

THE WESTERN FRONT COMES TO KANSAS



John Steuart Curry's The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne, 1928–1940, courtesy of the Westervelt Company and displayed in the Westervelt-Warner Museum of American Art, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

John Steuart Curry's *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*

by Steven Trout

On June 5, 1921, the citizens of Winchester, Kansas, and many neighboring communities turned out for an event that would later be immortalized by the Regionalist painter John Steuart Curry—the reburial of William Lewis Davis, the artist's high-school friend, in a small cemetery two miles southeast of town. Davis had been dead for nearly three years. In August 1918, while serving in the ordinarily quiet belt of trenches that wound through the Vosges Mountains of Alsace, France, he had become one of the first soldiers in the Kansas National Guard to die of wounds in the Great War. Thanks to a federal program that allowed families to repatriate the remains of their fallen loved ones (at governmental expense), Private Davis was at last back in the heartland. And he received a hero's welcome. According to the *Winchester Star*, services for the repatriated soldier began at 11:00 a.m. (Armistice Hour) in the Winchester Christian Church, where a packed house listened to a battery of uplifting sermons and patriotic speeches. The program culminated in a graveside ceremony led by a "firing squad, under the command of a sergeant from Leavenworth" and "the local chapter of the American Legion." Involving the entire community, along with scores of visitors, Davis's funeral was, the newspaper remarked, "one of the largest gatherings ever held in Winchester."¹

Whether Curry actually attended this event is unknown. Ironically, ties between "Curry of Kansas," as the painter later came to be known, and his home territory had loosened early in the artist's life. At sixteen, Curry left the Sunflower State to study at the Kansas City Art Institute in Missouri. Then came a sojourn at the Chicago Art Institute, followed by additional instruction at Geneva College in Iowa and, eventually, informal tutelage under Harvey Dunn, a famed illustrator (and fellow westerner) whose studio was located in Tenafly, New Jersey. To be close to Dunn, Curry took up residence in the nearby town of

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1. "Paid Honor to Our Soldier Dead," *Winchester Star*, June 10, 1921. Curry was born and raised on a farm near Dunavant, Kansas, southwest of Winchester, in the northeastern part of the state.

Leonia, and it was there that he was living in 1921. Years later, Curry implied that he had journeyed all the way from the East Coast to Kansas to see his former schoolmate put to rest, but a gap in his correspondence from the early 1920s makes this claim difficult to substantiate. By the same token, only sketchy information about Curry's friendship with Davis has survived.² In the years after the funeral the painter spoke affectionately of Davis as an "old school chum"; however, he did not offer any details. Nor does oral tradition in the Davis family go beyond a general recollection that the two young men were quite close.³ Like many of the claims used by Curry to establish himself as a painter of "authentic" Kansas subjects, his personal connection to Davis may have been exaggerated. This is the same artist, after all, who became famous for painting tornadoes (without ever having seen one); who perpetuated the stereotype of Kansas flatness by smoothing out the hilly countryside around Winchester (as in, for example, *Baptism in Kansas*, the painting that established Curry's reputation as a midwestern Regionalist); and who donned overalls for photographers in order to enhance his image as an unsophisticated rustic (when in fact Curry had spent nearly a year in the Paris of Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein).

However, while it is probably impossible to know whether Curry was in Winchester, Kansas, on June 5, 1921, there is little question that the *notion* of Private Davis's posthumous return from "Over There"—a homecoming at once poignant and macabre, patriotic and subversive—ultimately stirred the painter's deepest reflections on modern warfare and its consequences. Into his depiction of a heartbreaking scene that he may or may not have witnessed firsthand, Curry would pour his sense of frustration, as another world war erupted in Europe, thereby (in Curry's view) setting back the cause of art for a century or more, and as American isolationism, which the painter strongly supported, became untenable. At the same time, he would express an uncertainty shared by many of his countrymen in the 1920s

2. The only biography of the painter—Laurence E. Schmeckebier's *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America* (New York: American Artists Group, 1943)—sheds little light on their friendship. Nor are any clues to be found in Patricia Junker, ed., *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998).

3. "Cudworth Post Gets Painting by Curry," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 1, 1940, clipping, correspondence file B, John Steuart Curry Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as "Curry Papers"); Donald Davis, nephew of William L. Davis, interview with author, February 3, 2008. William Davis's youngest sister, Gladys, is still alive, along with several of his nieces and nephews.

and 1930s over the meaning of the conflict in which Private Davis died.

Curry began to paint Davis's return in 1928. And, almost immediately, he ran into difficulties. If one believes in the painter's affection for his childhood "chum," perhaps Curry was too emotionally close to his subject. If not, technical dilemmas provide an alternative explanation. Retouched again and again, Curry's depiction of the graveside service, ultimately titled *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*, would not be completed until 1940, one year before the United States' entry into the Second World War. Born of his growing fears (already confirmed by the time he finished the piece) of another global conflict and his ongoing engagement with the cultural memory of the First World War, this tragic canvas, which most studies of twentieth-century war art have curiously ignored, offers an extraordinary window into the workings of American military remembrance during the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* captures, in a midwestern microcosm, all the interpretive tensions and ideological divisions that prevented both Jazz-Age and Depression-era Americans from achieving a true consensus over the meaning of the Great War. And, thematically, the painting goes even further than that. Among its creator's most ambiguous works, this cryptic scene both harnesses the energy of commemorative ritual—one of the primary means by which communities construct and perpetuate their sense of the past—and, ultimately, underscores the terrifying hollowness of that very ritual. To view this canvas is to feel simultaneously the force and the failure of war remembrance when confronted with a conflict fought far away—somewhere far over the Kansas rainbow—for a questionable cause and with dubious outcomes.

However, before interpreting *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* as a rumination on war memory, we must first turn to its multiple contexts—to the young Kansas soldier whom Curry immortalized (and *may* have mourned); to the initially controversial program, run by the War Department, that between 1920 and 1923 transferred the remains of more than forty thousand fallen soldiers from American Expeditionary Force (AEF) cemeteries in France and Belgium to American communities spread from coast to coast; to the artist's exposure to World War I remembrance through memorials and literature; and, finally, to Curry's isolationist political convictions. The painting's social-historical milieu and



John Stuart Curry—born on November 14, 1897, in Dunavant, southwest of Winchester, Kansas—left the state fairly early in life, though the Midwest would come to dominate his artwork and define him as a painter. Along with Grant Wood of Iowa and Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, Curry helped to establish Regionalism, a modern art movement rooted in rural America. Curry was not without his critics, who accused the painter of perpetuating midwestern stereotypes in his works and persona. Here Curry paints in his studio at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1941, donned in his trademark overalls, thought a prop by his detractors to enhance his image as an unsophisticated rustic.

biographical origins help to explain its thematic complexity and, ultimately, its many contradictions.

