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# Making Sense of Joe Gould's Secret

James Silas Rogers

*University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, jrogers@stthomas.edu*

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James Rogers

**Making Sense of *Joe Gould's Secret***

M. A. in English – University of St. Thomas, 1999

### The Enigma of *Joe Gould's Secret*

Several years ago, I wrote of *Joe Gould's Secret* that, "By itself, the story seems too slim to sustain a 150-page book."<sup>1</sup> Mitchell's decision to devote himself to chronicling Joe Gould struck me then as an odd choice of subject matter, and the enigmatic nature of Mitchell's last book appeared to reverse the direction of his growth as a writer.

In a sense, this paper is an exercise in undoing these first impressions. I hope to show a continuity of theme between *Joe Gould's Secret* and the works that preceded it, and in recognizing that theme, to suggest other readings of *Joe Gould's Secret* -- readings that I hope will help to explain why a man of such serious and far-ranging interests as Joseph Mitchell would devote himself, at the peak of his literary powers, to chronicling his relationship with a bizarre, hugely idiosyncratic street person whose only claim to recognition was fraudulent.

The time seems right for a reconsideration of *Joe Gould's Secret*. Vintage Books is about to release a paperback version of the book the cover of which bears a photograph of the legendary bohemian, as well as a sticker announcing "Soon to be a Major Motion Picture!" The film version, starring Ian Holm as Gould and director Stanley Tucci as Mitchell, is scheduled for release in May, 2000. Such publicity may well do for Joe Gould what the Robert Redford version of *A River Runs Through It* did for Norman McLean's book -- that is, turn a book with a devoted cult following into an acknowledged "classic." And I even dare to hope that Mitchell's sudden exposure will lead readers to revisit the milestones of literary journalism that he published prior to the 1965 *Joe Gould's Secret*. Those earlier books have secured Mitchell's reputation as both an

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<sup>1</sup> James Rogers and Norman Sims, "Joseph Mitchell," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 185: American Literary Journalists, 1945-1995*, ed. Arthur Kaul (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997), p. 208; hereafter referred to parenthetically, thus: (DLB 208).

inventor and an outstanding exemplar of literary journalism in the twentieth century. Lillian Ross, John Hersey, Mark Singer and many other have cited Mitchell as both a mentor and an inspiration; David Remnick said of him that "Writers knew well that Mitchell had beaten the New Journalism to the punch by several decades."<sup>2</sup>

A number of major collections of literary journalism open with a piece by Mitchell, such as Sims and Kramer's *Literary Journalism* and Talese and Lounsberry's *Creative Nonfiction: The Literature of Reality* (DLB 200), and a forthcoming 75th anniversary anthology of the best nonfiction from *The New Yorker* will also give a Mitchell article pride of place.<sup>3</sup>

If the film and the reissuing of the book do lead to greater interest in Joseph Mitchell's *oeuvre*, it will, in a sense, be an odd way by which to be introduced to the unquestioned masterpieces of literary journalism that preceded it. It was an open question, in my mind, whether *Joe Gould's Secret* might even be called a work of literary journalism. Mitchell's journalistic commitment to factual accuracy is evident throughout the book, and it chronicles both the milieu of *New Yorker* journalism and Greenwich Village life in the 30s, 40s and 50s; but it might as readily be shelved under "memoir" as journalism.<sup>4</sup>

*Joe Gould's Secret* -- by far the longest single piece that Mitchell wrote -- differs in several ways from the rest of Mitchell's published work. For one thing, Mitchell maintains a prominent first-person authorial presence throughout the book, something he

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<sup>2</sup> David Remnick, "Postscript: Joseph Mitchell: Three Generations of *New Yorker* Writers Remember the City's Incomparable Chronicler," *New Yorker*, June 10, 1996, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> Sheila McGrath in telephone interview with author, November 13, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> The discussions of *Joe Gould's Secret* that follow will, I think, make it clear that Mitchell's last book meets all of the criteria by which Norman Sims defines the genre of "literary journalism" in the introduction to his 1984 anthology *The Literary Journalists*. Sims see the genre as being distinguished by the following characteristics: research by immersion on the part of the author; an attentiveness to structure as an integral part of the reporting itself, which often means that chronology is under-emphasized; an unswerving commitment to factual accuracy; a distinctive authorial voice, which can be a subjective voice recording the events as experienced by the author; an engagement, on the part of the author, with his or her moral responsibilities to the subjects of the reporting; and a sensitivity to symbolism and to observing what Thomas Wolfe has called "status details," which are observable facts that disclose larger realities about their subjects. Norman Sims, *The Literary Journalists* (New York: Ballantine, 1984) pp. 3-25.

does in no other piece. Numerous writers credit Mitchell with having helped to create the genre of literary journalism, but this usually comes in recognition of his experiments in blending fact and fiction in *Old Mr. Flood*, his commitment to what Norman Sims calls "immersion" as a reportorial strategy, and his talents for characterization and dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

After 1950, though, Mitchell grew progressively more comfortable with writing in a subjective manner. In this way, *Joe Gould's Secret* also may have helped to open the door to one of the defining innovations of the New Journalism that blossomed in the 1960s, of which James Stull writes that "the testament of (an authorial) self is frequently discernible as the shaping presence behind the nonfiction text."<sup>6</sup> An authorial presence illuminates almost all of Mitchell's earlier nonfiction prose in the distinctiveness of his style. But in Mitchell's later work, the author's presence becomes a part of the story itself, exemplifying a tendency in contemporary nonfiction of which Stull writes, "The repudiation of traditional journalism forms and procedures means .... that some writers of creative nonfiction, past and present, not only privilege a participatory and/or observing self but also redefine their relationship to subject matter in often idiosyncratic or at least personal ways."<sup>7</sup>

Mitchell's work became increasingly autobiographical as time went on in part because Mitchell himself had grown steadily more concerned with questions of authorial selfhood. He told Norman Sims on one occasion that he had been working on an

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<sup>5</sup> Given the universal recognition of Mitchell's artistic gifts and of his part in creating literary journalism, it is striking that there is not more critical work devoted to his writings. One can read all the serious examinations of Mitchell ever written in a single afternoon. I believe there are two reasons for the paucity of criticism. One is simply that Mitchell's productive years were over when the New Journalism began to attract attention in the mid- to late 1960s, and such writers as Mailer, Wolfe, and Didion took center stage as literary journalists. The second reason is that Mitchell's innate conservatism has placed him out of step with the critical *zeitgeist* of the age; Mitchell's characters typically look back to better days behind, and there is a naiveté about some of Mitchell's early characters which contemporary critics reject. As anecdotal evidence, I note that I have personally heard several readers describe his characterizations of gypsies as racist – unfairly, I believe, but not surprisingly.

<sup>6</sup> James N. Stull, *Literary Selves: Autobiography and Contemporary American Nonfiction* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Stull, pp. 3-4. Stull uses the terms "creative nonfiction" and "literary journalism" interchangeably in this book, though many other writers keep them distinct.

autobiography after the publication of *Joe Gould's Secret*, and stated, "What I'm writing will explain it all. I'm going to try to explain this whole matter of personas and disappointments, interruptions, and the like" (*DLB*, 209). One of Joe Gould's more enigmatic remarks provides another suggestion that Mitchell was intrigued by the fluidity of the self, when he quotes the author of the Oral History as saying that he has delusions of grandeur because "I believe myself to be Joe Gould."<sup>8</sup> Mitchell reports that, after discovering the truth about the Oral History, he felt "a surge of genuine respect for Gould":

He had come to Greenwich Village and had found a mask for himself, and he had put it on and kept it on. The Eccentric Author of a Great, Mysterious, Unpublished Book -- that was his mask. And, hiding behind it, he had created a character a good deal more complicated, it seemed to me, than most of the characters created by the novelists and playwrights of his time (*UOH* 693).

The closing words of *Joe Gould's Secret* similarly hint that Mitchell was beginning to give further thought to the question of roles and constructed selves; when he is asked if he will help to search for the missing manuscripts he answers: "'Yes,' I said, continuing to play the role I had stepped into the afternoon I discovered that the Oral History did not exist -- a role that I am only now stepping out of" (*UOH* 716). It seems plausible that at least part of the reason Mitchell chose to write about Gould was that the Greenwich village poseur afforded an opportunity to think about, and write about, questions of how we make and present the self.

