

owans in the Arts: Joseph Langland

As the world turns, regional imprints are blurring into homogenized "norms" and "standards"—such as those embodied in the ubiquitous franchise chains like McDonald's and Holiday Inn. The regions of the country that once impressed a culturally distinct attitude and quality on American life are disappearing as entities. Luckily, ethnic pride has encouraged an interest in identifying and preserving many of the diverse cultural attributes of the immigrants who settled America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Midwest has been defined as the heartland of America, a vast expanse of fertile prairie peopled by sturdy farmers of northern and central European stock; the land a stern provider, and Mother Nature an omnipresent but not always benevolent force in the lives of those who depended upon her. As the frontier receded westward to fabled California, seemingly inexhaustible midwestern farmland bore families through the seasons' cycles, through cyclic birth-growth-death patterns—and a dual character emerged: the land and the people became bountiful and barren, hard and gentle, persevering and yielding, satisfied and questing, loving and hating, but always constant.

The farm was a world unto itself, womblike, self-contained, where large families were the rule. Religion and work intertwined, and were as nourishing to the spirit and body as the daily bread. To the Midwest, the land, the farm, and the family were essential ingredients.

A writer's reflections upon origins and roots, his or her vision of the shaping force of a particular landscape and community, often reveals a sense of place—an essential character

inherent in our collective past and present. Iowa, in the heart of the Midwest, has produced many writers who have interpreted the beauty, puzzle, and tragedy found in the natural world; the myriad moods that the land forces upon its inhabitants; and the social ramifications of its politics, religions and nationalities. Joseph Langland is one of these writers.

Langland is a poet who grew up in northeastern Iowa in Highland Township, Winneshiek County. The background of much of his poetry is the American Midwest, the farmlands of Iowa where he spent his youth—and later, the mountainous country of Wyoming. He has authored and co-edited several books of poetry, college texts, and anthologies. Among them are: The Green Town (poems), published by Scribners in 1956; The Wheel of Summer (poems), from Dial Press in 1963; Poetry from the Russian Underground, co-edited with Aczel and Tikos from Harper and Row in 1973; Poet's Choice (anthology of poems), co-edited with Paul Engle, published by Dell in 1962; and a text and anthology of short fiction, co-edited with James B. Hall, The Short Story, published by Macmillan in 1956. He now lives in Amherst, Massachusetts and teaches at the University of Massachusetts.

Langland, born in 1917, emphasizes that he is still a "farm boy, midwestern, small town in my inner psychological landscape." Along with his brothers and sisters he attended the one-room Bekkan school. All of his grandparents were born in Norway, and the community of his boyhood was largely first and second generation Norwegian-American. He recalls that "almost all the adults in the community spoke Norwegian. The social center, as well as the religious one, was the rural Norwegian Lutheran Church. I was in my teens during the worst years of the Depression, 1930-1936, when almost the total cultural resources were immediate and local. . . ."

The rural, insulated world of his early years "sounds like another world now," he says. "It was solid, fairly rigid; it evaluated your conduct, and you knew it. You also had a very real place in it. Even casual life was fairly serious."

The following interview with Joseph Langland reveals insights into the life of an artist, in this case a poet, growing up

*in Iowa in the 1920s and 30s. This exchange of questions and answers was conducted through the mail during the fall and winter of 1975-76. A selection of Langland's poems is reprinted at the end of the interview.**

—JG

Judith Gildner: You were writing poetry in your teens. Can you identify the impulse behind your early interest in poetry? Was there encouragement from the rural community where you lived?

Joseph Langland: It is difficult to remember just when a seemingly natural interest in songs, games, riddles, nursery rhymes, music, rhythms, and all that began to seem like a natural interest in writing poetry, also. My father and mother were both well-educated people who read beautifully: stories from the Bible and the *Youth's Companion*, and even the local paper. In any case, I began writing poems about spring, a school for frogs, fighting wolves "up north," and sentimental and romantic treatises on Love, Duress and Ernest

Endeavor from about age nine or ten on, sporadically until about age seventeen, and then almost daily. What fragments I have seen of that lately are both amusing and embarrassing,



courtesy of J.L.