One especially poignant thread in the work's tangle of meanings is the sad, almost grotesquely ironic story of Private William L. Davis, who died at age twenty-three as a result of wounds received on his very first night in the trenches. Indeed, British war poets such as Siegfried

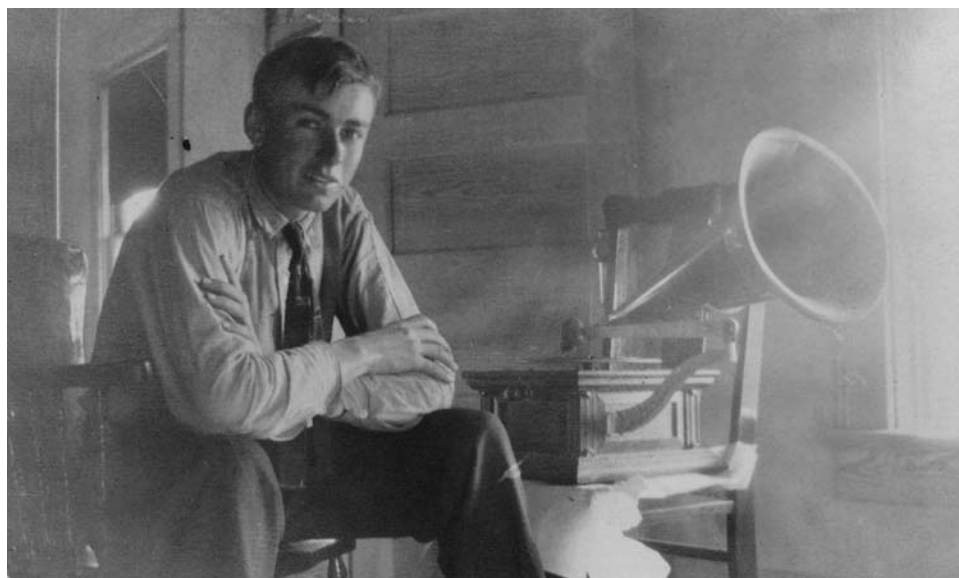
Sassoon or Wilfred Owen could not have devised a more sardonic illustration of war's senseless cruelty. Eager to play his part in the Great Crusade, Private Davis traveled thousands of miles and endured months of training in preparation for his single night of frontline service. According to Davis's father, who after William's death filed a short biography of his son with the Kansas State Historical Society, his boy "was among the first" to respond to "his country's call." He enlisted in Company B of the Third Kansas Infantry (headquartered in Oskaloosa, Kansas) in June 1917, just two months after the American declaration of war, and trained at Camp Doniphan, Oklahoma, where the National Guard units of Kansas and Missouri were merged to create the Thirty-fifth Division.⁴ After six months, the Third Kansas, now known as part of the 139th Infantry, moved by rail from Camp Doniphan to Hoboken, New Jersey, where it set sail for Liverpool, England. Fourteen days later, Davis and his comrades reached the western British shore, then traveled overland to Southampton, where they boarded the ships that would take them across the Channel—the most dangerous leg of their journey. Following a tense but uneventful crossing, the regiment began a new round of training under British instructors in Normandy. Three months later, the 139th finally entered the trenches, assuming control of a sector in the Vosges Mountains, about fifty miles from the Swiss-Alsatian border on the southern tip of the Western Front.⁵

Although the Vosges Mountains had seen their share of fighting, especially at Hartmannsweilerkopf (where tens of thousands of French and German combatants died), by 1918 the region was relatively quiet, the perfect place for green American troops to become acclimated to modern warfare—and to demonstrate their belligerency. While French forces in the area happily practiced a policy of "live and let live" by staying on their own side of No-Man's Land, choosing not to provoke their adversaries unless absolutely necessary, the men of the AEF, new

4. John W. Davis, biographical sketch of William L. Davis, William L. Davis file, World War I Kansas Soldiers, collection 49, Library and Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.

5. Homer F. Trapp, "Synopsis of the History of Company B," in *Company B 3rd Kansas N.G., 139th Infantry: Memories of the Reunion August-19-20, 1955, Oskaloosa, Kansas*, by U.S. Army Infantry Regiment, 139th Company B (Oskaloosa, Kans.: Independent Publishing Co., 1955), 8.

In August 1918, while serving in the ordinarily quiet belt of trenches that wound through the Vosges Mountains of Alsace, France, William Lewis Davis, aged twenty-three, became one the first soldiers in the Kansas National Guard to die of wounds in the Great War. Davis, pictured here, had been a high-school friend of Curry, and the repatriation of the soldier's body in the summer of 1921 became the subject of the painter's *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*.



to the war and eager to prove themselves to their skeptical allies, pursued a more aggressive policy—one that would cost Private Davis his life. In the 139th Infantry, as in other units, officers regarded American control of No Man's Land as imperative, and in addition to eagerly organizing raids against the enemy, they established outposts far forward of the American frontline trenches.

On the night of July 31, 1918, their first night at the front, Davis and another soldier received orders to stand guard at one of these hazardous positions. What happened next will probably never be known for certain. According to the account published in the *Winchester Star* on September 27, 1918, as soon as the two sentries entered the outpost, Davis "was wounded and captured by a squad of Germans, but he put up such a hard fight that his captors beat him over the head with their rifle butts and left him for dead, near the German wire entanglements, where he was found by his comrades next morning."⁶ The interests of wartime propaganda, one suspects, partially shaped this narrative. Davis, the article is careful to point out, had not willingly allowed himself to be captured. Instead, he had struggled valiantly until bludgeoned by the Huns, who then "left him for dead." In this version of the story, Davis's pluck combined with the Germans' brutality overshadows the terrible absurdity of his early demise.

By 1921, the year of Davis's return and reburial, the story had become more ambiguous. Indeed, an article on


the funeral published in several Jefferson County newspapers included testimony from an anonymous "comrade" in Company B, who related a somewhat different version of Davis's death. His account, apparently taken from a wartime letter composed while Davis was hospitalized, ran as follows:

Immediately after entering the outpost trenches Davis and another Sentry were challenged by four big Boche. Davis opened fire on them. They threw a bomb into the trench, wounding both Davis and the other man. Well, the Boche jumped into the trench and dragged Davis out, kicking and beating him, until Ralph Nichols [another member of Company B] saw them and opened fire on them. But he couldn't see Davis. Next morning Davis was missing, so they sent out a patrol to look for him and found him caught in the barb wire entanglement. They got him back into the trenches and sent him to the hospital. He has a scalp wound that is pretty bad.⁷

In this version, the specific cause of Davis's death, which occurred one week later as a result of "blood loss and exposure," remains concealed in the fog of war. The private may have received his presumably fatal "scalp wound" when the German grenade detonated or when he was violently taken prisoner. However, the story also accommodates an even more terrible possibility never

6. "Wm. L. Davis Dead," *Winchester Star*, September 27, 1918.

7. "William Louis Davis," *Farmers' Vindicator*, June 10, 1921; see also, "Paid Honor to Our Soldiers Dead," *Winchester Star*, June 10, 1921. The *Farmers' Vindicator* misspells Davis's middle name, which his father writes as "Lewis" in his biographical sketch of his son.

<small>CLASS OF SERVICE</small>	<small>SYMBOL</small>	WESTERN UNION	<small>CLASS OF SERVICE</small>	<small>SYMBOL</small>
Day Message			Day Message	
Day Letter	Blue	TELEGRAM	Day Letter	Blue
Night Message	Nil	<small>NEWCOMB CARLTON, PRESIDENT GEORGE W. E. ATKINS, FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT</small>	Night Message	Nil
Night Letter	N L		Night Letter	N L
<small>If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a day message. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.</small>			<small>If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a day message. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.</small>	

Form 1201

RECEIVED AT 3 KS OK 35 Gov't

Wa--Washington D C 508 PM Sept 24th 1918

Mr. John W. Davis

Winchester, Kans

Deeply regret to inform you that it is Officially reported that Private William L Davis Infantry died August Seventh from Wounds received in Action

Harris

Acting Adj. Gen'l

516 PM

Private Davis's father and stepmother first heard of William's injury and subsequent demise in the usual fashion—through a series of less than expansive telegrams from the War Department, which indicated first that William had been seriously wounded, then that no further details regarding his condition could be provided, and finally that he had died of his wounds. Telegram courtesy of the National World War I Museum, Kansas City, Missouri.

mentioned in 1918: namely, that Davis died as result of so-called friendly fire. Did Ralph Nichols shoot him without knowing it? Was Davis mortally wounded by one of his own comrades? As if to ward off such unsettling questions, the article ends with a predictably patriotic gloss on the narrative: "Those who can read between the lines of this brief sketch can find a story of true heroism beginning with enlistment and ending with a brave and hard fight hand to hand with an attacking force that was two to one. He died for the honor of his Country and for the Liberty of Humanity and the World."⁸