By far the most frequently offered explanation for Mitchell's interest in the story and the character of Joe Gould is that Mitchell saw in Gould a reflection -- albeit a sometimes distorted and negative image -- of his own career as an author. Such an interpretation is helpful and plausible, and I have advanced it myself in my earlier writings where I wrote that "Mitchell's involvement in the life of Joe Gould offers a cracked mirror in which to

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Mitchell, *Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) p. 660; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*UOH* 660). When *Joe Gould's Secret* appeared in two parts in *The New Yorker* on September 19 and 26, 1964, part one ended with this sentence.

consider his own life's work." (*DLB* 208). Stanley Edgar Hyman, who worked with Mitchell at *The New Yorker* puts it well:

In deeper terms, Gould is a masking (and finally an unmasking) for Mitchell himself.... By the end of the book, when he discovers Gould's secret, Mitchell becomes, not Gould's bearer or Gould's victim, but Gould himself, and the unwritten Oral History merges with Mitchell's own unwritten novel, a New York *Ulysses* (which Blooms magnificently even in four-page synopsis). Then we realize that Gould has been Mitchell all along, a misfit in a community of traditional occupations, statuses, and roles come to New York to express his special identity; finally we realize that Mitchell's work is precisely that Oral History of Our Time that Gould himself could not write.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Mitchell specifically invites the comparison; in the passages that follow his discovery that the Oral History did not exist, he notes the similarities he felt between himself and Gould. Mitchell made the comparison more explicit in an interview with Norman Sims:

"With all the people in New York City," I [Sims] asked, "why does Joe Gould become an interesting person to you?"

"Because he is me," Mitchell said. "God forgive me for my version of Flaubert's remark on Madame Bovary. I think all of us are divided up into lots of different aspects, you might say. To mix them up, you almost have to say, 'I am so-and-so,' just as I tried to do with Gould and all the different aspects of the people who had seen him."<sup>10</sup>

Readers who know more of Mitchell's career will recognize other parallels. For instance, both men displayed an innate taste for the eccentric and offbeat, an egalitarianism in their choice of subject matter, and an obsession with revision; Mitchell, after all, maintained an office at *The New Yorker* where he worked steadily for more than thirty years after publishing *Joe Gould's Secret* and declined to submit a single word of it

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<sup>9</sup> Stanley Edgar Hyman, "The Art of Joseph Mitchell," in *The Critic's Credentials* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), pp. 84-85.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Sims, "Joseph Mitchell and the *New Yorker* Nonfiction Writers" in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman Sims (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 98-99.

for publication in the magazine. For that matter, the coincidence of their identical first names may have added to Mitchell's sense of overlapping identities.

### Storytelling as an Encounter With Death

Roy Blount, who was acquainted with Mitchell, points out another way in which *Joe Gould's Secret* stands apart from Mitchell's work: it is the only piece in which the leading figure dies. Although I disagree with some of Blount's assumptions, he is right to identify mortality as central to understanding *Joe Gould's Secret*.<sup>11</sup> Death, of course, is Mitchell's great theme and the preoccupation of his mature prose.

In his introduction to *Up in The Old Hotel*, Mitchell points us precisely to the subject of death as the influence that underlies most of what he wrote. This 2,000-word introductory essay was the first --and to date, the only -- thing that Mitchell published after *Joe Gould's Secret*. In that introductory essay, Mitchell acknowledges that a sort of humor that he "can only call graveyard humor" pervades his stories; he adds that "graveyard humor is an exemplification of the way I look at the world. It typifies my cast of mind" (*UOH* x). He then recalls two specific influences on his "cast of mind." The storytelling tradition handed down through his family as a boy in the rural South, chiefly by his elderly aunts, provided the first influence; the sites that Mitchell describes as being most story-rich were the stories told in graveyards. The second influence that Mitchell records is the work of the Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada. Mitchell was introduced to this artist by Frida Kahlo. Posada's fantastic work showed an obsession with death. "[T]he majority of the engravings were of animated skeletons mimicking living human beings engaged in many kinds of human activities, mimicking them and mocking them..... I was astonished by these pictures, and what I found most astonishing about them was that all of them were humorous, even the most morbid of them, even the busted coffin on the streetcar tracks" (*UOH* xii-xiii). Death is an energetic presence in

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<sup>11</sup> Roy Blount Jr., "Joe Mitchell's Secret," (review of *Up in the Old Hotel*), *Atlantic*, August, 1992, pp. 97-99.



Posada's vision; a world in which human life persists even though it cannot, as it were, win the game it must play against Posada's grinning skeletons. Kahlo had thumbtacked these pictures throughout hotel suites because, Mitchell tells us, "She told me that she had put the pictures up herself so she could glance at them now and then and keep her sanity while living in New York City" (*UOH* xii).

Quoted in the process of introducing his life's work of chronicling New York, Kahlo's remark suggests that Mitchell was in many ways less than charmed with life in the city. It has become common for reviewers to refer to Mitchell's fascination with and affection for New York, but here he recognizes that the city can also drive people insane. A sense of the absurdity and terror of modern life may be closer to the surface of Mitchell's "cast of mind" than is immediately clear, as the dark conclusions of several stories written in the 1950s also suggest. Mitchell's admiration for Posada's ironic, even humorous vision of inescapable death mocking all human activity will be clear in an examination of the stories collected in *The Bottom of The Harbor*.

Because Roy Blount's review in *The Atlantic* is, I believe, the only commentary on *Joe Gould's Secret* that specifically connects Mitchell's last book to its author's attitude toward mortality, it is worth looking at closely. Blount suggests that Mitchell's encounter with Joe Gould caused a psychic change in Mitchell, and along with it, changed his attitude toward writing:

Gould appropriated Mitchell's office as his mailing address, came painfully close to letting down his mask with him, and made Mitchell feel guilt and disgust. Mitchell's tone in *Joe Gould's Secret* is marred by uncharacteristic self-consciousness and exasperation.

Everyone who got to know the smelly, shamelessly freeloading Gould eventually dismissed him as impossible. Mitchell put up with a lot more from him than anyone else did. I don't think it is being fanciful to suppose that Gould wore Mitchell out.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Blount, p. 98.

Blount goes on to note that, as Mitchell got to know Gould in all his pathetic and dysfunctional aspects, Gould deprived Mitchell of his capacity to align himself with the "independently cranky types" who brought their eccentric energies to his early reportage. "Professor Sea Gull," Blount claims, "...may have deconstructed Mitchell's sense of character." Moreover, Blount believes that Gould's death was uniquely disturbing.<sup>13</sup>

Blount may be speculating, but the chronological record shows a definite shift in Mitchell's productivity after he met Gould. Of the thirty-seven stories in *Up in the Old Hotel*, twenty-four were written before Mitchell met Gould. Mitchell had only one more byline in *The New Yorker* in 1942 after "Professor Sea Gull" appeared in January of that year, and wrote one profile in 1943.<sup>14</sup> After that his output slowed to what -- by the standards of journalism -- was a glacial pace. Nor can we dismiss the suggested cause-and-effect as *post hoc ergo propter hoc* logic; Mitchell clearly invested a great deal of significance in his experience of having been caught in Joe Gould's web. Why else would he return to the subject twenty-two years after the original *New Yorker* profile?

The structure of Mitchell's writing before *Joe Gould's Secret* provides a key to understanding its anomalous last chapters. *Joe Gould's Secret* represents an extension of

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<sup>13</sup> I find Blount's conjecture that Mitchell's encounter with Gould was a turning point in the former's life because Gould died to be an implausible stretch; Mitchell was a grown man when they met, and W.W.II was in full swing. Death could hardly have been a shock to Mitchell.

The fact that Gould's literary claim on immortality was spurious may indeed move his story out of the realm of the pathetic and into the nihilistic -- and as such, a disillusionment that began with the discovery of Gould's secret may lurk in the background of the naturalism found in such stories as "The Rats on the Waterfront," "The Bottom of the Harbor," and "Up in the Old Hotel." One has to invest an awful lot of impact in Gould's death to make that argument, though, and also to dismiss the fact that the greatest slaughter of the twentieth century was happening at the same time. Mitchell almost never mentioned the war in his journalism, but if one needs to identify a starting point for his naturalistic phase, it is hard to believe that the horrors of World War II were not a more immediate, and vastly more important, source of cynicism than Joe Gould's hapless lies.

It seems more likely to me that the encounter with Gould was transformative, not because of Gould's death some fifteen years later, but because of his deceit. Was Mitchell psychically shaken by having the rug pulled out from Gould's supposed literary immortality? Or was Mitchell's sense of himself as a reporter suddenly unsettled by the discovery that he had been taken in -- that he had advanced a lie in the pages of *The New Yorker*, a magazine with a legendary reputation for fact-checking? Is there a particular irony, and perhaps even a malevolence, in Gould's claim to understand and speak with sea gulls -- having "gulled" Mitchell and everyone else for forty years?