Joseph Langland

*Two features in the Summer 1975 issue of the *North American Review* (Volume 260, No. 2, 65-82) entitled, "This Wheel: An Introduction," and "The Sacrifice Poems: A Selection," by Joseph Langland are worth looking at. They offer a sample of some of the poet's strongest works, along with a lyrical narrative account of his youth on an Iowa farm. Among other things, he explains how he came to write the series of "Sacrifice Poems"—about the deaths of animals, friends, and relatives during his early years.

but I am glad that there was all that activity going on in that direction. As for other impulses: sure, I wanted to sing, to moralize, to elevate, to entertain. As for encouragement, there was a little from a couple of rural school teachers, almost none that I can remember from any child remotely near my age in the area. My mother let me know that she was proud of my poetry. I think my father admired the profession of poetry but I can not remember that he ever praised anything I was writing in my teens. As he told me—and this was fairly standard conduct in that area then—if you do well, that is expected of you; if you don't, I'll tell you. As for the rural community generally, the writing of poetry was an aberration which was O.K. *if* you were proficient in other accepted activities such as farm work, sports, and orthodox school work. If my writing of poetry had been dependent upon community approbation and encouragement it would have ceased long ago. But I think this is, finally, a condition for almost all good writers anywhere. They are solitary in work and praise.

JG: What were the cultural activities (stimulation) in your Iowa home (or school, community) when you were a boy and young man? How did your family react to your being a poet?

JL: I can answer the last part first. Basically, I was not a poet: I wrote some poems. Once, when I was twelve, my mother (following the publication of some little poem of mine in some library journal in Minnesota) had me dress up in my best suit and sit at the family writing desk for a portrait. I think this was in response to a request for a photo. I thought the whole idea fairly silly at the time, but I suppose that I was also sort of pleased at the idea.

The cultural activities? Well, the steady and regular formalism of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in the community had to be the focus of this. My father and mother were both well-educated and had a small library of good books in the farm home. Even so, I read a lot of second-rate material, such as *Prince of Graustark*, several Zane Grey novels, a lot of

Temple Bailey, Grace Livingstone Hill, Harold Bell Wright, the *Youth's Companion*. This was all well written in a formal sense, of course. I loved Hans Christian Anderson and Grimm's Fairy Tales in the rural school library, and books like *Smoky the Cowhorse* by Will James. I spent about a year and a half taking piano lessons from a local lady who had studied briefly at the MacPhail School of Music in Minneapolis; however, I was trying to play the little Mozart pieces at the same time as I was milking several cows morning and night. My fingers were strong and powerful but hardly limber. I was great on the big chords and hopeless on the trills and runs. I did not see my first movie in a town theatre until I was thirteen; then—a great event—I was taken to La Crosse, Wisconsin, thirty-five miles distant, to see "The Understanding Heart" and a Mack Sennett comedy.

But perhaps the best cultural stimulation was the sense of formalism and ritual and propriety and standards of accepted behavior which pervaded our lives. In retrospect, the character of that training seems to have a lot to do with an enduring sense of "culture." Our local minister was fairly severe in his speech and behavior, fairly formal in his sermons. I can still hear his voice, its patterns, and the modulations of language he used in his sermons. It was a fine balance to the standard diet of daily speech, often colored with Scandinavian rhythms and expressions.

JG: Would you say that the rural people you knew as a boy felt comfortable with poets? Can you define their attitude toward "the arts"?

JL: The first question never arose. I would never know. Since I was not a poet, simply one who wrote some verses—and most people did not even know that—I was just another boy growing up in the local social situation. And since part of that time was one of the Depression—and pride, vanity, or any effort to stand out from the crowd bordered on being a sin, a concept which was fairly pervasive in that society—we were all more or less equal. I certainly was never encouraged to think of myself as much different from anyone else, and I seldom did.

