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YOUNG, David Lee, 1929—
THE ART OF CONRAD RICHTER.

The Ohio State University, Ph.D., 1964
Language and Literature, modern

University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan
THE ART OF CONRAD RICHTER

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

I. INTRODUCTION................................................. 1

II. THE MOUNTAIN ON THE DESERT.................. 7

III. THE USES OF PHILOSOPHY......................... 24

IV. AMBIVALENCES............................................. 50

V. THE WATERS OF KRONOS.............................. 76

VI. TECHNIQUE................................................ 132

VII. THE TRAGIC VIEW.................................... 142

BIBLIOGRAPHY................................................ 159
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For almost thirty years, Conrad Richter has been writing novels and short stories about the frontier at various periods of American development. He dealt with Pennsylvania settlement life in The Free Man; he produced a magnificent recreation of the Ohio frontier in a trilogy comprising The Trees, The Fields, and The Town; and he wrote of the southwestern frontier in The Sea of Grass, The Lady, and Tacey Cromwell. He has also written novels about small-town life in Pennsylvania in the early years of this century, notably Always Young and Fair, The Waters of Kronos, and A Simple Honorable Man.

As a result of his choice of material, he has become known as a regional writer and a historical novelist. Thus in the recent publication of the Library of Congress, A Guide to the Study of the United States of America, he is recommended as a writer of "historical novels and short stories which give his impressions of life in America... His lucid style, depiction of local color, and recording of historical details are characteristics of his work."¹ And Edward Wagenknecht, one of the few

critics to deal with Richter at any length, says that in his three novels about Ohio, "if anywhere in fiction, modern readers can learn what it meant for a people to pit themselves against a wilderness."^2

This is not mean praise. But on one score, it slights what Richter claims is a central purpose to his work. For in writing about the frontier, Richter attempts to dramatize a pattern which he finds constant in the advance of homes, stores, railroads, and newspapers upon the wilderness. This pattern is the decline in vitality which, he says, always parallels the growth of culture. The trappers, woodmen, and cattlemen who break new ground—the most vital forces responsible for the victory over the wilderness—despise the weakness of the culture they paved the way for.

For example, one of Richter's pioneers—Worth Luckett in the Ohio novels—insists that if he had known his settlement would grow into a town, he never would have begun it. In The Free Man, Richter shows that the German indentured immigrants to colonial America, who withstood the perils of the ocean journey and the indignities of domestic service, are more honest, sturdy, and brave than their masters, the effete British who possess fine houses and rich clothing. And in The Sea of Grass, he indicates that the men who carved their cattle empires out of the desert are nobler.

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stronger, and more self-reliant than those who follow with the paraphernalia of civilization.

He argues the validity of this pattern by linking it to a concept he calls psycho-energism, an amateur's philosophy that declares man can best restore his depleted energies not through rest or ease (the advantages of culture) but through increased activity. He has written four expository books on psycho-energism, the most recent of them being *The Mountain on the Desert*. Richter claims considerable importance for his philosophy in the preface to this book, where he states that he wrote the Ohio trilogy expressly to illustrate it.

Richter, then, approaches fiction with two aims: he attempts to present an authentic picture of frontier life, and he tries to demonstrate that pioneers deserve our attention because they lived according to principles which have passed out of favor. The reviewers and critics consider him only in regard to his former aim; if they are aware of Richter's philosophy, they choose to ignore it. In a sense, they are justified. For while Richter is extremely skillful at creating pioneers and their environment, his philosophy lacks discipline; it is in many ways naive, betraying Richter's unfamiliarity with significant areas of modern thought such as psychoanalysis.

Of course it does not detract from our evaluation of Richter the novelist to say that he does not quite succeed as a philosopher.
But Richter approaches fiction with a third, more significant aim, and it does detract from his stature if we ignore it. In emphasizing his compelling scenes of pioneer life, reviewers and critics have ignored the fact that Richter's aesthetic consciousness encompasses far more than historical accuracy. He is primarily concerned with creating fiction that is totally satisfying—he welds his historical detail completely into the work so that the facts become but one element of the total impression. In his best work, moreover, his characters are vivid and consistent with themselves; yet they are complex and unpredictable, as satisfying fictional characters should be. Most important, Richter never lets his philosophy stand in the way of his story: he lets his characters be true to themselves even if it means that a philosophic point is lost.

Admittedly he does not always succeed in character portrayal. He has, however, done excellent work which justifies our plea that he be accepted as an artist rather than a writer who considers fiction merely a vehicle for historical fact and self-improvement formulas. My purpose, then, is to examine his work and point out its values—to pay him the kind of critical attention that he has not yet received.

I do not mean to suggest that no responsible work has been done. There is an article on the folklore in Richter's
novels\(^3\) and another on the mythic elements in his stories of the pioneers.\(^4\) And a dissertation has appeared which is valuable chiefly for its collection of scattered biographical information and for its study of Richter as a frontier novelist in the tradition of Elizabeth Madox Roberts and Willa Cather.\(^5\) But all of these works deal with matters peripheral to Richter's artistry.

Before we can discuss his artistry, however, we must examine his stated aims of re-creating the past and presenting a philosophy of self-revitalization. We can understand his art only if we understand how these goals influence it, and how it influences them. We have considerable source material for this part of our task—Richter has prefaced a number of his novels with statements of his concern with the past, and he has written at length on his philosophy.

However, he has said little about his artistic aims in general—a situation which need not hamper us, for his novels and


stories provide considerable proof of his conscious craftsmanship. Once we understand his philosophic position, we can detect with little trouble the scenes in which he sacrifices a philosophical point to the full realization of a character. And when we are aware of his attitude toward the role of the historical novelist, we can see how this attitude contributes to the impact of his fiction. In order to know his ideas, then, we must first look at his non-fiction work.
CHAPTER II

THE MOUNTAIN ON THE DESERT

In 1936, Richter collected nine of his recent stories into a volume called Early Americana and Other Stories, and prefaced the book with a statement of the ideals he has continued to hold. In this statement he declared that "Since early boyhood" he had been "almost painfully interested in early Americana;" and that this interest led him to collect details of pioneer life from old newspapers and books and from lengthy conversations with early settlers. He transferred this interest to his stories, which he based on "these endless, small authenticities, without which life would not be life either then or today." This passage goes on to hint at an aim beyond his desire merely to reconstruct the past: he hoped that the bygone days which fascinate him remain somehow alive, and in his fiction he tried to dramatize that aspect of the past which still possesses vitality.¹

Early Americana and Other Stories was in fact Richter's second collection. Twelve years earlier he had published Brothers of No Kin, which contains a dozen stories that had appeared in magazines during the previous decade. These pieces

¹Conrad Richter, Early Americana and Other Stories (New York: 1936), pp. v-vi. Subsequent page references appear in the body of the text.
exhibit an obvious conformity to market demands; they constitute his apprentice work, designed for mass circulation-periodicals, and they contain little evidence of his interest in American history and pioneer lore. Richter confessed that he grew tired of writing purely for the market, and reported, "In the winter of 1933, I thought it time to reverse a fifteen-year-old resolution and to turn my hand to the best fiction of which I was capable." This shift in his attitude toward fiction marks an important change in his work, which I discuss at length in Chapter VII. I need only mention now that Richter realized his essential purpose for writing in the mid-thirties, and it is since that time that he has commented on his aims of re-creating the past and dramatizing its values.

The preface to Early Americana and Other Stories provides the clearest statement of Richter's wish to make the past live again in fiction; later prefaces to his novels more or less echo it. For instance, he said in the acknowledgments to The Town that he tried "to impart to the reader the feeling of having lived for a little while in those earlier days and of having come in contact, not with the sound and fury of dramatic historical events that is the fortune of the relative, and often uninteresting, few, but with the broader stuff of reality that was the lot of the great

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2Twentieth Century Authors, ed. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York, 1942), p. 1172.
majority of men and women who, if they did not experience the
certain incidents related in these pages, lived through comparable
events and emotions . . ." And in a similar statement preceding
The Light in the Forest, he expressed his "gratitude to those
readers who have sensed what he was trying to do—not to write
historical novels but to give an authentic sensation of life in
early America."

Several times, then, Richter has made it clear that he tries
to re-create the past—to give the reader the sensation of having
lived in it. But in the prefaces to his fiction he says little
about his parallel aim of recalling certain values of the past
which he hopes have not entirely disappeared. To find more about
this second purpose, we turn to another work, The Mountain on the
Desert, in the foreword to which he advises that this is no novel
but "a continuation of the philosophy" underlying his fiction,
"particularly the trilogy, The Trees, The Fields, and The Town."
He adds that when he became acquainted with the philosophy he
expounds, he "considered the ambitious undertaking of building up,
if possible, a reading public that might in all fairness examine
such a work."

Actually, The Mountain on the Desert is Richter's fourth
volume to deal with his philosophy. Thirty years before it
appeared, he produced Human Vibration: the Mechanics of Life and
Mind (1925). The following year he issued Life Energy: the Key to Life and Its Phenomena, and in 1927 he published Principles in Bio-Physics: the Underlying Processes Controlling Life Phenomena and Inner Evolution. The 1925 volume is a popularly written account of ideas which he attempted (not quite successfully) to present with greater precision in Principles in Bio-Physics, where he couched his ideas in symbolic formulas that resemble a chemist's. Although he published nothing in this vein between 1927 and 1955, his interest in bio-physics—or psycho-energics as he later calls it—obviously remained strong, for The Mountain on the Desert advances the same ideas although expressed with considerably more skill and without resort to pseudo-scientific formulas.

Since there is essential continuity between Richter's early and late philosophical work, I shall illustrate his ideas with material from his most recent book. Granted, these theories have little intrinsic value; yet they are essential to an understanding of Richter's aims in writing fiction. I ask the reader's indulgence while I present, at the outset of this study, a brief sketch of psycho-energism:

We learn in our primary grade science classes that the human body is like an internal combustion engine, consuming the energy supplied by food. Richter, however, claims that the body's primary function is not to consume energy but to create it through
activity. He sees the body as a complicated organization of energy cells, each possessing mental, physical, and emotional aspects. In other words, a single energy cell may constitute an immediate physical motor activity, plus awareness of the body's sense impressions involved in the activity, plus the memory of similar actions in the past along with the sensations and emotions involving the various environments where it was performed, and perhaps even a racial memory of that action.

Each of these energy cells is linked to others by a means which Richter illustrates with a rather bizarre image:

"Well, we might roughly liken the human organism to a settlement of people all conjoined in the manner of Siamese twins, with blood vessels connected through fibrous tissue. Let's imagine further that when the people in this illustration are at rest and the pressure is quite low, the blood in an individual circulates in himself alone. It's only during action that higher pressure allows it to reach his connected fellows. So when one individual depletes and must replenish his vitality, instead of falling back on the slower method of rest and recovery, he arouses some of his fellows to wake up and move around. This raises their blood pressure and circulation. Now the depleted individual can draw on some of his fellow's blood, steal it and drink it to help out his own needs..."

"The human organism, body and mind, engages in this practice all the time... It's the common psycho-energetic method. But it's done under so many different guises that most of us don't know what's going on. We fail to recognize it as a release process. Strictly speaking it's a relief process. The purpose is to arouse energy flow in secondary groups to relieve a shortage in the primary group."

(p. 28)
The speaker, known only as Michael, is the apologist of psychoenergism to a group of New Mexico college students. The book consists of a series of dialogues between these students and their mentor, a former engineer who left the East for his health and settled in the New Mexico mountains where he weaves rugs. Michael (Richter is no doubt aware that the name means "one who is like God") apparently has the ability to heal, although Richter does not make much of this point; nevertheless it is hinted that two or three ailing Mexicans are noticeably better after Michael pays them a call. Perhaps the most positive though outré evidence Richter provides of Michael's healing ability occurs when Michael interrupts one of his explanations to stop a dog fight in the street. After separating the animals, Michael quiets the snarling aggressor by commanding, "Now that's enough, big dog! Don't you know that cursing and intimidating and blackguarding are inefficient release processes? What you've got to learn is an efficient release process. The first part is holding your tongue. Start saying nothing. Start right now. Don't say a word, just contain your deficit cell groups" (p. 65). Whereupon the dog grows calm and Michael, nodding approval, continues:

"Yes, it goes hard. Nobody knows it better than I. It's the hardest thing you dogs and we men ever tried to do, keep our mouths shut. Something insults or excites us and our racial self tries to get relief energy flows by way
of our mouths. But every word of defense or abuse we say weakens us just that much. No matter what that insulting Chow dog says or how it acts toward you, keep quiet. Once you control and relax your anger, it will release energy to make you purr like a lion."

He reached down and patted the dog.

"Now I can see by your hackles that you're feeling a little better. The thing to do in the meantime is transfer energy to your angry deficit groups by some other release process. Physical action is a good one. How about a little walk? Come on. Down this way. We'll walk to the big arroyo." (p. 66)

Richter does not follow up this case of canine emotional disturbance, but Michael's advice to the dog provides a clear synopsis of the essentials of psycho-energism. I hasten to add that most of Michael's discussion is confined to human problems.

From his earlier works on psycho-energism, Richter carries over the practice of symbolizing his concepts. The basic concept is the "R process," an automatic or instinctive borrowing of energy from one cell group to supply another group's deficit. A man employs the R process when he shouts at someone who insults him; he thereby releases vocal energy to supply the cell groups that feel a deficit—that felt the insult, in other words. The insulted man may, however, inhibit that release process in order to draw energy from another group—from walking, say. This conscious inhibition and choice Richter calls a "controlled release" or "CR process."

Richter attempted a somewhat pretentious scientific accuracy
of expression in his 1927 book, *Principles in Bio-Physics*—a volume for which he merely appropriated the term "bio-physics," since his thought is unrelated to the formal scientific discipline. Here is his formula for the R process: "1. Cn are touched off at certain rates by OC and CC. 2. A/BN supplying the Cn in question are set off by CA/B. 3. The Cn may be relaxed by A/Bn+ and drop instantly. 4. The A/Bn, once started, persist, subsiding more slowly" (p. 43). Of course, he had explained each of the symbols earlier; but unlike mathematical formulas, which are designed to make matters incontrovertibly clear, his served only to obstruct the understanding of some not very complicated ideas.

In *The Mountain on the Desert* he wisely eschewed formulas, and restricted his symbolized concepts to a total of three. The first of these is the instinctive or automatic R process, like cursing at annoyances or wincing at pain. The second is the consciously directed CR process which involves activities as disparate as prayer, turning the other cheek, or mowing the lawn when bored with reading.

The third concept which Richter symbolizes is the "ECE process"—the expansion and contraction of energy expenditure. This concept is particularly important because it provides the connection between Richter's philosophy and his fiction. The idea behind the ECE process is simply that hardship, pain, arduous work, and other
difficulties demand increased expenditure of energy; but if the same level of expenditure must be continued for a considerable time, it becomes normal—as, conversely, does a continued low energy expenditure. Evolution, Richter explains, is the continual increase of energy expenditure until that level becomes normal, when a further increase must be undertaken. He devotes the tenth chapter of The Mountain or the Desert to a discussion of this process and what it means in terms of pioneer existence, the "softness" of contemporary America, and the imminent domination of this country by another nation "from the North" (p. 212), presumably Russia. This prophecy of doom does not appear in his philosophic work until 1955.

One of his listeners asks to be shown how the ECE process works, but Michael hesitates:

"I must caution you first. . . . Expansion of expenditure to new rates and broader volumes of energy flow means deficit, pain, suffering for a time. As a result, such expansion is unpopular, against the organism's will. Today the Western world calls much of this process evil. Modern progress and science do their best to conquer it. They're confounded when it springs up more powerful and to most people more terrible than before in the very ashes where they thought they had destroyed it. What they don't realize is that it is apparently an integral process of the Creator and that the cards are stacked against those who try to destroy it. For example, when and if we overcome war and its increasing terrors, we'll find there are other obstructive forms of the creative process waiting for us, such as the stupidity of
popular leaders and the selfish weakness of popular majorities. When we overcome disease and lengthen life, we'll run into new problems such as over-population and starvation." (p. 194)

Michael illustrates his point in a way he often employs: he asks his charges to take him for an automobile ride, even though a dust storm is raging. Of course the young men protest; but Michael counters, "You see? Even the youth today shuns expansion of expenditure. It's a sign of the times. It wasn't so when I was a boy" (p. 195).

Instead of directing the students up the mountain above the storm, Michael orders them to drive down into the blowing sand. Finally they enter an adobe farmhouse where they relax while Michael tells them the purpose of their trip. He explains (pp. 196-198) that there are two kinds of energy deficiency. First, there are decreases in the flow of energy needed to meet the body's requirements—decreases such as fatigue, hunger, growing old. He continues:

"The other kind of deficiency is caused by unusual energy requirement. We run into disappointment, a problem to solve, a thorn to pull out, a chasm to jump, an enemy to fight, many kinds of shock. The ride down here today was one of unusual energy requirement. . . . Above-normal expenditure was set off by the sand storm through our eyes, our ears, our breathing, through the possibility of getting lost or having an accident, through absence of reality and familiar landmarks without the substitution of new ones. Having little experience with sand storms, no expenditure in the past had built up sufficient energy flows to these special conditions in ourselves. As a result the deficits were considerable and painful. However, sooner or later the thorn is pulled, the chasm is jumped, the enemy is routed." (pp. 196-197)
Michael tells them that inside the house they no longer suffer from the storm; they feel secure and at ease. Their energies continue for a while to flow at the abnormally high rate demanded by their experience outside, and this surplus of energy causes the sensations they recognize as relaxation and comfort. Before long, however, their energies would decline to match the greatly decreased demand now put on them; the sensation of ease would vanish; they would begin to feel bored and would want to leave. They would be ready for another energy-arousing experience.

These ideas lead directly to the psycho-energetic point which lies behind Richter's novels and stories. Michael goes on:

"The greater the difficulties of the pioneer, the more did his hardship, insecurity, danger and discomfort establish strong energy flows in him so that when resolved by hope in and effort toward eventual victory over them, the released energy of these hardships gave pleasure, not pain. The idea of pain wasn't in the pioneer so much as in modern people with fainter energy flows who look back on the pioneer and invent tales of his suffering and despair to cut him down more to their own size. They can never understand his satisfaction and even pleasure in his lot, as a hand-fed-and-housed parrot taken aloft in an airplane can never understand the preference and satisfaction of the eagle flying up there alone under his own pioneered power." (p. 200)

Unfortunately, Richter nowhere mentions that the ease, security, and effortless functioning of society which he condemns were the goals that most of the pioneers had in mind when they cleared the woods, built houses and churches and schools, laid roads,
set up stores, dug canals, and established legislatures and courts. Such were, in fact, the goals of the pioneers Richter himself depicts. Nor does he consider that many pioneers settled the West not to expand their energy flows but to escape an unpleasant domestic situation which, if endured, would have expanded their energies as much as pioneering.

These inconsistencies leave Richter's thought rather poorly defended. But if we regard psycho-energism as an expression of an attitude rather than as a formal philosophy, we can still take it seriously as an integral part of his work. And if we treat it as an expression of his attitude, we may consider its inconsistencies as ambivalences in his feeling. Indeed the ambivalences which his work displays demand a close look, and I discuss them at length in the next chapter. For the moment I shall mention but one disparity between Richter's thought and his practice in *The Mountain on the Desert*.

While Michael and the students rest in the adobe house, one of the young men brings up the subject of education and suggests the value of teaching people to be charitable to the poor. Michael discounts this idea:

"Education as practiced today is part of the cult of comfort—an attempt to get around the pain of the universal process of expanded expenditure. Moderns shrink from what their grandparents went through. So they set up the proposition that charity, tolerance, kindness, generosity
and other virtues can be established in the human being by instruction, propaganda, repetition. As a hopeful and soft-hearted human being I'm in great sympathy with the movement and try to practise it even though I'm often confounded by the results. Also, as an observing psycho-energist, disturbing questions confront me. Surely these easier methods were available to the Creative Engineers ages ago. Why then, if these easier methods produce the same results, were the people of centuries ago put through torment and hardship? Was ancient man so stupid that he couldn't have been instructed, while modern man is so intelligent that he may be? History teaches us nothing of the sort." (p. 201)

But Richter slights an important truth of education when he has Michael add, "Being taught something is not experiencing it. Little or no expanded rates are built into the pupil. He doesn't finally do things because of established psycho-energic processes that have become a deep part of him" (pp. 201-202). It is true that no education provides the experience which forms its subject matter. Every teacher knows this, even the freshman English instructor faced with students who are unconcerned with making an understanding of the complete sentence a deep part of themselves. But education is not therefore worthless. Christ's doctrine of love is not invalidated because the brood of vipers who heard Him would not practice it.

Michael himself acts as philosophic mentor to the college students, even though he denies the role when one of them asks why he teaches them. He replies, "I teach you because you came to me and asked questions . . . My opinion of the Creator's compassion,
intelligence and inventiveness is too great to let me suspect that I must come and instruct you or you will be lost somewhere on the way" (p. 202). But that reply is valid only within the dramatic context of Michael's dialogues with the young men. The book itself, Richter avows in the foreword, was written with a definite instructional motive; after all, he attempted "building up . . . a reading public that might in all fairness examine such a work" (p. ix). Furthermore, he declares that he wrote his novels—particularly the Ohio trilogy—in order to make the public aware of his philosophy. Despite Michael's criticisms of education, Richter himself consciously plays a tutorial role.

