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Heart Beats on the Left: Radical Strategies for the Novel

Second in a Series of Articles

Yonnondio: From The Thirties
by Tillie Olsen
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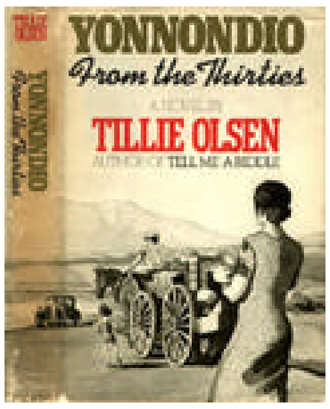
Eric Darton



Jacket of 1974 hardcover (out of print)

The radicalism of Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* lays claim to the part of us that drives us to adapt and survive. No other novel I've read, up to and including Wright's *Native Son*, refuses my demands for order and resolution — and even hope — more eloquently and firmly. Nor is *Yonnondio* 's narrator interested in readers ceding our wills. She wants us wide awake from the get-go:

> The whistles always woke Mazie. They pierced into her sleep like some guttural-voiced metal beast, tearing at her; breathing a terror. During the day if the whistle blew, she knew it meant death — somebody's poppa or brother, perhaps her own — in that fearsome place below the ground, the mine. (p.1)

I lay stress on the idea of *Yonnondio* 's narrator, rather than Olsen, because this book — the product of an impassioned writer in her early twenties — raises to such high relief the development of the narrator as a prime survival strategy of writing: an adaptive necessity. *Yonnondio* 's narrator works at adapting language to narration with the same intensity as her subjects, the Holbrook family, respond autonomically to the struggles of their lives. We sense this, and as readers, our instincts mobilize.

> "Goddam that blowhorn," she heard her father mutter. Creak of him getting out of bed. The door closed, with yellow light from the kerosene lamp making a long crack on the floor. Clatter of dishes. Her mother's tired, grimy voice. "What'll ya have? Coffee and eggs? There aint no bacon." "Dont bother with anything. Havent time. I gotta stop by Kvaternicks and get the kid. He's starting work today." (p. 1)

It does not take us long to tumble to the idea that what is being narrated does not describe our immediate material conditions or those of most readers today. So what connects us? Something, I think, very deep and basic: The promise, anticipated at the level of language, that here, in the space of this drama, we may extract some germ of what it takes to adapt to conditions we cannot control. We are not *Yonnondio* 's Holbrooks, true. We are neither the parents nor children of a white working-class family eking out a living in a Wyoming mining town in the early 1920s, soon to sally forth across the heartland: first to a failed Arcadian dream of farming South Dakota's unplowable "prairie marble," then to a slum apartment butt-up against the Chicago packing houses. Yet we have all awakened with the sense of being in deep trouble: once, twice, perhaps countless times. However comfortable we are today, we may wake up in a state of panic again. So we gravitate toward this narrator because she offers us something even more important than comfort: she acknowledges right up front a truth of what it is to be alive and human, in circumstances that challenge what is to be human, or even alive.

> "What're they going to give him?" "Little of everything at first, I guess, trap, throw switches. Maybe timberin." "Well, he'll be starting out one punch ahead of the old man. Chris began as a breaker boy." (Behind both stolid faces the claw of a buried thought — and maybe finish like him, buried under slaty roof that the company hadn't bothered to timber.) "He's thirteen, aint he?" asked Anna. (p. 1)

Olsen's narrator weaves herself into the dreams, into the waking moments of those she narrates. A writer couldn't do this unescorted. Such intimacies would be insupportable. This narrator is compelled to stand close, to bear witness, but she never confuses herself with the subjects of her narration, or protects them from the readers' awareness. It is this space between, the interstices in the weave that authorize her with oracular power. And it is in this space, though never in their lives, that her characters achieve their freedom, their uprightness — though all they struggled for was subsistence itself.

> Morning sounds. Scrunch of boots. The tinkle of his pail, swinging. Shouted greetings to fellow workers across the street. Her mother turning down the yellow light and creaking into bed. All the sounds of the morning weaving over the memory of the whistle like flowers growing lovely over a hideous corpse. Mazie slept again. Anna Holbrook lay in the posture of sleep. Thoughts, like worms, crept within her. Of Marie Kvaternick, of Chris's dreams for the boys, of the paralyzing moment when the iron throat of the whistle shrieked forth its announcement of death, and women poured from every house to run for the tipple. Of her kids — Mazie, Will, Ben, the baby. Mazie for all her six and a half years was like a woman sometimes. It's living like this does it, she thought; makes 'em old before their time. Thoughts of the last accident writhed in her blood--there were whispered rumors that the new fire boss, the super's nephew, never made the trips to see if there was gas. Didn't the men care? They never let on. The whistle. In her a deep man's voice suddenly arose, moaning over and over, "God, God, God." (pp. 2-3)