Private Davis's father and stepmother (John W. Davis's first wife died in 1906) were well acquainted with such grandiloquent rhetoric. The couple's first news of William's injury and subsequent demise came in the usual fashion—in a series of less than expansive telegrams from the War Department, which indicated first that William had been seriously wounded, then that no further details regarding his condition could be provided, and finally that he had died of his wounds. However, such matter-of-fact discourse was largely limited to these telegrams, and after a time it was replaced by more compassionate correspondence from a number of sources, beginning with the Red Cross, which sent the family a photograph of the wooden cross marking Davis's grave. As documented in the collection of family materials recently donated to the National World War I Museum by William's nephew Donald Davis, nearly everything else that John and his wife received related

8. "William Louis Davis," *Farmers' Vindicator*, June 10, 1921.

to William's death valorized his enlistment as service to Civilization—or to Christ, the two being nearly synonymous. Among the expressions of sympathy the Davis family received, for example, was a "Gold Star" greeting card sent by the Military Sisterhood of Oskaloosa, Kansas. Bearing the celestial symbol of military sacrifice, the card also featured a poem, the first lines of which read: "His life in the balance, Jesus/ counted not dear/ But poured it out for the truth." Similarly, the commercially-produced remembrance card that the Davises mailed to friends and family offered reassurance that William had "heard humanity's clear call/ And knew the voice divine."⁹ Not surprisingly, John Davis internalized this idealistic language of consolation and used it when describing his son for the Kansas State Historical Society. His son's biography ends with the declaration that William "was a lover of home and friends and never shrank from his life's duties. He died for humanity which will make his memory sacred to peace loving Americans."¹⁰

These words, composed by a grief-shaken parent, contain a revealing tension. John Davis finds solace, first, in the notion that his son died not for a nation, but for "humanity." All nations, in other words, benefited from his sacrifice. The father's words initially evoke a

9. Telegram, Adjutant General McCain to John W. Davis, August 11, 1918; Telegram, Harris to John W. Davis, September 11, 1918; Telegram, Acting Adjutant General to John W. Davis, September 24, 1918; Gold Star Card; Card from the Military Sisterhood of Oskaloosa, Kansas, William L. Davis Collection, file 1, National World War I Museum, Kansas City, Missouri (hereafter cited as "Davis Collection").

10. John W. Davis, biographical sketch of William L. Davis.

lofty vision of international progressivism—making the world safe for democracy—that underwrote the American war effort. John’s last words, however, locate Private Davis’s *memory* in his fellow countrymen and through the phrase “peace loving” points implicitly in the direction of American exceptionalism. Davis may have died for humanity, the passage implies, but his sacrifice is best understood by his progressive homeland with its inherent abhorrence of armed conflict.

The ideological tug-of-war in these words—between defining the meaning of William Davis’s death in international terms versus a more narrowly patriotic construction—reflects a national debate that would soon have a direct impact on John Davis and his family. Even before the Armistice, the question of where America’s war dead would ultimately rest drew fiery editorials in newspapers across the country. Forces on both sides of the issue quickly mobilized. In line with the Great Crusade’s international mission, as summarized by President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, the War Department preferred that the dead remain in Europe, where they would serve as enduring reminders of the United States’ selfless *intervention* in a conflict that might otherwise have destroyed European civilization. American war cemeteries in France and Belgium would let no one forget that the New World had saved the Old. In the summer of 1918, this position received a boost from former President Theodore Roosevelt, who insisted that the remains of his son Quentin, perhaps the most famous American casualty of the war, be left at the exact spot in the Aisne-Marne region where the flyer’s bullet-riddled aircraft had crashed. Roosevelt’s instantly famous metaphor for burial abroad—“where the tree falls, let it lay”—became a rallying cry for proponents of overseas cemeteries.¹¹

Predictably enough, the American funeral industry, which obviously stood to lose a good deal of revenue if the dead remained in Europe, squared off against the War Department and against the former president. Lobbyists representing the interests of morticians descended on Washington, D.C. However, it would be mistake to identify the repatriation campaign entirely—or even mostly—as arising from economic self-interest. Grieving families, not funeral home directors, formed the core of organizations such as the Bring Home the Soldier Dead League, one of the more prominent (and bizarrely titled) pressure groups to emerge during the controversy. In



The wooden cross marking Private Davis’s grave in Alsace, France, was photographed by the American Red Cross and sent to the soldier’s parents as a remembrance. Photograph courtesy of the National World War I Museum, Kansas City, Missouri.

the end, the federal government elected to satisfy both camps. Legislation signed into law by President Wilson in 1919 gave families the option of either allowing their fallen loved ones to be memorialized in permanent overseas cemeteries or having their dead returned to them at governmental expense. Moreover, each family would have until 1923 to decide, a generous time-frame subsequently narrowed by diplomatic problems. Lack of cooperation from the French government, which was understandably concerned about the possible health risks posed by the transportation of tens of thousands of cadavers on French trains, delayed the start of the repatriation program until March 1920.¹²

The details of Private Davis’s homeward journey were more or less standard, as reflected by the formulaic

11. Neil Hanson, *Unknown Soldiers: The Story of the Missing of the First World War* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 243.

12. G. Kurt Piehler, *Remembering War the American Way* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 96, 97.



With Sincere Sympathy

His life in the balance, Jesus
 counted not dear,
 But poured it out for the truth;
 So your soldier lad for the cause
 we hold right
 Has offered the gift of his youth.
 Oh, never is liberty gained without price
 It is bought through the anguish
 of others;
 And no man hath love that is greater
 than this,
 That he lay down his life for his
 brothers.

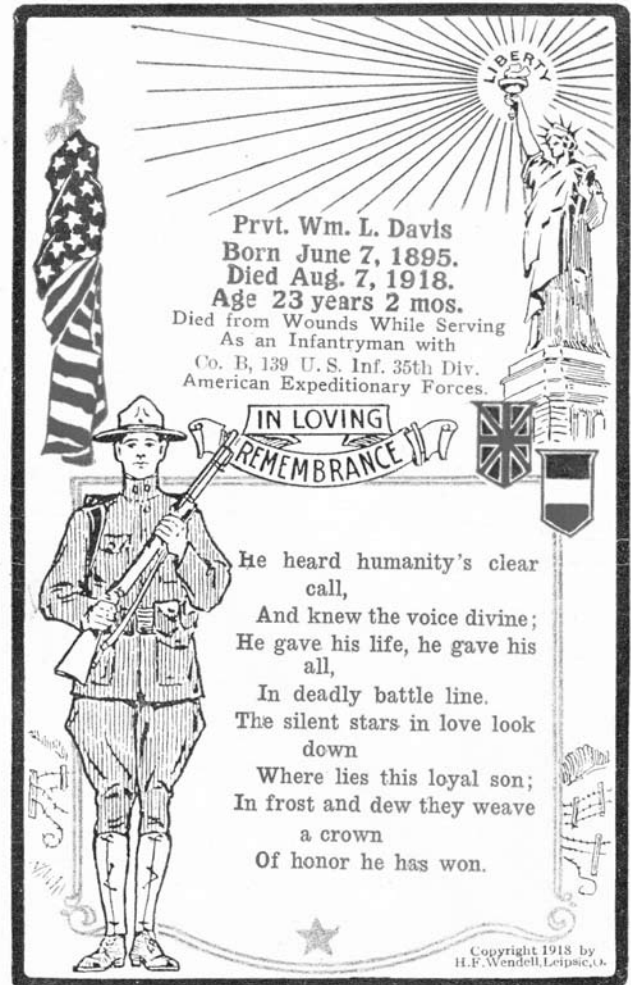
E.A.

