.





FIG. 6. *Through the Lace Curtain, Home Place*, 1947. Photograph reprinted by permission of Josephine Morris.



FIG. 7. *Rocker, Home Place, 1947*. Photograph reprinted by permission of Josephine Morris.





FIG. 8. *Straightback Chair, Home Place, 1947*. Photograph reprinted by permission of Josephine Morris.

chair may appear on either the right or the left side of the doorway. That Morris reversed his negatives at will suggests he was less interested in documentary evidence than in picturing place as archetypal—an important consideration relevant to ritualistic rather than realistic motives. This is a fascinating image, viewed by the American photographer Walker Evans as expressing “[s]ome of the shoddiness and all the heartbreak of the century.” Evans concluded that “Morris’s detailed comment [in the photograph] is a waft of rather pleasant melancholia.”<sup>47</sup> Morris appreciated the attention, but he emphasized his *personal* attachment: “I love the chair,” he insisted.<sup>48</sup> Because of the crisp and detailed starkness of this photograph, I am always led to a superstition of my own—that the watery shadow cast by the chair is an adventitious token of Morris’s efforts to carry us off, out of this world.

And finally, “Reflection in Oval Mirror, Home Place, 1947” (Fig. 9) is a beguiling and mysterious image that conflates time and space. Its allure lies in its power to draw us into its recessed spaces, the mirror serving simultaneously as magnet and reflector, its peculiarities of framing once again having a centripetal function. At the center is the memorialized past: the table in the corner and the wall above it are laden with images of memory. Because these are seen in a mirror, we may wonder why we do not see ourselves as well. Because those memories are so intimately private and incommunicable, at the center of this image it seems language is called into question. No wonder Morris chose it later to separate the chapters in *Plains Song*, where it adds such powerful silent commentary. This is the ultimate thing about Morris’s pictorial images: they lead us into places fraught with meanings beyond words.

In one of his final essays, Morris wrote, “I assume it is a cultural, not a human, aberration that makes it impossible for us to *reside* in, to be at rest with, an image.” And again, “What is it that forbids us from residing in what we *see*? Is it the fear that what we see,

what we actually see, might be all there is?”<sup>49</sup> His insistence here suggests his weariness with endless commentary about photography, but he is also expressing something about the limits of language to convey ultimate meaning—a meaning that may be far less complicated than all the language expended in explaining it.

In Morris’s extended attempt to define the experience he came too late for, he frequently compiled lists like this one: “The handle on the pump, the crank on the churn, the dipper floating in the bucket, the latch on the screen, the door on the privy, the fender on the stove, the knees of the pants and the seat of the chair, the handle of the brush and the lid to the pot . . .”<sup>50</sup> Lists like this, enumerating *things*, convey an idea of endlessness; more important, I think, such lists testify to the impossibility of completion through language. Intimate experience, that is, defies representation in any form. It can only be imperfectly copied: through words piled on one another, through events and scenes repeated from book to book, through photographs laid end to end, through combinations of words and images that must be impossibly “refocussed in the mind’s eye”—where pure experience is hushed into silence.

Representation is a daring, imperfect product of culture. Nature, on the other hand, appears to threaten Morris—because it offers “no place to hide.” To phrase this sentiment in such a way, and so often, is to insist that hiding is desirable. Indeed, Morris tells us that as a child he was often to be found *under* things; he makes lists of those things: “[I]n the Platte Valley of Nebraska, street culverts, piano boxes, the seats of wagons and buggies, railroad trestles, low bridges, the dark caves under front porches were all favored places of concealment.”<sup>51</sup> May Wright Morris be understood, then, from the beginning, and in a place at the edges of language, as a man seeking release from the mortal condition of all beings thrust into nature—the condition, indeed, that stole his mother from him so early and so irrecoverably?





FIG. 9. *Reflection in Oval Mirror, Home Place, 1947*. Photograph reprinted by permission of Josephine Morris.

There are few landscapes among Wright Morris's photographs, and his prose is filled with apparent attempts to find his way out of nature: by avoiding language that describes nature, by detailing its threats, by distorting its atmospheric effects, by remarking its appearance from cosmic space. The important thing is that his world was *inhabited*, and even when his inhabitants had departed, they left themselves behind as ghosts, and as ghosts they continue to haunt houses and mirrors and chairs, waiting to be acknowledged and affirmed.