<sup>14</sup> Blount, p. 98.

the great theme of Mitchell's work, the presence of death in the midst of life --a *memento mori* that became his own personal duende. It is the final statement of an authorial intelligence that conceived of death itself as something that could be negotiated with the tools of a writer, narrative and story.

In the pages ahead, I will examine how Joseph Mitchell's literary career shows a steady, and progressively greater, concern with death. Mitchell's treatment of death and mortality involves an awareness of mortality as a sort of figure in the carpet which underlies the more immediate subject matter of his stories. As he matured, death enters his stories with increasing explicitness, and becomes the inevitable and distinctive endpoint of his writing. And at a broader, phenomenological level, writing itself implicitly brings readers into a consideration of death. It does so in two ways.

The first of these ways is familiar, and well expressed in Keats's line from *Endymion* -- which has by now become a proverb -- that "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." Art, including literary art, always holds out the prospect of immortality if it is found to endure beyond its own age. George Steiner writes in *Real Presences*,

[I]t is within the compass of the arts that the metaphor of resurrection is given the edge of felt conjecture. The central conceit of the artist is that his work shall outlast his own death .... It is the lucid intensity of its meeting with death that generates in aesthetic forms that statement of vitality, of life-presence, which distinguishes serious thought and feeling from the trivial and opportunistic.<sup>15</sup>

Steiner's observation that "the central conceit of the artist is that his work shall outlast his own death," is central to Gould's self-inflation. In "Professor Sea Gull" Gould boasts of his intellectual agelessness:

"A couple of generations after I'm dead and gone," he likes to say, "the Ph.D.'s will start lousing through my work. Just imagine their surprise. 'Why, I be damned,' they'll say, 'this fellow was the most brilliant historian of the century.' They'll give me my due. I don't claim that all of the Oral History is first class, but some of it will last as long as the English language" (*UOH* 57).

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<sup>15</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 141.

In *Joe Gould's Secret*, Gould shows his scant published work to Mitchell with great pride . He says of his two short essays in *The Dial*, "Everything else I've done may disappear, but I'll still be immortal because of them" (*UOH* 648). Mitchell, who in many ways showed something akin to reverence for the past and for tradition, clearly believed in the reality of literary immortality. It is worth noting that some nine months before *Joe Gould's Secret* was published in *The New Yorker*, Mitchell publicly spoke of the connection between literature and immortality as A. J. "Joe" Liebling's eulogist on December 30, 1963:

In other words, what I am getting at, Joe is dead but he really isn't. He is dead but he will live again. Every time anyone anywhere in all the years to come takes down one of his books and reads or rereads one of his wonderful stories, he will live again.<sup>16</sup>

A second, more subtle, yet deeper way in which an engagement with death is implicit in the very nature of narrative has been articulated by, among others, Walter Benjamin and Frank Kermode. These theorists note that we approach stories with the expectation that they will conclude -- Kermode writes, "We cannot, of course, be denied an end; it is one of the great charms of books that they have to end"<sup>17</sup> --- and that this expectation, in turn, foreshadows or replicates the knowledge that death is the universal end of human life. I believe that Mitchell, who was extremely well-read, found a model for such an understanding of writing in his reading of Herman Melville.

Mitchell often wrote with a particular consciousness of literary forbears. He specifically tells us that as a young writer he had in mind an attempt to do for New York what *Ulysses* had done for Dublin (*UOH* 690), and elsewhere he identifies his ambition to write about the Fulton Fish Market "in the same way Melville wrote about whaling in

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<sup>16</sup> Raymond Solokov, *Wayward Reporter: The Life of A. J. Liebling* (San Francisco: Creative Arts, 1980), p. 322.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 23

*Moby Dick*.<sup>18</sup> In an interview with Norman Sims, Mitchell described how he began to think in terms of literary archetype while writing "Mr. Hunter's Grave":

My whole idea of reporting -- particularly reporting on conversation -- is to talk to someone long enough under different circumstances, like old Mr. Hunter down on Staten Island. I was always trying to reach his whole life. I couldn't really write about anybody until they spoke what I consider "the revealing remark" or the revealing anecdote or the thing that touched them....

Mitchell continues to explain that, after listening to Mr. Hunter at length, "I think, my God, here's Lear. Here's Lear on Bloomingdale Road in Staten Island" (*DLB* 207).

Similarly, Joe Gould's story finds a thematic antecedent, if not necessarily a direct ancestor, in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener." It is probably impossible to know exactly what relationship Mitchell saw between his book and Melville's "Bartleby"; my inclination is to say that Mitchell saw himself not as reworking Bartleby's story, but as standing in a particular historical line of descent from Melville. I would suggest, too, that the relationship Mitchell felt would probably find an analog in the passing-on of stories in oral tradition -- which, as we will see, is a recurring theme in Mitchell's writing. We *do* know that the author specifically made a link between Gould and Bartleby. On the dust jacket flap of *Joe Gould's Secret*, Mitchell wrote:

When I found out about Gould's secret ... I was appalled, but I soon regained my respect for him, and through the years my respect has grown, though I must confess that he is still an enigma to me. Nowadays, in fact, when his name comes into my mind it is followed instantly by another name -- the name of Bartleby the Scrivener -- and then I invariably recall Bartleby's haunting, horrifyingly self-sufficient remark "I would prefer not to."<sup>19</sup>

In both in the broad outlines of the story and in the implicit consideration of writing -- and especially *not* writing -- that Bartleby provides, Melville's story help us to understand

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<sup>18</sup> Sims, *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Mark Singer, "Joe Mitchell's Secret: The Eloquence of a Great Writer's Silence" *New Yorker*, February 22 - March 1, 1999, p. 150. I do not have access to the edition with its dust-jacket, but Singer points out that these remarks were definitely written by Mitchell himself.

Mitchell's attempt in *Joe Gould's Secret*. This is not to say that the two stories even approach a one-to-one correspondence; they differ in dozens of particulars. It is to suggest, though, that Mitchell consciously bore *Bartleby* in mind as he attempted to make sense of Gould; that the latter book is, in a sense, written "under the aspect" of *Bartleby*. In *Joe Gould's Secret*, Mitchell refracted Gould's story, and his own, through the lens of Melville's tale.

Some parallels appear obvious. Both stories are narrated in the first person by an unnamed New Yorker who traffics in words for his living; both protagonists actually live very near to one another -- *Bartleby* on Wall Street and Gould in Greenwich Village, just below it. In both cases the narrator is involuntarily saddled with an enigmatic non-writer. In both stories, the narrator devotes a great deal of energy to finding a way out of the relationship. There is a scene in both stories where the narrators ought to, by all rights, be angry with their albatross-like *Bartleby* or Gould but finds himself unable to evince anger. *Bartleby* makes his home in the lawyer's office; Gould makes free with Mitchell's office as well, treating it as a mailing address. Both *Bartleby* and Gould die in institutions, *Bartleby* in the city jail known as The Tombs and Gould in Pilgrim State Hospital. The closing words of Melville's story, "Ah, *Bartleby*! Ah, humanity!" are unmistakably echoed in Mitchell's words when he last sees the notebooks containing Gould's Oral History: "'God pity him,' I said, 'and pity us all'" (*UOH* 707).

For purposes of this discussion, the most significant bridge between the two works appears in the epilogue to "*Bartleby*," when the narrator discovers that the enigmatic copyist had formerly worked in the Dead Letter Office at Washington. "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?" writes Melville's narrator. He then imagines the scene in which cartloads of correspondence were prepared for burning; regardless of how vital and merciful the letters may have been in intent, they failed to reach their intended

audience: "On errands of life, these letters speed to death."<sup>20</sup> Melville's narrator suggests that a lesson absorbed in the dead letter office lies behind Bartleby's choice not to write. There, the scrivener came to understand that the very act of writing inevitably entails an encounter with mortality. This somber vision of authorship implied at the conclusion of Melville's 1853 story also informs -- perhaps at a subconscious level -- the writings of Joseph Mitchell.

George Steiner, in the passage quoted above, also observes that narratives inevitably evoke a sense of death, and that this quality inheres in the nature of narrative itself:

Hence the immemorial logic of the relations between music, poetry and art on the one hand and the affront of death on the other. ... It is the facticity of death, a facticity wholly resistant to reason, to metaphor, to revelatory representation which makes us 'guest-workers', *frontaliers*, in the boarding houses of life. Where it engages, uncompromisingly, the issues of our condition, poetics seeks to elucidate the incommunicado of our meetings with death (in their terminal structure, narrations are rehearsals for death). However inspired, no poem, no painting, no musical piece .... can make us at home with death, let alone "weep it from its purpose."<sup>21</sup>

Steiner's insight that "in their terminal structure, narrations are rehearsals for death" links *Joe Gould's Secret* to the books and stories that precede it. The very act of writing and setting out a story, implies that there will be an ending; and every ending, in turn, evokes death.<sup>22</sup> Frank Kermode also articulates the connection between narrative and death in *The Sense of an Ending*:

Men, like poets, rush 'into the midst,' *in media res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine

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<sup>20</sup> Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" in *Great Short Works of Herman Melville*, ed. Warner Barthoff (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p.74.