As for attitudes toward the arts, we must remember that from 1921 to 1934, when I was in rural school and in high school in that area, the farmers were generally having a fairly tough time making ends meet. Everyone was expected to contribute toward the essentials, which were food, clothing, and shelter, plus a formalized religion. If one wanted to play the piano, read, or do anything related to the arts, that was to be done in so-called leisure time, or when others were not working, or when "the chores were through." If one were caught, say, reading a book during the "working hours," which included practically the whole of daylight, one was made to feel guilty about it, and one certainly did. We had church choirs, summer community sings oriented around the church, Luther League entertainments on Sunday evening which included a little music and recitation. There were a few public programs in the rural school. My father and mother were excellent readers, and they read to us nine children a variety of things, almost always something with moral uplift or spiritual admonition, and they were very good at this. I value their voices and attitudes in my background now even if I live by a somewhat different set of ethics and beliefs.

JG: In an interview with Philip Tetreault in 1973 you emphasize the importance of the shaping form of your boyhood. Can you expand on this for Annals readers? How important is place to your development as a writer.

JL: Perhaps in my answers to one or two of the previous questions I partially answer the question about "shaping form." I do know that there was a sense of hierarchy of values, of a basic structure of life pattern and style, and a standard expectation of accepted behavior which was pervasive in our rural community. We all knew what it was, and we all tried, more or less, to conform to it. Even when we did not—going off to local dance halls, drinking on the sly, making our own sexual investigations, trying out racy language (it is astonishing what was tolerated in the barn but not in the house) carrying out halloween and shivaree tricks, etc—we knew exactly what it all was in relation to the expected norm.

And we kept the Saturday night bath and Sunday church services with enough exactitude to maintain our public rectitude. Or I always supposed that we did. I know that my own moral and ethical system began to take on some personal shape, partially in opposition to the public one, when I was between thirteen and fourteen years of age, but I kept that largely to myself. For instance, I can remember what a break-through it was when we were allowed to schedule a community cow-pasture softball game on Sunday afternoon. And by the time we were fourteen and had been "confirmed," we had all been warned against dancing because it meant, inevitably, putting the pelvic portions of the body together.

As for place, that is always important to me. I like to have a sense of being "rooted" where I am, and a lot of my metaphors, and the landscapes with which I think, come from a firm sense of place. I had such a sense growing up on the farm in northeastern Iowa. In fact, in 1977, that home farm will have been "in the family" for 100 years. It has now accommodated five generations from my grandparents to my grandchildren. Surely, one must be lucky to have it so in our transient world, particularly since I, myself, was never really a keeper of the place, but a beneficiary and now a visitant.

JG: *Have you written poems that refer back to your Norwegian ancestors and Scandinavian history, geography and traditions?*

ML: Yes. This material enters in all sorts of ways, usually not overtly. "A Little Homily" comes from the rhetoric of a Norwegian Lutheran pastor. "Ecclesiastes" comes from that same pastor's interpretation of the book, *as I remember it*. "War" mentions this and uses part of the speech rhythm. My "Sacrifice of Uncle Hans" deals, in part, with the society and some of its values. But I am surprised at how few the specific references are. Lately, among newer poems which have been published in magazines but not books as yet, I have been exploring this Scandinavian background more specifically: "Norwegian Rivers," "At Langeland Lake, Stord, Norway," and in some poems on Lapland (where I lived briefly with a

Lapp family and a herd of reindeer in April 1973 in Finnmark, Norway). Then I have been deliberately using some Scandinavian speech rhythms in some of my new poems. They may not come through to others as having this origin, but they come out of my head that way and take part of their authenticity from that source.

As for traditions, I do not doubt that the patterns of some of the traditions are so strongly in my make-up that I could eliminate them only by being false to myself, which I have no desire to do or be.

I have visited Norway for varying lengths of time from a couple of weeks to three-four months at a time, and I am also writing a few poems based on the geography of Norway, particularly the Western Coast, which is where all my grandparents were born.

JG: What do you find to be distinctive characteristics of the Midwest—of its land, people, culture, attitudes? Are there certain aspects of your Iowa upbringing that you thought you were escaping when you went away to college? Do you ever think about the possibility of living in Iowa again?