## NOTES

1. Wright Morris, *The Works of Love* (New York: Knopf, 1952; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), pp. 12-13.
2. Wright Morris, *The World in the Attic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 17.
3. Wright Morris, *Ceremony in Lone Tree* (New York: Atheneum, 1960), p. 5.
4. Ruthe Stein, "A Freeze Frame on Eras Past," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 September 1992, pp. B3-B4.
5. Wright Morris, *Plains Song: For Female Voices* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 216.
6. Wright Morris, "Our Endless Plains," *Holiday* 24 (July 1958): 142; see also Morris, "Where the West Begins," *Prairie Schooner* 54 (summer 1980): pp. 5-14.
7. See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977). See especially Tuan's maps and diagrams of sacred and intimate places, as well as his several references to Morris's *The Home Place*. See also *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*, Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher, and Karen E. Till, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
8. Morris, *World in the Attic* (note 2 above), pp. 173-74.
9. Wright Morris, "How I Put in the Time," in Clarus Backes ed. *Growing Up Western*, (New York: Knopf, 1990), pp. 108, 110.
10. Morris, *Works of Love* (note 1 above), p. 3.
11. Wright Morris, *God's Country and My People* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), unpaginated.
12. Morris, "How I Put in the Time" (note 9 above), p. 119.
13. Wright Morris, *The Field of Vision* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1956; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1974), p. 212.
14. Wright Morris, *Will's Boy: A Memoir* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), pp. 14-15.
15. Morris, *Field of Vision* (note 13 above), pp. 211-12.
16. Morris, "Our Endless Plains" (note 6 above), p. 139.
17. Morris, *Ceremony* (note 3 above), p. 3.
18. Morris, *God's Country* (note 11 above), unpaginated.
19. Morris, *Field of Vision* (note 13 above), p. 220.
20. Wright Morris, *The Home Place* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1999), p. 174.
21. Wright Morris, *The Territory Ahead* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1957; reprint, with new preface and postscript, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1978), p. 15.
22. Wright Morris, *The Man Who Was There* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1977), p. 82.
23. Morris, *Home Place* (note 20 above), p. 59.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
25. Morris, *World in the Attic* (note 2 above), p. 26.
26. See Morris's attack on Norman Rockwell in "Abuse of the Past: Norman Rockwell," in *Territory Ahead* (note 21 above), pp. 113-29.
27. Morris, *Plains Song* (note 5 above), p. 137.
28. On the similarities of Morris's prose to photograph albums, see Joseph J. Wydeven, "Focus and Frame in Wright Morris's *The Works of Love*," *Western American Literature* 23 (1988): pp. 99-112.
29. Morris, *Works of Love* (note 1 above), p. 13.
30. Wright Morris, "Willa Cather," in *Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments: American Writers as Image-Makers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 67.
31. Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," in Virginia Faulker, ed., *Roundup: A Nebraska Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), pp. 7-8.
32. See Wright Morris, "The Cars in My Life," *Holiday* 24 (December 1958): pp. 45-53.
33. Morris, "Willa Cather" (note 30 above), pp. 61, 66, 67.
34. Morris, *World in the Attic* (note 2 above), p. 66.
35. Morris, *Field of Vision* (note 13 above), pp. 54-55.
36. Morris, *God's Country* (note 11 above), unpaginated.
37. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 2d ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1966; New York: Dell Publishing, Laurel Books, 1969), p. 501.
38. Morris, *Ceremony* (note 3 above), p. 301.
39. Morris, *God's Country* (note 11 above), unpaginated.

40. See Ursula Brumm, *American Thought and Religious Typology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970).

41. Wright Morris, "The Camera Eye," in *Time Pieces: Photographs, Writing and Memory* (New York: Aperture, 1989), p. 18; see also Wright Morris, *The Fork River Space Project* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

42. Wayne Booth, "The Two Worlds in the Fiction of Wright Morris," *Sewanee Review* 65 (summer 1957): 377; see also G. B. Crump, *The Novels of Wright Morris: A Critical Interpretation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978). Crump found Booth's "Platonism" theory for Morris problematic but suggested there are two kinds of Morris novels: those that emphasize immanence and those that emphasize transcendence.

43. Morris, *Works of Love* (note 1 above), p. 172.

44. Wright Morris, "The Inhabitants," in James Laughlin, ed., *New Directions in Prose and Poetry 1940* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1940), p. 147.

45. A useful discussion of depression photo-text technique is found in Jefferson Hunter, *Image and Word: The Interaction of Twentieth Century Photographs and Texts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987). Wright Morris's photo-text practice is discussed on pp. 56-63.

46. Sandra S. Phillips, "Words and Pictures," in *Wright Morris: Origin of a Species* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1992), p. 31.

47. Walker Evans, "Photography," in Louis Kronenberger, ed., *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*, (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 180.

48. Wright Morris, interview by Jim Alinder, in *Wright Morris: Structures and Artifacts: Photographs 1933-1954* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, 1975), p. 118.

49. Wright Morris, "Photographs, Images, and Words," in *Time Pieces* (note 41 above), p. 63.

50. Morris, *God's Country* (note 11 above), unpaginated.

51. Wright Morris, "Of Memory, Emotion and Imagination," in *Earthly Delights* (note 30 above), p. 1.