Richter's ambivalence toward education is paralleled by his inconsistent attitude toward psycho-energism itself. In one place he claims that "people of the older days" had far greater respect than we have for the value of this expanded energy flow, no matter how painful it was. "A boy or man was seldom offered help, however heavy his task, unless he asked for it. . . . older generations often accepted these things as the wise dispensation or discipline of the gods" (p. 199). Nevertheless, he adds, if a person lives for a while in poverty, and experiences the expanded flow of energy that comes from living through hardship, he becomes more sympathetic to others in the same condition and helps them in whatever ways he can (p. 200). Now, even if it were true that the poor and the once-poor are more sympathetic than others to the impoverished, it would
Seem a violation of psycho-energic evolution to give food or money or housing to those lacking these blessings. For the sake of consistency, Michael should argue as do supporters of the caste system that the poor need poverty for their spiritual advancement.

Richter does not push his philosophy of psycho-energism to the logical conclusion of making strength of will the supreme virtue. Richter's sympathies are hardly fascist, and he does not want to turn psycho-energism into a superman doctrine like Hitler's National Socialism. Moreover, if only the strong-willed deserved respect, Richter would be unable to depict the weak, the ill, the tempted, and the mischievous characters with the sympathy that his fiction reveals. His pioneers in no way resemble Ayn Rand's fanatic individualists.

Richter thus puts a moral limitation on psycho-energism, and in determining why he does so we are led to investigate the source of his ideas. While he is scrupulous in listing sources for the information in his historical novels, he gives the reader no hint about the origin of his philosophy. The absence of this information disturbs us, particularly since Richter seemed to indicate that there was a source when he said that he started The Mountain on the Desert "as a young man when first coming on Michael's work" (p. x); he implied that "Michael's work" was an independent body of thought. But was there such a body of thought? Probably not. By postulating Michael and his work, Richter tried to suggest
an authority for his own ideas when indeed there was none. This situation seems all the more likely in view of Richter's further statement that he could never "rest at any age" while his philosophy "remained unwritten" (p. x). In fact, his philosophy has not remained unwritten, for The Mountain on the Desert was his fourth exposition of it; but he chose not to acknowledge those early volumes and implied that this latest version was the first presentation of his ideas to the public. In those early publications, moreover, Richter mentioned no indebtedness to a Michael, or to any other source of inspiration.

How, then, did he come upon his concepts? The answer, I believe, is simply this: he got them at home. If we eliminate from psycho-energism the symbols, the formulas, and the vague concept of energy cells, we find that it is essentially made up of commonplaces. Richter invented the "controlled release process" to explain the virtue of a civil response to an insult, yet his explanation provides no new understanding of the Biblical reminder, "A soft answer turneth away wrath." The process which he called the "expansion and contraction of energy resources" is familiar to all of us in countless injunctions to labor; and none of us doubts the truth that, up to a point, we increase our capacity for work by working. The essence of psycho-energism, then, consists of the truisms which Richter was exposed to in childhood. He grew up in a
decidedly religious atmosphere—even the dust wrappers on his novels proclaim that he was "the son, grandson, nephew, and great-nephew of clergymen"—and the moral platitude seems to have been one of the commonest elements of his early environment. In a fictional biography, A Simple Honorable Man, Richter presented his father as a gregarious Lutheran minister who invariably expressed his beliefs in platitudes and cliches.

Richter is no original thinker, but he is inventive. His ideas are those that he heard as a boy in a devout household, and he has embellished them with formulas and symbols in an attempt to make them seem scientifically ordered; and the distinct moral tone of the concepts he absorbed prevented him from assuming an extreme self-assertive position.

Nonetheless, Richter insists that his ideas inform his fiction. We shall therefore see in the next chapter how he intends us to read his novels and short stories.
CHAPTER III

THE USES OF PHILOSOPHY

Richter's novels are free from the strange terminology he uses in *The Mountain on the Desert*. In his fiction he makes no noticeable use of the word "energy," let alone terms like "CR process," "expansion and contraction of energy," or "psycho-energism." Lacking his philosophical volumes, we would never suspect him of writing stories as exempla of a more or less formal body of thought.

This reticence clearly benefits the fiction. That we fail to suspect the existence of his philosophy says little for its power, but the great advantage is that the characters never appear as mouthpieces of their author's argument. Only in the later pages of *The Town* do characters preach, but they have the dramatic justification that they are old, recalling fondly their early years in the forest. Nowhere in his fiction does Richter enter astride a hobby horse.

We are nevertheless bound to see how his philosophy applies to his fiction, and not merely because of what he says in *The Mountain on the Desert*. For the psycho-energic abilities of his protagonists, and their inabilities as well, provide a key
to the most significant tensions in Richter's writing.

The best place to begin is with the work Richter singled out as demonstrating psycho-energism—the Ohio trilogy. Since these novels are for the most part episodic, the philosophy shows up less in total plan than in particular scenes such as the beginning of The Trees, with the Luckett family trekking west from Pennsylvania to the Ohio forest where Worth Luckett hopes to find more game. They travel two hundred miles on foot over mountainous country. Even the smallest of Worth's children carries a bundle, and only his wife Jary travels light because she has tuberculosis. Years later, in The Town, Worth's oldest daughter Sayward says of the trip that if their father had asked them how they were getting along and if they could make it, they would never have got to Ohio (p. 441). This exodus, and Sayward's comment on it, exhibit Richter's "expansion and contraction of energy process": the Luckett family unflinchingly met each difficulty of the trip and thereby gained sufficient energy to meet subsequent trials.

Admittedly, some incidents make questionable the psycho-energetic value of the journey. For instance, Jary's tuberculosis is hardly helped by a walk of two hundred miles, and she dies not long after they have settled in their cabin. Furthermore, Worth's uncharitable attitude toward his family apparently results not from his concern for their ultimate welfare but from his
inability to face a family crisis, or even the threat of one. When his wife dies, her children gather around her but Worth stands at the door, his back to her; after her burial he runs off for several weeks giving no thought to care for the children (The Trees, pp. 55, 63). Later, when his youngest daughter is lost in the woods and he has vainly tried for weeks to find her, he says to himself, "Now that he was out this far, he would keep on beating the woods for her till he reached the grandaddy of rivers" (p. 178). He never returns to his family.

I evaluate Richter's dramatizations of his philosophy in the next chapter; the problem now is to discover how Richter makes his characters apply his ideas.

The psycho-energetic exemplar in the Ohio trilogy is of course the heroine, Sayward Luckett Wheeler. Even as a girl of fifteen or less, she shows her willingness to endure hardship, to expend energy beyond the normal demands of life. Early in The Trees, when the Luckettis are still in Pennsylvania, Worth leaves his wife and children to go on an extended hunting trip. There is no meat or meal in the cabin and Sayward, seeing a young buck swimming in the river, takes it upon herself to provide food. She dashes into the water, grabs the buck by his antlers, and struggles with him until he drowns. When Worth returns with only a 'possum, he finds fresh venison hanging from the rafters (p. 7).
Sayward's psycho-energetic capabilities do not flag as she grows older. During a famine, when she is married and her husband Portius walks to Kentucky with other settlers to buy grain, she is again alone with hungry children and no food. As her children near starvation, Sayward day after day searches the woods for meat, but it had all been killed off the season before by farmers trying to rid their fields of the depredations of animals. Sayward finds nothing until one day she goes out to get snow for water and sees a turkey cock run across her cornfield. She dashes inside for a rifle and then crawls behind tree stumps after the turkey. Too late she realizes that she has not put on a wrap, nor closed the cabin door; but she reflects that she can not turn back—the children, now watching her from the open door, may get frostbitten but she must not shout to warn them. Her fingers are numb with cold and she hardly knows when she touches the trigger. She shivers, and finds it almost impossible to keep the rifle steady. Nevertheless she tracks the bird, aims when his head appears behind a log, and shoots him. Again she provides for her family, doing a man's work, enduring cold and hunger, obeying the psycho-energetic urge to increase energy expenditure rather than decrease it (The Fields, pp. 100-102).

Sayward is strong and self-reliant all her life, and she believes in encouraging the same virtues in her children. Her
attitude results in the death of her two-year-old daughter Sulie, who burns to death while playing near a fire, but Sayward refuses to indulge in inordinate guilt: "She didn't hold too hard against herself either for not harping more about staying away from fire. She had done it a plenty. You couldn't dingdong at young ones all the time. You had to let them be their own selves once in a while, or they'd grow up tied to their mam's apron strings" (The Fields, p. 66).

Like Michael in The Mountain on the Desert, Sayward gains strength and good spirits from tending the sick—for most people, Richter believes, an energy-depleting task. In The Fields, a neighbor girl asks Sayward to nurse her ailing mother, and Sayward grows strong at the prospect: "The more she heard how her good friend lay out there at the point of dying, the steadier she got. It would make an ailing person feel better just to see her. You could tell here was somebody that wasn't scared. Just the way she stood there and asked the right questions showed she was a master hand at sickness" (p. 138). Occasionally, someone not so psychoenergetically capable as Richter's protagonists resents this selflessness. Sayward's son Guerdon complains that his mother will spend all day and perhaps half the night doing a favor for a neighbor while she refuses her own son the pleasure of going fishing, ordering him to grind corn instead (p. 138). Needless to say,
Guerdon grows up to be no good—a murderer who runs away from home and is never seen again.

Sayward is not always the psycho-energetic heroine. In *The Fields*, she once fails to meet life's demands, but she eventually recognizes her waywardness and reforms. She becomes ill after the birth of her eighth child, and she vows to become pregnant no more. She realizes that Portius will not accept her decision with equanimity, but she reasons that his increasing legal practice will "take his mind off of it" (p. 205). For more than a year Sayward has no intercourse with him. But some months after her first denial of Portius, she hears gossip that the new schoolteacher is pregnant and is soon to marry the settlement scapegrace, Jake Tench. She recognizes that Jake and the teacher make an unlikely couple, and she believes that he is not the father; yet her suspicions remain unaroused by the fact that Portius had himself brought the teacher from his home state, Massachusetts. When at last she learns of Portius' infidelity she feels hurt and bewildered; but her feelings drive her back to the psycho-energetic path of meeting her obligations. The first therapy she administers to herself is hard work: she yokes the oxen and plows a cornfield. Working calms her, as she knew it would: "You had to be even-tempered and patient with them if you wanted to work with oxen. . . . It did her good now to call at them, letting off the black bile she felt for Portius. The team didn't mind. . . . It had something restful
in the placid way they went, nodding their heads or chewing their cud. Once you saw them pursue their deliberate and melancholy journey around the field, your 'nervy strings' could not help but let up a little" (pp. 268-270).

Sayward eases her immediate emotional disturbance by an expenditure of energy which, in Richter's formula, not only gets the plowing done but also releases energy to the depleted cell groups involved in her disturbance. But she does more to get back into the psycho-energetic swing than drive the ox team. She realizes that she has violated one of the laws of life. At the end of the day, she visits the bedroom she assigned Portius when she decided to sleep with him no longer. Portius is away on business for several days, yet Sayward decides to sleep there that night, and every night thereafter. She gazes at his bed (made, like the ox yoke, of cherry wood). "It was really his and hers," she reflects, "but she found out today she had shirked on it. She had made him sleep over here by himself. That was her secret sin. All the time she reckoned she had kno. You can't cheat God and live. Sooner or later His word would catch up to you. . . . She was broke to the yoke now. She had fought against it. She had yawed around and fouled it. But it did no good in the end. It only got her under the whip and the harrow" (pp. 271-272).

Sayward is not the only character in the Ohio trilogy with
psycho-energetic capabilities. Her brother Wyitt shows the same vitality in his first escapade as a hunter. Wyitt is eleven years old when he gets his first rifle, a weapon he is particularly proud of because it boasts a charm lodged between the barrel and the stock—a piece of brown paper that a "witch master" had inscribed, "Who hunts with this gun will be lucky" (The Trees, p. 225). The gun is taller than Wyitt and almost too heavy for him to lift; and he wastes his seven balls of lead, failing to hit the squirrels he aims at. When he has no more ammunition he sees an old buck that ignores him as though sensing the boy's inexpertness as a hunter. Wyitt digs one of the lead balls from a poplar tree, smooths it with his knife, reloads, and fires, propping the barrel on a log. The buck falls wounded, but when Wyitt straddles it to finish the kill with his knife, the animal rises; Wyitt can not use his knife because he must hang on with both arms. He has a rough ride: the buck tries to dislodge Wyitt by hitting the boy's legs against trees, but Wyitt vows, "It kin throw me, but I won't stay threwed. It kin kill me but it kain't whup me" (p. 231). The wounded buck soon tires, and Wyitt grabs his knife. It is nearly night, and he lights a fire by which to skin the animal, completing the chore despite his wounds. "That paper was true,'" he reflects with unconscious irony. "'Who carries this rifle will be lucky'" (p. 232). In psycho-energetic terms,
Wyitt chooses to expand rather than contract his energy resources when he determines to ride the buck to death. This habit of will determines his livelihood, for he becomes a hunter like his father.

Wyitt's sister Sulie, whose disappearance in the woods drives their father from home, shows the same resourcefulness and strength of will. The men who track her discover places where she fed on cherries and whortleberries and where she made a bed of leaves (The Trees, p. 174). Then they find a playhouse she had built from sticks, and in it a table she had made, on which was a cloth torn from her dress and a nosegay of flowers. They find no signs of panic—she seemed to consider her meandering as something of a lark. Apparently, even a child of six can successfully apply the principles of psycho-energism. It is beside the point that Sulie never comes home, and that she is found many years later living a slovenly life as an Indian squaw (The Town, pp. 255-270).

In one way, the novels add a concept to Richter's philosophy that is not stressed in The Mountain on the Desert or the earlier formal expressions of psycho-energism. Richter believes that each person has—in Emersonian terms—a star for his wagon; that each person must be true to his inner self. To violate or ignore this temperamental pattern is to bring trouble on oneself and others. Sayward laments that in civilized communities everybody lives by the same fashion, and anyone who objects is considered
fit only for an asylum. But in the woods, each was his own man and no two people had the same attitudes (The Town, p. 410). Young Wyitt was a hunter, and though he tried to be a farmer he knew that he would never succeed; he had to follow game, and finally he left home (The Fields, pp. 80-82). Early in The Trees, Sayward realized her womanly place in the world, and the realization brought her peace (pp. 82-83). But when she violated the demands of her nature and refused to have more children, she caused herself anguish, and was responsible for the ruined lives of the Massachusetts schoolteacher and her daughter.

The land, too, has an ideal state, Richter believes. It is not virgin land, necessarily, but land barely habitable by white men. The virgin Ohio forest is no garden of Eden but more nearly a hell that can drive people insane, that causes disease, that shuts out sky and sun. The forest must be cleared, but the land nevertheless has a pattern of existence that must remain undisturbed. The settlers violate this pattern when they determine to do away with the animals which have been raiding the crops. They organize a hunt and kill hundreds of creatures, and they congratulate themselves on saving their harvest. But the outcome proves disastrous. The summer is cold and grain fails to mature; a hard winter follows and then a summer of drought when again there is no harvest. Many settlers return to their
home states and many others die in the famine. The tragic irony
is that they cannot live on game because they have slaughtered it-
hunters go out every day but fail to find even a rabbit or a
squirrel. In their mistaken attempt to save their crops they
have destroyed their only other food. They have violated nature
and they pay severely for their folly (The Fields, pp. 69-105).

In The Sea of Grass, Richter presents his most forceful case
for the integrity of nature, and he attempts to show that the man
who possesses psycho-energic strength is the only person capable
of living in tune with nature. The character who pleads for the
land is Colonel Jim Brewton, a New Mexico rancher who toward the
end of the nineteenth century opposes the wave of homesteaders
who have crossed the Rio Grande into his range. He fights them
not because they settle where his cattle graze but because they
attempt to raise grain in arid soil which supports nothing but
buffalo grass. His wife Lutie, who hails from "the East" (St.
Louis), sides with the homesteaders; she cannot understand the
agricultural facts involved, particularly since several unusually
rainy seasons (1878-1886) favor the homesteaders' crops. Also
on the settlers' side is Brice Chamberlain, a lawyer who handles
their cases against the cattlemen and who thereby wins Lutie's
sympathy and eventually her favors. She has a son by him; but
Brewton, although aware of her adultery, raises the boy as his
own, demonstrating his psycho-energetic capability under humiliating circumstances.

Although homesteaders ruin the land, Brewton remains, struggling to keep his herds despite the fences and the erosion which begins when the weather reverts to its usual dryness and the wind removes soil no longer held by buffalo grass. In this extremity, the Colonel and his men determine on a range war with the nesters, but before battle is joined they are halted by a detachment of federal troops who have been secretly summoned by Chamberlain and who convince Brewton that if he fights, he commits treason. Since the colonel's loyalty cell groups are stronger than the energy groups which would rid the plains of fences and plowshares, he retreats, shouting after the soldiers, "You can keep the nesters from being blown away, but God Himself can't the prairie!" (p. 80).

Brewton raises Chamberlain's son Brock with the same permissiveness that he exercises with his legitimate son, James. Herein the colonel errs: Brock's character needs sterner guidance. Left to govern himself, Brock grows up a ne'er-do-well and eventually becomes a gunman. He ends in an abandoned nester's shack, surrounded by a posse. Wounded, he swears to shoot everybody but his real father, whom he demands to see; the elder Chamberlain, however, leaves town when he hears of Brock's trouble. But the colonel, loyal to his wife's bastard, rides down to the cabin and
remains with the young man until he dies.

By running from his son's distress, Judge Chamberlain demonstrates his psycho-energetic ineptitude, a defect (according to The Mountain on the Desert) common among men who favor progress. He resembles Chancey Wheeler in The Town, who ridicules the pioneers' delight in the hardships they had experienced and who favors such cultural advances as the railroad when his sturdier relatives prefer the older canals. Chancey favors increased settlement and population growth, just as Chamberlain wrongly encourages homesteading on the arid plains. Chancey's grandfather, the old woodsman Worth Luckett, had complained that settlements were a moral disgrace: "The best folks come out here at the start, if they wasn't here already. They was all man and woman, I kin tell you. Them that come after or stayed behind were second raters. They were faint-hearted, weak-legged or money grubbing, and it's good they never come early. They couldn't have stood the gaff" (The Town, p. 240). Likewise, Colonel Brewton insists:

"I have sympathy for the pioneer settler who came out here and risked his life and family among the Indians. And I hope I have a little charity for the nester who waited until the country was safe and peaceable before he filed a homestead on someone else's range who fought for it. But when that nester picks country like my big vega, that's more than seven thousand feet above the sea, when he wants to plow it up to support his family where there isn't enough rain for crops
to grow, where he only kills the grass that will grow, where he starves for water and feeds his family by killing my beef and becomes a man without respect to himself and a miserable menace to the territory, then I have neither sympathy nor charity!" (The Sea of Grass, pp. 23-24)

Like Chancey Wheeler, Judge Chamberlain defies this heroic attitude. His cowardice brands him a typical latecomer who lives off the advantages gained by the first settlers and who turns those advantages to ruin.

Nor is Brewton's wife psycho-energetically adept. She, too, cannot understand the proper use of the land and takes the homesteaders' side against her husband; moreover, she resents the loneliness of the vast, uninhabited range. Thus ill fit to be a rancher's wife, she plans to escape with her lover. But Chamberlain's fear of Brewton's gun keeps him from the train on which he had promised to accompany Lutie to Denver, and the shame of her abandonment keeps Lutie away from Brewton for fifteen years. She returns only after the death of Brock, who united within himself the selfishness and the love of society which characterized his parents.

Colonel Brewton is able to persevere through the nesters' misuse of the land and through the scandal of his wife's infidelity by drawing, Richter would say, on energy-releasing cell groups. One of these is his faith that the land will itself drive away the homesteaders. Another is his willingness to raise with
affection his wife's son by Chamberlain. A third is his desire for revenge against Chamberlain. The peculiarity here is that Brewton wants revenge not because Chamberlain committed adultery with his wife but because the lawyer betrayed her by not leaving with her as he had promised. It is not the personal insult but the principle that the colonel wants to avenge.

Richter's novel *The Lady* (1957) illustrates his metaphor, in *The Mountain on the Desert*, of the people who are joined like Siamese twins and who draw upon each other's resources in times of depleted energy. The protagonist is Doña Ellen Sessions, who owns a huge New Mexico sheep ranch. Her brother-in-law, cattle rancher Snell Beasley, is tempted to use Ellen's garden as a short-cut when he drives his stock to the railroad; Ellen warns him against trespassing, but Beasley nevertheless orders his men through her property—whereupon Ellen murders Beasley's foreman with a well-aimed rifle shot.

Ellen avoids trial because a code among people of any honor whatsoever decrees that no woman gets mixed up in such affairs; her brother Charles confesses to the slaying, and is acquitted by a jury of sheepmen. Soon thereafter, Charles is killed by two cattlemen who are later arrested for murdering one of Charles' character witnesses. No evidence links them to Charles' death, but in the public mind they are being tried for his murder instead
of the other man's. Ellen's husband Albert, who is the circuit judge, refuses to disqualify himself from hearing the case on grounds that to do so would look like a desertion of Ellen's cause and an admission of her guilt. The murderers are hanged, and the next victims are Albert himself and the Sessions' only child, a boy of about eleven, who disappear in the desert on the way to Albert's next stop on his judicial circuit. Ellen's victory over her brother-in-law occurs at the end of the novel, when Beasley tricks her into a buggy race. Ellen's horse Critter, refusing to let Beasley's Arabian thoroughbred pass, rams his rival—and horses, buggies, and drivers all topple. The Arabian is unhurt, Ellen emerges scratched and bruised, Critter lies dying, and Beasley, by a technically embarrassing equus ex machina, lies dead. Ellen's devoted pet has finally solved her difficulties.