JL: First, I feel that the land is hospitable to man. If you treat it well it will come fairly close to sustaining you in return. Of course, with this goes a sense of closeness to nature and a kind of fatalistic dependence upon it, which also means a kind of stoic acceptance of whatever comes. Usually, I think of Midwesterners as speaking more slowly than people in the East, at least, and as being less contentious about matters. This is not wholly a blessing by any means. Carried to extremes—as it often is—it can dull the mind. Since I have been living outside of the Midwest essentially since 1942, I am third of a century out of touch with the cultural situation there. I did feel that the University of Iowa, in 1938 and on, was a marvelous cultural community with more stimulation than any young man could profitably use. I think of Midwesterners as being fairly straightforward, often blunt, sometimes bland, generally honest and dependable, mistrusting both “wit” and “airs.”

When I went away to college in California in 1934 for two years, I thought I was shedding a complete form of life only to wake up a little later and discover the same face in the mirror. That's always so; I'm glad of that, now.

Yes, I could live in Iowa again and be fairly happy and quite productive in my writing. But I also love other areas of the country and feel very much at home in western Massachusetts, where I have now lived for over sixteen years. I have spent five years of my life in Europe and could spend more there, although I could never *stay*. And I have spent five-six years of my life living in places such as New York City, San Francisco, Chicago, Seattle, Vancouver, London, Oslo, and Rome, but I still think of myself as being rural and "small-town" in my basic orientation.

JG: What poets and writers (if any) have had an influence on your work? What books did you read as a boy and young man?

JL: As for influence, it is difficult to say. But I can easily say that I love Yeats, Keats, and Frost. Of course, I like Shakespeare—so obvious that one would almost forget to say so. I liked a lot of the midwestern poets of the thirties, once thought that terrific; Sandburg, Lindsay, Masters, Feril, Neihardt, Edwin Ford Piper, Fletcher, Ficke . . . strange how some of them have faded away. Have read a lot of Wordsworth. Enjoy [Wallace] Stevens a great deal. Loved ballads all my life. Also nursery rhymes, songs, lyrics for songs. I have been writing lyrics for songs myself lately. But the question of influence defeats me. I now think that the literary influences are so broad as to escape the specific. Maybe others can say as to that.

In response to a previous question I mentioned some of my reading. Maybe it would be useful to say that, though I could read rapidly, I prefer to read everything I love to read at a slow rate, preferably at the rate of the speaking voice. I "hear" almost everything I read at that rate as though it were said aloud. Perhaps reading a lot of poetry taught me that. Once fell in love with Hudson's *Green Mansions*. Don't dare to read

it again. And I have gone through huge love affairs with Joyce, Hemingway, Chekov, Welty, Faulkner, Djuna Banes, Melville, Sherwood Anderson, Mark Twain among many prose writers.

I once could say a poem from memory from every major poet in the English language, or almost so. I wanted the sound of them on my tongue. I have a lot of Yeats, Frost, and Keats in my head even now. Some Stevens. I admire some things in [William Carlos] Williams but find him almost impossible to memorize, whatever that means.

Perhaps I should add that I have spent some time studying music and art, and at the University of Wyoming I taught a year-long course in the history of world lit, music, and art for several years. Those remain very lively interests with me.

Read the *Des Moines Register* daily for years and years while growing up on the farm. Was madly devoted to a few sports teams (The Washington Senators baseball team ruined $\frac{2}{3}$ rd of all summer days.)

JG: *Did you find symbols and/or subjects for poems in your everyday (extraordinary) surroundings?*

JL: Of course. The whole of "The Sacrifice Poems" is about this. In fact, I still think of the high rolling hills and farming country of northeast Iowa as a kind of psychological landscape of my mind, yielding anything I am capable of thinking about and providing all the examples I would ever need. One might very well educate himself anywhere on earth and use his home locale for the symbolic and representative reference.

In my introduction to "The Sacrifice Poems" I give a series of alternate thematic titles for the poems there; Sacrifice of the Grey Wolf is my title for the Cold War; Sacrifice of a Hill of Ants mine for The Holocaust or The Atomic Bomb; Sacrifice of a Gunnysack of Cats is mine for The Necessary and Beneficial Perversions of Love; *etc. etc.* No writer has come to terms with himself until he can see the universal possibilities in what he locally knows or provincially commands. And I have added elsewhere, the past is your good luck; until that is understood, *no matter what that past is*, a writer lacks a true subject because he has no locale in which the subject can

knowingly happen. No good writer of fiction or poetry is such because he has had "so many interesting experiences." In fact, it just might be that the experiences take on interest because of a large and imaginative way of seeing them.