<sup>21</sup> Steiner, pp. 140-41.

<sup>22</sup> George Core argues that the "distinctive contribution" of *New Yorker* writers Mitchell, James Thurber, E. B. White, and A. J. Liebling has been to move "the familiar essay toward fiction," and reminds us that Mitchell specifically "has always called his essays *stories* -- not reports or essays or memoirs or something else -- *stories*." Emphasis in original. George Core "Stretching the Limits of the Essay," in *Essays on the Essay*, ed. Alexander Butrym (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 208.

will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure for their own deaths.<sup>23</sup>

The theorist who has best formulated the connection between narrative and mortality is Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Storyteller." Benjamin's comments may be applied usefully to *Joe Gould's Secret*:

...the reader of a novel actually does look for human beings from whom he derives the "meaning of life." Therefore he must, no matter what, know in advance that he will share their experience of death; if need be their figurative death -- the end of the novel --but preferably their actual one. How do the characters make him understand that death is already waiting for them -- a very definite death at a very definite place? That is the question which feeds the reader's consuming interest in the events of the novel.

The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.<sup>24</sup>

But in Gould's case, there is, and could never be, an end to the book; even before he had discovered the truth about the Oral History, Mitchell described the book as "huge and formless and shapeless" (*UOH* 680). A shapeless book is one that has no organization, and in this case, perhaps also one that never will conclude.

Samuel Weber has used Walter Benjamin's theories of narrative in a discussion of *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>25</sup> Responding to Benjamin's assertion that "There is no story for which the question, 'What happened then?', would lose its legitimacy," Weber writes,

Perhaps that is precisely the ultimate fascination of "plot": a world that has no end.... [Benjamin]... contrasts the teller of tales with the novelist, understood as the distinctively modern figure of narrative.... For the storyteller and his listeners there is no absolute end; the plot can always be extended, because the finitude of

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<sup>23</sup> Kermode, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> In the 1942 profile of Gould, Mitchell specifically mentions Sterne's book by observing that "The Oral History is almost as discursive as 'Tristram Sandy.'" (*UOH* 59) At that point he believes the Oral History to be a real book. When he finally does read the notebooks that contain Gould's endless reworkings of the death of his father they resemble nothing so much as Tristram's endless attempt to record all the details of his life.



individuals is imbedded in a larger whole: that of a community which in turn is part of an even more comprehensive whole.<sup>26</sup>

"For the storyteller and his listeners there is no absolute end "; nor for Joe Gould, who clung to an alcoholic fantasy that he was charged with a commission to record the whole of modern times. Gould reported that he was adding to the Oral History on a daily basis, a mountain of words that kept growing and growing. A project such as Gould's could never be "contained," as Weber puts it, because it took as its subject nothing less than the whole of civilization: every word ever spoken was putatively a potential addition to Gould's colossal work-in-progress -- and every word ever spoken could stave off death just that much longer.

#### Joseph Mitchell's Teleology

Joe Gould, the bohemian, managed to sidestep the question of how to end the story by the simple expedient of never getting further than the beginning -- if it indeed it was a beginning. Joseph Mitchell, the journalist, had no such luxury: he wrote for publication and therefore needed to bring his stories to a close.

Mitchell's care as a writer was legendary. In compiling the several books that make up *Up in the Old Hotel*, he left nothing to chance in the arrangement of the stories. In both *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* and *The Bottom of the Harbor*, Mitchell presented his stories out of chronological sequence. He did so for particular authorial reasons, which I believe stemmed from his wish to make a coherent *gestalt* of his life's work. In the next section of this paper, I will survey Mitchell's writing with special attention to the manner in which he ends stories. A consistent thematic pattern emerges throughout *Up in the Old Hotel*, a pattern that moves the reader toward a conclusion that reflects on death.

Three themes in particular, recur, any of which could sustain an article-length survey. We might call the first of these the Appointment-in-Samarra syndrome: the idea that, regardless of where we begin the story, or how far afield a story may take us, we will

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<sup>26</sup> Samuel Weber, "Reading -- 'To the Very End of the World.'" *MLN* 111, 5 (December, 1996), 819-34.

need to reckon with death at the end of the day. Stories that start out hunting for wildflowers or gazing at the Hudson River end with a reckoning of death. This becomes the pervasive theme and organizing principle of *The Bottom of the Harbor* but it is also suggested in Mitchell's other, and earlier, books.

The second such theme is Mitchell's skepticism about the writing itself, and in particular, about journalism. The opening essay of his first book, a collection of articles written while he was still on the staff of New York newspapers, makes clear that Mitchell intends his work to be read as a critique of conventional journalism. The opening sentence of the book explicitly introduces his misgivings about the profession of writer: "Except for a period in 1931 when I got sick of the whole business and went to sea.... I have been for the last eight years a reporter on newspapers in New York City."<sup>27</sup> In other words, at the age of twenty-three or twenty-four, Mitchell was uncertain about the merits of journalism. More important -- for this appears to be a clear foreshadowing of both *Joe Gould's Secret* and his own decades-long period of nonpublication following its appearance in print -- Mitchell introduces, as a possible response to such doubts, the abdication of the writer. Mitchell's misgivings about writing stem, at least partially, from his profound sense of the ephemerality of writing. Again and again, as we survey his collected work, we find Mitchell expressing a conviction that written record will not endure.

The third prominent theme disclosed in this analysis provides a counterpoint to such skepticism; it is Mitchell's sense of the privileged place of the spoken language, particularly when weighed against the written word. Mitchell has a distinctly oral sense of history, and often suggests that immortality in language can be attained, not with a book, but by having one's story and one's words enter into oral tradition. In the opening essay of *My Ears Are Bent* -- and notice that the title itself directs us to orality rather than

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph Mitchell, *My Ears Are Bent* (New York: Sheridan House, 1938), p.11; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (MEB 11).

to written words-- he makes clear the distinction between the vitality of speech and the lifelessness of journalism:

The best talk is artless, the talk of people trying to reassure or comfort themselves, women in the sun, grouped around baby carriages, talking about their weeks in the hospital or the way meat has gone up, or men in saloons, talking to combat the loneliness everyone feels. The talk when you interview someone for a newspaper is usually premeditated and usually artificial. (*MEB* 19-20).

These lines might well provide a charter for Joe Gould's mighty, albeit mythical, *Oral History of Our Times*.

*McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*

As a young writer, the colorful and the offbeat preoccupied Mitchell. Such inclinations dominate the pages of his first two books. The newspaper features collected in *My Ears are Bent*, for all their humanity and freshness, are for the most part curiosities. The glibness of some of Mitchell's newspaper writing jars a reader familiar with the style he perfected at *The New Yorker*, where he was allowed weeks, even months, to research and write a story. His second collection, *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* (1943), contains three sections, the first comprising his early *New Yorker* reportage and the other two sections presenting seven works of short fiction. Only the nonfiction will concern us here; Mitchell's strength was his journalism, and his undistinguished fiction falls well short of his literature of fact.

The author of *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* was still a young man. He was more drawn to the eccentrics he met in New York City, to the various subcultures that thrived there, and to the odd and unexpected, than he was to the reflective, slow-moving subjects of his later work. Even so, a concern with aging and the inevitable decline of youth is present in his early work. He opens *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* with "The Old House at Home," a warmly evocative 1940 account of an old New York tavern populated by "a rapidly thinning group of crusty old men" (*UOH* 3), whom we see at the end of the story, "insulated with ale against the dreadful loneliness of the old and alone" (*UOH* 22). As we

will see, in this respect "The Old House at Home" sets the tone for mature stories -- and by this I mean the pieces that appeared in the *New Yorker* from 1950 forward, each of which inexorably moves the reader toward a meditation on death.