Among the expressions of sympathy the Davis family received was a "Gold Star" greeting card pictured here, sent by the Military Sisterhood of Oskaloosa, Kansas. Bearing the celestial symbol of military sacrifice, the card also featured a poem, the first lines of which read: "His life in the balance, Jesus/ counted not dear/ But poured it out for the truth." Card courtesy of the National World War I Museum, Kansas City, Missouri.

governmental correspondence that John Davis received during the weeks leading up to the body's return. For example, a form letter from the head of the Cemeterial Division of the Quartermaster General's Office reminded the Davis family that the War Department could not share information with the American Legion or any other patriotic organization.¹³ Thus, if the Davises wished to include an Honor Guard in the funeral proceedings, then they would have to contact their local Legion Post directly, which they did. Another piece of official correspondence, signed by an officer in the Graves Registration Service, explained that Private Davis's war risk insurance provided up to \$100 for funeral expenses.¹⁴ To collect, the family would have to fill out a notarized form and attach the undertaker's bill. Perhaps the largest mass migration of the dead in American history—nearly half of the nation's one hundred thousand fallen soldiers were brought home—the repatriation program of 1920 to 1923 involved, by necessity, bureaucracy and paperwork, as well as patriotic spectacle.

13. Charles C. Pierce to "The Relatives of our dead," n.d., Davis Collection.

14. R. E. Shannon, "Notice Regarding Reimbursement of Funeral Expenses," Davis Collection.



The commercially-produced remembrance card that the Davises mailed to friends and family, pictured here, offered reassurance that William had "heard humanity's clear call/ And knew the voice divine." Card courtesy of the National World War I Museum, Kansas City, Missouri.

On June 1, 1921, John Davis at last received word that his son was back in the United States: a telegram from the Graves Registration Service announced that Private Davis's remains would leave Hoboken, New Jersey, the terminus for ships carrying bodies from France, at 10:30 a.m. and arrive in Winchester "Via [the] Union Pacific Railroad" in a matter of days.¹⁵ As it turned out, the trip from the eastern seaboard to the heart of the American Midwest took more than seventy-two hours. Davis's flag-draped casket finally reached Winchester on Saturday, June 4, one day prior to the memorial service that Curry would spend twelve years fashioning into art.

15. Telegram, Graves Registration Service to John W. Davis, June 1, 1921, Davis Collection.

In many respects, *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* recreates that event with considerable accuracy. According to Donald Davis, Curry's depiction of John Davis, seen kneeling by the side of the coffin, is a nearly perfect likeness.¹⁶ And the news coverage published in the *Winchester Star* and elsewhere attests to the accuracy of other features, especially the phalanx of soldiers (from nearby Fort Leavenworth) and uniformed American Legion members that stands in the left side of the crowd. A close examination of the painting reveals that the words "Winchester, Kansas," and "Legion" appear, along with the Legion's star emblem, on one of the three flags carried by the Honor Guard—a meticulously rendered historical detail.

At the same time, however, Curry exercised his artistic license and made creative adjustments where necessary for the sake of his themes. Note, for example, that the very title of the painting is a factual inaccuracy that nonetheless amplifies the work's cultural resonance. As we have seen, Private Davis did not return from the Argonne. He was actually buried in Alsace, where he died more than a month before the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, or the Battle of the Argonne, began. Curry probably knew this.¹⁷ Davis's heroic struggle in No Man's Land, when accosted by the "four big Boche," no doubt figured prominently in the sermons and tributes delivered on June 5, 1921. And even if Curry did not attend the funeral, it seems likely that this story concerning a celebrated classmate, one of the earliest Kansas casualties, would have reached him in some form. By tying Private Davis to the Argonne, the final and biggest AEF battle during the war, Curry erased the distractingly

anomalous circumstances of the young man's death and in so doing made him a more representative symbol of the nation's war dead. Thus, nowhere does the painting hint at Davis's peculiar destiny as a possible victim of hand-to-hand combat (the ultimate rarity on the World-War-I battlefield) or, worse, friendly fire. Nowhere does the canvas acknowledge the absurdity of Davis's real-life demise, his fatal misfortune on his very first night in the trenches. Instead, Curry shifts his focus away from the details of Davis's death to the broad outline of his ideologically dubious return. The title of the painting not only transplants Davis to a battle where more than twenty-six thousand Americans were killed (including seventeen members of Company B), it also underscores the central tragedy of any war.¹⁸ *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* reads like a happy picture of a warrior's triumphant homecoming from a hard-fought battle. What the painting actually depicts, however, is the return of bones in a flag-covered box. Chillingly, the title of the painting reminds us that only the lottery of combat—particularly cruel and capricious in Davis's case—determines the kind of return a soldier will have.

Curry's other significant departure from fact involves the painting's unsettling perspective. In an early sketch of Davis's graveside service, the artist set the point of view much closer to the ground, nearly on an even level with the figures.¹⁹ In this version, we see the ceremony as if we too are in the cluster of mourners. The finished painting creates a very different effect. Here, we are above the crowd, looking down—almost as if we are the disembodied spirit of Private Davis himself. And the countryside is tilted in such a way that the vast immensity of the prairie, against which Winchester's water tower shows up as a mere speck, appears to mock the spiritual ceremony in the foreground, making it small even as it occupies nearly half of the canvas. To achieve this point of view, Curry modified the landscape of his youth—just as he had done for different artistic (and arguably commercial) purposes in his other famous Kansas paintings. In this case, considerable topographical manipulation came into play. The Winchester City Cemetery (known in 1921 as the Wise Cemetery) where William L. Davis is actually buried sits on a hillside, which

16. Donald Davis, interview with author, February 3, 2008.

17. Interestingly, several variant titles of the painting made their way into newspaper coverage when the work was sold to Milwaukee's Alonzo Cudworth Post of the American Legion in 1940. For example, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* ("Cudworth Post Gets Painting by Curry," June 1, 1940, clipping, Curry Papers) described the unveiling of "*Private Davis Returns*." The *Milwaukee Journal* ("New Curry Painting Is Accepted by Legion," May 31, 1940, clipping, Curry Papers) switched back and forth between "*The Return of Private Davis*" and "*Private Davis Returns from the Argonne*." It was Curry himself who established the painting's "proper title" (apparently for the first time) in a letter to Malcolm K. Whyte (May 13, 1940, clipping, Curry Papers), the representative of the Cudworth Post. The title given in that letter is the title that we know today—*The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*. Since the painter indicated in a subsequent note to Whyte (June 22, 1939, clipping, Curry Papers) that "Davis was killed in the Forest of the Argonne," he may by this point (nearly twelve years after the funeral) have forgotten the location of his friend's death. But this seems unlikely. During the Meuse-Argonne battle, the Thirty-fifth Division did not fight in the Argonne Forest (the site of the Lost Battalion's famous struggle), but in the mostly open countryside located to the east. A desire to tie his painting to a familiar and mythologized battleground seems to have guided Curry as he selected his title.

18. Trapp includes William L. Davis in his list of eighteen total fatalities in "Synopsis of the History of Company B." Davis was apparently the only member of the company to die in Alsace. Davis's name appears incorrectly as "Lester M. Davis" in the roster of Company B included in Clair Kenamore, *The Story of the 139th Infantry* (St. Louis, Mo.: Guard Publishers, 1920), 70.

19. Schmeckebier, *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America*, 59.



Curry exercised his artistic license and made creative adjustments where necessary for the sake of his themes. The unsettling perspective of his funerary painting is one example. In an early sketch of Davis's graveside service, pictured here and first published in Laurence E. Schmeckebier's biography of the artist, John Steuart Curry's *Pageant of America*, we see the ceremony as if we too are in the cluster of mourners. In the finished painting Curry creates a very different effect in which the countryside is tilted so that the vast immensity of the prairie appears to mock the spiritual ceremony in the foreground, making it small even as it occupies nearly half of the canvas. To achieve this point of view, Curry modified the landscape of his youth—just as he had done for different artistic (and arguably commercial) purposes in his other famous Kansas paintings.

slopes eastward at a relatively steep pitch two miles southeast of the town. From Davis's gravesite, it is impossible to see Winchester in the distance—the slope is just too steep, the grave too far from the summit. Indeed, even if a twenty-foot tower were erected at the spot, it would not offer the view that Curry has painted.