So I make no special claims for Iowa as a place except that I always thought of it as a good place, completely adequate for any good writer. I suppose that I will continue to find symbols out of my Iowa past as long as I am imaginatively active; I cannot imagine it otherwise.

JG: Fiction to speak of?

JL: No, not really. I did do a college anthology-textbook in short fiction with the fiction writer, James B. Hall. It was a good text based on different types and approaches, with critical introductions to each section. I enjoyed doing it. Then I have written a few short stories and have even had some nice encouragement from editors on them, but I don't really care about them. I write fiction only when I don't feel quite up to writing poetry. Whenever I get my best feelings and ideas I reserve them for poetry rather than fiction. All of which is to say that I am not a fiction writer. One is what he has the patience and love to be as his first choices. Second choices are for journeymen in the arts, and many are proficient at them. I don't happen to be. I am jealous about keeping the best of myself for poetry, remembering that all art is a second principle, life itself being the first. I have written a poem about art, and I call it "Second Principles." Art depends upon life; any life it seems will do if we look at the lives and backgrounds of artists we admire.

JG: How, if at all, did politics affect or shape your literary life? Religion?

JL: Politics, in the usual public sense, has had almost nothing to do with my career as a writer. I have always been obliquely concerned with public themes, but I have not been a crusader, as a writer, of particular causes. I like Robert Frost on that: politics deals with grievances, poetry with grief. I got involved with anti-Vietnam demonstrations, sit-ins, read-ins, etc. They had to happen and one had to, wanted to, do these things, but for me they are largely a literary wasteland. I felt sympathetic

to the Farmer's Union way back when. I have had a grandfather who served as a Minnesota legislator and a father and a brother who were Iowa legislators—all Republicans. I am a registered Democrat and have given my political love away to Adlai, Eugene, and George. I have a small book of poems (lying in type in Iowa City, I guess, still) called *Adlai Stevenson*, and I wrote a campaign song for George McGovern, and I arranged for Eugene McCarthy to come to the University of Massachusetts *to read his poems*; that kind of thing says something about my politics.

As for religion, that is another matter. The Norwegian Lutheran Church, to which I no longer belong, shaped a part of my thinking long before I began to shape much of it myself. One overthrows the theology and keeps a good deal of the character of the thing, as I imagine I have done. And I keep something of the manner of phrasing and habit of thinking, and I use part of the ethical and moral code of the institution, ingrained in the community, as a point of departure for a large number of ideas, symbols and metaphors, and even certain kinds of organization and progress in some of my poems. After all, a good part of the soundness of the religion is based in an almost Jungian legendary and mythic sense of the history of the race. The Christian story and the Pagan story often trot in the same harness, and the followers often share the same carriage though to some it is blasphemy or heresy to say so. Not to me. All I ever knew, in any deep and subtle way, of growing up in a natural farm in N.E. Iowa proclaims that deep relationship. I think I have put it into some of my poems; at least, I hope so.

JG: Although specific locale is not mentioned in the group of sacrifice poems, the experience and feelings they recall come out of the years of growing up on an Iowa farm. At what point in your life did you write this series?

JL: I wrote them from 1958 to 1963, and I added two new ones the summer of 1975. The events referred to, or the cluster of experiences which I consolidated into one so-called "event" actually happened from about 1923 to 1936; also one,

"Sacrifice of a Wild Rose," had its originating experience in 1921 and became a poem in 1975, over half a century later. God only knows what memory is up to all the time in between! I assume that it plays some tricks but that these are accommodated by the nature of whatever I am; in this way we remain true to ourselves even when we are false in our facts. I don't advocate this, but I allow for this and in the artist's way honor it.

JG: Why did you decide to leave the world of the farm?