The link between The Lady and psycho-energism becomes apparent when one character describes Ellen as a woman of superior charm and position who commands intense loyalties—so intense that those devoted to her will sacrifice their lives (p. 181). Her brother Charles accepts guilt for the murder she commits, her husband supports her at the cost of his life by refusing to let another judge hear the second murder trial, and finally (however improbable the action, it proves the theory), her horse kills the man who causes all her troubles. A psycho-energic interpretation would identify each of these saviors as a cell of honor, devotion,
and courage, which can be drawn upon to the limit when the most
 deserving cell, Ellen, requires what the others can supply. Nor
 is there any question that she is deserving despite her definite
 high-handedness. True, she shot the cowhand. True, also, she had
 once beaten to death a Mexican who had by cruel means trained her
 favorite riding horse to bow (p. 15). But Richter preserves our
 sympathy for her by keeping her always in the right—although that
 right is not always legal. The Mexican erred in maltreating her
 horse, and Beasley's cattlemen, having previously been warned,
 wronged her by driving their stock through her land. Moreover,
 like God, she is pure to the pure though to the crooked she shows
 herself perverse. She makes frequent overtures of friendship to
 Beasley; she takes in an orphan (the narrator of the story) and
 brings him up with the same kindness and privilege that she grants
 to her own son; she refuses to believe that her husband and son are
dead until she has absolute proof; she bears her misfortunes with- 
 out complaint and with good spirit. Since she is capable of these
 kind acts and courageous attitudes, Ellen is able to draw upon the
 resources of people around her; and because she deserves their
 affection she keeps the reader's sympathy despite her occasional
cruelty.

Richter's psycho-energism finds a place in his short stories
as well as in his novels. "Early Americana," the title piece of
his 1936 story collection, exhibits a scene of strenuous
psycho-energetic application. The story is set in the Texas Panhandle, about 1870. The romantic plot is the kind that appealed to readers of the Saturday Evening Post, where the story originally appeared: Laban Oldham, the young hero, finally discovers his love for Chatherine Minor, a girl who has had her eyes on him for some time. But the central scene pulls the story far above the level of slick fiction. It is an extremely well handled account of the threat of an Indian raid on an isolated buffalo trading post run by Chatherine's father. Laban, Chatherine, her father, and several other men and women face almost certain death, so the men agree on a grim plan: when it seems that the end is at hand, they will shoot the women before the Indians can inflict their torments upon them. The men draw cards to determine which woman each will kill. Laban draws the queen of hearts which, obviously, represents Chatherine; and the knowledge that he may have to kill her forces him to regard her in a far more personal way than previously. The women, naturally, are not informed of the plan.

Chatherine is a fit partner for Laban. Through the night of tense waiting for the raid she remains calm, serving food and coffee, washing and putting away the dishes as though never doubting that she will use them next day. Psycho-energically she is as capable as Sayward Wheeler. The raid never occurs—the Indians are frightened away by a band of buffalo hunters, and Laban is spared killing the girl he loves. Nevertheless, the reader is sure
that Laban would have killed her had the raid taken place, and his successful facing of an energy-expanding situation has turned Laban into a man.

Twenty-two years before "Early Americana," Richter published "Brothers of No Kin," the title story of his first book. Although the technique of that early piece is far less accomplished, it is as much concerned with psycho-energetic heroism as his later work. Set in the small town of Heisler Cove in southwestern Pennsylvania, the story deals with a peculiar relationship between Ebeneezer Strait and Jeremiah Ritter, and is burdened with a consciousness of sin that recalls Hawthorne. Ritter has broken every commandment, and leaves Heisler Cove after a murder. For thirty-five years he corresponds with Strait as he travels about; but finally, mortally ill, he returns to die. Strait takes care of him, suggesting that Ritter go to church. Ritter is eventually moved to go, and when he arrives he begins praying aloud, confessing his sins. At this point Ritter has a vision wherein he sees himself sent to hell despite his confession. He asks Strait for help, but Strait can only suggest continued prayer, and Ritter still sees the open jaws of hell. Finally, upon Ritter's ceaseless pleas for help, Strait prays that he himself may assume the other's sins. The magical result is that Ritter's vision of hell fades, being replaced by the opening gates of heaven, and he dies assured of salvation. Strait has successfully met a situation demanding expanded energies;
but his trials continue. The author is unfortunately vague about his character's motivation, but Strait sells his farm, sees that his family is cared for, and embarks on an apparently endless pilgrimage to expiate the "unpardonable" sins he has assumed; at the end, moreover, Richter assures the reader that "Atonement was hopeless" (p. 579). Strait seems to have known that he would never be able to expiate Ritter's sins; his assuming them in the face of certain damnation indicates a high degree of ability to expand energy, although the purpose of this moral advance is lost if Strait is damned anyway. The story poses insoluble teleological problems--Richter fortunately left heaven and hell out of subsequent stories--but it shows his early concern with protagonists whose strength of character leads them to accept the severest trials.

In his latest book, A Simple Honorable Man (1962), Richter continues to dramatize his psycho-energetic ideas. This is a fictional biography of his father, here called Harry Donner, who decides when he is nearly forty to become a minister. The owner of a store, he has a wife and three children and is handicapped by lacking a high school diploma. Moreover, he is a Lutheran, and becoming a minister requires completing high school, college, and seminary, a course which would lead him into his middle forties before he could be ordained. But the call is strong and, with the blessing of his father-in-law, who is the Lutheran minister in town, he sells his house and his business and becomes a student. Such a
drastic change in career would draw heavily on the capabilities of
the strongest man, but it is merely the first of the sacrifices
which Harry and his family must submit to. For offsetting his
friendliness and eagerness to help others are tendencies to be
utterly frank and thoroughly uncomfortable among the well-to-do.
All these traits brand him unfit to minister to a wealthy charge,
and for thirty years his family endures poverty.

A seminary debate provides the first indication that Harry
will never be a worldly success in his spiritual calling. As­
signed to the negative on the question, "Resolved that alcohol
is the curse of mankind," Harry believes that the debate is a
pure "exercise in reason and persuasion" (p. 68). He forcefully
wins, mentioning Jesus' changing water into wine, adding Paul's
advice to Timothy to drink wine for his stomach, and concluding
with the personal illustration that when he was a boy his father
often took him to the saloon. Earlier in the year Harry had been
elected president of the seminarians, and the faculty now objects
to a prominent student's using such arguments. The objection is in
fact so strong that Harry can no longer be approved as a summer
substitute in a city church. One of the faculty reminds him that
honesty is a virtue, but not indiscretion, and that urban congrega­
tions require that their ministers be tactful. As a result of
winning the debate, Harry is sent to a village from which he must
minister to five indigent churches situated seven miles apart. For
the rest of his life, Harry does little better.
According to the principle of expanded energy release, Harry turns the perpetual disadvantage of impoverished congregations into what is, for him, advantage. His wife, like many Richter heroines, regrets the great distance to her home town. She silently longs for luxuries that her husband can never provide, and she resents his giving their meager household funds to people whom he considers needy but who are often merely wasteful. And she never feels at home among the poor and uneducated, with whom Harry is most at ease. Their sons, too, share their mother's attitudes rather than their father's. The black ministerial suits and the sacramental utterances about man's sinful nature annoy particularly the oldest son, Johnny, who at the beginning of the novel is frightened at the prospect of his father's new vocation and at the end regards as a waste his father's life among the hill people of Pennsylvania. But what John regards with distaste is to his father the joy of life. Harry is most energetic and most sensible of spiritual guidance when he ministers to people whom his family, and even his congregation, regard as unworthy; and he is restless in his charges until he finds some remote, unchurched settlement where, like one of the Apostles, he can preach and offer communion. The congregation that pays his salary disapproves of his missionary zeal and resents his spending time among the uncouth, and its disfavor usually forces Harry to move on in a few years.
He plans once to move to Brooklyn, where a friend has a large church and an elite congregation. The church needs an assistant pastor, and Harry travels there to deliver a trial sermon. Upon returning he reports to his family the magnificence of this church, where there are more members than seats, where prospective members are turned away unless they have excellent references, and where he would make two or three times his present income (pp. 221-222). There is no question about Harry's qualifications. He is offered the job, but to the dismay of his family he turns it down. He tells them that the congregation seemed not to need him. He says that he saw many people who did need him, but they were on the street, and he was certain that if he preached to them, the congregation paying him would object as had his other congregations. Moreover, he could hardly preach to people that his own church would refuse membership to. These arguments lessen none of his family's disappointment at his refusal; but Harry's conviction that the move would be wrong for him, whatever its benefits for his family, determines his accepting yet another impoverished charge.

As Richter's philosophy asserts, Harry receives a new surge of energy when he faces unpleasant or tragic circumstances. One example of many in the novel occurs immediately after Harry tells his family about refusing the Brooklyn charge. He abruptly leaves the house and goes to a neighbor's, where a ninety-four-year-old
patriarch has lain paralyzed for more than a decade, in dismal spirits and convinced by his many years of utter uselessness that God has forgotten him—otherwise he would long since have died. As soon as Harry enters the house, with his kindness and his message of comfort, he feels "suddenly refreshed, strong, filled with vitality" (p. 224). He derives energy from challenges that would deplete the resources of his wife and children.

Harry remains full of vitality after he retires. He takes what he calls a "snug and cozy sleeping chamber in the commodious Eureka Hotel" (p. 284)—an establishment so shabby that his son is ashamed to let him stay there. But when John suggests that his father leave, the old man insists that he is needed: he frequently supplies nearby pulpits, and he makes other old men in the hotel feel that they are not useless. He defies age and ill-health until his spirit is finally broken, ironically, by the inconsiderateness of another minister.

At his last charge, Harry had encouraged a boy who showed interest in the ministry. He had got financial help for the boy, he had sent money himself, and he recommended the young man for a church in a sizable town. Harry went to hear the trial sermons, and as a final favor offered to drive the new minister home. It was a hundred-mile trip, and at the end of it the young man got out, thanked Harry, and went into his parsonage, without offering the older man so much as a cup of coffee for his trouble. Harry
continued driving to a son's home but in the middle of the night he ran short of gasoline and turned into a service station. It was closed, and he had to wait through the winter night. The trip gave him pneumonia, and though he recovered from the disease he did not fully regain his health.

Harry's father-in-law had been a courageous, outspoken preacher who had earned the respect of his community. He had blessed Harry when the latter decided to give up storekeeping for the ministry, and Harry had become a man of God loved by many. But the young man who received Harry's blessing lacked the kindness which a minister should possess. Harry soon dies from disappointment at the young preacher's attitude, which devalues what Harry had always believed was the great worth of religion (pp. 292-296).

Miraculously, Harry's death does not keep him from tending his sheep. One of his friends is a paralyzed woman named Tilly, whom his son Gene has taken in; Harry was one of the few people who could understand her faltering speech, and he had always cheered her. While Harry is in the hospital, Tilly says that she has just seen him: he appeared to say that he "was going on a long journey" and he wanted "to give his pal goodbye" (p. 301). Gene sniffs at Tilly's story, insisting that if his father was going to make a supernatural "visit," he would appear to his own flesh and blood. Nevertheless, shortly after Gene hears Tilly's report, he receives
a call from the hospital informing him that Harry died twenty
minutes before. Even in death, Richter suggests, the strong can
work—deriving perhaps their greatest energy from this "most
powerful and effective of ECE processes" (The Mountain on the
Desert, p. 217).

Harry Donner, Ellen Sessions, and Jim Brewton possess con-
siderable moral and physical strength and effectively gain energy
from difficult situations; we can see how Richter, in his stories
of these people, dramatizes his concept of the expansion and con-
traction of man's energy resources. But at the beginning of
this chapter I mentioned that his protagonists often exhibit
traits of character which detract from their value as specimens
of psycho-energic capability—although these traits may add
greatly to his protagonists' stature as believable human beings.
In the next chapter, we investigate some of Richter's attitudes
which contribute to the viability of his creations.
CHAPTER IV

AMBIVALENCES

Conrad Richter's heroes have vast stores of energy which they renew by the admirable technique of constant labor. They seem righteous (though they occasionally defy the law); and they know positively what is best for themselves, for a society composed of equally heroic people, and for the land they live on. These virtues yield them the great blessings of almost constant good health, long life (if the story goes that far), and universal respect. As the creator of these heroes, Richter is considered a patriotic novelist who celebrates American self-reliance and stick-to-itnessness and who holds the pioneer up as a pattern for our emulation. He draws reviews like the one in which Louis Bromfield calls The Fields "the kind of book which Americans of these times should read. . . . It is almost mystical in its appreciation of those forces from which we have derived so much of our strength in the past."

But the reader wonders. Worth Luckett in The Trees leaves his family permanently to search for his youngest child, and thereby escapes the problem of his daughter Genny's affair with Louie

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Scurrah. He is not the least concerned about the health of his wife and children during the family's trip to Ohio. His wife has to shame him into finishing a cabin so that the children will not have to spend the winter sheltered only by a lean-to. Is Worth's unconcern for the needs of others one of the pioneer traits that deserve emulation today?

In *The Sea of Grass*, Colonel Brewton condones the brutality of his cowboys in assaulting a homesteader, and he considers honest the packed jury's verdict that the men are not guilty of the crime. Doña Ellen Sessions of *The Lady* commits two murders and is punished for neither, and she is responsible for two trials in which justice is mocked. Do these characters possess a determination that latter-day, "soft" Americans have lost and must regain?

Is preacher Harry Donner a worthy exponent of Richter's ideals when, in *A Simple Honorable Man*, he leads his family into an indigent life that they are ill-suited for and that they resent?

Indeed, his protagonists seem not all they are psychologically cracked up to be. Almost every one of them is in some way weak or cruel. What we must decide is whether Richter accepts this cruelty, injustice, weakness, and lack of a concern for others, as philosophically right, or whether he implicitly questions the virtues of the strong people who bear his psychonegative standard. Richter naturally admits no doubts in *The Mountain on the Desert* or his earlier works related to it, so the
evidence must come from the dramatic context of certain scenes in his fiction and from changes he adopts in narrative tone. If we discover doubts and ambiguities we may brand him inconsistent in thought, but that is no great crime. Few writers escape the charge. But such a discovery may enable us to see that Richter is concerned with problems more central to existence than the settling of the United States and the ECE process.

In general, he betrays his misgivings about his heroes—and consequently about the philosophy they exemplify—in failing to realize these characters fully. Few of his protagonists are completely satisfying creations, particularly in his earlier fiction. Even Sayward Wheeler, for all her apparently true-to-life pioneer attitudes and speech, occasionally seems hewn from rock maple. His best characters are the weak and the pettishly defiant, like Chancey Wheeler of The Town or John Donner of The Waters of Kronos and A Simple Honorable Man.

Colonel Brewton of The Sea of Grass is particularly remote. The reader sees only his melodramatic exterior; the loyalty others feel for him is never explained. When he enters the court where his two cowhands are on trial, he transforms it from "a dingy room to one kindled and illuminated by the lightning-flash of one man's vitality and power" (p. 18). He passes in front of a bench to greet his fiancée, and the men seated there scatter "like sheep in front
of him" (p. 18). All the court functionaries truculently to him, including the sheriff who brings him the bailiff's chair and the usually glum judge who smiles a greeting (p. 19). The jury enters, and one spectator remarks that "for any other man except Jim Brewton the jury would have stayed out with their verdict until they had had their dinner on the county" (pp. 19-20). Upon hearing the verdict of not guilty, all the cattlemen at the trial cheer; and the narrator, Brewton's young nephew Hal, admits that in his joy he "wanted to give the Apache war-whoop" (p. 20).

Thus is Brewton seen at his first appearance in the novel. Pictured as a "rude territorial czar" (p. 18), he continues to be wrapped in a romantic mist, Richter's fanciful descriptions hiding rather than revealing his character. Brewton is variously "an unruly lead steer" (p. 23); an "uncontrollable Bedouin chief" (p. 66); a "war-horse" (p. 101); "a powerful bull" (p. 115); a "rude czar" again (p. 116); again "a mossy-horned lead steer" (p. 136); "an untamed shape in the shadows" (p. 145); "a wild stallion" (p. 147); and "a shaggy old mountain" (p. 149). Even his handwriting is "spirited, erect and unquenchable" (p. 88).

These vague descriptions are all we get of Brewton. Nowhere does Richter let us glimpse Brewton's thoughts or help us understand his motives. Analysis of the protagonist's motives is in fact so lacking that The Sea of Grass seems not a short novel
despite its 149 pages but a long work that is scarcely half written.

It is not because Richter is a poor handler of characters that he pictures Brewton so hazily. On the contrary, other figures in the book are much better drawn. Lutie Brewton is believable as a vivacious, sociable woman transported from a large city to a dull ranch on a vast dull plain. Even Brice Chamberlain, though he seldom appears, is well-realized as a principled young attorney who becomes a political opportunist afraid of disgrace and danger.

Richter keeps Brewton an abstraction not because he lacks ability but because he is uncertain of Brewton's morality. He wants to make of Brewton a philosophic ideal, but he cannot wholly accept the high-handed acts that proceed from this ideal. Thus we get no clear impression of Brewton as a moral being. We see fairly clearly that he honors his wife even when he knows that she commits adultery with Chamberlain. (We are never convinced, however, that he loves her.) We see—though less clearly—that he raises the children, including his nephew and the boy Lutie bore to Chamberlain, without favoritism. For all this we applaud him. But he despises homesteaders and is not above having them beaten and run off the land to which they have legal claim. Admittedly, homesteaders ruin the land by trying to grow crops, and the law which grants them this right was made with no knowledge of the character of the land. But Brewton nevertheless sanctions a crime when he
lets his men assault the settlers. We are unable to reconcile his
defiance of the law and his cruelty with his admirable qualities.
Richter's conflicting desires to make Brewton a rude psycho-
energetic czar, and at the same time to keep him an admirable hero,
lead him to see his protagonist indistinctly.

In *The Lady*, Richter has made a much better short novel; but
he faces the same conflict with regard to his protagonist, the
murderer Doña Ellen Sessions. He takes pains to show that she is
in many respects a good woman: she is a loving mother; she
generously takes in an orphan when his father is killed, and she
raises him with all the advantages of her wealth; she is a loyal
wife; she is an exemplary mistress of her servants; she tries her
best to preserve family ties with her sister and her conniving
brother-in-law. But Richter allows not the least insight into
the side of her character that prompts her to beat to death a
stable boy who mistreats a horse or to gun down a cowhand who
drives cattle through her garden. By depriving his readers of
this insight, Richter betrays his unwillingness to investigate
certain aspects of his psycho-energetic heroine's character. Ellen's
two murders may supply energy to some of her deficient cell groups.
But Richter's failure to show us her impulses or to make clear her
reactions reveals that he disapproves of those murders but at the
same time is unwilling to discredit the philosophy which would
admit them as courageous, valid responses to difficult situations.
Often in *The Mountain on the Desert*, Richter suggests that man's independence decreases with advancing civilization. Civilized man prefers his comfort to energy-expanding hardship, and becomes thereby enslaved to his comfort. Probably no character in his fiction better exemplifies the ideal independent hero—or better preaches the doctrine—than the woodsman Worth Luckett in the Ohio trilogy. In the last of these novels, he returns in his old age to the Ohio settlement he had begun many years before and finds it grown into a sizable town with paved streets and brick houses. At his daughter Sayward's house he meets one of her in-laws, an old maid from Massachusetts who has been impressing on Sayward's children the virtue and industry of their father Portius' New England ancestors. The New Engander, Cornelia Wheeler, insists that the town he founded must be grateful to old Mr. Luckett because, "When you came here, there must have been nothing but a formidable wilderness. Today the country is developed and the people civilized and benefited" (*The Town*, p. 235).

Worth insists that if he thought a town would follow, he would never have settled. "The country's spoilt and folks are gettin' less account every day," he says (p. 236). He complains that the Indians are being moved farther and farther west in order "To give their land to men who hadn't the guts to come out in the first place. That's the kind that's mostly got it now. And what do
they want with it? Why, they want to make it just like the country they left back East. Already they've put in flour mills and wool mills and saw mills and fullin' mills and all kinds of mills. . . . Money, that's what they're crazy about. Money! A cabin's not good enough any more. They have to have a mansion house like this. A bag of meal used to make a whole family feel good. Now it don't mean nothin'. . . . The best folks come out here at the start, if they wasn't here already. . . . Them that come after or stayed behind were second raters. They were faint-hearted, weak-legged or money grubbing, and it's good they never come early. They couldn't have stood the gaff. They'd a starved or been scared to death. I been around, and I kin tell you." (pp. 238-240)

These are the heartiest of psycho-energic sentiments. All his life Worth has been a solitary woodsman, depending for food on nothing but his ability as a hunter. If any character in Richter's novels demonstrates that energy can be drawn from energy-depleting circumstances, it is Worth. Yet, as with other Richter heroes, there is a side to his character which the author refuses to analyze; for Worth's actions, though in accord with psycho-energic independence and self-reliance, violate most people's sense of decent human relationships. In The Trees, Worth predicts a famine and suggests that his family cross the Ohio to territory more favored with game. He is not concerned that his wife Jary has tuberculosis, and with the help of the children, who are eager for the trip, he forces her to decide in favor of moving. She must endure an arduous journey on foot over mountains and through dense woods, the only
concession to her ill health being the lightweight bundle she has to carry. At one point during their trek the trail forks, the right-hand trace leading to Sandusky and the Great Lakes, the left continuing into even denser forest. Jary brightens at the prospect of open prairie and she pleads with her husband to turn north rather than go on into the woods. Worth insists that the trip would be too far for her; but this sole expression on the journey of his concern for her is but an excuse. Actually, he refuses to settle near Indians whose language he does not know, so he leads the family on the left-hand trail.