Clearly, then, Curry did not aspire to create a completely realistic depiction of Davis's reburial. Commercial considerations perhaps explain why. As historians Marjorie Swann and William M. Tsutsui have persuasively demonstrated, Curry of Kansas (who spent much of his career living in Connecticut) was adept at giving his East-Coast audience what it wanted—scenes, the more violent or grotesque the better, of exotic flatlanders inhabiting a strange, monotonous landscape.²⁰ Unfortunately for Curry, this approach to Kansas subjects proved less successful when practiced *within* his home state. The controversial imagery in his Kansas Statehouse murals, especially the towering figure of a crazed John Brown, led to a falling out between Curry and the Kansas legislature and, ultimately, to the termination of his commission in 1941, a blow from which the artist never completely recovered. In the case of *The Return of*

Private Davis from the Argonne, however, Curry has done more than capitalize on Kansas oddity, topographical or otherwise. Here Kansas space, as much imagined as real, provides the perfect setting for a complex work that addresses both the unsettled memory of World War I and the likelihood of the United States becoming entangled in an even bloodier European conflict.

Beyond the sad story of William L. Davis, Curry's artistic milieu and personal experiences, both during the First World War and afterwards, also helped shape the content of his painting. As art historian Charles C. Eldredge has recently shown in his book-length analysis of *Hoover and the Flood*, Curry's historical paintings operate on multiple levels and draw upon far more cultural and biographical sources than one might at first imagine.²¹ In *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*, a painting with an especially lengthy gestation period, this density of meaning is particularly striking. For example, at least two works by other painters probably influenced Curry's composition. While studying drawing in Paris in 1927, he may have seen Gustave Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans* (1849), a twenty-foot-long canvas that inspired heated controversy within Paris art circles by depicting a commonplace ceremony, attended by ordinary middle-

20. Marjorie Swann and William M. Tsutsui, "John Steuart Curry: A Portrait of the Artist as a Kansan," *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 241–52.

21. Charles C. Eldredge, *John Steuart Curry's Hoover and the Flood* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).



While studying drawing in Paris in 1927, Curry may have seen Gustave Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans* (1849), a twenty-foot-long canvas that, like Curry's painting, emphasized landscape. The rocky bluffs depicted in the background of his burial scene mirror the craggy emotional texture of the ceremony in the foreground, where some of the participants weep decorously while others look away or talk among themselves. Satire inhabits the literal and figurative margins of Courbet's painting—just as it does in Curry's treatments of Kansas subjects. Painting courtesy of the Réunion des Musée Nationaux, France, and Art Resources, New York, New York.

class citizens, on a scale ordinarily reserved for scenes of epic historical events. Like Curry's painting, Courbet's emphasized landscape. The rocky bluffs depicted in the background of his burial scene mirror the craggy emotional texture of the ceremony in the foreground, where some of the participants weep decorously while others look away or talk among themselves. Satire inhabits the literal and figurative margins of Courbet's painting—just as it does in Curry's treatments of Kansas subjects.

A more somber and straightforward canvas by Harvey Dunn, Curry's mentor in the early 1920s, probably also had a direct influence on *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*. Completed shortly before Curry began work on his own depiction of a burial on the Great Plains, Dunn's *I Am the Resurrection and the Life* (1926) portrays a small group of mourners perched atop a bleak, wind-swept hill in the Dakota Territory. Once again, landscape is central to the painting's effect. Over the shoulders of the pioneers, open grassland stretches for miles in a series of wave-like crests. The only houses one can discern appear as mere dots on the horizon, looking more like ships on the Atlantic than domiciles anchored in the earth. As art historian Henry Adams observed of this painting, "Dunn focuses on the seriousness of the scene" and avoids any hint of irony or satire. Nevertheless, his

emphasis on the threatening vastness of the frontier, set against the determined efforts of its inhabitants to find meaning in death and comfort in ritual, anticipates Curry's approach.²²

Combined, Courbet and Dunn provided Curry with a compositional template full of thematic possibilities. However, the themes that Curry ultimately chose to explore had as much to do with his recent past (and fears for the future), as they did with the paintings that he appears to have partially imitated. Like many men of his generation—including, for example, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner—Curry was haunted by the war that he had narrowly missed. Guilt and disappointment, born of the artist's inability to join in the Great

22. Henry Adams, "Space, Weather, Myth, and Abstraction in the Art of John Steuart Curry," in *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*, ed. Patricia Junker (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 121. A veteran of the Western Front, Dunn may also have had a more indirect influence on Curry's painting. In 1918 Dunn was the best known of the AEF's eight official artists, and he continued to paint war subjects throughout the 1920s. In 1928 he began to contribute cover illustrations for *The American Legion Monthly*—sometimes stirring, sometimes sober depictions of Doughboys in action. While studying under Dunn in Tenafly, Curry would have seen many of his mentor's war paintings—and the collection of World-War-I memorabilia, helmets and weapons for use as props in future battles scenes, that Dunn received as a gift from the U.S. Army. Dunn proudly displayed his collection in his studio.

Adventure, perhaps initially dominated his feelings toward the conflict. In 1917, while studying at the Chicago Art Institute, he had hoped to join one of the U.S. Army's camouflage units, a common destination for artists. However, he unknowingly missed the deadline for voluntary enlistment, which came much earlier than expected, and the war ended before his draft registration number was called. A photograph from 1918, taken shortly after Curry transferred to Geneva College, shows the artist in uniform, his head shaved above his ears, looking very much the part of a Doughboy. However, Curry's service never went beyond a few weeks in the Student Army Training Corps. As if to compensate for his civilian status, his letters to his parents from this period expressed a youthful bellicosity. He repeatedly conveyed his desire to join the fighting in France, and in the martial spirit of the time he noted slackers among the service workers at the Chicago Art Institute: "Everybody talks war and nobody goes. There is an unpatriotic bunch at the cafeteria. They are all Germans or sympathizers."²³

In the 1920s, Curry's attitude toward the war changed considerably, thereby setting the stage for his well-documented support of isolationism in the late 1930s. Among the events that shaped this reassessment, Private Davis's funeral in 1921 probably played a lesser role. Curry's disenchantment with the Great Crusade seems to have come later, as the painter became more intimate with loss, via a sudden family tragedy, and as antiheroic literature and film redefined popular memory of the conflict. In other words, for Curry, Davis's reburial acquired over time a set of meanings that it did not necessarily possess in 1921. Later events combined to magnify its significance. Much of this process apparently occurred toward the end of the first postwar decade. During his period of European study in 1927, Curry visited and, in fact, sketched one of the American battle cemeteries on the former Western Front, an already emotional experience made more poignant still by a subsequent bereavement, which may have colored and intensified the artist's reflections on the loss of so many young men.²⁴ Within several months of Curry's return to the United States, his younger brother, Paul, who had fallen ill while enrolled at Harvard Law School in 1916, suddenly died at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. In her account

of this sudden tragedy, Curry scholar Sue Kendall noted that Paul's untimely death "may help to explain the origins of *Baptism in Kansas*." Seeing his sibling struck down so unexpectedly "spurred Curry to recall a powerful religious experience from his youth and to explore that memory in paint."²⁵ A similar connection can be drawn between Paul's demise and *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*, which Curry started less than a year after his return from Europe and just months after losing his brother. Perhaps the terrible spectacle of a promising life cut short led Curry's imagination back to the American memorials and grave markers that he had just seen in France—and then further back, to a schoolmate's posthumous and bitter return from a war that had killed him on his very first night as a combatant. In short, by 1928 Curry had no shortage of personal reasons to reflect artistically on death and commemoration, albeit in a way that would once again play to his East-Coast clientele.