JL: Well, I liked the farm. I even liked some of the work. I certainly loved the landscape and the seasons. But I was the fourth child and the third boy. Also I loved books, reading, writing, music, art; on the farm these were all 'extras' not to be tolerated during the working day. I either had to leave the farm or give those up; it was never stated that way, and I think that I probably never actually phrased it that way to myself, but that was the way it was *then*. Then I did well enough in school to make it in high school and largely work my way through college. Right after college came W.W. II, and after that the G.I. Bill and more graduate school and, behold, there I was, an assistant professor at the University of Wyoming. Of course, I was making choices all along, but at the moment it just seemed to happen that way, as though my career were an accident of time and place up to that time. I know that it was not, really, but I also know that when I meet a young person who has his life outlined from an early age and follows a plan for it I am astonished and think that he is living in another world. As he is. There was a time during the Depression when the goal was largely to make it from day to day and forget all long-range ambitions. Writing poetry, meanwhile, was just something I did, almost as though one never knew, then, that that was the long-range goal.

I think, now, that the farms are more hospitable to the fine arts. That's what I think. I have not really tried it out.

JG: Is a farmer's son more likely to discover truth in his world than say a businessman's son in his world of urban complexity?

JL: To such questions I would say a flat NO. And to the question reversed a flat NO! All worlds are enormously complex; it all depends upon what one sees of it. I know that since America is perhaps $\frac{3}{4}$ th urban now there are some who think that the urban scene is more pertinent to most readers, but that's the kind of thinking I deplore. The difference is *how* you think with whatever you think with. The individual is so much more stunning than the scene, and thoughts and feelings so much more complex than the manmade environment; any "localist" must trail way in the distance behind such acknowledgments, if that is his argument; likewise, any "localist," if he is perceptive and imaginative enough, has the world in his palm.

One contemporary poem says that American Poetry "must have a stomach that can digest rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems." Well, O.K., who wouldn't agree? But it's not even a very good list, and I suspect it is admired chiefly by people looking for "New Sociological directions in American Poetry." Put any good poem beside it, even another by the same author, and one wants to throw this one away. So much for relevance and contemporary "truth." It comes from anywhere where one has truly looked. The real truth is the ability to "look into the crater of the ant."

JG: *Nature's cycle of life-decline-death-rebirth is a theme in your poetry. In almost everyone's past there is an autumn of memory; your poem "Dry Grass" expresses loss, but also expresses hope, and faith in the cycle.*

At least I have death here
 Real in my human hand. It
 Is reassuring, being clean
 And common to my autumn wit
 And in my memory, green

Is the motivation behind the writing of many of your poems to recall, interpret the past?

In the poem, "Willows," affirmation of life is strongly felt. The last two stanzas place man squarely in the universal cycle.

When I am an old man and dying, almost lost
 On the northern slopes of death, a stiff reed
 Trembling from husk to seed,
 My flutes all cracked with frost,

I will translate myself into a brown
 Paradise of willow roots, a whole
 Country of mountain meadows for the soul
 Dreaming toward natural grace in a green town

JL: Well, the past is what we have. The present is a slippery thing, and the future is never here except as the past. Nevertheless, we live in a world which is swept by existentialist philosophies. There is a huge youth movement of self-realization. Some of my best friends are "into" this. I am sympathetic for a while. But in the long run such programs seem defeatist, indulgent and selfish. Of course, all poets, the very best of them, love the sensual moment and the thoughtless excess. So do I. But they need the underpinnings of a more enduring philosophy. My upbringing on the farm gave me a huge faith in the cyclic nature of things. Death does not defeat that; it is part of the positive force of it.