Jary is dismayed. Not only does she have to tramp week after week through dreary woods, but she must settle finally in a wilderness where there is not a single neighbor. Like many of Richter's women, Jary loves the sociability of town life and she deeply resents being deprived of it. What is more, her difficulties do not diminish when the trip is finally over. Worth prefers to hunt, even though there is a cabin to build, and every morning throughout autumn he leaves with his gun, not returning until nightfall. Near death, Jary is constantly depressed by having to live under tall, dense trees which shut out the sky. Through late summer and fall she says nothing to Worth about their half-built cabin and the lean-to he has put up for temporary shelter. But her spirits eventually revive when she
glimpses patches of sky through branches now empty of leaves. Once more (though briefly) her old self, she demands that Worth finish their cabin—which he obediently does. But there is no doubt that he would prefer letting his wife and children shift for themselves.

Only in an extremity can Worth be brought to perform some kindness that takes him away from hunting. His sole favor to Jary after he builds the house is a trek to the nearest mill for white flour which she has been pleading for (pp. 49-50). Upon his return, Sayward bakes bread, but Jary is too sick to eat. Shortly thereafter she dies, with her children surrounding the bed; while Worth, unable to bear the scene, stands at the door looking out at the trees. As soon as Worth builds a coffin and buries her, he goes on a hunting trip, leaving the children unprotected.

A point in Worth's favor is that he feels bound to remain close to the family until one of his daughters marries and her husband takes over the job of providing meat. Yet Worth shows his lack of scruple in attempting to make a match for Sayward. The prospect has just settled in the vicinity and is chiefly notable for his lack of stature; and Worth tries to promote the marriage after he has known the man less than one day. Sayward blasts her father's dream of freedom by refusing: "I'm a standin' up with no Tom Thumb," she says (p. 81). But not many months thereafter Worth finds his pretext for leaving.

He returns from a hunting trip to find about his cabin a
dozen or so people, assembled to help look for his youngest daughter, Sulie, who is lost in the woods. For two weeks men scour the forest, but all of them, except Worth and another woodsman named Louie Scurrah, return without finding her. Some days later Louie appears with venison for the Lucketts and news that their father, having gone as far as the Miami river in his search, decided to keep on: "he said he couldn't look at his cabin now with his littlest gone" (The Trees, p. 178). He leaves the family with all its problems—which include Louie himself, who has been having an affair with Worth's second daughter, Genny. Worth had opposed their marriage, although he had left it up to Sayward to discourage Louie (p. 154); and his permanent absence is tacit confession that he is little concerned about Genny's welfare.

Once or twice Sayward remarks on her father's motives, recognizing that he does not always act from principle but from self-interest. She understands, for instance, his reasons for trying to marry her off (The Trees, pp. 79-80). But for the most part Sayward and her brothers and sisters never judge Worth's actions. He forces his sick wife to walk some two hundred miles to a new wilderness home merely because he refuses to do anything but hunt—though he has other skills, notably that of carpenter. Yet none of the Luckett children questions whether the trip should be made or considers Worth wrong in insisting on it. All the children (except the boy Wyitt) inherit their mother's love for
town life, for neighborliness, for creature comforts. But none expresses resentment at being torn from the Pennsylvania settlement to live in the forest. Nor do any of the children question their father's lengthening absences from home, particularly after tragedies when family stability is shaken. The sole comments on Worth's departures are Sayward's, who notes from time to time that men are free to wander but women must remain by the fireside to "mind the big kettle and the little kettle" (p. 63). Nor, when Worth has gone for good, do his children reflect that he has deserted them. Only in The Town, with the appearance of Sayward's son Chancey (who speaks with Richter's own doubts), is there a character in the trilogy who condemns the selfishness and meanness of the pioneer heroes. For the most part, a kind of moral vacuum surrounds the psycho-energic strong man, Worth.

Other characters in the trilogy, however, exist within a strong moral framework. Louie Scurrah, for example, is obviously a scapegrace at his first appearance. He straddles the path where Wytt and Sulie must drive the cows they tend for a neighbor, forcing the herd into the brush. Wytt and Sulie tell their father about the stranger, and Worth recognizes him as a white Indian, raised by Delawares, who often led other whites into ambush. Louie, the story goes, had associated with Simon Girty, another renegade white who had been employed as an interpreter by the Continental Congress but who deserted the American
cause, encouraged Indian cruelty toward American captives, and was a "delighted spectator" at Colonel William Crawford's burning at the stake by Indians in June, 1782.\(^2\)

A solitary cabin, overgrown with brush, testifies to a liaison of Louie's and to the lonely death of the woman. He possesses some charm, however, and his woodsman's talk makes such a friend of Worth that the latter agrees to repair Louie's old cabin. Wyitt outgrows his initial distaste for Louie and becomes fascinated by the hunter's Indian lore. And two of Worth's daughters, Genny and Achsa, fall in love with him.

Nevertheless, we are kept aware by the attitudes of other characters that Louie is up to no good. Eventually he marries Genny, but leaves her alone in the cabin for long periods (as he did his other woman). He forbids Genny's visiting and only reluctantly takes her to the settlement's first Independence Day celebration, where he refuses to dance with her, preferring her sister Achsa (p. 213). Wyitt notices black-and-blue marks where Louie has beaten Genny (p. 212). Sayward fears asking Louie to treat Genny more kindly because the request will only make things harder on her sister (pp. 184, 212). Finally, Louie runs off with

\(^2\)"Simon Girty," *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone (New York, 1931), VII, 323. Girty is one of the few historical figures appearing in Richter's fiction; Louie Scurrah is his own creation.
Achsa, whom he has got pregnant, while Genny in her isolation gets cabin fever. Neither Louie or Achsa is ever heard from again.

In short, moral judgments are passed on Louie at almost every turn. This moral atmosphere surrounds not only Louie but practically every character of importance in the trilogy. Sayward's husband Portius is a conniving Yankee, yet for the most part he is honest. Jake Tench, who once skins a wolf alive, is cruel; but his backwoods humor often eases uncomfortable situations, and he is not above playing the accommodating vassal by marrying the schoolteacher Portius has made pregnant.

So it is with other characters. They judge and are judged, and life in the Ohio settlement proceeds within a clear moral framework. But for Worth Luckett the standards of decent behavior seem not to exist. Admittedly he is presented as shy, as a bumbler in society—even the society of early settlers. But while such characteristics give him some dimension, they are not faults; and Worth's real faults are not remarked on, or even thought about, by any character in the story. Richter cannot give Worth a clean moral slate but at the same time he refuses to condemn him because Worth is the exponent of the philosophy Richter espouses. His only recourse, as it was in The Sea of Grass, is to place Worth in a realm divorced from the greater reality that his other characters inhabit and that his readers recognize.
One more psycho-energetic protagonist deserves mention: Harry Donner, the middle-aged storekeeper turned clergyman in *A Simple Honorable Man*. Harry's decision to become a minister demands the energy and single-mindedness that can be expected of Richter's heroes, and we are satisfied that he does not err. The dependence of many parishioners on him and the love they feel for him, evidence the rightness of his choice despite his disappointments and "dry" periods when he feels a numbing lack of God's grace.

Yet we have doubts about the ultimate value of Harry's life. A minister who prefers to work among the unchurched, to be a de facto missionary, should in forty years or so be responsible for the conversion of a number of sinners. Yet none of the characters in the novel demonstrates the least religious fervor; and that Harry occasionally gets a church built does not indicate in the book any more than in life, that any of its members has found redemption. In fact, one of the clearest impressions the novel gives is that most church-goers are morally immutable. The good remain good but get no better while the selfish and proud remain just so; a few people, however, may get worse.

At the end of the book, John Donner himself remarks on the uselessness of his father's life: listening to an organ tuner play Bach in a deserted country church on a weekday, he reflects (with obvious reference to his father), "all this improvidence of praise for God and good will toward men, lavished, wasted, on
an obscure log church in an obscure mountain valley, poured out through the open door on stony fields, worn rail fences and a poor yellow dirt road that led to the small weathered barns and smaller unpainted houses of obscure unremarkable men" (p. 310).

Moreover, the solace that Harry Donner brings on a pastoral visit is less than spiritual. It is not the comfort of God but the comfort of his own presence that soothes. His vitality and good spirits make him welcome, even as a surprise visitor at mealt ime. In fact, Harry trades on this welcome by timing his visits so that he will be present when the food is ready (p. 182), a habit he excuses by insisting that the dinner is the housewife's "gift to the Lord. It's something she can do for him. It's not for us" (p. 277). But people delighted in Harry's presence before he became a minister. When Harry's father-in-law was lying on his deathbed, the practical nurse fluffed his pillows and said, "Now that's just like Harry. He couldn't do it any better." But the old man pettishly decided, "it wasn't at all like Harry. Something was lacking. Lou Kriner might be an experienced practical nurse but she hadn't in her hands what Harry did, nor did light and life accompany her into the room" (p. 27).

Jim Brewton in The Sea of Grass possesses similar power. His nephew thus describes the Colonel's entry into a courtroom: "Since that day I have been in many a courtroom, but never any so quickly transformed from a dingy room to one kindled and
illuminated by the lightning-flash of one man's vitality and power, so that today I can still see it as in the strongest sunshine . . . " (p. 18). When either Jim Brewton or Harry Donner walks into a room, it is not the power of God but the vitality of the man that others feel.

Richter's attitudes in A Simple Honorable Man appear most clearly in the criticisms of Harry expressed by other members of the family. First of all, Valeria's father Elijah Morgan objects to Harry's entering the ministry. Himself a minister, he warns Harry that he is middle-aged, that younger and smarter men at seminary will get the prosperous charges while he will have to accept the hard work and meager pay of impoverished ones. Moreover, Harry must support a wife and three boys, and the older man does not want his daughter to suffer (pp. 7-8). But Morgan changes his mind, as much from atonement for earlier sins of hard-heartedness as from conviction that Harry is truly called (p. 30); yet his prophecy of Harry's difficult life is fulfilled, and Valeria and the boys do indeed suffer.

Valeria expresses her resentments against Harry late in life, particularly when she is forced to move from a pleasant farm village to an ugly mining community. The altitude shortens her breath, the pains at her heart grow severe, and, as she writes to a relative, the locality stinks: "It smells like the infernal regions. You can see brimstone burning on every rock
dump and all the stones of the stream are painted with sulphur" (p. 237). The mountains keep her relatives from visiting, and she feels uncomfortable among the "alien" Slavs, Poles, Italians, Hungarians, and Greeks (p. 238). She determines, like a good wife, to endure it all for her husband's sake, but she cannot relieve her loneliness or her sense of foreboding (p. 240).

She dies in this unhappy place. On her deathbed she reflects that she has failed throughout life to accept the people among whom Harry has been most at ease, and they have reciprocated by not accepting her. She came from a well-to-do family, and she has hated the poverty and outright mendicancy that Harry felt was proper for a servant of Christ. She recalls Harry's thoughtless generosity, which she had to make up for by constant scrimping. She has few pleasures to remember and, oppressed by a "monotonous weariness," she welcomes the end (p. 271). Though Harry has helped many people, he has notably failed to make life pleasant for his wife.

Harry's chief critic is his oldest son, whose attitude was first expressed in the preceding novel, The Waters of Kronos, where John recalled with distaste his father's two sets of manners—one for company and one for the family. As a guest, Harry had a jovial cliché for every occasion and he gave elaborate thanks for even the humblest meal. But at home, he remained
silent, stern, and preoccupied. He said an attenuated grace at meals; occasionally he forgot that he said it, and upon family insistence that he had indeed performed the duty, he raged, "Do you mean I pray and don't know it, like the heathen?" (pp. 155-156).

In A SimpleHonorable Man John regards his father's religion as a dismal business. The novel begins with a scene in which religion, in the person of John's grandfather, casts a shroud upon the beauty of the world. Young John is trotting down the street beside his father, captivated by the golden light of late day, when the magic is broken by the appearance of his grandfather who emerges from the parsonage, approaches them "like a long dark jackknife solemnly opening and closing," and then unlocks the church door to enter the "cavernous depths" (p. 4). John waits for the dissipated sense of beauty to return, but his hope vanishes when his father announces that he wants to talk to the old preacher. Waiting on the sidewalk, John laments how his father changed when he saw the minister. A few minutes before, Harry had seemed jovial, fearless, heroic; but upon seeing his father-in-law, his manhood departed and he became a stranger (p. 5).

The boy sneaks into church and hears his grandfather count the reasons why Harry should not enter the ministry. John is
shocked: he had not known his father entertained such a wish, and
he stands appalled at the prospect of his father entering "a joyless
life and existence peopled with stiff black figures like Pap-pa,
Uncle Peter, Great-Uncles Timothy and Howard, a calling streaked
with shadows and gloom, with taboos and negations, where dark in-
comprehensible watchwords like 'holiness,' 'original sin,' 'the
blood of the lamb' and 'eternal damnation' chilled the heart of a
young boy. Just to think of it drained the green brightness out
of the world and all the wild airs blowing" (pp. 8-9).

After the old man changes his mind and blesses Harry's
ambition, John feels trapped in theological darkness. Even the
kindest and most pleasant of his aunts chills him when she solemnly
advises that now he will "have to stand up for Jesus"; she makes
him all the more aware that he is shackled by an "iron ring of
Christian gloom" (p. 35). John is not so much upset by the
change in family life as by the unfathomable force which impelled
his father into his new career. He complains of being made
"captive by the cross," he resents his father's slavery to in-
visible but "powerful and even ruthless rulers," and he regards
with fright such somber Christian formulas as "There shall be
weeping and gnashing of teeth," "Take, eat, this is my body," and
"Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood" (pp. 35-36). Despite
some happy times while his father attends the seminary, John
remains terrified by the Christian life, and his discomfort
increases when his father brings home for the first time his book of ministerial acts, a slim volume of "peculiarly deadening black with nothing to relieve it save a faint golden cross with its crossbar slanted upward." Even this austere binding provides a dismal if unintended symbol: "There was also a cloudy mark or two on the black cloth as from a perspired thumb, and this together with the slanted crossbar made it appear as if the cross were some supernatural object floating among the clouds, without visible means of support, which gave it an unearthly effect like God's handwriting on the wall" (p. 73).

John sees that this book works an unfortunate change in his father. Whereas Harry had practiced singing and debate alone in his room, now he recites passages from the ministerial acts. Sneaking upstairs to listen, John overhears the burial service. Though repulsed by its doleful phrases, he remains at the door, and he is relieved when his father turns a page and begins "The Order for Holy Baptism." The boy feels sure that this will be pleasanter, but Harry's voice keeps its funereal tone as he pro-nounces, "This child is corrupt and depraved through sin and is subject to everlasting death and condemnation." Appalled, John turns and runs downstairs,

out into clean air free from death and condemnation, purified with the scent of new grasses and growing things. Here he could
shut out the incomprehensible words from his ear but not the sound of his father's voice or the sight of him sitting there with sternness and judgment on a poor child. . . . Never before today had the boy heard his father call anyone corrupt and depraved, let alone a small child. . . . Only a few days ago he had been filled with the undergraduate's joy of living. How could a little black book do this to a man? A feeling of rebellion rose in the boy, a feeling he was to remember years later when first he read Lafcadio Hearn's cry addressed to the same revolutionary causes, "Woe! Woe! Thou didst destroy it--the beautiful world." (pp. 74-75)

One more incident confirms John in his resentment of the calling which has estranged his father. As a supply minister during the summer, Harry is due to preach his first sermon. After a week of agony devoted to its preparation, Harry leaves for church, accompanied by the family. John stays home, however, his stomach upset by anxiety over the failure that his father anticipated; but after the house empties, John feels so much relieved that he can lie in bed no longer. He gets up and in concern for his father he crosses the street to the church and stands under an open window where he can hear the sermon. He recognizes his father's voice, but its tone is subdued and he cannot make out the words. But suddenly the tone changes and John hears his father shout, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Frightened, John runs back to the house, undresses, and climbs again into bed (pp. 78-79).
These early scenes establish John's attitude toward his father. As he grows older, however, the boy—-not a believer himself—questions Harry about his faith; and, while accompanying him one day on a pastoral call, he attempts to discover the source of his father's unflagging good spirits. Harry visits an ageing couple, the McPhails, whose son was hanged for murdering his wife and child. They fear that their son suffers in hell, and that when they die they must be sentenced to watch him in a sea of fire, begging for water which they will be unable to give him (p. 187). Harry spends several hours with them, trying to convince them that salvation is not impossible for their son—a solace that John thinks is dishonest. Later he asks his father how he can believe such a thing when there is no way of proving it. Harry answers by insisting that he is healthy and happy in his work. Since his job is right for him, he asks, in which way is he better off: believing what he preaches to be true, or preaching with the suspicion that what he says may be false because there is no proof? John has no argument against his father's belief, and he drops the discussion. But he notices that late at night, after a difficult day, Harry seems to have abundant energy—he even sings as he drives their buggy home (pp. 188-191).

John is more impressed by his father's limitless energy
than by his belief that "God personally supports me, and...
his presence and angels go with me, gives me grace to do what
I'm called on to do and peace of mind while I'm doing it"
(p. 190). We get the impression that Harry's energy comes not
from God and his angels but from his facing energy-demanding
situations, such as his lengthy visit with the McPhails. John,
who in embarrassment leaves the house after supper and goes to
sleep in the buggy, can only wonder at his father's vitality.

This episode constellates John's conflicting attitudes
toward his father. He feels that Harry has chosen the right
career— at least he cannot argue against his father's willing-
ness to help others. Yet John feels that in becoming a minister
Harry has slighted the concerns of the rest of the family: for,
like his mother, John is horrified by the tragedies of his
father's parishioners and embarrassed by having to depend on
their generosity. Moreover, John marvels that his father
remains full of vigor at the end of a long day's traveling and
counseling, yet he is repelled by the situations which his father
finds revitalizing.

John's ambiguous regard for his father explains why there
is no sustained conflict in A Simple Honorable Man. Since it
is balanced by respect, John's antagonism toward his father
never breaks into a conflict demanding resolution. Thus at the
end of the novel John believes that his father wasted his life, but at the same time he sympathizes with his father's groaning over the sins of the world and with the selfless activity with which he praised God. Furthermore, with admitted variation, *A Simple Honorable Man* follows the pattern of Richter's earlier novels: the psycho-energetic hero remains in a world distinct from that of his family. Here the distinction is not one of morality but of temperament. Nevertheless, like Worth Luckett, Harry Donner recovers his energies away from home, and fails to understand the problems of those closest to him.

In Worth and Harry, Richter revealed the artistic conscience which dictates that he shall be true to his conception of character and override his desire to expound his philosophy. In his first novel, he attempted to make Colonel Brewton a dramatic tool for the expression of his ideas; and the result was a character whom we cannot accept because his stallion-like strength of will is too vaguely realized. Richter could not go on constructing such characters—thus his later novels show the tension between his philosophy and his art. He could not distort Harry Donner and Worth Luckett: he refused to make Worth a dependable family man and to portray Harry as a considerate husband and father. True, he recognized a pronounced strength of character in these men—as he did in Jim Brewton—but he recognized shortcomings as well. Richter may attribute strength and
self-reliance to psycho-energism (although he does not make the attribution overtly in his fiction), but his honest portrayal of his best characters results from the ultimate victory of his art over his philosophy.

When we assess the final importance of Richter's formal thought, we must conclude that its value is restricted to the insight it provides into his fiction; for psycho-energism offers no new guide for life, and it establishes no new conception of existence. An examination of psycho-energism gives us a partial understanding of why he creates his characters as he does; it explains some of the ambivalence with which he approaches many of his protagonists, whom Richter the philosopher wants to delineate as self-reliant individualists but whom the artist cannot help presenting as occasionally thoughtless and cruel human beings. But there are further ambivalences to investigate: those which give even greater impact to his fiction and which we see most clearly in The Waters of Kronos. We take a close look at this novel in the next chapter.
CHAPTER V

THE WATERS OF KRONOS

The Waters of Kronos plays a leading role in our discovery of Richter's aims and attitudes. It exhibits conflicts involving time and authority which are similar to his ambivalence toward his own philosophy of strength and self-reliance. These attitudes appear elsewhere in his work, but they find clearest expression in this short novel; a close look at The Waters of Kronos, then, will bring these attitudes into relief so that we can see them more clearly in his other fiction.

The Waters of Kronos is a fantasy; in this respect it is unlike any other novel he wrote. The plot, in fact, is one that even a science-fiction writer would be wary of: John Donner, an aging writer, has driven for a week from his New Mexico home to visit the graves of his ancestors, relocated on high ground now that a dam in the river Kronos has inundated the small town where Donner grew up. While examining the headstones, he finds a stretch of the old road which led down the hillside to Unionville; and as he stands musing, a horse-drawn wagon approaches, the driver heading for the water. Donner hails him, and together they ride not into the dam but into Unionville as it was in the
early years of the century. He spends two nights and a day in his native town, talking with his father (who is still in his thirties), with other relatives, and even with himself as a ten-year-old boy. Finally a uniformed guard summons him back to the present, but at the close of the book Donner does not yet return; he waits for a visit from his mother, but we never learn whether the visit is made.

By means of this fantasy, Richter tries to come to grips with a problem that has occupied him throughout his career: the significance of the past. The title itself introduces his pre-occupation. Obviously, the river Kronos symbolizes the flow of time; its inundation of his boyhood home represents the permanent loss of the past. But the destruction of the past is not a natural phenomenon—it is a catastrophe caused by the man-made dam. In other words, the past has disappeared because man's advancing, destructive, and debilitating cultural advance has overwhelmed it.