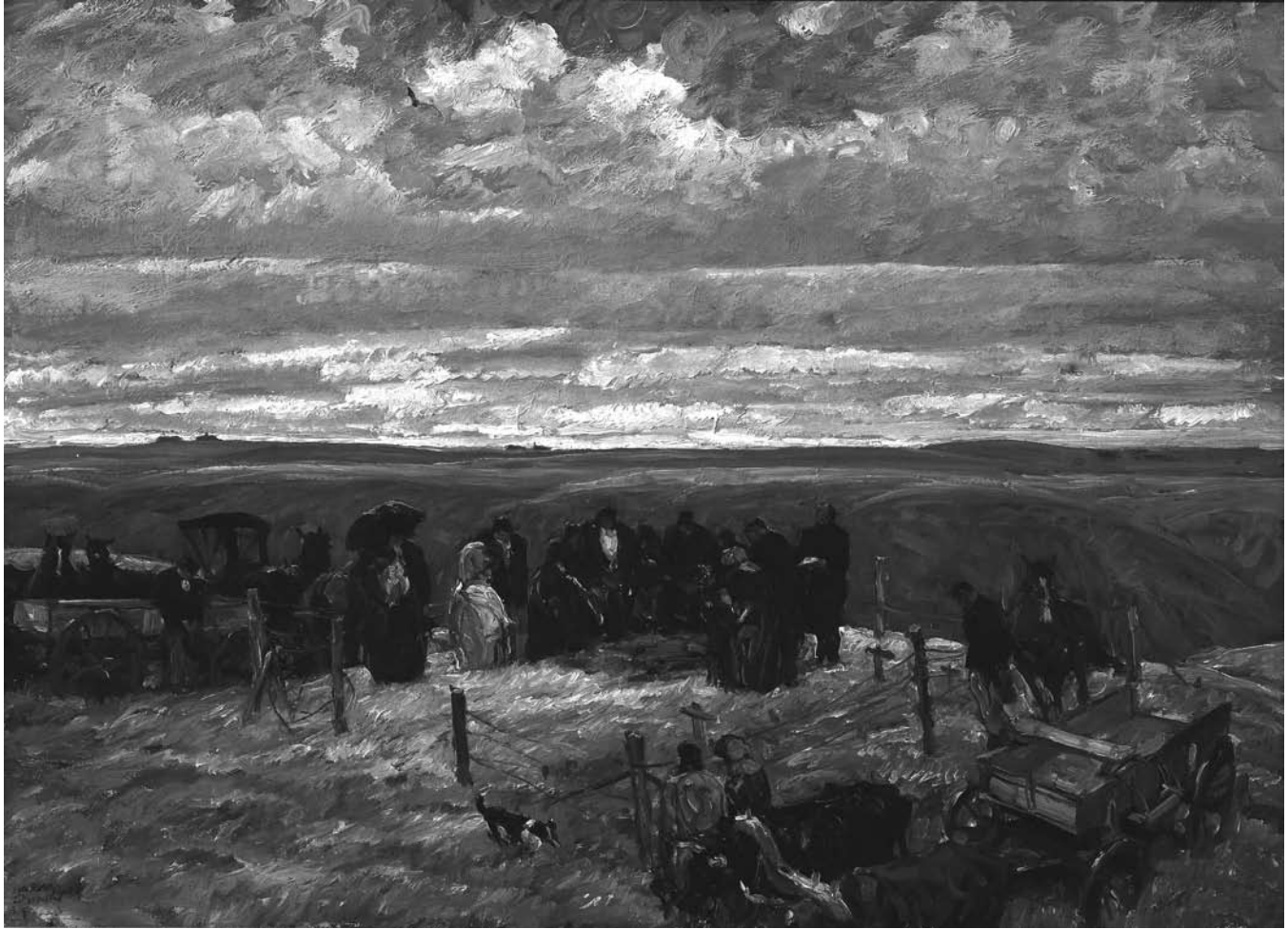
The painter's exposure to works of First World War literature and other cultural engagements with war memory perhaps also played a role in his depiction of Private Davis's homecoming. According to Curry's biographer, Lawrence E. Schmeckebier, the painter's sensitivity to the "tragedy, suffering, and death" produced in such superabundance on the Western Front came partially through his reading, which included Alfred Noyes's famous poem "The Victory Ball" (1918), a work that in some respects anticipates *The Return of Private Davis From the Argonne*.²⁶ Like Curry's painting, "The Victory Ball" focuses on a patriotic ceremony, in this case a dance to mark Germany's defeat, and on a homecoming of sorts. While the dancers celebrate, the phantoms of dead soldiers, who have at last returned from France, move about the ballroom unseen, undercutting the gaiety with their spectral presence. Curry's painting creates a similar effect through its ghostly point of view: as discussed previously, we look down on Davis's patriotic burial from an odd, unearthly perspective—as if witnessing the event through the dead man's eyes. Noyes's mockery of the idealism that led these soldiers to their deaths perhaps also struck a responsive chord in Curry. While the participants in the Victory Ball abandon themselves to sensuality—"Gripped by satyrs"—the dead look on, surprised at how little the world has changed as a result of their passing:

23. Quoted in M. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), 83.

24. Schmeckebier, *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America*, 254.

25. Sue Kendall, "Alien Corn: An Artist on the Middle Border," in *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*, 167.

26. Schmeckebier, *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America*, 255; Alfred Noyes, "The Victory Ball," in *Selected Poems* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Lippincott, 1939), 339.



*A somber and straightforward canvas by Harvey Dunn, Curry's mentor in the early 1920s, probably had a direct influence on *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*. A small group of mourners perched atop a bleak, wind-swept hill in the Dakota Territory is portrayed in Dunn's *I Am the Resurrection and the Life* (1926). Once again, landscape is central to the painting's effect. Over the shoulders of the pioneers, open grassland stretches for miles in a series of wave-like crests. The only houses one can discern appear as mere dots on the horizon, looking more like ships on the Atlantic than domiciles anchored in the earth. Dunn's emphasis on the threatening vastness of the frontier, set against the determined efforts of its inhabitants to find meaning in death and comfort in ritual, anticipates Curry's approach. Painting courtesy of the South Dakota Art Museum, Brookings.*

"What did you think
We should find," said a shade,
"When the last shot echoed
And peace was made?"
"Christ," laughed the fleshless
Jaws of his friend,
"I thought they'd be praying
For worlds to mend."²⁷

As we will see, Curry's use of space in his treatment of Davis's burial, combined with various satirical touches,

offers a similarly unsettling critique of the ultimate value of military sacrifice.

It is also important to note that Curry began work on *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* at a time when efforts to grapple with the meaning of the First World War took on a new level of intensity in the United States and found a greater variety of cultural expression than ever before. For example, within just a few months of Curry's departure from Europe in 1927, the American Legion staged its "Second AEF" convention in Paris, a lavish affair that involved nearly twenty thousand veterans. Two years later, "the notoriously frugal Calvin Coolidge" signed into law federal legislation that provided free transportation to Europe, along with

27. Noyes, "The Victory Ball," 339.

complimentary five-star accommodations, for Gold Star Mothers (mothers of fallen servicemen) who had elected before the 1923 deadline to have their sons' remains permanently interred overseas.²⁸ Remarkably, this generously funded act of remembrance went forward despite the arrival of the Great Depression; the first of the five Gold Star Pilgrimages took place in 1931.