By no means all of the stories gathered in Mitchell's first collection of *New Yorker* pieces raise considerations of mortality; most profile comic and flamboyant characters and subcultures found in New York and environs. Of the eccentrics profiled in the pieces that follow, none is more outlandish than the subject of a 1942 profile, Joe Gould, which appeared under the title "Professor Sea Gull." In this piece, Mitchell keeps himself out of the story entirely, but Gould's self-portrayal in the earlier story is much like the one we meet in the book on Gould twenty-three years later. "Professor Sea Gull" falls into the classic *New Yorker* mode of reporting on the highly unusual in an ostensibly detached and factual manner. But the book, unlike this early story, offers a more complex and developed figure. In "Professor Sea Gull" we learn nothing of Gould's unhappy childhood and feelings of exclusion that appear in the later book; this is Gould without pathos, Gould in his public, performative mode only. Significantly, neither the reporter nor anyone else in the story indicate even a hint of suspicion about the Oral History. He and his mighty book are simply part of the vibrant, improbable urban milieu that is New York.

*McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*-- or rather, the collected nonfiction that forms the first portion of the book -- ends with a piece that Mitchell published in 1939, "As Good as Monkey Glands." Unusual because it is one of only a handful of Mitchell articles not directly concerned with New York City, "Monkey Glands" is still about the out-of-the-ordinary; it reports on the workings of a terrapin farm near Savannah, Georgia. The title refers to the then-current quackery that advocated the use of primate sexual glands by aging men in order to stave off aging and to restore sexual vitality. This is specifically alluded to in the last paragraphs of the story; the nonfiction pieces in *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* conclude with this exchange:

I told Mr. Freund that Mr. Barbee professed to believe that the consumption of terrapin meat is better than monkey glands for regaining youthfulness.

"Seriously," I said, "do you think there's anything to it?"

"I've been around terrapin for years and years, and I eat the meat myself, and I've talked the matter over with dozens of old Chinese fellows," Mr. Freund said, "and I wouldn't be the least bit surprised" (*UOH* 324).

Mitchell has thus collected the nonfiction pieces in *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* in such a way that the book is bracketed by a concern with death and aging. The book opens, in the "The Old House at Home," with a portrait of old men about to encounter the ravages of old age; it ends by introducing -- albeit a bit skeptically -- the prospect of a youth elixir.

### *Old Mr. Flood*

Mitchell selected the order of stories in *McSorley's* so that they would end with a reference to rejuvenation. As far as I know, no one has yet remarked on how elegantly this topic segues into his next book, which opens by picking up exactly the same theme. The concern with mortality and the body's decline that was only an occasional motif in the earlier work becomes a preoccupation in the 1948 *Old Mr. Flood*. The book is structured around a fictionalized composite character, the then 93-year-old Hugh G. Flood, of whom Mitchell says, "Many aged people reconcile themselves to the certainty of death and become tranquil; Mr. Flood is unreconcilable" (*UOH* 375). When a septuagenarian neighbor tells Flood that he feels he is "not long for this world," the old man snorts back "Well, by God, I am ... I just got started" (*UOH* 378).

As reportage, the stories of "Fish-eating, whiskey, death, and rebirth" (*UOH* 373) in *Old Mr. Flood* provided Mitchell with a means of presenting the folkways of New York's Fulton Fish Market. As a window into the preoccupations of the author, the three stories in the book betray a markedly increased concern with death. Mitchell's hero seems to conceive of longevity as a dietary matter. Flood advocates uncorrupted, natural foods and strenuously objects to modern tampering with nutrition: he praises a woman who "bakes

the way her great-great-granddaddy baked" (*UOH* 397) and denounces fruits and vegetables that "have been improved until they're downright poisonous" (*UOH* 377). Seafood forms the core of his diet theories: "'Fish,' he says, 'is the only grub left that the scientists haven't been able to get their hands on and improve'" (*UOH* 377).<sup>28</sup> He calls himself a "seafoodetarian":

To Mr. Flood, the flesh of finfish and shellfish is not only good to eat, it is an elixir. "When I get through tearing a lobster apart, or one of those tender West coast octopuses," he says, "I feel like I had a drink from the fountain of youth" (*UOH* 376).

Although a number of critics have asserted that the name of Mitchell's composite character, Hugh G. Flood, was an allusion to Edward Arlington Robinson's poem "Mr. Flood's Party," similarly about an aged man's defiance of time and fate, Mitchell himself professed to have been completely unaware of the Robinson poem and ascribed the similarity to mere coincidence.<sup>29</sup> But Flood's name unquestionably suggests the phrase "Huge Flood," presumably a reference to the story of Noah -- likewise, a tale of death and rebirth, as the book's introduction describes *Old Mr. Flood*.

Each of the three stories of this book concludes with what, at first glance, may strike readers as an irrelevant joke or anecdote -- a technique that may make more sense if we bear in mind Mitchell's insistent privileging of orality. The title story, "Old Mr. Flood" ends enigmatically, with a story of three "Brooklyn boys" who eat too many oysters and undergo a miraculous surge of energy, which the old man proudly calls an "oyster fit." The connection between oysters and male sexuality is unmistakable; in the next story, Mr. Flood recounts a shaggy-dog story about a race horse being fed oysters to impart a jolt of energy. The second story, "The Black Clams" also ends with an anecdote -- in this case, a long and improbable vaudeville joke that likewise refers, at least indirectly, to

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<sup>28</sup> Perhaps we should remember here the comment of the sculptor Suskind, who sometimes stored Gould's notebooks, on Gould's endless revisions: "Jesus, Joe!" I said. "You certainly improved that one. You improved it right out of existence" (*UOH* 664).

<sup>29</sup> Telephone conversation with Sheila McGrath, December, 1999.

unchecked sexuality by introducing a story about a traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter.

The third and final story of *Old Mr. Flood*, is "The Black Clams," which takes place at the old man's 95th birthday party. References to morbidity abound in this story. A hypochondriac retired policeman named Cusack ticks off a litany of his ailments, and in doing so sets a pattern that Mitchell will follow in his next two books. In the next-to-last page of *The Bottom of the Harbor*, Mr. Hewitt similarly lists his many operations and accelerating physical complaints (*UOH* 618), and, four pages from the end of *Joe Gould's Secret*, an attending psychiatrist from Bellevue Hospital catalogs Joe Gould's "staggering number of minor ailments, one right after another" (*UOH* 712).

Elsewhere in the story, Mr. Flood sings an old song called "Down Among the Dead Men," and one of the guests, an embalmer, speaks at length about his profession. At the close of the story and the book, the old men are gathered around talking about old times and denigrating the effete-ness of the modern world when their talk turns to the topic of the influence of the moon on human behavior. Mr. Cusack tells a story of two "full-mooners" who drive a stolen hearse around Manhattan, stealing bundles of newsstands from the street corners in order to throw them in the harbor. The final anecdote is interrupted when one of the guests, the trade embalmer, is summoned to attend to a dead body somewhere; after which Cusack jocularly dismisses the incident with the stolen hearse as the inevitable influence of a full moon.

It would be easy to imagine Posada illustrating this scene. Beneath this dreamlike anecdote lurks a meditation on the vanity of human effort, and of journalism in particular: under a full moon, the news is gathered into a hearse and discarded in the sea -- to be swept away by the tides, also created by the pull of the moon. An echo of "Dover Beach" appears here, in the ultimate indifference of the sea, and it would be well to bear this passage in mind when we consider Mitchell's subsequent indulgent attitude toward

Gould's non-writing: in the big picture, he seems to suggest here, those who write make no more lasting contribution than those who do not.

And still, Mr. Flood's unreconcilable attitude toward death announced at the start of the book persists at the end. Mitchell's account of the nonagenarian's party has old Mr. Flood hoisting his glass in the company of friends, and he confidently anticipates another twenty years of vigorous life. And the overlap between Mitchell and his invented character Hugh G. Flood is underscored when we note that Mitchell ceased to publish after *Joe Gould's Secret* appeared in 1965, twenty years after this story -- and that the fictional Mr. Flood's ninety-fifth birthday was July 27, 1945 (*UOH* 411) -- which, in the real world, was also the thirty-seventh birthday of Joseph Mitchell.

### *The Bottom of the Harbor*

The ultimate destination of the discarded news bundles at the close of *Old Mr. Flood* provides the title of Mitchell's next book, *The Bottom of the Harbor*. Mitchell's decision to collect the six stories of *Bottom of the Harbor* in an order different from their chronology continues the trajectory of his work toward a consideration of last things. A survey of the endings of the six stories in *The Bottom of the Harbor* finds that in all cases Mitchell ends his stories by reminding his readers of death. Looking at these stories in the order in which they were written discloses a steady growth in the author's preoccupation with mortality and the decline of the body.