Moreover, Richter's symbolism couples this primitivism with the protagonist's intense personal problem: John Donner's attempt to recover a cultural ideal parallels his desire to find his own identity and to achieve his rightful position in his family. From the beginning of the book, Donner remarks on the cultural significance of the dam; but his awareness of his personal difficulty grows slowly. Since this gradual self-understanding illuminates a number
of important themes in Richter's other novels. I must outline several episodes in *The Waters of Kronos* in some detail.

In the early pages of the narrative, Donner wonders why, near the end of his life, he has driven across the country to his birthplace which now lies under water. He wants to visit relatives' graves, but he suspects that this is not his real reason for coming. He has in fact made the trip with some reluctance, and as he nears his destination "fresh misgivings" oppress him. He has not been well, and he hopes that the trip will cure him, though he is not sure that it will (p. 3).

He believes that he finally understands his reluctance to come when he first sees the artificial lake which covers his old home. The view unsettles him, though he had known that the dam existed, and he chides himself for not looking with favor upon this evidence of "modern progress" (p. 7). But it is not his sentimental attachment to the old town that causes him to regret its inundation. Rather, the dam has a symbolic value, representing something that exists "in the back of his mind and in the back of everyone else's mind"—the return to chaos, to meaninglessness, of all the painful struggling of the people who lived where the waters of Kronos now rise (p. 7). Nowhere has Richter more succinctly or powerfully stated the essential burden of his mature work than here: "Perhaps one had to be old as he to recognize what one saw, to understand first how man had struggled
up so painfully and so long, and then with that sad knowledge to come upon one's own once living, breathing and thinking people swallowed up in the abyss, given back to primordial and diluvian chaos" (p. 7). His despair that life has no meaning leads him to consider the dam his "worst enemy" as he drives toward the gate where the cemetery visitors must stop (p. 8).

The cemeteries lie on the hills around the dam, where they have been transferred at public insistence from the town before the waters covered it; they remain the sole memorial that a town once existed. The guard at the gate insists that their relocation was vain: "what difference does it make once you're dead whether you're covered up with ground or water or both?" (p. 12). But to Donner, the cemeteries represent the sole link with the past; they stand as a valuable "holding back against the darkness" (p. 12).

Donner realizes that he is still not sure why he wants to visit the graves, and this uncertainty—which he expresses often in the opening scene—is an early indication of the ambivalence which disturbs him and which motivates his actions throughout the novel.

The cemetery awakens in Donner's memory a host of anecdotes, which for Richter embody the essence of the past far more truly than does his philosophy of pioneer strength. As Donner walks
among the graves of his relatives, he recalls that his grand-
father's horse Mike would, unguided, take the road to church
on Sunday but on no other day of the week (pp. 14-15). He
remembers his grandfather at a funeral denouncing the high-living
members of a local lodge (p. 16). He remembers the legend that
his grandmother turned to stone in her coffin (p. 19). He re-
calls his great-aunt Teresa, a school-teacher who took her pupils
for walks and held an angry gander by the neck while they passed
(pp. 19-20).

Donner has not come merely to recall anecdotes, yet he is
still uncertain about the real purpose of his visit. He believes,
however, that there is a clue to his venture in a sixty-year-old
snapshot which he now takes from his notebook. He had taken the
picture himself, and it shows his mother and two brothers in their
sitting room; behind them is a closed door, under which streams
light from the kitchen—a room, Donner believes, that contains
"something he couldn't name but which in his mind's eye was
infinitely bright and rich with the light of youth." Of late,
whenever he looks at this picture he feels a strong urge to pull
the kitchen door open and walk into the brightness beyond it.
But he never succeeds in penetrating the light; and he laments
that although he has gained more honors than most men, and has
always achieved his goals through "setting into motion
concentration and mental impulses" (which are the determined efforts of psycho-energism), he remains unable to grasp this secret of the past (pp. 28-29).

At this point in his visit to the cemetery, Donner notices the horse-drawn wagon which he hails to ride—miraculously—down to the village. Thus far uncertain about the reason for his trip, Donner finds a purpose when he arrives in Unionville: he will attempt to discover the mistakes he has made in the past and he will try to show the ten-year-old Johnny Donner—himself—how to avoid these mistakes. This motive determines the subsequent action of the novel, and in the scenes that follow we discover that Donner's sense of guilt is indeed deep and that he is tormented by feelings that he does not fully understand.

He makes his first attempt at self-discovery by visiting the store his father had sold in order to enter the ministry; his father is there this evening, however, helping the new owner arrange stock. John Donner is disconcerted: he is in his seventies, but his father is still a young man of thirty-five. The older man remains outside a moment, listening to his father sing a familiar song:

"Lift high the latch, my boy, my boy,
And wait outside no more.
There's love and rest, my boy, my boy,
Within thy father's door." (p. 44)
John always felt that in frequently repeating this song his father implied a reprimand against John's failure to "give up his youthful, dissenting ways, his shying from church and people, and enter into his father's hearty way of life and religion" (p. 45).

Harry Donner of course does not know the old man, and receives him cordially but formally. After a brief interview, confusing to the younger man and frustrating to the older, Harry bids John good night and leaves while his son looks after him, oppressed by grief. Standing alone in the store, John succumbs again to reminiscence. He remembers his father's pride in him, and the eagerness with which Harry introduced his boy to adults. One of his clearest recollections is of his father's buying half a dozen copies of John's first book and giving them to friends, and he remembers with remorse the pain he gave his father when he upbraided him for this unwanted publicity. Now, John wants desperately to atone for his cruelty and for his inability to be the gregarious, religious person his father wanted him to be. He wants to walk down the street arm in arm with his father and express the fondness he never admitted to, and he is grief-stricken that it is too late, that his father does not even know him (pp. 53-55). Donner's guilt figures significantly in the new conception of himself that he acquires at the end of the story.
On his next visit, Donner reveals further depths to his disturbance, and in this scene Richter introduces a theme which he had employed in earlier novels. Like Chancey Wheeler in The Town, and like True Son in The Light in the Forest, Donner wonders about the identity of his father: he suspects that Harry Donner is not really his parent. Donner reveals his suspicion when, still determined to alter young Johnny's character, he calls on his favorite aunt. A chief source for his many stories about the family, Jess Ryon had encouraged his literary aspirations, and he feels closer to her than to any relative outside his immediate family. But when she answers his ring she regards him, to his dismay, as a stranger. Explaining that her father had just died and that she must go to a family meeting, she starts to close the door in his face; but he insists that he wants to talk about Johnny Donner. He asks a few hesitant questions about the boy, meanwhile recalling to himself his mother's frequent wistfulness and the emotion aroused in her by Whittier's lines, "For of all sad words of tongue or pen, / The saddest are these: 'It might have been!'" And he remembers the discomfort he felt with his father, which led him to speculate often that "his father was not his real but a foster father" (p. 45). With these recollections in mind he blurts the question, "Do you know or could you tell me if there was someone else Johnny's mother cared for before she married Harry Donner?...
Is he really a Donner?" (pp. 71-72). His impertinence of course brings a rebuff, and Aunt Jess leaves for her meeting.

After this failure he determines to visit his parents' house, despite the rebuff he had earlier received from his father. On the way he muses about the reality of the town which he knows cannot exist. In a scene that recalls the aged Sayward Wheeler's patting the trees in front of her brick mansion (The Town, p. 417), Donner touches a maple tree to make sure that it exists and finds it quite solid. Since it is real, he reasons, he must be unreal; and this thought recalls his frequent inner promptings that the phenomenal world is an illusion. Moreover, he has doubted the reality of his own identity. He has often repeated his name to himself and produced the sensation that it did not belong to him, whereas other names—that is, other identities—have seemed more properly his own. Occasionally, while he intoned one of these names to himself, someone had rudely called "Johnny" and brought him back to "the dream that others called reality" (p. 83).

He knocks at the back door of his old home and is greeted not by his mother, whom he had hoped to see, but by the maid, who sends him away after scolding him for appearing like a thief and claiming to be a member of the family. As he walks down the street, Donner turns to look back at his childhood home, where-upon "such yearning came up in him that he could scarcely stand
it, a yearning for many things vanished, but most of all for what as a boy he had valued so little and almost despised" (p. 89).

This scene marks an emotional climax in the book. Donner's yearning for the past, for things he had ignored when he was a boy, is his strongest feeling. But this longing is ironic, for Donner has never been temperamentally fit to delight in the experiences which, now that they are past, seem so precious. What, after all, does he yearn for? The Waters of Kronos provides a two-fold answer.

First, Donner regrets having taken but slight notice of the sensations of physical existence. During the first hours of his visit to Unionville he laments, "How fragrant was the air he had grown up in and never noticed, redolent of bark and leaves as of the forest!" (p. 41). At his Aunt Jess' house, he examines eagerly each object: sofa, buffet, rug, stairs, fireplace, lamps, sconces, piano (pp. 73-79), and each has precise significance in his memory. After his visit, when he stands gazing at the house, he berates himself for once taking all those intimate facts of existence for granted (p. 82). The novel is full of these small but important details, mentioned for the most part with nostalgia.

Second, Donner regrets having slighted human relationships. He laments his lifelong "shyness, his inability to feel comfortable with people, to make small talk" (p. 52). He regrets his failure
to show affection to his father (p. 55) and he longs to feel again the paternal protection that as a boy he had always found embarrassing (p. 116). His father always heartily greeted everybody he met on the street, but this cordiality always made John wince (p. 44). His aunt Teresa had once run into the street in her petticoat to chase a gang of boys who were jeering and throwing stones at the town drunk, but John's reaction to his aunt's heroism was only shame (p. 64).

In his embarrassment, young John is typical of many boys who, as adults, possess considerable social ease; but Donner never grows out of his ineptitude, and late in life he regrets it as he regrets letting life's sensations slip by unappreciated. But these complaints are superficial; Donner essentially laments that he is the person he is, that he is bound by temperament to his shortcomings. Indeed, Donner could never have made himself receptive to physical sensation because of his mystical conviction that reality is a "dream" (p. 83). Similarly, his belief that he did not "belong" in the world, and that he was not related to his father, forced him from "enthusiastic sociability" (p. 46) into solitary study. Despite all attempts, he could never adopt the friendly manner habitual with his father.

We make no mistake, I believe, when we identify John Donner with Conrad Richter and consider the protagonist's attitudes in
The Waters of Kronos to be Richter's own. And an occasional bit of evidence like the following reinforces the identification. When the National Book Award for fiction went to Richter for The Waters of Kronos in 1961, news reports of the presentation revealed that Richter was afflicted with shyness at least as severe as Donner's. Richter refused to speak, although addresses were given by the other two recipients of awards, William L. Shirer and Randall Jarrell. Instead, Richter's publisher Alfred A. Knopf read for him a statement saying that "his preacher ancestors had used up all the speaking talent allotted to his lineage." Richter also refused to join in a press conference before the presentation, preferring to sit and listen while the other writers answered reporters' questions.¹

As Richter's failure to imitate his father's gregariousness has tormented him for many years, so apparently has his yearning to redress his insufficient repayment of the affection others felt for him. One of his early stories, published in Brothers of No Kin, records an obvious fulfillment of this wish. Called "The Old Debt," the story tells of a minister's son, Max Schmursdorf, who quits or gets fired from a number of jobs but finally manages to keep a

position in Chicago as a private secretary to a wealthy man. Max extravagantly describes the luxurious life of his employer in letters to his mother, who is an early version of Valeria Donner in The Waters of Kronos and A Simple Honorable Man: "she reveled in the letters and in dreams of beautiful homes, of dull Persian rugs and rare old tapestries, of Japanese vases and huge paintings in oil, of white-shaded dinner candles and luncheon doilies, of noiseless butler, servile footman, and pleasant, sympathetic maid, of filmy gowns, of consomme and capon fricassè and charlotte russe—of all that is the heritage of a cheated woman, born to high-hat poverty, reared on tales of bygone prosperity, and married into the clergy" (Brothers of No Kin, pp. 72-73). After six years as a private secretary, Max returns home with his savings, and announces a plan to take his mother to New York for a week's vacation. His father raises puritanical objections, but Max reminds him that he once said his children could never repay their debt to their mother; Max argues that the attempt is worth making. He treats her, then, to a week at the Waldorf, to fine dinners, to the opera. He rents a chauffeured car, buys clothes

2Richter himself was once a private secretary, according to his biography in Twentieth Century Authors, ed. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York, 1942), p. 1172.
for her, and pays for the souvenirs she wants for the family. They return in high spirits, and after the week's events are recounted and the souvenirs distributed, Max admits privately to his father that he has been fired from his secretarial position, and that he has spent all his money on his mother. He asks for a hundred dollars to go to California where he hopes to find another job.

Today, of course, "The Old Debt" would find no market; readers—or at any rate editors—are familiar with Freud and would find it embarrassingly naive. In The Waters of Kronos, Richter is more careful when he skirts psychoanalysis, although at the end of the book he attempts (with no success) to advance Freudian doctrine. But "The Old Debt" reveals that Richter's inability to achieve satisfying human relationships has always plagued him.

In The Waters of Kronos, Richter commits one or two minor technical transgressions. The first of these occurs when Donner, after leaving his parents' house, enters a bar for supper. He attempts to pay for his sandwich and beer with a dollar bill, but the bartender refuses it: the bill is the small, current size not introduced until 1929. The bartender regards Donner with suspicion while John gazes ruefully at his "small and inadequate" dollar. (Practically everything modern is "small and inadequate" for Richter.) Donner then pays with a quarter which—unhappily for the story's psychological accuracy—the bartender accepts without examination (pp. 94-97).
After his meal, Donner continues walking and reminiscing. He knows the misfortunes that will befall many of the people he sees and he finds no happiness in the knowledge. He looks in a window and sees a young mother reading to her children, and remembers that all of them will die of tuberculosis within a decade (p. 97). On a porch farther down the street he sees another young woman with children; he knows that a few weeks hence her husband will kill her, the four children, and himself. Eager to save them, Donner shouts at the woman to leave immediately, but he succeeds only in frightening her and attracting the neighbors' attention. After this attempt to change the course of events he walks on, feeling "debased" (p. 99).

That night he sleeps in a covered bridge, and next morning he attends his grandfather's funeral at the church, where he watches his mother enter behind her three sons. One of these boys is he himself, whom he now sees for the first time in the novel. But the elderly Donner scarcely notices Johnny--and we are surprised, for it seems that he should be particularly eager to see himself. However, this is also the first time that he has seen his mother, and his eyes are all for her; but she is veiled, and her form appears "like the outline of a memory whose living heart and breast were still barred from him." Harry Donner follows her down the aisle and sits at the end of the pew, "vigorous and
alert," Donner reflects, "as if to protect them from the contagion of death and all its malignancies." Donner succumbs to another spasm of yearning. "Oh, Dad, let me be with you!" he cries to himself, and he nearly gets up from his seat in his longing to sit "at his accustomed place with his brothers and parents, beloved, guarded over and secure." But he knows he cannot, and, "repulsed and shaken by the impossible, he came back to his battered self" (p. 116).

Donner walks from the service to the burial, and on his return to town he receives an object lesson in the value of the kindness which, in his relatives, always shamed him. Some boys recognize him as "that crazy old man" who last night had shouted to a woman to leave her husband. They follow him to town, throwing handfuls of stones, some of which draw his blood. He remembers ruefully his embarrassment when his aunt Teresa chased the boys who were stoning the town drunk, and in his pain and disgrace he cries, "Aunty! Where are you now?" (p. 123). Of course, no one comes to his aid.

In town, the boys leave him, but Donner discovers another cause for fright. He hears a sound that nobody else notices: the rising of the waters of Kronos--"The sound of chaos" (p. 126). The noise fills him with anxiety because he has not yet talked with his mother, indeed has not truly seen her, since in
church she was veiled; "he had not as yet got to the heart of the
great secret" (p. 126). Determining again to speak to her, he
walks to his grandfather's parsonage, where the family sits at
the funeral dinner. He barges in and demands to see his mother.
He refuses, however, to give his name or hers, and although she
is present she makes no show of recognition. The only person at
all sympathetic to him is his senile Aunt Teresa, who thinks
Donner is her brother who was buried earlier in the day. He
succeeds only in making a fool of himself before the family, and
one of his uncles finally sends him away (p. 134).

The events of this day have given Donner another purpose
for his visit, although his psychic disturbances prevent him from
recognizing that it has become his central purpose while he re­
mains in Unionville. He has glimpsed his mother at the funeral
and at the family supper, and he now determines that he must gain
her recognition before he can achieve peace within himself. He is
far less concerned with talking to young Johnny and correcting the
boy's mistakes. Donner's new determination adds yet another dimen­
sion to our view of his character. It leads us to a scene in which
Donner does indeed attain a measure of self-understanding—a scene
in which, moreover, Richter unites a number of themes that he has
employed in earlier novels.

In order to gain an interview with his mother, Donner
determines once again to visit his boyhood home. Soon, he knows, his family will come, he will be let in, and he will see his mother. But he has not eaten all day and in his weakness he faints on the porch. When he revives he finds to his dismay that he is not in his parents' side of the double house but in the side occupied by a coal miner and his wife. He asks the woman, Mrs. Bonawitz, if she will call Mrs. Donner. She promises to do so, though with reluctance, and leaves Donner to sleep in an upstairs bedroom. He hears her talking with her husband in apparent quarrelsomeness, although Donner knows that the tone is merely characteristic of their dialect. Nevertheless, the harsh sound recalls to him a "monstrous" voice within him which he has known all his life and which has never failed to give him "a feeling of indescribable fear and repulsion" (p. 146).

His recollection of this voice forces upon him a number of unpleasant memories. He recalls that when he was very small he visited a butcher shop with his mother; the butcher told him, "You better watch out they don't keep you and cut you up with the meat" (p. 147). He remembers that at the funeral of a playmate he had been reluctant to view the body, whereupon an old Pennsylvania Dutchman scolded him, "Sei net so bong. Er schtinkt net" (p. 147). He recalls an outdoorsman whom he had admired until one day at a pigeon shoot he saw him "tear out the eye of a live pigeon before
putting it into the trap, burning its rear hard with his lighted cigar so it might fly erratic with pain and be the harder to bring down" (p. 148). And he especially remembers a witch who was supposed to be able to assume animal shapes, and from whose buttocks the doctor had to remove lead shot after a farmer had shotgunned a cow that refused to give milk (p. 148). All these horrors, even the last, humorous one, are somehow involved with the threatening, unidentified voice within him.

His reverie is broken by Mrs. Bonawitz, who announces that she told young Johnny Donner about the old man's desire to see his mother. Then Johnny himself enters with the message that his mother will see the old man tomorrow (p. 150). Donner is startled to see himself as a young boy (although he scarcely noticed Johnny earlier in the church) and he attempts to engage the shy youngster in conversation. He asks Johnny how his mother is; he inquires if she still bakes the boy's favorite bread, and if she still keeps the lamp lit for him at night (p. 151). The boy gives noncommittal replies which make the old man want to teach Johnny the immense value of these minutiae of life. Donner wants to say, "Did he appreciate his mother, his youth? If not, for God's sake beat the ancient method of the zodiac, the slow unwieldy scheme of awareness after deprivation, the cruel system that taught you most beautifully and effectively when it was too late" (p. 151). But he
realizes that the attempt would never succeed; such things, he now understands, can never be taught to another.

But his memory of the terrible voice gives a new purpose to his interview: he will try to discover its origin from Johnny. He asks if the boy has nightmares and then hears a voice when he is awake, if he is afraid of this voice, if he can identify it. Johnny answers "yes" to all these questions, but he will not name the owner of the voice. "I can't," he complains, and in confusion he runs from the room (pp. 152-153).

Mrs. Bonawitz has been present throughout the interview, and after it she wordlessly leaves to report the incident to her husband. Their voices remind Donner again of his "hidden enemy" (p. 154), but now he hears another voice in juxtaposition—an actual voice. His father, on the other side of the house, is talking in the despairing tones he habitually used at home. Donner remembers that friends and relatives esteemed his father for his joviality, and naively admired the cliches in which he usually framed his conversation. But at home his father was somber, and given to singing doleful songs, one of which Donner now recalls:

*Near, near thee, my son,*
*Stands the old wayside cross,*
*Like a gray friar cowled*
*In lichens and moss.* (p. 158)
The family always referred to it lightly as the "Lichens and Moss Song," but to Donner it had a foreboding significance which he could not identify until years later he read Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In *Oedipus*, Donner recognizes a "fellow doomsman," similarly terrorized by "the omen of the unfavorable words" and by "the inescapable doom that lay close ahead" (p. 158).

In the gloom he sits up in bed to examine himself in the mirror. His reflection frightens him: his face seems to have lost its individual character over the years, and in the dim light the visage seems to be a monster's. Time's ravages are obvious in the "hair cruelly thin, the skull revealed, the coarsened smear of a face, the confusion of features once so indubitably his own, now run together as if returning to primordial chaos..." It is as though the waters of Kronos were in his blood, threatening to drown his individuality as they have inundated his boyhood home. But Donner sees a further terror in his mirrored face. He recognizes the "grim, forbidding" features of his long-dead ancestors who, he thought (and hoped) had utterly vanished. He sees "the thick short neck of his choleric Grandfather Donner, the trap of a mouth of his Great-Grandmother Stricker, his Great-Uncle Timothy's arrogant nose, the bitter look in the eyes of his Grandmother Morgan who had to die before she had her children raised." He laments that these are "the real survivors," that as long as he was young and energetic
his face had disguised the features of his ancestors but now, with age, "they had come up out of him like a den of turtles swarming over a rock" (pp. 160-161). The sense of defeat and the fear of death which give rise to this powerful figure make the revitalizing schemes of psycho-energism seem utterly futile.