Then there was the international boom in First World War literature, which began in 1928 and reached its climax in 1930. Shortly after Curry began work on his treatment of wartime loss and commemorative ritual, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), the most popular war novel of all time, rose to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, and, in an expurgated form, reached additional tens of thousands of readers through the Book of the Month Club. In 1930 Lewis Milestone's cinematic adaptation of Remarque's novel swept the Oscars. Quick to take advantage of the market that *All Quiet on the Western Front* spectacularly revealed, writers throughout Europe and the United States rushed their own war books into print. In all, thirteen significant works of American First World War literature appeared in 1929 (including Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*), followed by still more in 1930.²⁹ This wave of war-related cultural activity perhaps provided the market-savvy painter with yet another form of inspiration: from a commercial standpoint, the time was right for Curry to paint a Kansas scene that would intersect with the larger subject of America and the Great War. Personal tragedy, various artistic and cultural influences, and (last but not least) the marketplace all form part of the backdrop for *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*.

During the late 1930s, politics joined this tangle of influences and creative stimuli. Ordinarily reticent on matters of state, Curry openly expressed his isolationist views. In an interview conducted shortly before he delivered a public lecture in Cincinnati, the painter remarked, "I studied in France—but [I] don't think we ought to feel it our duty to go to war every time France and other European nations resume their 1,000 year-old quarrels." Moreover, he warned that another large-scale conflict would extinguish the artistic renaissance of which Regionalism was a part: "After the World War there began a splendid resurgence in Art in America, and we are in the midst of this movement now—but war will kill

it before it can reach its flowering." "War and beauty," the painter added, "do not go together."³⁰ Established by this point as the official artist-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin (the first such position in American history), Curry found a like-minded friend in the outspoken governor of Wisconsin, Philip F. La Follette, a leader in the America First movement. Indeed, in 1938, Curry painted the inauguration of La Follette's National Progressive Party, which included the avoidance of foreign entanglements as a central feature of its platform, at the University Stock Pavilion in Madison. Further evidence of Curry's support for isolationism came in 1940, when he wrote to Kansas Senator Arthur Capper to congratulate him on his opposition to the Lend-Lease Act: "You're 100% right," Curry declared, "in your stand on our Foreign policy in the Senate."³¹

The myriad sources and influences outlined above help to explain the ambiguities that permeate Curry's canvas. Is *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* a tribute to a lost friend and a Kansas hero? A depiction of mourning colored by Curry's own family tragedy? A vision of pointless military sacrifice, of waste, inspired by the antiheroic war literature and film of the late 1920s and early 1930s? A grim warning of war's costs delivered by an openly isolationist painter? Or yet another somewhat exploitive rendering of Kansas exotics produced with non-midwestern buyers in mind? Remarkably, the painting lends itself to all of these interpretations. Tension and contradiction appear everywhere. Note, for example, that Davis's casket, decorated with the Stars and Stripes, actually leads our eye away from the American scene for which it serves as the epicenter. Forming a vertical line, in a painting dominated by horizontals, the coffin points toward the distant horizon, reminding the viewer, as Henry Adams has observed, "that Davis died in a far-away place, for remote and mysterious reasons."³² This feature of the painting raises a question that goes to the heart of American memory of the First World War, memory that failed during the 1920s and 1930s to settle into a coherent body of cultural myth shared by most Americans. Does the true meaning of Davis's death reside in the nation to which he has returned or in the "far away place" from which he has come? Indeed, one can read Curry's painting, on this

28. Piehler, *Remembering War the American Way*, 102.

29. Steven Trout, "World War I in American Prose Works, Theater, and Cinema, 1919–1939," *American Prose Writers of World War I: A Documentary Volume*, ed. Steven Trout, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 316 (Detroit, Mich.: Thomson-Gale, 2005), 399.

30. "Great Renaissance of Art Seen if United States Escapes War," clipping, n.d., Curry Papers.

31. Quoted in Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 84.

32. Adams, "Space, Weather, Myth, and Abstraction in the Art of John Steuart Curry," 120.

level, as an ambivalent response to the specific policy debate that surrounded the postwar commemoration of America's fallen soldiers. Whose agenda offered the most meaningful form of remembrance—advocates of repatriation, who wished to reconnect the fallen with the commemorative traditions of their homeland, or supporters of overseas cemeteries, who hoped, in a sense, to keep America's war dead permanently enlisted in the cause of international progressivism? By splitting the viewer's attention between the patriotic ceremony and the distant skyline, which no one attending Davis's reburial could actually have seen, Curry suggests that this question has no answer. Thus, his painting simultaneously evokes the passions of isolationism and internationalism (passions that the painter had felt at different points in his life), but sides with neither as a response to the Great War.

The painting's perspective, almost cinematic in the way that it zooms over the crowd (as if drawn irresistibly by that distant horizon), also creates a sense of emotional distance between the viewer and the scene. And what appears initially as an almost sentimental celebration of midwestern patriotism and Heartland religiosity soon takes on darker, more sardonic significance. On the surface, the painting offers a touching display of small-town unity and military fidelity. Indeed, unlike Courbet, Curry has painted his provincial mourners in attitudes of genuine grief. There is nothing perfunctory about their participation in the service. Heads bowed, the townspeople lean toward the coffin with an air of protectiveness, as if reassuring the dead man that he is still part of their community. The military participants in the ceremony, regular soldiers and uniformed Legionnaires, likewise claim Davis as one of their own; these olive-drab figures stand stiffly at attention, absorbed in paying the proper ritualistic tribute.

Such, it is worth noting, were the thematic elements that presumably appealed to the painting's buyers in 1940. Through donations from thirty local individuals (collected over the course of a year-long subscription campaign), the Alonzo Cudworth American Legion Post 23 in Milwaukee acquired *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* for \$1,500, less than half the price listed by the artist's New York gallery.³³ On May

33. "Statement of Account for Period June 16, 1939 to June 4, 1940," Curry Papers. The price discount may have reflected Curry's generosity and his desire to see his painting in an appropriate venue. However, Maynard Walker, head of the New York Gallery where Curry's work was displayed and (on occasion) sold, felt that the artist overpriced his work. See Swann and Tsutsui, "John Steuart Curry," 252.

31, 1940, Curry presented the painting to the Legionnaires at a formal dinner held in the post's Cudworth Memorial Building. The subject of stories in both the *Milwaukee Tribune* and the *Milwaukee Journal*, this ceremonial gathering added yet another chapter to the story of William Davis's posthumous commemoration, as the piece of art that bore his name became part of a sacred space (itself named after a dead man) devoted to the memory of the Great War. On the surface, at least, *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* became fused through this event with an institutionally sanctioned version of war memory—namely, that of the American Legion, which continued (even as it embraced isolationism) to glorify military service and sacrifice. Not surprisingly, patriotic officialdom dominated the proceedings. Just as dignitaries of various kinds had spoken over the private's remains nearly twenty years earlier, official representatives ranging from the mayor of Milwaukee to two U.S. Army colonels now paid homage to Curry's painting.³⁴

Perhaps the most interesting—and revealing—comments made during the dinner came from Alfred G. Pelikan, the director of the Milwaukee Art Institute. Tellingly, Pelikan acknowledged that a "few post members" had earlier questioned the appropriateness of the painting for a Legion "clubhouse." (Did these members, one wonders, already perceive the many tensions that lurked beneath the work's veneer of sentimentality?) As the occasion's sole spokesman for high culture and aesthetics, the director took it upon himself to defend the painting. After praising the picture as a "great work of art," he promised "those who had doubts that months from now they would find a depth of feeling wrought in the canvas by the artist that they do not find today."³⁵

In his assertion that Curry's painting requires more than one viewing before its full "depth" becomes apparent, Pelikan was accurate. However, the meaning revealed by such repeated examination is quite different from what the director had in mind. A closer look at this supposedly patriotic and sentimental canvas reveals discordant details. As we have seen, Curry does not call the sincerity of his mourners into question. Thus, in this regard, his painting bears a stronger resemblance to Dunn's *I am the Resurrection and the Life* than to Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans*. However, there is something off about the Protestant preacher at the center of the painting. Captured at a moment of dramatic gesticulation, in

34. "New Curry Painting is Accepted by the Legion," Curry Papers.