The earliest story in *The Bottom of the Harbor* is "The Rats on the Waterfront," written in 1944. "Rats" is somewhat anomalous in Mitchell *oeuvre* -- for one thing, it presents no strongly drawn human characters, and Noel Perrin is fair when he says it is "the only one [in the collection] some lesser person might have written ..... [it] is merely brilliant reporting."<sup>30</sup> And yet even this irregular piece concludes with an anecdote about a ship called the *Wyoming* that had docked in New York harbor while infested with rats carrying

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<sup>30</sup> Noel Perrin, "A Kind of Writing for Which No Name Exists," in *A Reader's Delight* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1988), p. 21.



the bubonic plague -- the Black Death. Although the story concludes that "the city was safe" (*UOH* 503), the reader feels anything but reassured. References to treachery, bribery, and panic fill the closing pages, and the exterminators' frequent mention of fumigation evokes memories of poison gas in W.W.I and, perhaps, of the rumored extermination of European Jews.<sup>31</sup>

In the 1947 "Dragger Captain," Mitchell profiles Capt. Ellery Thompson of Stonington, Connecticut, a sort of waterfront rustic genius. The story celebrates Thompson's many talents and the innate dignity of his independent life, and is in some ways the most conventional of the book's six stories. "Dragger Captain" nonetheless alludes to death at many points, among them a discussion of human bones being dragged in along with the fish (*UOH* 540). A remarkable instance of Mitchell's "graveyard humor" occurs in a digressive story about a health columnist who, despite his endless prescription of cheerfulness, had cut his own throat. Throughout "Dragger Captain" the vibrancy of life on board ship plays off against the nearness of danger and death at sea. In the closing pages, Mitchell employs a favored technique and ends the story with an anecdote or a joke. The sailors of Capt. Ellery's crew swap stories about the inhabitants of Block Island, who are famous for preying on the victims of shipwrecks. "Dragger Captain" ends with an apocryphal story of a sailor washing up on Block Island only to be clubbed on the head by his own mother, " 'A son's a son,' she said, 'but a wrack's a wrack'" (*UOH* 573).

The title story of the collection, the 1951 "The Bottom of the Harbor" is in some ways closer to the "Rats" story than to the other stories in the book. For most of the piece, it presents an account of New York harbor's history since the days of Dutch settlement. It presents a fair amount of natural history -- in this case, in an examination of what lies

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<sup>31</sup> "Rats" may well gain in depth if we consider that it was written during World War II, and that Mitchell's closest friend, A. J. Liebling, was a Jew who had covered the war in Europe; it may be that Mitchell's "brilliant reporting" was also a means of writing about his intuition that something horrible had been let loose in the world through Nazism and modern warfare.

under the waters of New York harbor. Most of the story also shares with "Rats" the quality of not being about individuals or even directly about human communities, but rather a chronicle of the animal world. And, as in "Rats," readers cannot help but be uneasy about the future as Mitchell describes the decline of the New York fisheries due to the pollution and bacterial contamination of the waters.<sup>32</sup>

Mitchell makes a graceful transition from natural history into reportage in the closing pages of "Bottom of the Harbor," as he accompanies Andrew Zimmer, the state Shellfish Protector, who inspects the oyster beds and fishing vessels in the harbor. The closing pages of "Bottom of the Harbor" also signal a new development in Mitchell's mature work, the reintroduction of a first person, and increasingly autobiographical, voice. There is no first person narration in the 1947 "Rats" or the 1947 "Dragger Captain" (nor in "The Mohawks in High Steel," which appeared in 1949); Mitchell waits until the final section of "Bottom" to introduce himself into the prose, with the quiet line, "Mr. Zimmer is a friend of mine, and I sometimes go out on patrols with him" (*UOH* 483). From that moment, the author's own presence -- always understated, never intrusive -- becomes an integral part of Mitchell's narrative strategy. The three remaining stories in *The Bottom of The Harbor* open with distinctly personal statements by the author about his work habits or his frame of mind.

Zimmer and Mitchell meet a harbor captain named Roy Poole with whom, over bowls of oyster stew, Zimmer compares notes on the condition of the waters. Poole reports a troubling dream he has just had in which the harbor has been drained dry, like a bathtub, and he has been wandering around the mud, seaweed, skeletons, and "wormy old wrecks" of the harbor floor. The conversation drifts to various other topics about the

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<sup>32</sup> Ben Yagoda has praised the strength of Mitchell's environmental consciousness in this essay, pointing out that it appeared in *The New Yorker* a full eleven years before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Ben Yagoda, "Exploring the Bottom of the Harbor: Joseph Mitchell and the Nature of New York" (paper presented at the second biennial meeting of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, Missoula, Mont., July 17-19, 1997).

harbor -- where it is deepest, where it is shallowest -- and Poole mentions the Potter's Field area of the harbor, where drowned bodies wash up.

The bleakest lines Mitchell ever wrote appear in the closing paragraphs of "The Bottom of the Harbor." When Zimmer tries to argue that new anti-pollution measure might be making the harbor cleaner, Poole scoffs: "I've read that ..... and I've heard that. Only I don't believe it" (*UOH* 487). Zimmer presses him:

"Seriously, Roy," said Mr. Zimmer, "don't you think the water's getting cleaner?"

"Of course it isn't," said Mr. Poole. "It's getting worse and worse. *Everything* is getting worse *everywhere*.....My only hope, I hope they don't pollute the harbor with something a million times worse than pollution."

"Let's don't get on that subject," said Mr. Zimmer.

"Sometimes I'm walking along the street," continued Mr. Poole, "and I wonder why the people don't just stand still and throw their heads back and howl."

"Why?" asked Mr. Zimmer.

"I'll tell you why," said Mr. Poole. "On account of the God-damned craziness of everything" (*UOH* 488).

The story ends with Poole excusing himself from the lunch counter with the parting words, "Take care. Take care. Take care" (*UOH* 488). We might well take care in the face of such an apocalyptic view of the future. Poole's phrase, the "God-damned craziness of everything," may faithfully record the dialogue but it also hints that the man-made blight on the waters may incur divine retribution; this is Old Mr. Flood's diet theory writ large, a reminder that we try to improve on nature at our own peril. What seems clear, as *The Bottom of the Harbor* progresses, is that in his maturity Mitchell came to accept a paradox of human mortality; death is a part of nature, but so, too, is the impulse to resist death that lies behind the doomed quests for rejuvenation.<sup>33</sup>

A year after "Harbor," Mitchell published the story that he chose as the title piece for his omnibus collection of *New Yorker* writings, "Up in the Old Hotel." In this and in the two pieces that followed it, Mitchell consciously moves the narrative into an explicitly

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<sup>33</sup> In this context it may be relevant that Joe Gould's first love was the study of eugenics, a science that assumed the perfectibility of the human species. The hubris behind any such endeavor would, I imagine, horrify Mitchell.

eschatological realm. The story evokes *Moby-Dick* in its opening lines; the same lines also sound a distinctive *New Yorker* note in their blend of seriousness and incongruity: "Every now and then, seeking to rid my mind of thoughts of death and doom, I get up early and go down to Fulton Fish Market" (*UOH* 439). Despite this half-somber beginning, Mitchell's authorial presence is, for most of the story, a matter of being an observer. "Up in the Old Hotel" is about an Italian-American restaurant keeper, Louis Morino, and the business that he operates in the bottom floor of an old hotel under the name Sloppy Louie's. The upper floors of the building have been sealed off for years; they can be reached only by means of a peculiar hand-operated elevator that may or may not be safe. Louie says of the elevator, "To tell you the truth, I just don't want to get in that cage by myself. I got a feeling about it, and that's the fact of the matter. It makes me uneasy -- all closed in, and all that furry dust. It makes me think of a coffin, the inside of a coffin." (*UOH* 449). Louie, who is an amateur historian of the building, has fanciful ideas about what the upper floors might hold; based largely on stories that he has gathered about the building in its earlier days, Louie hopes that the closed-off floors might contain documents that will seal his connection to old New York.

Mitchell and Louie impulsively decide to explore the upper floors, an experience that proves disappointing and unsettling for Louie. The reality of what actually exists in the hotel floors above Louie's restaurant utterly lacks the romance of the past he has imagined for the building; he finds no written records that will confirm his sense of connection the past, but finds instead that the upper floors contain only meaningless detritus. The stories have had more vitality than the written record. The previously unexplored past suddenly alarms Louie. After finding a religious placard in one empty room that reads "The Wages of Sin is Death," he abruptly cuts the tour short. The last lines of the story belong to Louie:

"The wages of sin!" he said. "'Sin, death, dust, old empty rooms, old empty whiskey bottles, old empty bureau drawers. Come on, pull the rope faster! Pull it faster! Let's get out of this!" (UOH 464).