Donner's climactic realization in this scene is linked with an unfortunate criticism of Freudian psychology. He tells himself that the ultimate reason for the son's hatred of the father is that in the father's disturbing traits the son perceives the "inescapable dissolution and decay" that he himself is heir to; the father, in other words, affords a distressing preview of the son's fate. Here, Donner thinks, is the secret, the true reason for "the great deception practiced by man on himself and his fellows, the legend of hate against the father so the son need not face the real and ultimate abomination, might conceal the actual nature of the monster who haunted the shadows of childhood. . ." Donner concludes, "Even the creator of the hate-against-the father legend must in his bitter later years have guessed the truth" (p. 161).

This realization, which is essentially a self-deception, permits Donner to relax and settle into further reminiscence about his boyhood. As he had been aware of the terrible voice within, so he now becomes aware of another inner being--the boy who appears
in his consciousness whenever he abandons the adult concerns of existence; he feels "something unseen coming and trying to push the door wider and hold it open so that more of a boy's world could come in" (p. 165).

This door is probably the mental equivalent of the door in Donner's snapshot, which conceals secrets of the past that he wants desperately to discover. Through the mental doorway now flood memories of the richness of his childhood, and they are so charming but evanescent that he fears even his breathing will scatter them. The sensations seem insignificant enough: the baseball scores in his father's newspaper, the quality of the paper itself—even the flavor of the newsprint, the watering of his mouth at hearing the words "candy" or "ice cream," the aroma of spices on cupboard shelves, the attractiveness of the table set for mealtime, the "sounds and movements of his mother at the kitchen stove" which "fanned in him delirious expectation" (p. 166).

As he had earlier, Donner feels remorse that in his childhood he had taken all these sensations for granted, had never suspected that his delight in them would cease, and had never considered that his youthful energies would wane. Yet even in his old age the receptive, innocent child within him occasionally returns, as it does now. Donner lies in bed,

observing the boy in him as a living bird within the shell, marvelling at its sure instinct never
to observe itself directly, openly, never to examine, analyze or appraise. When he did that, the joy of being died. When he gave mysterious unseen life the rein again, eyes not shrewd or exacting, but dreamy, receptive to the unseen presence and the way that had been provided, letting the chosen things come instead of choosing and going to them, then the magic reality returned. . . . This was the wisdom of age-old youth and which man lost, never to admit the enemy of life, the adult conceit that pleasure or joy could be created or even improved by man's cleverness, by taking it apart, measuring it, weighing, judging and comparing it, even thinking about it, only to bar the soul from consummation of all the prepared wonder and delight. (pp. 167-168)

Donner is awakened early in the morning by Mrs. Bonawitz, who throws covers over him; he had sweated during the night, and she is protecting him from a chill. She announces, moreover, that she recognizes him as a Donner. For years she has been doing the Donner wash, and she has long been aware that Harry Donner's clothes have an odor different from other men's. She tells John that she knows he is indeed related to the Donners because his clothes smell like Harry's (p. 168).

This curious yet intimate identification with his father leads John Donner to another of his realizations, one which brings him a profound sense of peace. It is induced by another reminiscence: he recalls that as a boy he once ran four miles in a race against his younger brother. He lost by only a few feet, but when he collapsed in painful exhaustion on the perch, he was not so much dismayed at
his defeat as relieved that he never again would have to prove that because he was older he was therefore stronger. After his defeat, the old man recalls, he had felt "beaten but free" (p. 169).

Donner feels the same sense of relief when Mrs. Bonawitz identifies him with his father. Following upon his earlier conviction that the "son-father-hate legend was fiction," this identification suggests to him that "with all the dissolution and mortality he saw in himself in the glass, he was still the real and true son of his powerful, ever-living father, the participant of his parent's blood and patrimony" (p. 169). He feels at peace.

The sound of the rising waters of Kronos, which has plagued him during much of his time in Unionville, has (at least for the moment) subsided. He feels closer to his home, to the source of things; now, neither time nor temperament but only "the thinnest of walls, separated him from the bosom of his family." He lies at ease, "quietly remembering" (p. 170).

In Donner's discovery of peace in identification with his father, Richter has presented what appears to be a resolution in his own thought. One of Richter's motifs has long been the displacement of the father--or of both parents--in favor of a kindly relative or friend whose guardianship represents ideal parenthood. Several of his novels (The Sea of Grass, Tacey Cromwell, The Lady, Always Young and Fair) are narrated by boys so situated. Richter
carried this idea further in *The Town* by making Chancey Wheeler imagine that his parents were not his, that his real name was Henry Ormsbee (p. 115), and that his real parents lived elsewhere.

In fact, the theme of the displaced parent was so important to Richter that he wrote an entire novel based on it. *The Light in the Forest*, which appeared seven years before *The Waters of Kronos*, concerns a lad named John Butler, who in early childhood is captured by Delaware Indians and is adopted by a chief and given the name of True Son. The boy is returned to his white parents in the repatriation of prisoners arranged by Colonel Henry Bouquet in 1764—the move which effectively ended the "conspiracy of Pontiac."

Now in his mid-teens, True Son has spent his entire boyhood among the Indians and upon his return he has only contempt for the confined, acquisitive ways of the white man. The only member of his family he likes is his young brother Gordon, who listens admiringly to the older boy's tales of Indian life. Eventually True Son escapes and returns to his tribe along the Tuscarawas River in what is now Ohio (the same setting as in the Ohio trilogy), where he is welcomed by his foster father and mother. Soon after his return, however, he goes on a war party against the whites; and since he has white skin and knows English, he must play the role of decoy. At the approach of a boat filled with settlers, True Son is ordered to wade a short distance into the water and cry for
help: the Indian strategy of course is to slay the whites when they near the shore. True Son follows orders until he sees in the boat a boy who reminds him of his brother Gordon. Suddenly he shouts that it is an ambush, and the frightened settlers quickly row away from the shore. True Son's treachery disgraces his father and angers the other Indians, who decide in council to execute the boy. His foster father saves his life, but later dissolves their relationship and insists that the boy return to the whites. True Son still feels repugnance at the thought of leading the white man's life, but he faces certain death if he remains in Indian territory. He agonizes over the question of where he truly belongs—with the whites whom he hates but has saved in spite of his Indian training, or with the Indians whose freedom he cherishes but whose cruelty in warring against women and children revolts him. At the end of the book, disowned by his Indian parent, he cries, "Then who is my father?" (p. 178); but he finds no solution to his dilemma.

In *The Waters of Kronos*, Donner discovers the answer that had eluded True Son and Chancey Wheeler, and he is reconciled to his father. Richter has finally solved the problem which he had frequently dramatized—he has identified himself with his "line." It is significant that Richter's next novel, *A Simple Honorable Man*, was a fictionalized biography of his father.
Donner's reconciliation provides him with peace of mind sufficient to enable him to face calmly the prospect of leaving Unionville. While he rests, Mrs. Bonawitz enters to announce that someone has come to take him home: "He said you wouldn't know his name but he has 'Guard' printed on his cap" (p. 172). Although Donner feels that the understanding he has reached during the past few hours enables him to leave if he must, he is not wholly willing to go. The snapshot of the family, with light streaming under the closed kitchen door, remains a mystery. He makes no move to leave, for he remembers that his mother had said she would visit him today. He is convinced that when she arrives he will be completely freed of the alienation from life that he still feels: "She need only come into the room and invisible currents would light up between them. He could scarcely wait. She had promised yesterday that he would see her 'tomorrow' and she had never told him a falsehood yet" (p. 176).

The novel thus concludes, with no solution of the chief mystery, with no return to the reality of Donner's contemporary existence, with no proper Aristotelian "end." On formal grounds, this lapse can be condemned. Moreover, we sense that Richter attempts to clog his story with symbolism when he has a "guard" invade the visionary Unionville, which should remain uniquely Donner's if it is to preserve its integrity. Mrs. Bonawitz, to
whom the Kronos dam is inconceivable, would of course consider the guard to be an employee at a mental institution. This incipient symbolism might lead a reader into a morass of speculations which have little value.

But in another sense, the ending of The Waters of Kronos is not amiss. Donner refuses to return to the present when he is called because he is not willing to re-admit the waters of the dam to his consciousness. His waiting for his mother at the end of the book is a gesture—albeit a passive one—signifying faith in life's meaning. Were he to return to the present, chaos would return to life. He sustains the barrier against chaos even though it is a tenuous one, existing only in the imaginative reconstruction of the past.

Thus The Waters of Kronos is satisfying as a work of art. Perhaps it seems odd that it should be so, considering that part of what Donner "realizes" about himself is self-deception, and that at the end the reader is left hanging with no positive reconciliation between the worlds of dream and reality. Nevertheless, Richter handles his protagonist with consistent honesty; he gives Donner no easy solution to his life-long difficulty. Thus we believe in Donner as a puzzled old man who finds partial answers to his problems but who remains baffled by existence.

Richter's success in The Waters of Kronos becomes more
apparent if we compare the novel with a story on the same theme written ten years earlier. In the story, "Doctor Hanray's Second Chance" (1950), Richter provided all the answers, and he made the protagonist's return to reality as clear-cut as Scrooge's awakening on Christmas morning. Yet the resolution is too easy, and Richter's unhappiness with it is obvious in the light which the novel provides.

The story concerns Peter Hanray, a scientist responsible for developing the atomic bomb, who visits the Rose Valley Military Reservation to wander in the cemetery of the town, Stone Church, where he was born. The town has been evacuated because the Army reservation has taken over; but the graves are excellently kept—are neater, in fact, than they were when the townspeople tended them. To the disappointment of the military authorities, Hanray has no interest at all in the installation. The Colonel who welcomes him, however, insists that he be accompanied by a guard, a soldier who turns out to be a boor who ridicules the townsfolk who objected to relocation when the Army moved in.

Hanray has not been well. Moreover, he makes his visit in a mood of self-dissatisfaction; although world-famous, he feels himself a failure compared with his father, John Hanray, a physician who never made much money but who loved people, believed in God, and prayed for his patients.
During his walk, Hanray enters an area untouched by the military, and in the dusk he notices a boy coming down the road. In astonishment, Hanray sees that the boy is himself. The old man stops him and after a few introductory remarks he says that he wants to visit the doctor, Peter's father; the shy youngster reluctantly walks with him to the Hanray household. Doctor Hanray meets his mother, he sees the house as he remembers it, he sees the table set for dinner; his mother watches him closely and seems to recognize him, although she talks to him as to a stranger.

John Hanray is out, but he returns shortly and talks in private with the visitor, who soon admits that he wants to discuss Hanray's son. The boy is in high school and is interested in physics and chemistry. The physicist Hanray pleads with the father to keep the boy from the career he is headed for and turn him to medicine, encourage him to be like the father. The father says he has tried but failed, and he asks the visitor to make the attempt.

Mrs. Hanray invites the visitor to supper. At the table, the boy is still reserved—even hostile—toward him; but the family dog enters and greets the stranger with the same face-licking eagerness that she bestows upon young Peter. The boy, startled at the dog's demonstration, regards the physicist with new appreciation, whereupon the elder Peter begins to suspect that he will have some success with the youngster.
The scientist asks permission to stay a while that evening, but as soon as he says the words he realizes that he has committed a grave mistake: by some supernatural means he has ended his visit. The dog growls; there is a knock at the door. Young Peter answers and announces that it is a "guard." The scientist bids farewell, and his mother promises to pray for him.

The ending is a trifle ludicrous, although the return to reality is indeed unmistakable: Peter steps off the porch, but there are no steps. As he painfully picks himself up, he realizes that as soon as he went out the door he left the past; and he remembers that the Army has removed steps and other appendages from the houses it left standing. Hanray looks up and sees that the door he has just used is boarded shut. But he is happy—his parents said that they would pray for him. "And the boy inside of him had made his first sign of peace to the man he had become" (p. 110).

Aside from the story's superficial resolution, the most obvious difference between it and The Waters of Kronos is its almost total lack of reminiscence. The anecdotes in the novel give it a sense of reality that remains unimpaired even by the improbability of Donner's visit to Unionville. Though in comparison his short story is rationally plotted (for example, the guard's appearance at the end is more believable in the story), it sorely lacks
the sense of life that makes the novel a valuable aesthetic experience.

The story lacks other dimensions. Peter Hanray never concerns himself with such matters as the power of the mind to create a reality, the sensation that the phenomenal world is an illusion, the influence of the past on the present. All these matters give John Donner considerable pause.

But the chief defect of the story lies in Hanray's conviction that he has helped to change young Peter's character. The physicist re-enters the present with the satisfaction that "the boy inside of him had made his first sign of peace to the man he had become." He believes that young Peter will give up his unworthy plan to be a scientist and will become a kindly country doctor like his father. Hanray the scientist rejoices that his mission to the past has been successful.

But in The Waters of Kronos, John Donner realizes the utter impossibility of changing young Johnny's character. When Donner arrives in Unionville, he vows to help Johnny; but his vain attempts at altering the course of events, and his increased understanding of himself, convince him that he can be of no help whatsoever. Johnny's character is fixed.

Throughout his career, Richter has struggled with the problem of character, and the view which he dramatizes in The...
Waters of Kronos results from years of attempts to draw character in a satisfying, honest way. His mature art reveals character in an essentially tragic light. This tragic view deserves understanding, and its development deserves to be outlined; in Chapter VII, I consider this tragic view and the way it helps shape Richter's art. But a few things remain to be said about The Waters of Kronos.

Although this novel proves to be a valuable tool for examining Richter's work, it is not, as I suggested earlier, his best effort. That praise belongs to the Ohio trilogy. Nevertheless, The Waters of Kronos does not deserve to be waved aside as a mere attempt to discredit Freud—a judgment made by one of its reviewers.  

A critic with a psychoanalytic bent, however, could make much hay from the rank growth of symbol and conflict in the book. There is obvious sexual significance in Donner's cherishing a photograph which shows light streaming from a crack under the kitchen door, particularly since the kitchen harbors a secret which only his mother can reveal. There are Oedipal overtones in his intense desire to "see" his mother—a desire which is invariably frustrated. Even the appearance of the guard at the

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end of the novel is consistent with the pattern of frustration; although his arrival seems to violate the integrity of Donner's vision, the guard fulfills the function of censor by preventing Donner's visit with his mother. And the fact that Donner gives himself a variety of reasons for coming back to the inundated Unionville, indicates to the Freudian that none of his explanations is the true one.

The reader with a psychoanalytic background would further note Donner's conflicting attitudes toward his father and grandfather. Grandfather Elijah Morgan's funeral takes place during John Donner's visit to Unionville, and this event is the chief agent frustrating Donner's attempts to see his mother: she is necessarily preoccupied with grief and family business. More important, however, is the fact that Morgan was a black-clad, ramrod-straight, authoritarian Lutheran, who in the early pages of A Simple Honorable Man symbolized for young Johnny the rigors of Christianity, and who on his deathbed encouraged Johnny's father in his ministerial ambitions. John admires his grandfather as a strong, respected authority, but hates him as a representative of the religion which turns a boy's carefree life into a somber, ostensibly pious existence. Elijah Morgan and Harry Donner, then, stand as the two halves of a split father-image. Since the death of a father has profound psychic
significance for his son, and since Donner subconsciously regards Morgan as his father, Morgan's death frees Donner from much of the father-hatred that had long troubled him. After the old man's funeral, Donner identifies himself—for the first time in his life—with his ancestry; he accepts his place within the family, and this acceptance dispels Donner's fantasy that Harry was not his father.

Yet at the end of the book Donner is not entirely healed. He never totally resolves his ambivalence toward his father, for he accepts his relationship with Harry only in the pseudo-world where he is old enough to be Harry's father. Furthermore, he still hopes to see his mother, and he yearns for the secret which only she can reveal. A psychoanalytic critic would insist, rightly, that the waters of Kronos cannot wash away the Oedipus complex.

But psychoanalysis fails to account for the power of a good story. And Richter has done an extremely good job of storytelling, making believable his fantasy pilgrimage to the Unionville of his youth. It is believable because the texture of Unionville life has substance; we become aware of so many details, and we learn so much of their significance, that the town exists vividly for us. Yet the story remains a fantasy because Donner intimately knows people who do not know him, and because he knows
about events that have not yet occurred at the time of the story. So neatly congruent are the worlds of fantasy and reality that we never turn away from the book in the impatience we feel when an author outrages our belief in him. Richter lets us down only twice—when the bartender fails to examine the coin Donner offers in place of the worthless dollar bill, and when the guard disrupts our sense of the privacy of Donner's experience.

Richter keeps his novel convincing by not offering a pseudoscientific or -psychological explanation, by not contriving a rational denouement as he did in "Doctor Hanray's Second Chance." And he does his novel great service by refusing to "plot" it as he did the story ten years before. The mechanical plot of his short story forced the characters into an artificial mold; conversely, the construction of the novel is determined by the character of its protagonist, who is a believably complex human being exemplifying, in F. O. Matthiessen's words, "the implication of counter-statement, which adds the density of real experience." 4

The novel turns, then, on Donner's partially realized, barely understood conflicts, the ambivalences which have tormented him all his life. From boyhood, Donner has lacked self-possession; he has never been able to assume his father's gregarious manner. Consequently he has maintained independence, but at the cost of a

guilty conscience; he has always doubted the motives which led him to solitude, to reading, to nature. Thus when he tries to greet strangers with a show of friendliness, or when he warns a young woman that she and her children will soon be murdered, he succeeds only in making a fool of himself; yet when he retreats into solitude he feels that he avoids his social duty, that he rejects, in other words, his inheritance from his father.

These conflicts determine the movement of the novel, which proceeds from Donner's uncertainty about himself to his at least partly satisfying realization. While he follows this course, Donner tries to gain two ends: he longs for personal insight—from the beginning he wonders why he has made the long trip back to his native town—and he longs for acceptance by his family when he finds himself in Unionville.

In striving for insight, Donner does not yearn for the kind of religious experience that would justify his existence; he seeks no personal vision, no intellectual enlightenment of the kind experienced by devotees of yoga or zen. On the contrary, Donner seeks—and receives—a social insight which defines his relationship with his father and his ancestors, his "line." And the revelation which he desires most, and which still eludes him at the end of the novel, is again social rather than personal: he desires recognition from his mother, who is no visionary
creature but a human being no less real than Mrs. Bonawitz and Aunt Jess and the bartender. Significantly, even Donner's symbol of his mother's secret records a social moment: the photograph which he cherishes pictures his mother and his two brothers in the sitting room; Donner himself was part of the group, for he operated the camera.

Finally, the secret Donner longs for is essentially not a piece of information. Rather, he feels that his desire will be satisfied simply by his mother's recognizing him as her son. "She need only walk into the room..." (p. 176). Yet while recognition by his mother remains his chief hope, he has tried for similar acceptance by others. To gain it, he imposed on his father, on his Aunt Jess, and on the assembled family at their dinner; but at each of his visits he was rebuffed and dismissed. The obvious reason for these dismissals is that Donner seems to be an impostor. No one can believe his claim to be Valeria Donner's son since he looks thirty-five years her senior. But there is a more significant reason for Donner's frustrations, and in exploring it we venture into Richter's other works.

John Donner's chief trouble in The Waters of Kronos is his social impotence. His father, his Aunt Jess, his other relatives, do not reject him out of unkindness. They are, in fact, hospitable folk--Harry Donner in particular has a reputation for generosity
to strangers. The difficulty rests with John Donner: he can find no way to make these people accept him, if not as the aged version of their ten-year-old Johnny, at least as a distant member of the family or as a likable visitor. Although his mind teems with anecdotes which he could relate to prove his acquaintance with the family, he never mentions them. He falters at each encounter with a relative, and often he stands astonished, urging himself to speak only when the person he faces starts to turn away. His impotence, his inability to force himself into the family where he feels he belongs, keeps Donner a stranger to his close relatives despite his eagerness to be accepted and to be free of his customary reserve.

Donner cannot become part of his family, yet he is an intimate. He knows all the family business and, like the relatives, he attends his grandfather's funeral. Yet no family activities depend on him; he must remain on the periphery. Comparable situations occur frequently in Richter's books; although he often writes in the first person, the "I" rarely plays an essential part in the action. For example, The Sea of Grass is the first-person recollection of Colonel Brewton's nephew, Hal. He performs occasional services, but he is no more than a spectator of the central events— the homesteaders' invasion, Lutie's departure and return, and young Brock's rise and fall as a gunman. Richter
even denies young Hal the pleasure of shooting a man who insults Lutie—a bystander spoils his aim, and then the colonel enters to end the scrape. In *Always Young and Fair*, the "I" is the heroine's young cousin, and his chief duty is to remain in the room when her unwelcome admirer calls. In *The Lady*, the first-person narrator—the heroine's ward—is a mere observer of the feud between Dona Ellen and her brother-in-law. The "I" in *Tacey Cromwell* figures significantly at the beginning when, as a boy, he deserts home and travels to his brother Gaye; but the youngster soon fades from prominence and the novel almost exclusively concerns Tacey, Gaye, and Seeley. And the "I" is particularly retiring in *The Mountain on the Desert*: the narrator sits in on every session with Michael; but while all the other pupils ask questions and are addressed by their mentor, the "I" never speaks and is never spoken to by the others. The first-person narrator of all these books, like John Donner in *The Waters of Kronos*, often finds himself near the center of the action, yet Richter never allows him to influence its result or to be more than a spectator. And in this connection we recall the National Book Award ceremony, at which Richter himself insisted on playing the role of spectator.

In his sense of impotence lies the source of Richter's basic message. For he sees culture paralleling his own situation: he finds contemporary life impotent when he compares it
with his image of the past. Throughout his fiction runs the theme that, as the son is inferior to the father, so in society each generation is weaker than its predecessors.