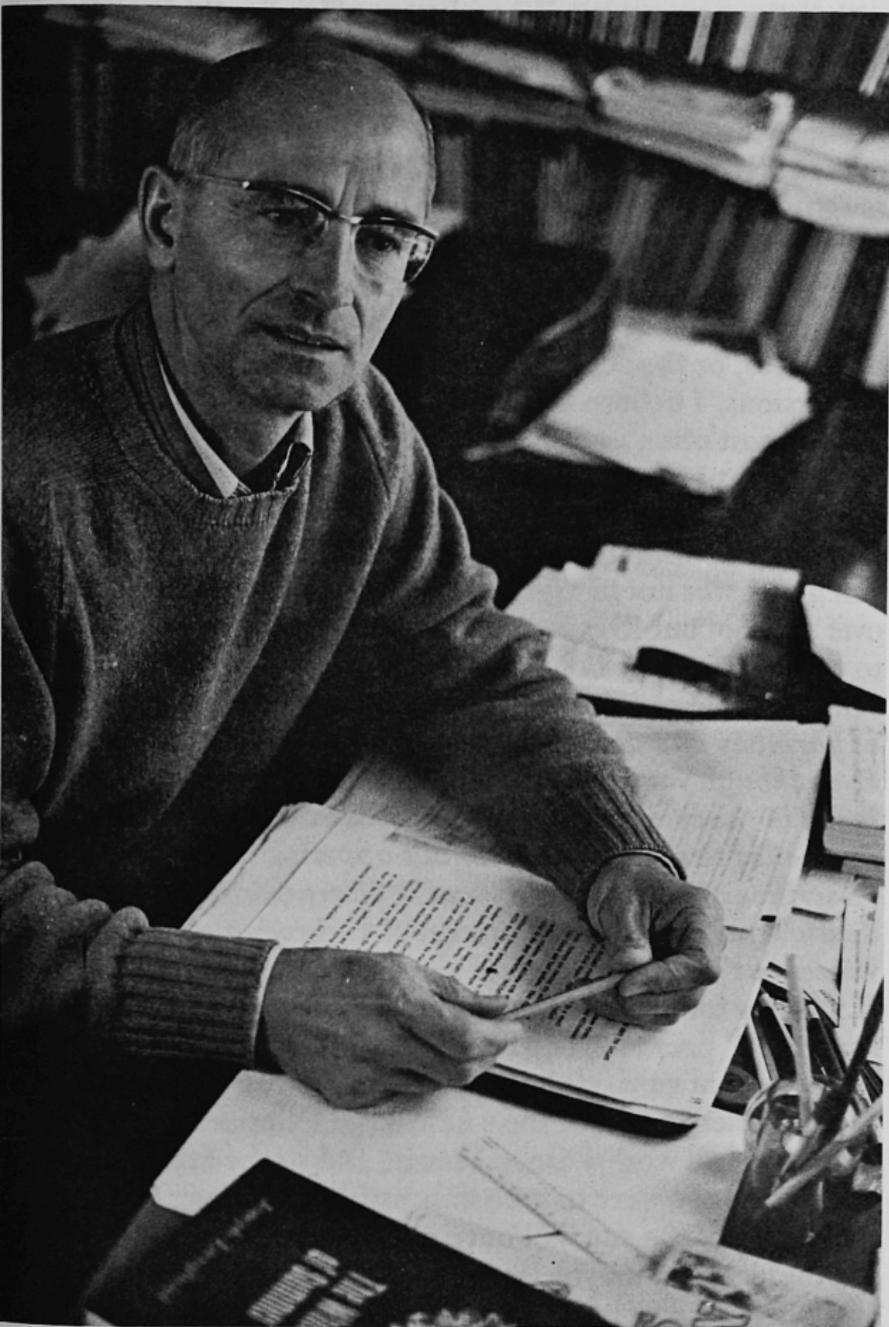
JG: *"The Wheel of Summer" is such a powerfully earthy and sensual poem. From the first line, the reader is driven irrevocably on (as fate drives the piglets to be castrated, fattened, and eventually slaughtered for our tables) by a pulsating rhythm, like heartbeats, to the concluding lines which celebrate the vibrancy of youth—"Calloused and cocked, wicked and wise and young,/We ran, three golden idols, back to chores,/Shouldered the wheel of summer, and journeyed on."* Taking control of one's destiny seems to be an underlying theme in this poem. Did your farm experiences instill a sense of security and a positive attitude toward the future? Did the national economic crises of the 1930s have any effect on your writing?

JL: I grew up with the notion that any moderately healthy and intelligent person could do a great deal to shape his own destiny. I believe that this notion was quite common among

many of the immigrants. Of course, some of them felt that this must happen over a period of time, that securing an education was one way to improve one's position in life, and that the present generation might have to slug it out for the sake of the next generation. My own father told me on his deathbed in 1955 that he had not realized his true capabilities (although he had been a banker-farmer-legislator and a highly respected man), that I might do a little better, but that we probably would not really have a distinguished person in our family until we got to one of our children, his grandchildren. Well, that was fairly typical of a habit of thought which was quite pervasive among first and second generation immigrants. Nevertheless, I believed that if I worked hard, studied hard, applied myself however I could, my whole life condition would greatly improve. I still hold something of that belief, in the arts as well as in life. The American Dream and the idea of Progress held some real validity in the whole community.