At moments like this, *Yonnondio* asserts the radical proposition that no matter how abject our situation may be, our direct response to untenable conditions always contains within it an ur-form of protest. Over and over in *Yonnondio* , it is Anna who comes closest to allowing this sense of what might be political will to well up within her. But every ounce of Anna's energy, of her astonishing determination, is directed simply toward holding her family together. Her road across America's heartland never leads to a revolutionary epiphany. Olsen's narrator will permit no billboards, no spectacle. A lesser narrator would find in Anna a heroic martyr, and to the reader's immense relief, endow her sufferings with "meaning." Anna would gravitate toward her formal, aesthetic role: baring her breast upon the barricade that we might discover the all-transcendent spirit of Revolutionary Womanhood. But for this narrator, that would be dismissive; it would annihilate Anna's subjectivity. Instead, we encounter images such as this:

> In the square of lemon light from the kitchen window, Anna picked up the laundry basket. The moistness and dimness were all around now. Mazie, slipping out to fetch Anna and Ben, stood transfixed in wonder and fear. Her mother was walking dreamlike round and round the yard, laundry basket on her head, disappearing in and out of the clutching mists; emerging, disappearing; an enchanted Ben following her. His voice came dreamy and disembodied. "Yes, that's how they carries clothes there, Benjy, basket on their heads, hands on their hips like I cant do. Walking like queens, hoop earrings big as bracelets in their ears. Parrot birds that talk, and flowers bigger than washtubs, all colors and smells." "Where is it, Momma, where is that place." "I dont rightly know. I aint never been, Benjy. I only saw it in a picture book." She put the basket down, bent to him fiercely. "You read books, you'll know all that." (pp. 95-96)

The scene above takes place well into the book, when the jaws of industrial Chicago are already firmly closing around Anna and her family. By now it is clear, though, that *Yonnondio* 's narrator has, as Walter Benjamin put it, "nothing to say, only to show." At every stage, her characters' struggles are paralleled, with the radical adaptation of language, to the task of narrating the unnarratable. It is as though the narrator has somehow, by a generation, anticipated Jabès's response to Adorno's famous dictum that after Auschwitz one can no longer write poetry. To which Jabés replied: "after Auschwitz we must write poetry but with wounded words." Thus while *Grapes of Wrath's* about-to-go-underground hero, Tom Joad, urges his ma to listen for him in the sounds of hungry kids, laughing in anticipation of hot dinners to come, America's white working class achieves in Olsen's narrator its anti-Steinbeck. The intimacy of the voicing for each character is unmediated by any strain of moralizing or sentimentality. It trusts the horror to reveal itself. Nor does it presume that symbols are exhausted of meaning. In one early scene Mazie goes wandering near the saloon where her father is drinking. An insane miner, hideously disfigured in a gas explosion, sights her.

> Dazed, he saw it was a small child, with unholy eyes, green. A voice spoke in him, "A little child, pure of heart." That was it. The mine was hungry for a child, she was reaching her thousand arms out for it. "She only takes men ‘cause she aint got kids. All women want kids." Thoughts whirled in colors — licking to flame; exultation leaped up in him. Sheen McEvoy will fill you, ol’ lady.… Mazie looked up. Sheen McEvoy was standing above her, laughing. Her heart congealed. The red mass of jelly that was his face was writing like a heart torn suddenly out of the breast, and he laughed and laughed.… Screams tore at Mazie’s throat, caged there. Sweat poured over her. She closed her eyes. He strode toward the shaft. He kissed her with his shapeless face. In Mazie her heart fainted, and fainted, but her head stayed clear. "Make it a dream, momma, poppa, come here, make it a dream." But no words would come. Instead, another voice, thundering. "What are you doing with that kid, McEvoy?" "Stand out of my way. The mine is calling for her baby. Men’ll die — unless she gets a baby. Stand back." (pp. 11-12)