Clearly, Mitchell's ironic opening in this essay -- his attempt to rid himself of thoughts of death and gloom by visiting the fish market -- has been a fool's errand. The same specter of death and decay that haunted Mr. Poole's dream in the previous story has been looming over Sloppy Louie in the derelict rooms of the old hotel. There is a moment in the story when the two men wipe the dust off an old mirror and look at their stained faces; Louie comments "We're the first faces to look in that mirror in years and years" (UOH 462). The message is inescapable: in the unexplored areas of life, we see our own deaths.

The 1956 story "Mr. Hunter's Grave" is, to my mind, the most graceful prose Mitchell ever wrote. It too opens with a quiet allusion to *Moby-Dick*: "When things get too much for me, I put a wild-flower book and a couple of sandwiches in my pockets and go down to the South Shore of Staten Island and wander around awhile in one of the old cemeteries down there" (UOH 504). From this idle beginning, Mitchell's narrative leads us into a detailed history of an African-American community that dates back to the days before emancipation. Once a vibrant and self-contained enclave, the community entered a half-century of decline after the waters off the South Shore grew contaminated.

The story also reveals Mitchell's respect for oral tradition, a concern that no doubt also helps to explain the initial attraction that its author felt toward Joe Gould's mighty project. A dignified, pious, even noble 87-year-old African-American, George Hunter, keeps the community's history. Mr. Hunter is unimpressed with so-called progress; he notes the materialism and improvidence of the younger generation with disdain, remarking that "the only thing they pay cash for is candy bars" (UOH 523). Sitting in Mr. Hunter's living room and, later, walking through the graveyard with the old gentleman, Mitchell subtly unfolds the lore and genealogy of the community in Mr. Hunter's anecdotes and family tales. And perhaps here, too, we see an implicit critique of the

written record. Mitchell's sense of historiography depends on spoken tradition; as I have written elsewhere, "When challenged to introduce an unfamiliar subculture to his readers, Mitchell instinctively relied on orality: Go to an old man and tell the stories that he tells you."<sup>34</sup>

One of the stories Mr. Hunter tells Mitchell is of a deceased resident who was known by two names, and so used both names on his tombstone. Yet not even words chiseled in stone will survive forever:

... Of course, in a few years he'll pass out of people's memories under both names ... To tell you the truth, I'm no great believer in gravestones. To a large extent, I think they come under the heading of what the old preacher called vanity -- 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity' -- and by the old preacher I mean Ecclesiastes. There's stones in here that have only been up forty or fifty years, and you can't read a thing on them, and what difference does it make?

Mr. Hunter goes on to describe his Christian faith in the omniscience of God. He concludes, "Stones rot the same as bones rot, and nothing endures but the spirit" (*UOH* 534).

"Mr. Hunter's Grave" ends with the old man's bemused revelation that, because of a gravedigger's mistake, he will need to be buried two graves over from his headstone. Though the error "outraged" Mr. Hunter, the story ends on a note of resignation:

He stooped down, and pulled up a weed. Then he stood up, and shook the dirt off the roots of the weed, and tossed it aside.

"Ah, well," he said, "it won't make any difference" (*UOH* 536).

Mr. Hunter's acquiescence at the prospect of death -- a final displacement in a world where he no longer feels at home -- is unique in the work of Joseph Mitchell. Moreover, it stands in precise opposition to the final lines of the story that followed it, which closes out *The Bottom of the Harbor*, the 1959 "The Rivermen."

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<sup>34</sup> James Rogers, "Joseph Mitchell's Irish Imagination" (paper presented at Irish Diaspora Studies conference, Carbondale, Ill., March 25, 1998).

No other Mitchell story is so steeped in death as the closing story of this book, the 1959 "The Rivermen"; nor does any other story, with the possible exception of "Up in the Old Hotel," operate on such a profoundly archetypal level. In it, Mitchell explores the world of the shad fishermen of Edgewater, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from Manhattan. The majestic opening paragraph of "The Rivermen" describes the Hudson River in its various moods, concluding with a description of a dreamlike sturgeon rising from the waters:

It was six or seven feet long, a big, full-grown sturgeon. It rose twice, and cleared the water both times, and I plainly saw its bristly snout and its shiny little eyes and its white belly and its glistening, greenish-yellow, bony-plated, crocodilian back and sides, and it was a spooky sight (*UOH* 574-75).

In Mitchell's hands, crossing the Hudson, in which eerie, giant fishes lurk, is in some ways equivalent to crossing the Styx. The community of Edgewater lies on the other side, where the principal neighborhood is Shadyside -- actual names that can be found on a map today, but in the context of a Mitchell story, also names freighted with gloomy references. In this story Mitchell again opens a window on a community by means of its cemetery. One of the more remarkable graveyards in Edgewater is surrounded on three sides by the Aluminum Factory; hearses must pass through the factory gates on their way to a burial. Later Mitchell notes, without comment, a chamber-of-commerce sign at the city limits: "WELCOME TO EDGEWATER. WHERE HOMES AND INDUSTRY BLEND" -- a wonderfully ironic phrase, given the cemetery's location (*UOH* 596).

"The Rivermen" is also the Mitchell story most attuned to the cycle of life renewing itself. In a digressive moment in "The Rivermen," one fisherman mentions to another that he once caught a shad roe weighing more than thirteen pounds. "Just think how many fish she must have spawned in her time," the second fisherman reflects. "If it had been me that caught her, I'd've patted her on the back and put her back in" (*UOH* 606). The fisherman is dismissive: "A commercial fisherman is supposed to catch fish, Mr.

Townsend, not put them back in." Even as Mitchell marvels at the fabulous fecundity of this old fish, he recognizes that the reality of the world is that it must be slaughtered.

At two points, Mitchell observes schoolgirls jumping rope and singing songs, and the middle-aged fishermen recognize the songs the girls sing as tunes from their own youths. The first song is "Mama, Mama/I am ill," which includes the lines "Doctor, Doctor/Will I die?/ Yes, my child/And so will I -- " (*UOH* 601). Near the end of the story, the girls switch their sing-song and skip to the grisly but familiar rhyme, "The worms crawl in/the worms crawl out." We confront the inevitability of death even as we sense the continuity of the generations -- in the rhythms of the fishermen's life, the rosebushes that spring from the graves of the early settlers, the return of the shad each year, and most of all, in the image of the endlessly self-renewing river itself.

As reportage, "The Rivermen" chronicles the centuries-old practice of commercial shad fishing, the techniques and traditions of which are set out memorably, chiefly by having the old fishermen tell their own story. But the story operates at more universal and reflective level: it is also an account of how men live under the inescapable specter of death. As "The Rivermen" closes, a group of fishermen gather in the bunkroom of a shad-fishing barge. One of the fishermen takes note of a photo taken at a shad bake a few years previously: "'Oh, God, Harry,' said Mr. Hewitt after he had studied the photograph awhile, 'it was only just a few short years ago this photograph was made, and a shocking number of the fellows in it are dead already' " (*UOH* 613-14). Their conversation turns to a story about a philandering fisherman who used to pick up young widows at their husbands' gravesides, and then to the inescapability of death and decline. The story ends with Harry, the middle-aged fisherman, dismissing his friend Mr. Hewitt's concerns about mortality. When Hewitt asks what the purpose of life is, as we know that we're all going to die, Harry answers,



"You supported your wife, didn't you?" asked Harry. "You raised a family, didn't you? That's the purpose of it."

"That's no purpose," said Mr. Hewitt. "The same thing that's going to happen to me is going to happen to them."

"The generations have to keep coming along," said Harry. "That's all I know" (*UOH* 617).

We realize that the shad serve as metaphors for human existence: like the shad, we are caught in the nets of time and mortality. And then, Mr. Hewitt bemoans his aging for a bit more, and Harry again cuts him off. As Harry opens another round of beer, he delivers the closing words of the story and the book:

"As far as I'm concerned," he said, "the purpose of life is to stay alive and to keep on staying alive as long as you possibly can" (*UOH* 619).

The six stories of *The Bottom of the Harbor*, thus, trace an arc that runs into progressively more explicit considerations of mortality at the conclusion of each story. They begin with a story in which we have only the natural world, which is sinister and ready to re-inflict bubonic plague -- the Black Death -- on human populations. These continue to a story that focuses on the innate dignity of Ellery and his crew but which reminds us that human society, even the family, is also capable of treachery and murder. The title story "the Bottom of the Harbor" closes with a reference to the ecological death-wish -- the "god-damned craziness of everything" -- that now characterizes the human interaction with the natural world. It is almost as if the word "harbor," with its associations of safety and security, is being ironically exploded in this story. The next story extends this dark vision. It ends as Louie flees in alarm from the overwhelming presence of death and decay when he at last enters the old hotel. The pleasant life that Louie has created in his fish shop is only a superficial means of staving off the overwhelming power of mortality. Louie, too, and by extension all New York, is at the bottom -- living as Mr. Flood's song put it "Down Among the Dead Men" -- and functioning in daily life only by ignoring the specter of death that looms above him. The closing lines of "Mr. Hunter's Grave" -- "it won't make any difference" -- evoke a noble

stoicism based on Christian faith, rooted in the conviction that the world and our bodies are not our true home.