He strikes this primitivistic note with force, often in the opening paragraphs of his novels and stories. For example, he begins The Sea of Grass by saying, "That lusty pioneer blood is tamed now, broken and gelded like the wild horse and the frontier settlement. And I think that I shall never see it flowing through human veins again as it did in my Uncle Jim Brewton riding a lathered horse across his shaggy range or standing in his massive ranch house, bare of furniture as a garret, and holding together his empire of grass and cattle by the fire in his eyes."

Elsewhere, Richter refrains from such strong comparisons as that of the present with a gelded horse, but he perseveres in insisting on the superior vitality of the past. He begins "Smoke Over the Prairie" with this lament:

"It is ground into dust now like Mobeetie and Tascosa, swallowed up by the grass and desert along with split ox-shoes, shaggy buffalo trails, and the crude cap-and-ball rifle. And how can I say it so that you who were not there may see it as I did, rolling, surging, fermenting under the brazen territorial sun, that vanished rude empire of which my father was a baron, a land as feudal as old England, larger than the British Isles, with lords and freemen, savages and peons, most of them on horseback, all here in America a little more than half a
century ago, and yet in another world and
another age that was just then—although we
didn't know it—drawing to a violent close?"
(Early Americana, p. 38)

Richter by no means reserves such comments for his opening
sentence. Throughout his work he scatters remarks which salt
his complaint of present inferiority. The young narrator of "The
Square Piano" (an "I" like the impotent narrators mentioned above)
makes this admiring comment about the heroine's hair: "The color
of a new saddle, it held a burnished vigor, a hardy luster, unlike
hair today" (Early Americana, p. 269). The heroine of Always Young
and Fair was a "deceivingly delicate creature of the end of the
last century. We have no such pure gossamer handiwork of our
Creator today" (p. 3). She was "rich, beautiful, traveled, beloved
and looked up to as few rich are today" (p. 49). Her family was
one "of the old stock of the better families of town" noted for
"a certain temper of hospitality that has almost disappeared"
(p. 78). And her suitor, an Army captain, marched with a "leaning-back swagger that soldiers don't seem to know any more"
(p. 19).

In such passages, of course, Richter is attempting to re-
establish a culture that seems to him more virile, more self-
reliant than that of the present. He idealizes, for example, the
hardy independence of the Indian in The Light in the Forest and
explains himself in a preface by pointing out "that in the pride
of our American liberties, we're apt to forget that already we've lost a good many to civilization" (p. viii).

But he has another, more personal aim. For the virile past is linked closely in his imagination with his own strong, independent ancestors who--according to Richter's own law of heredity--have passed on to him only their weaknesses. Thus in recreating past worlds, Richter is shoring up the imperfect creation that he feels himself to be.

Now, if the heroic men and women of preceding generations cannot transmit their admirable qualities, they must suffer from some defect. Richter refuses to grant their imperfection in his various pronouncements on the free, valorous past. Nevertheless he senses their failing, and this awareness sometimes causes him to draw his heroes vaguely, as he does Colonel Brewton in The Sea of Grass. But sometimes, in his best work, it helps him to create characters like Worth and Sayward in the Ohio trilogy, who command our belief by virtue of their complexity.

But this dual, cultural-personal aim of his has a further important effect: it influences his narrative technique. Richter receives justifiable high praise from the reviewers for his evocations of pioneer life, and his technique deserves close analysis--which we undertake in the next chapter.
CHAPTER VI

TECHNIQUE

In Richter's fiction, the past worlds he re-creates have dual significance. They embody the strength and vitality he feels he lacks, and they dramatize certain hardy virtues he believes contemporary culture lacks. In order that his creations may satisfy his demands, he makes his fiction as detailed as he can. The one quality of his work that elicits nearly universal praise is his ability to incorporate the minutest details of daily life into the textures of fiction. When he mentions wagons moving down a road he tells us not of the mere rattling of wheels but, far more precisely, of "the rattling of greased hubs and axles" (The Free Man, p. 80); the adjective calls up the workaday world that Richter always keeps his readers aware of. He shows us that a cabinet maker at the end of the eighteenth century joined a coffin not simply with pegs but with oval wooden pins driven with the grain into round auger holes (The Trees, p. 61). We learn that such an unpracticed woodsman as lawyer Portius Wheeler built his cabin not of pine or maple but of buckeye logs, which were the "easiest for a greenhorn to cut to length" (The Trees, p. 209). Significantly, in John Donner's treasured snapshot it is the door to the kitchen which conceals the
secret he longs to discover; for of all rooms in the house, the kitchen is most closely associated with daily life and is most fully stocked with the paraphernalia of domesticity.

Richter exercises great skill in weaving his details into the progress of his narrative; he never inserts them parenthetically, and they cannot be separated from the action. His ability stands out most clearly in a striking passage from The Trees, in which Sayward Luckett prepares a rustic "tea" for the first woman guest in her Ohio cabin. Sayward works at the fire while talking with Mrs. Covenhoven, a new settler who has brought to the west a china tea service and certain pretentions to gentility.

"Well," she said, "I'll start a gittin' you some tea—if it's all the same to you."

"Oh, I don't want you to go to any trouble," Mrs. Covenhoven told her.

"It's no trouble," Sayward said. "My big kettle has soap in. But I ain't a usin' the other."

"I could loan you one," the pock-faced lady offered.

"Oh, I kin do all I want with one."

Sayward took the small kettle and used it the first time to fry out bear's bacon for shortening she would need later on.

"Almost warm enough for a body to wash their hair," she said.

She used that kettle a second time to bake sour dough biscuits in, after she had poured the shortening in a gourd.
"You and your man have a mess of poke yit?" she made talk again. "It has plenty around."

When the biscuits were done, she used the kettle a third time to fry the shortcake in, first working the fresh shortening in the dough until it was ready.

"Pap got such a nice silver fox last winter," she said. "I wish you could a seed it."

Now she took the kettle a fourth time and used it as a bucket to draw and fetch water from the spring.

"I heerd your man's a puttin' up a double cabin?"

"Not that one room isn't big enough for us," Mrs. Covenhoven explained modestly.

"No, one room's got plenty room for the six of us," Sayward agreed.

When the kettle started to simmer, she used it a fifth time, as a teapot, putting in a lick of dittany and sassafras root shavings. Then she poured out a pair of steaming wooden cups and set them with her two breadstuffs on the trencher. Oh, if this woman could give Worth two kinds of breadstuffs at one time, Sayward would give her no less. In truth she would go her one better, for her sour dough biscuits were not fine and scanty but of a hearty size with a square of smoked bear's bacon set in the top of each to run down over the sides and bake with a tasty crust.

"Tea's done," she said gravely. "You kin draw up your stool." (pp. 106-108)

The first quality of Richter's technique that we notice in this passage is, of course, his careful selection of detail to
give us a close look at a scene of pioneer life. We see how Sayward used her cooking utensils ("the big kettle and the little kettle," as she elsewhere refers to them), ingeniously making one do a variety of tasks while the other was employed to make soap; we learn of the use of wooden'cups, bear's bacon, sour dough, dittany and sassafras. Moreover, we glimpse the rough world around the cabin, with its poke and game, and we learn that shampooing was a toilet activity reserved for warm weather.

But the details serve another function: they effectively dramatize the differences in social status and housekeeping capabilities between the two women. Mrs. Covenhoven has a kettle to lend, but the more resourceful Sayward knows how to keep her utensils in use and does not need to borrow. The visitor admits that her husband is building a two-room cabin for only two people, while the Lucketts' single room easily accommodates six. And Mrs. Covenhoven, relatively ignorant of backwoods life, contributes nothing to the conversation when Sayward gossips about poke and silver fox and hair-washing weather.

The details serve yet another function: they provide Richter the means for advancing the narrative. Mrs. Covenhoven and Sayward do not tell each other about themselves, nor is there any interior monologue reporting either character's opinions about the other, nor does Richter enter with authorial pronouncements on
either woman. Yet he conveys the sense that each woman wants to befriend the other, and he shows their acquaintance growing while Sayward prepares and serves tea, so that after Mrs. Covenhoven departs, we believe in Sayward's feeling that "a woman's comfort in another woman still lingered in her bones" (p. 109).

Thus the details of Sayward's tea preparation fit into the story not merely to provide a quaint picture of pioneer improvisation; Richter weaves them into his narrative whole, making effective dramatic use of the particulars with which he re-creates the past. He gained this ability, no doubt, during his many years of writing fiction for the mass market. Few schools provide better training in narrative compression, or insist more effectively that every word do as much work as possible. At least one lasting benefit derives from contriving stories for popular magazines.

Richter has won praise for the accuracy of his re-creations of the past. Maurice D. Schmaier, author of an article entitled "Conrad Richter's The Light in the Forest: an Ethnohistorical Approach to Fiction," commends Richter for reconstructing, "with a high degree of accuracy, a particular contact or acculturation situation that took place 'beyond the limits of living memory.'"  

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1Ethnohistory, VII (1960), 328.
Schmaier concludes that in this novel "Richter does more than any conventional scholar has done to bring mid-18th century Delaware-White relations into clear, three-dimensional focus. . . . Presented as an intrinsic part of a dramatic, continually unfolding story, each bit of information obtained by Richter from ethno­graphic and historical sources, from consultation with professional scholars, or from his own field work contributes to the novel's total effect." The Light in the Forest "does 'give an authentic sensation of life in early America:' a sensation that the reader is among the flesh-and-blood Indians, Indianized White men, and White settlers who composed mid-18th century Pennsylvania contact society, and that he is sharing each societal group's problems, hopes, and attitudes."^2

But where does Richter get the information about pioneer life that he uses so effectively and accurately? According to the acknowledgments with which he prefaces The Light in the Forest and several other novels, Richter has used a wide variety of sources. He has employed early collections of local histories, such as Henry Howe's Historical Collections of Ohio, Sherman Day's Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania, and Joseph

^2Ibid., pp. 373-374.
Doddridge's Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars of the Western Parts of Virginia and Pennsylvania from 1763 to 1783. He has ranged in libraries from the New York Public and the Library of Congress to the Huntington. He has used the collections of a number of state and county historical societies.

But he maintains a severe attitude toward much published history. Hints of his distaste appear often in his work, but he states his opinion most clearly in an article in The Atlantic Monthly:

"Modern historians, caught in the complicity of expedience and self-defense, repeat that the American character has not changed. We may wear different clothes, but if you look at us closely you will still see the number thirteen riding boots of George Washington. So the later Romans, looking back on the days of Caesar and Pompey, must have spoken longingly and tragically to each other at some steep and dangerous dip in their decline. . . . [The modern generation] see the new pictures, read the new books. The musty old books, the dusty fine-print historical collections, the opinions of men who lived and observed on the spot, they seldom see. They take for granted the supremacy of their modern world."  

Unfortunately, Richter never names the "modern historians" he has read, and surely we have difficulty agreeing with him, for

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responsible historians make it their business to trace the shifts in national character. His disparagement of writers of history seems less a specific condemnation of their faults than a part of his general disapprobation of contemporary life. With his aversion to formal history, Richter maintains a parallel aversion to the label "historical novelist," although most of his readers consider that he fits into the classification, and he receives high praise as a historical novelist in Edward Wagenknecht's Cavalcade of the American Novel—one of the few studies of American fiction to recognize Richter's skill. Richter insists that his purpose is "not to write historical novels but to give an authentic sensation of life in early America" (The Light in the Forest, p. viii). And in the acknowledgments which preface The Town he says that his purpose in writing the novel was to

"impert to the reader the feeling of having lived for a little while in those earlier days and of having come in contact, not with the sound and fury of dramatic historical events that is the fortune of the relative, and often uninteresting, few, but with the broader stuff of reality that was the lot of the great majority of men and women who, if they did not experience the certain incidents related in these pages, lived through comparable events and emotions, for life is endlessly resourceful and inexhaustible."

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Richter, then, believes that formal history, the modern in particular, fails to present the past truly. And when he gets down to cases, he asserts that even the older histories—and all books—lack an essential quality. "In all life," he writes, "nothing is quite so pleasant to the soul as forgetting the banalities of politics and the artificialities of book learning to lose oneself in an older and realer world concerned with such things as the sagacity of horses and oxen, the natural cunning of wolves, the loyalty of dogs, the value of tanning with hemlock and rock-oak bark, the matchless fur of the mink, marten and fisher, on which no frost would stick and which no cold could penetrate."5

Of course, he gets in touch with this "realer world" not through reading but through talking with trappers and tanners and clearers of the land. Richter gleans most of his material from his notebooks of conversations with early settlers, and when he prefaces a novel with acknowledgments he mentions with particular gratitude the people who have told him their stories. And in his foreword to Early Americana he distinguishes between pioneer "history" and "life," the latter having been revealed to him in the anecdotes of "men and women who lived through the seventies and sixties, a few through the fifties, and who spent hours on end patiently bringing

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to light details and authenticities he wished to know, not of history, but of life."

Other material, of course, came from his family; we have noted that in *The Waters of Kronos* he wrote of receiving anecdotes from his Aunts Jess and Teresa. His article "Pennsylvania" fondly recalls his introduction to pioneer lore:

"Of the entire state, the northern-central region was my favorite. . . . Here, in large, prosperous valleys as well as in smaller ones shut off from the rest of the world, I found people of the old-time pioneer stock, people who had a flavor of individuality and woodsmoke going back hundreds of years. From them I learned the art of leisure and of enjoyment in storytelling, the luxurious extravagance of sitting and talking an afternoon away under a chestnut-shingled roof or a live walnut tree."

He tries, then, to get close to a "realer world," "not of history, but of early life," when he solicits anecdotes of pioneer days; and he tries to re-create this world when he builds his fiction around these recollections. His concern with anecdote, as in *The Waters of Kronos*, has in considerable measure determined the episodic character of his novels.

But his interest in early settlers' reminiscences has
another, more profound effect: it determines a quality of his work even more characteristic than its episodic nature. This quality appears in the contrast between the intensely clear and palpable immediate setting, and the vague unreality of the world beyond it. In the Ohio trilogy, for example, Richter makes us keenly aware of what Sayward's cabin looks like. We know the size of the trees surrounding it, and the distance to the neighbors' cabins. We are intimately acquainted with the routines of the Lucketts and the Wheelers. But we have only a vague awareness of a world beyond this setting. Richter locates only a few landmarks: we learn that the English Lakes lie to the north, and the Juniata and Conestoga Rivers to the east, in Pennsylvania. The Ohio River is east and south. The Scioto and Miami Rivers are in the west and beyond them is "that long river frozen in winter at one end while the other end has flowers and palm trees on either bank," as the Mississippi is called in The Trees (p. 178). Except for mention now and then of these bodies of water, and for occasional references to the Bay State and Kentucky, the world beyond the Lucketts' settlement of Moonshine Church seems not to exist.

Moreover, as Richter has forewarned, he concerns himself not at all with "history." None of his characters is a historical figure, and none of his scenes dramatizes actual events. In fact, Richter seems to go out of his way to avoid linking his novels and
stories to precise dates or recognizable places. Only in Tacey Cromwell does he set his action in actual towns—Socorro, New Mexico, and Bisbee, Arizona. And when he has occasion to refer to an actual place, he never uses the modern name if a different name was current at the time of the story.

I am by no means suggesting that Richter vaguely imagines the world he writes about. On the contrary, he preserves in his mind a quite clear picture of his setting and its surroundings. Invariably, Richter’s setting is an actual place, but if the reader wants to pinpoint it he has to do some detective work.

A curious reader may want to know, for instance, the exact setting of Richter’s best short piece, the title story of Early Americana. The first paragraph sets the story in the Staked Plains. But these plains are vast, occupying much of western Texas and eastern New Mexico; where in this great area does the story take place? The action occurs in "that rude, vanished, half-mystical buffalo settlement, Carnuel;" but maps show no Carnuel on the Staked Plains. However, the hero is Laban Oldham, whose parents were among the earliest settlers in the area. Does the name Oldham appear on maps? Indeed it does: Oldham County lies in the Texas Panhandle, on the New Mexico border, in the center of the Staked Plains. Richter mentions no Oldham County existing today, but it is a safe guess that he pictured the "vanished, half-mystical" trading post in the area which the county now occupies.
The reader who enjoys making such identifications can find a better challenge to his detective ability in the Ohio trilogy. Where do the Lucketts settle? Richter never names the river beside which the Lucketts build their cabin, and to identify it as the Tuscarawas the reader must piece together several bits of evidence. The first of these is Louie Scurrah's description of the boat trip down river that he and his fiancée Genny Luckett make: "They had floated light as a leaf down this river, down past the forks, down past where the little river came in, down past the stockade to the Ohio where water was plenty as at the English Lakes and the settlements thick as blackberries" (The Trees, p. 186). This provides us with some useful geographical information, although we still cannot identify the river.

Four pages later there is another clue: Louie calls the Ohio settlement they visit "the Point" (p. 189). Is the Point an actual place on the Ohio? Modern maps do not show it, but if we examine Henry Howe's history (one of the books that Richter praises in the "Acknowledgments"), we discover that the Point designates the meeting of the Muskingum River with the Ohio, and that it has been so named ever since the settlement was established there.?

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7Henry Howe, Historical Collections of Ohio, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati, 1888), II, 787.
We know, then, that Louie and Genny traveled on the Muskingum; but where did they begin their journey? We recall that the first landmark Louie mentioned was "the forks." Is that, too, the name of an actual place? We trace the Muskingum River northward for eighty miles or so until we come to its formation at Coshocton, where the Tuscarawas River from the east joins the Walhonding from the west. We strongly suspect that this is "the Forks:" and, for support we return to Henry Howe, who tells us that the juncture at Coshocton was indeed so named.\footnote{Ibid., I, 466-467.}

But how can we be sure that Worth Luckett built his cabin by the Tuscarawas and not the Walhonding? We derive the answer from an episode in \textit{The Town}. Sayward is asked to sell some of her land for the Ohio and Erie Canal—"a ditch to join up the English Lakes and the Ohio," as Sayward considers it (p. 129). A map of the canal shows that it follows the Tuscarawas for many miles, meeting it at Coshocton; it does not follow the Walhonding, although it crosses the Walhonding at the Forks.\footnote{For a map and history of the Ohio canal system, see Francis P. Weisenburger, \textit{The History of the State of Ohio}, Vol. \textit{III}: \textit{The Passing of the Frontier 1825-1850} (Columbus, Ohio, 1941), pp. 92-106.} Since Sayward's cabin lies at some distance from the Forks (according to Louie's account), it must be located not where the canal crosses the
Walhonding but where the canal follows the Tuscarawas.

Richter sets his trilogy, then, on the north bank of the Tuscarawas (or perhaps the west bank—the river turns north near Newcomerstown, seventeen miles east of Coshocton) in eastern Coshocton County or in Tuscarawas County. This district also provides the setting of True Son’s Indian village in The Light in the Forest (p. 148). If we browse through some of the "dusty fine-print historical collections" that Richter may well have examined, we find further connections between the Ohio trilogy and actual events in the area. We find, for instance, a parallel to the episode in which a recently built bridge is destroyed in a flood (The Town, pp. 112-122). A Coshocton County historian notes, "A bridge was built over the Tuscarawas at Coshocton in 1832. . . It was carried away in a freshet about a year after it was finished." It would serve little purpose to investigate Richter’s sources at any length: the significant point is that Richter has in mind a specific geographic location and a specific historical era, yet he refuses to connect his narrative with the objective reality.

One reason for this refusal is the obvious technical one that since Richter chooses not to deal with historically prominent people

10William E. Hunt, Historical Collections of Coshocton County (Ohio). . . 1764-1876 (Cincinnati, 1876), p. 54.
or events, he does not need to locate his settings precisely. Were he to do so, he would stuff his work with unnecessary detail; and in using detail Richter exercises considerable tact. He never employs too much, and what he does employ always contributes to the sense of life and to the movement of the narrative.

Moreover, by not specifically identifying his settings, Richter gains for his work a sense of isolation. In The Trees, for instance, the woods dominates the settlers' consciousness, and ours. The setting, replete with details of life but at the same time isolated from broader political and geographical environment, becomes a universe. The Richter character who enters this universe participates in the myth of the American Adam, whom R. W. B. Lewis describes as "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources." When on their trek to Ohio the Lcketts climb a ridge and see below the apparently limitless forest of Ohio, Richter describes the scene by comparing it to the sea—the traditional image for the American wilderness (whether it be forest or grassland) because the sea betrays no creature's trace; it is always virgin territory. Here

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is Richter's handling of a familiar scene in American literature--
the meeting of the settler with the wilderness which lies waiting
for Adam:

For a moment Sayward reckoned that her father had fetched them unbeknownst to the Western ocean and what lay beneath was the late sun glittering on green-black water. Then she saw that what they looked down on was a dark, illimitable expanse of wilderness. It was a sea of solid treetops broken only by some gash where deep beneath the foliage an unknown stream made it way. As far as the eye could reach, this lonely forest sea rolled on and on till its faint blue billows broke against an incredibly distant horizon.

They had all stopped with a common motion and stood looking out. Sayward saw her mother's eyes search with the hope of finding some settlement or leastwise a settler's clearing. But over that vasty solitude no wisp of smoke arose. Though they waited here till night, the girl knew that no light of human habitation would appear except the solitary red spark of some Delaware or Shawanee campfire. Already the lowering sun slanted melancholy rays over the scene, and as it sank, the shadows of those far hills reached out with long fingers.

It was a picture Sayward was to carry to her grave, although she didn't know it then. In later years when it was all to go so that her own father wouldn't know the place if he rose from his bury hole, she was to call the scene to mind. This is the way it was, she would say to herself. Nowhere else but in the American wilderness could it have been. (The Trees, pp. 8-9)

Indeed, Sayward's life begins at that moment; her occasional memories of a Pennsylvania childhood have only a tenuous connection
with her subsequent experience. She stands above the forest (again in Lewis's terms) "as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history." Richter's acceptance of the Adamic myth helps explain his distaste for formal history as well as his habit of isolating characters from the broader cultural and physical environment.