Mazie of the narrative survives this night to continue living on in a world in which adults cannot protect, and children cannot comfort, and in which there is no base line, only an all-powerful force that crushes as it tears apart, that pulls relentlessly asunder and down. But Olsen’s narrator is very careful not to offer her symbolic material up for the construction of either politically abstract or quasi-religious notions. Most readers, myself included, when confronted with the scene above, will, in some part of themselves, gravitate toward the comforting thought that the forces bent on chewing up Mazie and her family represent the voracious aspect of some ultimately beneficent fertility principle, or else the familiarly contorted face of an angry patriarchal G*d. But the narrator doesn’t give us any wiggle-room. The earth of *Yonnondio* is an earth alienated from itself and therefore turned against its children. It is an ogre of zero awareness and endless appetite, and we know it only by its drive to annihilate. In political terms, this ogre is industrial capitalism, and Olsen is fully cognizant of that. But her narrator refuses to pull so facile a rabbit out of her hat. As with Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi’s *Weep Not Child,* we become politicized by enmeshment in the drama itself — a drama which, whatever our circumstances, we feel we need to play through in order to identify some crucial dynamic in our own struggle.

It took me several attempts over six months to make it through the 152 pages of *Yonnondio* . For me, the process of reading it was like trying to carry on domestic life in a kitchen hung with Goya’s "black paintings." But fleeing the gallery doesn’t really help, because once glimpsed, the images persist, and multiply on their own.

Olsen stopped writing *Yonnondio* in 1937. She had begun it five years earlier at the age of nineteen. Incomplete, it was published in 1972, after Olsen’s reputation had been established by the success of *Tell Me a Riddle* , a quartet of superb interlocking stories. *Tell Me a Riddle* . is, I think, nearly required reading before attempts are made to embark on *Yonnondio* . This is not because of any failing in *Yonnondio* , but because its "almost unbearably harsh poetry," as Alice Walker calls it, will doubtless seem more daunting absent a prior encounter with Olsen’s mature voice. To some extent, it was reading her later work, and thus taking in something of who Olsen eventually became as a writer, that gave me the heart to finish *Yonnondio* — to the degree that it indeed is, or can be finished.

YONNONDIO:
FROM THE THIRTIES
TILLIE OLSEN

Cover of currently available 1995 paperback

From her mid-twenties, in response to circumstances which did not permit her the leisure to write, Olsen gave her energies over to the day-to-day necessities of work and child-care and for several decades simply assumed that the novel of her youth was lost. In 1972, however, while searching for another manuscript, she came upon fragments of *Yonnondio* "intermixed with other old papers," then found "odd tattered pages, lines in yellowed notebooks, scraps." Though "other parts, evidently once in existence, seem[ed] irrevocably lost," enough emerged to allow Olsen to weave together eight chapters from the bits and pieces of as many as fourteen previous versions, drafts, and revisions.

At the point in the narrative where Anna wakes her family to another day in a seemingly endless Chicago heatwave ("Come on, get freshened up. Here, I’ll help you. The air’s changin, Jim. Come in and get freshened up. I see for it to end tomorrow, at least get tolerable.") Olsen's writing had, in fact, stopped. Very little material existed to fuel the reconstruction of the book which, as she termed it, had "ceased to be solely the work of that long ago young writer, and in arduous partnership, became this older one’s as well."

In 1994, Olsen permitted a new edition to be published containing three original fragments. These outline the concluding maneuvers of the plot-line and give further glimpses into the breathtaking narrative assertiveness of that "long ago young writer." The additional fragments are wonderful to have, and it was extraordinarily generous of Olsen to provide us with them. They permit no heretofore unimaginably optimistic spin, but offer the satisfaction of confirming what we already sensed: that the author intended to see the Holbrooks through to the ultimate wrenching dissolution of their family in the slums of Chicago. We learn who lives and who dies. We learn that Mazie, *in extremis,* develops an insatiable appetite for reading. Our leave-taking does not rise to "closure" but rather keeps our covenant with narrator and narrated intact, and imminent.

In a strange way, the hero that emerges from *Yonnondio* is the narrator herself. And her heroism is grounded in the nearly super-human quality of her restraint. Playing by her own rigorous set of rules, she must never show what's outside the frame. She cannot impose political solutions. Her role is to permit the narrated to respond as adaptive organisms to the specific and immediate conditions of their lives. By aligning herself so closely to them, while witnessing their lives so unflinchingly, she opens up empathic capacities within the reader we almost wish we didn't have. It is through this empathic connection that we also recognize some inkling of what it must have cost the narrator and her close companion, Olsen, to stay so proximate, so awake. Here is a narrator who has attuned herself to vibrate with the sensation of the narrated and never lose their pitch, in order to better sound their notes through the integrity of her own instrument. This makes her narrative voice capable of tracking exquisite nuances of bitterness and ambivalence that have everything to do with politics, yet are at the same moment bound up with the remorseless drive to adapt:

> When Anna made Will and Mazie ready for school that first morning, she stood them up against the wall and said fiercely, "You two got a chance to really learn something now; you're goin to a good school, not a country one. I catch you not doin good and I'll knock the livin daylights out of you, you hear?" But Mazie hated it. The first day: "MazieandWillHolbrookhavecomefromthecountrywheretheygrowthecornand wheatandallourmilkcomesfromsayhellotoMazieandWillchildren." Her palm held in Will's moist with fear. A big room, biggern the whole country school, squirming with faces, staring.… At recess, her heart quieting, telling two girls, Annamae and Ellie, about riding a horse, somebody hissed: "So ya come from the country where our milk comes from; ya learn about bulls?" and smack, a head butted her in the stomach. Bewildered, gasping for breath, swaying, she heard Annamae laugh, "Oh, Smoky, didja put that one over," and in a darkness of rage and hatred she lunged at him, but already he was across the playground, his too big shirt flapping in the wind, his angular face jeering. And then she turned to Ellie and shoved her down, and turned to Annamae to shove her down, but the teacher was holding her shoulder, steering her inside the school. "Perhaps you indulged in rough play of this nature where you came from, but we do not permit it her, nor does it go unpunished." Mazie could still see Smoky's jeering face. "Lemme alone," she cried and, making her body a hard ball of force, wrenched herself free. Then paralyzed at what she had done she stood in front of them all and began to cry. Hearing Will savagely whisper to someone next to him, "that aint my sister, that aint my sister," she cried louder and louder, uncontrollably. (pp. 49-59)

What befalls Mazie, Will, their siblings and their parents, owes as little to the abstraction of a tragic "fate" as it does to their individual and shared faults. So when Jim drinks too much and beats Anna, we get no more wiggle-room than when McEvoy tried to throw Mazie down the mineshaft. In desperation we may resort to: "well, if Anna'd had the sense not to marry a drunk, she'd wouldn't have gotten into this mess," or, "that's what did it, the drink! If Jim had been a real man — cleaned up his act — why the family would have been fine!" And when we grasp at these straw moments, to prove to ourselves that the Holbrooks really are a special case, and therefore nothing like us, we end by embracing the actuality of our own circumstances again. These may not be, in the present moment, as grimly unmediated as the Holbrooks', but they require nothing less than the full-scale engagement of our adaptive capacities. The catastrophe of the Holbrook family — falling most harshly on its woman and children — emerges so strongly as a *social* catastrophe, precisely because it is not narrated objectively. It is not about others, it is about ourselves in different shoes. *Yonnondio* 's deep radicalism lies at the points where the adaptive struggles of its individual, bound-together subjects intersect. Just before the bottomless pit of Chicago opens up, Anna and Jim's last morning on the farm:

> Two figures moving with pain in the dawn darkness, in the vapor mist. Two voices lashed by a dry and savage wind, bringing strangely the scent of lilac. "Almost time now, Anna. We'd better go." "Yes. It's so quiet now, Jim." "Mr. Burgum's waiting." "You'd think you could hear somebody's rooster. Doesnt seem like the other mornin's we woke up to work in." "No. C'mon, Anna. Let's go. Now." "Funny how Will cried all last night, and Mazie wouldn't sleep but in the hay. You'd think the children wouldn't care." "Anna — they're waiting." "This hay smells good. I'd like to breathe it in so's not ever to forget." "Right away now, or we'll miss the train." "Right away now, Jim...Jim, what's the matter, life never lets anything be?...Just a year ago...I tried for us to have a good life. You tried too, Jim." One word, austere. "Anna." Two figures blur into one, gnarled and lonely. Very low he says: "You're shivering. Cold?" "Awful cold. Let's go. Now." "But you cant take it lying down — like a dog. You cant, Anna." (pp. 45-46)

Neither here, nor at any other point in *Yonnondio* , is Olsen's narrator laying out a critique. She offering something much richer: her astonishing voice for the wailing of a lament that would otherwise remain mute — knowing full well that there is not much distance between a wail and a cry of protest. It's all a matter of circumstance. A lament, in the end, explains nothing. But then it explains nothing away.

In forthcoming issues of *Frigate* , Eric Darton will write on Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* , Chester Himes's *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* , and Elio Vittorini's *Conversations in Sicily* , newly retranslated by Alane Salierno Mason.

DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY
Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Margins.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. Translated by Rosemary Waldrop.
Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993.

ALSO OF INTEREST
Whalen-Bridge, John. *Political Fiction and the American Self,* Univ. of Illinois Press, 1998. Paper, 256 pp., $17.95.

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