What the farm taught all of us was that if we worked hard we might finally have a moderately decent life. Expectations were not great but good. Even the years of the dust bowls and the Dakota crop failures and the Depression of the thirties did not kill off those expectations, although there were years when the only expectations for almost all of us were to meet the basic need of food, clothing, and shelter and little more. I myself taught in a rural school in Winneshiek County, Iowa, in 1936-37 for a full-year salary of \$440, and there were others, including my older sister Corrine, who taught two or three years earlier for considerably less. We were stoic; we accepted it; the lot was common; we shared it together.

Of course, that whole condition in the thirties had an effect on my writing, but not in the way one might immediately expect. I did not feel depressed. I did not condemn the government or the society. I did not feel crippled by it in body, mind, or soul, although I have known many who were. I did not read this as any prophecy of the enduring future. Instead, I think I learned, with millions of others, to be stoic, tough, hopeful, to endure and persevere, to work hard for extremely modest rewards, to survive optimistically



Photograph by Bunyan Webb

Joseph Langland at home in Amherst, Massachusetts

with little or no praise. When I went off to World War II I did not need much conditioning to take whatever I might have to take, or look at and face whatever came my way. In fact, particularly after the war was over, I felt that I had to retrain my sensitivity to get a little more aesthetic softness into that toughness.

But I think that any one who cares about this life should always be training his sensibility, always, and that there are ways of doing that which parallel, say, the physical training of an athlete, or the occupational conditioning for various professions. I believe in a kind of inspiration, but I think it comes most often to those who work at it.

Perhaps I was just young enough, just naive enough, just uneducated enough, in age and location to get through The Depression without being done in by it. It's hard to say, but I'm glad I was not in my twenties until that period was largely over. Part of our lives is a kind of luck. and the main thing is to use whatever luck one has. Yes.

JG: Out of the violence of the sacrifice poems comes a feeling of harmony and deep care about creatures, wild and domestic. Even though you have said elsewhere that you have a positive belief in the cyclic nature of life and death, are you totally reconciled to the human animal's appetite, as expressed in "Sacrifice of Three Wild Geese"? "Carnivorous, we fed on death/And kept our bodies warm/And rode the bitterest winter out" . . .

JL: Never totally. That regret must run through every "sacrifice" poem I ever wrote. I do not ever wish to flinch from or dodge that view; still, it is one which nature imposes upon us and which is part of the whole large balance with which the natural world works. Or so I see it, and so the farm taught me to see it. If one were to take impossibly long views I suppose the energy of the sun will burn out, maybe there will be another ice age, maybe, maybe, BUT in a shorter view, which is still a long view in the history of man, the ways in which the world regenerates itself are astonishing beyond belief. Meanwhile, our destiny is to look at it and imagine at least a

little of what it is. For me, that means a few poems which a few others might really care about and the wish never to suspend the activity of the verbal imagination, which must follow as a second principle upon the first one of life, itself. That is part of my higher appetite, and I am 'animal' too.

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Four Poems by Joseph Langland*

SACRIFICE OF THREE WILD GEESE

Three geese blew down the wintry air.
Some law condemned their cries
And did them in. I saw the snow
Drift on their bloodshot eyes.

Native to God, they whacked our stream
And flopped on solid ice,
Srying our blasted hills with errant
Instincts of advice.

All homing prophecies of spring
Were glazed with glassy spears;
Our granaries, at zero blue,
Were buttoned to their ears.

Three geese, shucks! The silly birds,
Who taught them to repeat
Unseasonable Indian-summer tales,
Our climate of deceit?

*The poems reprinted here are © Joseph Langland. "Genesis," "Willows," and "Dry Grass," first appeared in *The Green Town*. "Sacrifice of Three Wild Geese" first appeared in *The Wheel of Summer*.

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