In "The Rivermen," however, Mitchell probes the difficulty of attaining Mr. Hunter's resignation. This world may not be our home, but it is the only home we know, and we too live within the natural order. Through Harry, Mitchell tells us that, as created beings, our instinct and our obligation force us to resist mortality. There may be no escape, but we nonetheless need to act like one of Posada's dancing skeletons, to swim upstream against the inevitable conquest of death.

### Joe Gould's Escape

There is further reason that Mitchell was intrigued by Gould's persona: Gould appears to have been for him an emblem of the romantic outsider. In "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin notes two archetypal types of storytellers. The first is the farmer, the person tied to the land who knows the lore that has been handed down for generations. The second is the sailor, who has been away and returns with tales of far-off places. Mitchell clearly saw himself as assuming, through his immersion in New York, the role of the former, and such stories as "The Old House at Home," "Dragger Captain," "Mr. Hunter's Grave," and *Old Mr. Flood* are celebrations of established communities, of continuity and tradition. But, as might be expected, there is a counterpoint; the nomadic figure also attracted Mitchell. He wrote two stories and a stage play about gypsies; "Santa Claus Smith" (1940) concerns an elderly man who hitchhikes around the country leaving a trail of bogus checks; and he describes the Native Americans of "The Mohawks in High Steel" in the opening sentence as "The most footloose Indians in North America" (*UOH* 267).

In *Joe Gould's Secret*, Mitchell notes how Gould became in his imagination a reminder of famous wanderers. Before approaching his *New Yorker* editors about doing a profile of Gould, Mitchell recalls, "I never saw him without thinking of the Ancient Mariner or of the Wandering Jew or of the Flying Dutchman," as well as of a mysterious

nocturnal wanderer in his hometown, or of "one of those men I used to puzzle over when I read the Bible as a child, who, for transgressions that seemed mysterious to me, had been 'cast out'" (*UOH* 633). As Gould's pathetic story unfolds, we learn that the Harvard-educated son of an old New England family either really was -- or at least felt himself to be -- "cast out" by conventional society. But like the Ancient Mariner, Wandering Jew, or Flying Dutchman, he becomes synonymous with his nomadic status, and by embracing that role, the cast-out converts himself into the one who has escaped.

Gould has done nothing if not flee the nets of conventional society. He lives in poverty and knows nothing of physical comfort. But he has also escaped the burden of reality; in a revealing passage Gould says that he has "always felt at home" in New York City, "especially in Greenwich Village, down among the cranks and the misfits and the one-lungers and the has-beens and the might've-beens and the would-bes and the never-wills and the God-knows-whats..." (*UOH* 623). This is quite literally the "pipe-dream" world of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*; Gould feels at home in an environment where that-which-is-imagined is given as much consideration as that-which-really-is.<sup>35</sup> By means of his *imagined* Oral History, Gould further extends his escape; not only does he escape societal norms in a life style putatively devoted to art, he also escapes the constraints of literary art itself: the need to actually write, the need to subject himself to the opinion of readers, the need to concern himself with the demands of editors and publishers, and most significant, the need to concern himself with time in the manner that real-world writers -- and particularly journalists -- are required to do. Unlike Joe Gould, writers must conclude their works.

For these reasons, the circumstances of Mitchell's realization that the Oral History doesn't exist are crucial. The discovery occurs in Mitchell's office at *The New Yorker*.

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<sup>35</sup> The last chapter of Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* speaks of the artist's impulse to escape from time and the "real world". He quotes Wallace Stevens's line that "...the theory/Of poetry is the theory of life/As it is, in the intricate evasions of as..." It may be useful to think of Gould's fantastic Oral History as something like De Quincey's "fake end, when time shall be no more, produced by opium. This is the triumph over time...." Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, pp.155, 173.

Having grown exasperated by Gould's refusal to take any steps to bring the Oral History into print by evading all of the publishers to whom Mitchell introduces him, Mitchell stumbles onto the truth when he says in anger that he is "beginning to believe .... that the Oral History doesn't exist" (*UOH* 688). The expression on Gould's face confirms that this is indeed so. Mitchell incredulously ticks off the audacity of Gould's invention and the lies he has had to create to sustain it. Then,

At that moment, one of the editors knocked on the door and came in with proofs of a story of mine. He said that some last-minute changes were having to be made in a story that had been scheduled to run in the next issue, and that because there might not be time enough to complete them, my story had been tentatively scheduled to run its place, and that he would like to go over the proofs with me.

"Does it have to be done right now?" I asked.

"Well, as you might gather," he said, rather sharply, "we're kind of in a hurry." I saw that I couldn't very well put this off.... (*UOH* 688-89).

In the precise moment that Mitchell has confronted Gould about his book that exists only in his imagination, Mitchell is himself confronted with the absolute control of time over the real writing in which he engages. He does not have *Bartleby's* -- or Gould's -- option of preferring not to write.

Gould excuses himself, offering only the quiet remark, "It's not a question of laziness," before turning his back. After reviewing the proofs, Mitchell sits down to compose himself. He finds it impossible to stay angry. He reflects that Gould made his preposterous claims for the Oral History not only "in order to dupe people like me but also in order to dupe himself" (*UOH* 690). Moreover, Mitchell has a special understanding of Gould's self-deceit, because he himself at the age of twenty-four, had indulged in an extended fantasy about a novel he intended to write. "I had thought about this novel for over a year," Mitchell confesses, describing how he would imagine shifting paragraphs and chapters around and envision the finished book -- "But the truth is, I never actually wrote a word of it" (*UOH* 692).

Mitchell even finds it somehow admirable that Gould *hadn't* written the book -- "One less book to clutter up the world, one less book to take up space and catch dust and go unread ...." (*UOH* 693). Here, one thinks back to the bundles of newspapers thrown into the harbor at the close of *Old Mr. Flood*, and to the photograph that closes *My Ears Are Bent*, which shows Mitchell sleeping under an open newspaper over the caption "The Author's Opinion of the Sunday Newspaper." Mitchell, in these moments, implicitly interrogates the whole project of journalism with versions Mr. Hewitt's despairing question about the meaning of life -- "what's the purpose of it?" (*UOH* 617).

Gould returns a short while later, and Mitchell senses that he wants to "unmask" himself -- to which Mitchell reacts with unexpected irritation:

"Oh, for God's sake," I felt like saying to him. "Don't lose your nerve now and start confessing and confiding. If you've pretended this long, the only decent thing you can do is keep right on pretending as long as you live, no matter what happens" (*UOH* 695).

In the cadences of this passage, we cannot help but hear echoes of the closing lines of the preceding book: "the purpose of life is to stay alive and to stay alive as long as you possibly can."

Joe Gould has hit on a strategy for staying alive as long as he possibly can. The "secret" referred to in the title book is not only that Gould never wrote the book; the secret is also that Gould -- in his fantasies at least -- had in fact discovered a way to stave off death, by writing a book that because it was never written could also never be finished. That the book itself was imaginary does not trouble Mitchell: if anything, it underscores the chasm between Gould's literary world, which can go on for ever, and the actual circumstances in which Mitchell, a journalist on a weekly publication, needed to work. As a journalist, he contended with real world constraints that never troubled Gould, such limitations as length, "relevance," the world's tastes, and deadlines -- the last word

being, in itself, a suggestion an encounter with death that lies imbedded in every act of writing.

Considered this way, *Joe Gould's Secret* reveals itself not as a slight, enigmatic book but rather, as a consideration of death as conceived by Mitchell's highly literate imagination -- and, as such, also the culmination of a career-long quest to engage with mortality. What Joe Gould offered, perhaps at a subconscious level, to Mitchell and to those who believed in him was the prospect of a peculiar kind of immortality.

Ultimately, Joseph Mitchell looked to Joe Gould for the same thing that the Chinese terrapin chefs sought, or that Mr. Flood sought in his "seafoodetarian" diet, the secret of staying young. When, in the closing pages of *Joe Gould's Secret*, Gottlieb organizes a committee to hunt for that which doesn't exist -- the missing manuscripts of the Oral History -- the impossible search assumes archetypal dimensions, evoking the most famous of all quests for something that does not exist: the Fountain of Youth.

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