There remains a third explanation for this isolation, one which helps us understand his art to an even greater degree. Perhaps it is best stated as a paradox: Richter seems to feel that a sense of the unreal is very much a part of reality. When he described the village of Carmuel in "Early Americana" as "vanished" and "half-mystical," he revealed an attitude that governs not only that one story but all of his fiction. Complementing his extremely clear focus on detail, on immediate events, there are in all his novels and stories vague places or improbable, vague events which serve important functions in the plot.

It is true that in The Sea of Grass, Richter makes Colonel Brewton a vague character. But he uses another device in the story to balance his precisely detailed accounts of the homesteader invasion: he sends Lutie Brewton away for fifteen years—an improbable absence, to say the least, for Lutie utterly disappears.

12 Ibid., p. 1.
Although rumors circulate concerning her whereabouts, there seems to be no truth in any of them—a further unlikely circumstance, for Lutie is the kind of woman people notice and remember. Her temperament, moreover, drives her to live in cities where there are frequent dances and parties, and it is hard to remain incognito in such surroundings, particularly in an era of rapid communication by telegraph and fairly rapid travel by train. Word of his vivacious, wayward wife is more likely than not to find its way back to the Colonel. Now, it is not impossible for Lutie to keep her whereabouts hidden for fifteen years, but it is unlikely; and if Richter wants us to believe in her absence, he must help our unbelief. He does not. In fact, he does not even let Lutie offer a word of explanation when she returns. Richter simply lets her vanish. When she leaves the locale where the story is set, she ceases to exist except in the memories of her husband, children, friends, and the narrator, Hal, all of whom remain unswervingly loyal to her.

Richter uses a similar device in Always Young and Fair, a short novel relating Lucy Markle's neurotic devotion to Tom Grail, her young fiancé who is killed in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. Richter probably chose the name Grail for its symbolism; indeed, Lucy regards his memory as holy, and she spends much of her life attempting to keep it alive in the
small Pennsylvania town where they both grew up. She decorates her house with pictures of Tom, she continues for decades to wear her 1898 wardrobe, and she regards as sacrilegious her family's attempts to marry her off to Tom's cousin Will, who had also been in the Philippine campaign. At the end of the book, the aging Lucy comes to her senses, admitting that she has been faithful to an illusion and that she has grown older while Tom, in her own and in others' memories, has remained always young and fair. She gets the now unwilling bachelor Will Grail to marry her but, ironically, he suffers a paralytic stroke shortly after the wedding and she must spend the rest of her days nursing an invalid.

Richter's handling results in a more believable story than The Sea of Grass. Whereas he makes us accept Lucy's disturbed devotion, he failed to make us accept Lutie's disappearance. Yet he remains concerned with the impingement of the unreal—the half-mystical memory of Tom Grail—upon reality.

Richter often brings this sense of unreality into minor situations in his work. In The Trees, for example, Sayward often reflects that the normal span of human life is thirty to forty years. Her mother dies at thirty-seven, and Sayward considers her to be an "old woman" (p. 135); it never occurs to her that her mother died while still young. Actually, Sayward has no justification for her limited view. She left Pennsylvania at the age
of fifteen—old enough, obviously, to retain clear memories of her grandmother and grandfather along the Conestoga (The Trees, p. 175). And as a settlement grows around her Ohio cabin, old people like Granny MacWhirter appear. Clearly, Sayward should realize that thirty-seven is by no means "old." Yet Richter emphasizes Sayward's conviction, which is so strong that it makes the reality of age seem unreal, a vanished, legendary quality.

Finally, in The Waters of Kronos the setting is half-mystical like Carnuel, for the town which John Donner visits lies under a man-made lake. And while the Unionville trees and sidewalks seem palpable to Donner, he realizes that there is no rational explanation for their existence. Moreover, Donner admits to a quasi-mystical feeling that the world is unreal, while at the same time he is deeply affected by the details of his surroundings; and he reveals that he has been troubled all his life by this dual sensibility. In this novel, Richter comes closest to unifying the real and the unreal: both become states of mind existing successively and now and then simultaneously. He does not resolve this ultimate conflict—perhaps it has no resolution. But he dramatizes it extremely well.

In the main, Richter's novels do not suffer from his habitual view of the world, with its disparity between the real and the half-mystical. His mature work is grounded in reality, and he has
discovered how to make this sense of unreality serve his technique: The Trees certainly gains in impact from the sense of isolation it conveys; it is his best book, and it is a fine novel by any standard. Nor do the other novels of the Ohio trilogy suffer, nor does The Waters of Kronos.

There was a time, however, when Richter had trouble handling the sense of unreality in his fiction—considerably more trouble, in fact, than he had in his first novel, The Sea of Grass. His discovery of a way to convert this sense into good fictional coin is very possibly the reason for his resolving in the early 1930's to write the kind of fiction that most appealed to him. His difficulties with the early stories involved his handling of character, a consideration of which leads us to examine Richter's essentially tragic view of human existence. This discovery, and this view, concern us in the next chapter.
CHAPTER VII

THE TRAGIC VIEW

It must be admitted that Richter sometimes fails his readers by not analyzing his characters fully, by not showing their motives. This difficulty does not appear in the Ohio trilogy, in The Waters of Kronos, or in A Simple Honorable Man, where the characters are believable throughout. But in other novels he is not so successful. In Tacey Cromwell, for instance, we wonder whether altruism prompts Tacey to leave her position as madam of a bawdy house when her lover's young half-brother arrives; whether the boy's arrival somehow convinces her of the error of her ways; whether Tacey has dreamed of motherhood, and the boy provides her with an opportunity to fulfill her dream. The novel raises these questions, but it does not answer them, and we feel that we know less about Tacey's motives than we should. When we read The Free Man, we wonder what prompts Henry Free to marry the woman who had him whipped for a misdemeanor when he was her indentured servant. Our familiarity with psychology may lead us to a number of answers, all of them uncomplimentary to the hero and none of them, undoubtedly, consonant with Richter's intent. We
wish that Richter had gone more deeply into Henry Free's character. And *The Sea of Grass* suffers from lack of motive for many of the characters' actions, such as Colonel Brewton's willingness to raise his wife's child by Brice Chamberlain.

In a sense, this occasional absence of motivation in Richter's work is akin to the lack of relationship between his immediate settings and the broader environment. Like his settings, many of his characters seem "half-mystical." This is not to say that he deprives his characters of a reason for acting the way they do; but the motivating cause does not appear where we expect to find it—in the character's psychology and in his reactions to other characters' acts and attitudes.

The determining force behind many of his characters' actions is their ancestry, which Richter usually refers to as their "blood." A few examples will explain the concept of "blood" and show how frequently he is dependent on it.

In *The Fields*, Sayward Wheeler's young brother Wyitt recognizes that he is no farmer; he has tried to temper himself to husbandry, but he has failed. He knows that for the rest of his life he must follow game, as his father had before him. "Sooner than spend the livelong day with a grubbing hoe," Wyitt tells himself, "his pappy would have hanged his self to a weeping pin-oak tree. His pappy had Monsey blood, and so did he" (p. 80). We
never learn who the Monseys are; like most of the ancestors Richter devises for his characters, they exist as names only, as personified forces. They determine character and action, but they never appear as characters in their own right. Wyitt leaves without saying farewell, and though he has some misgivings about the abruptness of his departure, he avoids the chance that his sister might try again to make him stay by saying that hunters never become respectable men of property. "He knewed she was right," Wyitt reflects. "He had tried to break his self of it. He'd knock the wildness out of him, he said, if it was the last thing he did. He had done his dangest to kill the ever-hunter in him, but it wouldn't stay killed. It was his Monsey blood, he reckoned. It would never say die" (p. 82). Another explanation for Wyitt's hunting tendency might be environment; hunting is perhaps the commonest manly pursuit on the frontier. But Richter never suggests that environment shapes his characters in any significant way. When he delves deeply into motive, he almost always uncovers ancestry as the first cause.

In The Lady, Doña Ellen Sessions descends from aristocratic English and Spanish blood, and the mixture is responsible for the contradictions in her character--for the arrogance which leads her to murder, and for the love and devotion she bears to her family and servants. Her young ward, the narrator Jud, comes from a different line and thus he feels himself incapable of understanding
her. "After all," he says, "she was the child of several races, with long lines of conflicting ancestors rising in her from the past for a moment or two before falling back into the rich and ancient blood stream. To me, an Anglo boy from Missouri without a drop of the blood of the conquerors or of the English gentry in his veins, Ellen seemed still more of that mysterious creature, a lady, with all the contradictions and complexities of her sex" (p. 75).

Johnny, the narrator of *Always Young and Fair*, makes a similar comment about the protagonist Lucy Markle. He has grown to manhood, and he has traveled across the country twice, but he has nowhere seen a woman to compare with her. He wonders "what distant strains of blood must have fused in her to make a creature of such extraordinarily fragile and lovely power" (p. 64).

In *The Waters of Kronos*, John Donner counts among his ancestors on his mother's side a family of Scarlets, a vague clan whose nationality may have been French or Italian (the family disputes the matter), and whose social status may have been aristocratic. Whatever the facts, the Scarlets are held responsible for good and bad. When young John has a fit of anger, his father blames it on "the Scarlett temper" (p. 143), and when he publishes his first book, his Aunt Jess attributes his literary bent to "the Scarlett mind" (p. 144). We have seen the great importance attached
to Donner's ancestry at the end of the novel, where Donner looks at himself in the mirror and discovers in his own face the faces of "grim forbidding... ancestors he couldn't name but who had looked aged at forty." When he was younger, he believed that he had defeated those ancestors in himself, had kept them from asserting themselves; but now, in his old age, he laments that they possess a vitality which forces their recognition. They are "the real survivors" (p. 160).

Now, people often bring up ancestry to explain a friend's or relative's twist of humor or habitual gesture or tendency to overeat. Usually the explanation is as lightly received as given, and neither speaker nor listener subscribes to the deterministic inference that "blood" decides character. But Richter does accept this determinism. By frequently referring to his characters' "blood," he indicates that their natures are fixed and that there exists no possibility of change.

This is not to say, of course, that his characters do not in some ways alter. Sayward Wheeler learns to read and write after she is married and has several children; and further evidence of her education appears in The Town, where her speech is less salted with backwoods expressions than it is in The Trees. Tacey Cromwell adopts the decent life of a seamstress after she gives up her career as madam and dismisses her lover. But to change
themselves, these women draw on reserves of strength that they
have always possessed. Essentially, Sayward and Tacey and
Richter's other protagonists are unable to change in any funda­
mental way, just as John Donner is unable to assume the gregarious
manner of his father.

The notable fact is that Richter did not always handle char­
acter with the determinism apparent in his novels and later stories.
The plots of many of his early stories turn on a definite--even
extreme--change in the protagonist's character. The hero is usually
an irresponsible youth who becomes an admirable, upright young man
fully capable of supporting the wife he acquires and of managing
the family fortune.

One of these heroes is Valentine Pierce in the story "Forest
Mold," which appears in Brothers of No Kin. Val is the son of a
wealthy industrialist who puts the boy through college and then
offers him a laborer's job in his furniture factory. Val refuses;
he much prefers living off his father's fortune to working in the
mill. In the evening after his father offers him the job, Val goes
to a party with a friend named Lou, who brings two girls. At the
party, a burly stranger makes advances toward Val's girl, where­
upon Lou offers Val a gun; Val fires, the stranger collapses, and
Lou helps Val escape to a secluded lumber camp. Val gets a job as
a lumberjack and becomes acquainted with a nearby family which
includes a mother, her twenty-year-old daughter and her sixteen-year-old-son. The mother owns a stand of first-growth timber but, lacking money to hire help, she cannot get it to market. Val offers to do the work in his spare time, and he enlists the help of a lumberman named Barney, whom he had met at the camp and who has become his friend. They overcome a number of obstacles but finally get the timber cut, whereupon Barney leaves to find a buyer—who turns out to be Val's father. Realizing that he has been found, Val gives himself up for the murder he is convinced he has committed, but his father tells him that the supposedly dead man has recovered. Later, the elder Pierce meets Barney in private and pays him for the role he has played: and in this scene the reader learns that the party was staged by Val's father, that Lou was in on the plot, that the stranger whom Val "shot" was also hired, and that the gun held only blanks. The entire production was Pierce's scheme to make a man of his son. Of course, the scheme works: Val proves himself able and willing to work, and he comes to respect his father. Pierce had not, however, planned Val's acquaintance with the family who owned the timber; and Val's gracious offer of assistance proves that he learned his lesson. It hardly needs mention that Val becomes engaged to marry the daughter.

"Forest Mold" employs one of the commonest techniques in
popular fiction, the reversal—the device by which the sheriff in the television western turns out to be the chief rustler, and the glamorous blonde in the soap opera is revealed to be a shrew. Richter's frequent use of the reversal plot in his early stories testifies to his eagerness to hit the mass market; but when he decided to write stories that he wanted to write rather than those that would sell, Richter gave up the reversal plot. He did not throw over everything he had relied on during his apprenticeship; most of the stories in Early Americana and several of his novels are weighted with the love themes which appealed to the readers of The Ladies' Home Journal. But from Early Americana to the present, none of his stories depends on a surprise ending.

Doubtless his aesthetic conscience prompted Richter to forego surprises; he was maturing as an artist and he wanted to do better work. But there is another reason for his change: he realized that his plots were distorting his characters, and he could no longer honestly accept falsifications of human nature. Most of his early reversal stories involve just such a radical change in character as Val Pierce undergoes in "Forest Mold," and they produce this change in as unbelievable a way—through a father's or uncle's or friend's scheme to set up a false environment in which the hero is forced into self-reliance and responsibility. The situation in "Forest Mold" is indeed preposterous: a father
arranges a party, stages a fake murder, provides an escape for his son, and arranges hard work in a lumber camp for him—all by way of forcing the boy to rely on himself rather than on his father's money. But the situations are no less fantastic in other early stories.

For example, in "Over the hill to the Rich House" (Brothers of No Kin, pp. 168-187), a wealthy executive leaves his business and feigns poverty in order to force his wife and son into a renewed appreciation of the simpler pleasures of life. And in "Tempered Copper" (Brothers of No Kin, pp. 131-167), lumbermen force themselves to harass a youthful member of their gang and thereby cure him of violent fits of anger. In each of these stories, the personality of one of the characters is altered for the better by an environment created purely for the purpose of effecting the change. If we can base an assertion about Richter on fiction that he obviously tailored to the market, we may say that when he wrote these stories he felt that if character could be changed at all, it could be done only by such drastic means. At any rate, we know that he eventually quit writing stories involving such improbabilities, and at the same time he quit suggesting in his fiction that human character was capable of change.

Herein lies Richter's central value: he has achieved an
understanding of character and he dramatizes his view in consistent, believable portrayals. Once he determined to present human nature as he perceived it, he refused to return to his earlier method of plotting. Only in The Free Man does he waver: he concludes the story with an improbable marriage between a wealthy young lady of Philadelphia and her former indentured servant. But world affairs probably determined this plot. For the protagonist, Henry Free, is a Pennsylvania Dutchman (like Richter himself) who was born in the Palatinate; and since the novel appeared during World War II, it seems likely that Richter meant to defend the patriotism of German-Americans. Thus he made Henry Free an early volunteer fighting for American independence, and he joined him in marriage to an aristocratic Englishwoman who was also aiding the revolutionary cause. In his foreword to the novel he suggests, "Perhaps in an understanding of the Pennsylvania Dutch, their loyalty to democracy and their love of peace may be found the secret of a peaceful Europe in the years to come."

In most of his novels, then, and in his later stories, Richter keeps his characters consistent with his view of human nature. He believes that we are fated to be what we are, that our "blood" determines our destiny. Essentially, this view is a tragic one, and the honesty of Richter's portrayals shows that he accepts the tragic implications. In fact, his novels gain their chief force
from these implications. Harry Donner in *A Simple Honorable Man* is real for us not because he gains strength from adversity according to the tenets of psycho-energism, but because he is totally unable to change himself or improve his status. He leads his family into penury without being able to help himself or them; his naïveté perpetually condemns him to impoverished, contention-ridden churches; his constant good humor before relatives and church members strikes his family, and particularly his son John, as hypocrisy, for he is morose and uncommunicative at home. Since we sympathize with his standards of Christian behavior, we understand how his disappointment in a selfish young minister results in his death; but we also sympathize with his family's critical attitude, and we agree with the judgment of his son John that Harry's life was a waste.

True Son's conflicts in *The Light in the Forest* also result in a story embodying Richter's tragic view. Born a white but brought up as an Indian, True Son finds that his white blood eventually triumphs over his training; yet this predominance of the white man in him makes him an outcast, unwelcome to either side. At the end, he hates the confined life his white father wants him to lead, but because of his white blood he hates the knavery of the Indians who plan to kill white women and children in an ambush. Torn between loyalties, considered an enemy by whites and Indians alike, he cries in anguish, "Then who is my father?" He finds no answer.
Nor does Lucy Markle in *Always Young and Fair* ever find a satisfactory resolution to her disturbed promptings. Loyal throughout her youth and middle years to the memory of her dead fiancé, she eventually realizes her folly. Yet she never accepts reality; for by the time she recognizes the truth that she would be better off married to Will Grail, he no longer wants her—he is confirmed in his bachelorhood. Nevertheless she tricks him into marriage: she lets the neighbors see her emerging from Will's house in the morning, dressed in her nightgown. But of course he too has aged, and shortly after their marriage he suffers the stroke which paralyzes him for the rest of his life. Her once beautiful face bears a "look of ancient and bitter disappointment" (p. 171)—the result of her life-long self-delusion. By not rewarding Lucy with pleasant sunset years after she realized the error of her attachment to a dead man, Richter kept her character consistent with itself and thereby with his own attitude.

The Ohio trilogy is usually commended for the picture it provides of frontier life. But after we have read the novels to get this picture, we find that we can read them again with fresh enjoyment. The final test of all art is its ability to remain fresh, and the Ohio trilogy passes this test easily. But when we find ourselves enjoying *The Trees* for the third or fourth time, we must admit that our pleasure does not come primarily from the information
that Richter conveys about the frontier. Were this information all that he provides, we would read his books once, take notes, and shelve them.

And when we finish *The Trees*, we do not feel that contemporary life is as distasteful as Richter has recently said it is. He does not idealize the forest. He presents it as a lonely, treacherous place where people work hard with little reward, where they die without the aid of a doctor or the consolation of religion, and where they may go mad. If he idealizes anything, it is not the forest but the opportunity to expend energy and gain strength. Yet *The Trees* is no apology for psycho-energism. We do not put the book down resolving that we must be about our business quickly in order that we may increase our store of energy. And when one of his characters comments on the insidious effects of cultural advance, the comment merely seems "in character" and not a special plea of the author's. Richter's ambivalence toward his own philosophy is such that in his novels he always counterbalances one character's expression of it with another character's opposing viewpoint; and he presents both characters sympathetically.

We do not read the Ohio trilogy, then, because it advances a philosophy or because it comments on contemporary civilization. Nor do we value it as a work of art because it offers a compelling picture of pioneer life, although it does this admirably.
We value it because it is an artistic whole, unified by Richter's consistent attitude toward the characters he invents. He never sacrifices them to the demands made by readers of popular fiction: he does not distort them for the sake of a trick of plot, and he does not make his heroine a beautiful woman like Lutie Brewton or Tacey Cromwell or Lucy Markle. Nor does he make any of his men romantically vague like Colonel Brewton.

The unity involves certain tragic ironies—reversals in Aristotle's sense, not the popular magazine editor's. All her life Sayward works hard, clearing land and saving money. At the end she is a wealthy, honored citizen of the town; and she stands as the chief representative of the class that she has always looked upon with disfavor and that her father despised—the class of money-grubbing second-raters who stay behind because life is easier in the town than in the wilderness.

Of all Sayward's children, Chancey demands most of her care when he is a child, and she remains partial to him when he is grown. Yet of all her children, he is least inclined to follow her example of hard work. He is confounded by his ancestry—he feels that he does not truly belong to Sayward and Portius. Throughout his young manhood he publishes articles against Sayward and her contemporaries in the newspaper he edits; but he does not know that the paper's secret benefactor is Sayward herself, and he does not find out until
she is near death. At the close of *The Town*, he visits her bedside, wondering, "Could there be something after all in this hardship-and-work business... He had thought hardship and work the symptoms of a pioneer era, things of the past" (p. 431). He speaks to her, but she is too ill to answer; Chancey realizes that she will never answer and that "from this time on he would have to ponder his own questions and travel his way alone" (p. 433).

Thus at the close of the Ohio trilogy, Richter seems to insist on the value of psycho-energism, to suggest that Sayward, who has always lived according to this philosophy, remains superior to the disbeliever in work, the partisan of "comfort, ease and peace" (p. 431). But in the final analysis, Richter does not greatly emphasize psycho-energism, for his main concern in the closing scene is Chancey's vain attempt at reconciliation with his mother. A similar scene would be quite possible if the philosophic positions were reversed--if Sayward were, like her father, a lover of creature comforts and settlement life, and if Chancey were a robust man of the woods like Wyitt. Richter is not primarily concerned with the philosophy, but with the unbridgeable difference between Sayward and Chancey, whose clashing opinions represent a far deeper discord between them. Mother and son have never been able to meet on any common ground--their natures have kept them apart, just as John
Donner and his father remained alien to each other, and True Son to his father. The complexities of human existence, and its tragedy, are more compelling than the hopeful formulas of psychoenergism or the hardships of the frontier.
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