35. "Cudworth Post Gets Painting by Curry," Curry Papers.

the midst of a sermon of clichéd, neo-patriotic content that is easy enough to imagine, the preacher seems curiously animated for such a solemn occasion; thus, he is perhaps a satirical figure consistent with Curry's tongue-in-cheek depiction of Bible-Belt Evangelicalism in such works as *Baptism in Kansas* and *The Gospel Train*. Here again, the artist defines Kansas exoticism in terms of quirky religious practice.

Notice too that the preacher's grandiloquent gesture does *not* lead the eye upward. Lost in the crowd of mourners and swallowed by the vastness of the prairie, it is an empty gesture delivered in empty space—despite the sunrays that *almost* appear to deliver a benediction. This may seem like excessive interpretation except that gestures that call attention to themselves are one of the hallmarks of Curry's style. For example, in *Hoover and the Flood*, the centrally positioned figure of an African-American Moses, arms lifted in praise to the heavens, conveys the painting's central themes of deliverance and salvation. More ambiguously, John Brown's outstretched arms in *The Tragic Prelude*, one of Curry's statehouse murals, simultaneously suggest his Christ-like martyrdom and his destructive fanaticism (reinforced by the Kansas cyclone that spins and the fires that burn behind him). In *Hoover and the Flood* the central figure's hands stand out against a neutral background; in *The Tragic Prelude* John Brown's hands are bloody red compared to the coloring of his tanned, weathered face and the blue of the Kansas sky; in *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*, however, the preacher's hands blend entirely into the background of the mourners. It is his face, his speech perhaps, that is highlighted. The preacher's raised hand can, of course, be read as a conventional invocation of the heavenly spirit. At same time, however, the gesture accommodates a quite different interpretation, signifying a speaker who is lost in his own platitudes, pompously holding forth on a subject of which he knows nothing—namely, the war from which Private Davis has "returned."

The line of identical black Model T Fords, visible behind the crowd, likewise complicates the painting's meaning. In terms of composition, this string of automobiles creates a line of demarcation between the foreground and the background—between the cemetery and the distant expanse of fields—and thus contributes considerably to the illusion of depth. However, the townspeople's appropriately funereal vehicles also carry thematic significance by hinting at the deadening conformity of small-town America. This may seem a stretch. However, by the time Curry began work on *The Return of Private*

Davis from the Argonne, the cult of the automobile had become a well-established target in the "Revolt against the Village" school of American fiction, a midwestern literary movement with close thematic ties to Curry's more satirical Kansas paintings. For example, in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), the preoccupation with motoring displayed by small-town physician Will Kennicott, along with virtually all of his male cronies, becomes a prominent measure of the cultural vacuity of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota. Willa Cather's Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *One of Ours* (1922) likewise constructs the automobile as a symbol of rural midwestern malaise. Significantly, the best driver in Cather's narrative of early twentieth-century Nebraska is the unsympathetic Enid Royce, a temperance advocate, vegetarian, and would-be missionary. Used primarily to carry its operator from one meeting of self-righteous reformers to another, Enid's Ford is described unpleasantly as a "black cubical object." In both of these works, automobiles connote not freedom—not the open road—but the values of an oppressively insular small-town world where technology is valued over art, total compliance to social convention is demanded, and intellectualism is scorned.³⁶ Would Private Davis, we wonder, have wanted to return to such a world? Curry, we know, left it as quickly as he could.

And then there is the Honor Guard, whose members stand ready with their rifles and bugle, beneath flags that one can almost hear flapping in the Kansas wind. Disconcertingly, the faces of these men—those that we can see—are interchangeable and expressionless, as if stamped out with a military mold. And two of the uniformed standard bearers look almost sinister, their features blotted out by the shadows of their steel helmets, giving them the eerie appearance of doughboys in gas-masks. Indeed, these spectral figures—Curry's version, perhaps, of the phantoms who show up for the Victory Ball—remind one of the enlistees featured in the artist's 1938 painting *Parade to War*, living men, marching to glory amid tickertape and applause, who simultaneously assume the appearance of corpses. Thus, into what appears initially as a stirring portrait of martial tribute, Curry inserts a subtle critique of military regimentation, as well as a grim reminder of the horrors of modern industrialized warfare.

36. See Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1920); Willa Cather, *One of Ours* (New York: Knopf, 1922), 208.



*Into what appears initially as a stirring portrait of martial tribute in *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*, Curry inserts a subtle critique of military regimentation, as well as a grim reminder of the horrors of modern industrialized warfare. One way he achieves this is through his depiction of the Honor Guard, some of whom look almost sinister, their features blotted out by the shadows of their steel helmets, giving them the eerie appearance of doughboys in gasmasks. Indeed, these spectral figures remind one of the enlistees featured in the artist's 1938 painting *Parade to War* (above), living men, marching to glory amid tickertape and applause, who simultaneously assume the appearance of corpses. Oil on canvas, 47 13/16 x 63 13/16 in., gift of Barnett Banks, Inc., AG.1991.4.1. Courtesy of the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida.*

In the end, then, *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* presents the First World War as an event that—in America at least—defied translation into a stable body of collective memory. Whether representing the community, the church, the Legion, or the army, the mourners depicted on Curry's canvas all labor to fit Private Davis into various social narratives—metaphorical equivalents of the flag-draped casket that houses his remains. The preacher, his face dramatically lit from above, Bible clutched to his chest, eulogizes a fallen Protestant crusader. The Legionnaires, on the other hand, enfold Private Davis into a stern tradition of service and manliness that joins together American soldiers of all wars—regardless of their causes or outcomes. Flags, flowers,

sermons, and salutes—the painting brings together multiple forms of commemorative apparatus, all of which are intended to make sense of a young American's death in the Great War, a death that in Davis's case constituted an ironic "satire of circumstance" worthy of Thomas Hardy. But the Kansas plains that seemingly extend forever in the background of the painting, an essential feature that Curry accommodated only by refashioning the topography of Jefferson County, are unmoved by the pomp and circumstance. Limitless and indifferent, they form an existential void within which the preacher's rhetoric and the Honor Guard's salute seem hollow and puny. Moreover, none of the consolatory narratives offered by either Church or State seem to reach John Davis,

who kneels alone, bent with grief, and lost in his private pain. Although completely surrounded by his fellow townspeople and dressed in his Sunday best, he is as removed from the ceremony as the lonely water tower on the horizon—perhaps the most devastating of the many ironies that Curry packs onto this haunting study of war and remembrance.

By the time of its completion in 1940, Curry's exploration of the ambiguities of the Great Crusade had also become a warning. Indeed, here again, Kansas space lent itself particularly well to the national themes that the painting addresses. By depicting a burial in the landlocked Heartland, *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* vividly demonstrates how far the tragic consequences of foreign intervention had reached in 1918—and might reach again. In this sense, the painting carries a clearly isolationist message, which is reinforced by the strange line of clouds, thunderheads in the making, that billow upward beyond the water tower, looking almost like the smoke produced by exploding artillery projectiles. Are these the clouds of another war waiting both literally and figuratively on the horizon? One year after finishing *The Return of Private Davis From the Argonne*, Curry depicted America's entry into the Second World War through a similar meteorological metaphor. Commissioned by *Esquire* magazine, Curry's painting *The*

Light of the World (or *America Facing the Storm*) eschewed conventional patriotism in favor of apocalyptic imagery. Allegorical rather than realistic, the painting shows a group of Americans on the eastern seaboard, set against a medley of buildings that include a small-town church and Manhattan-style skyscrapers, as they gaze at a terrifying storm approaching from the Atlantic. With the arrival of war, the ominous belt of clouds depicted in Curry's Kansas painting had become a hurricane.

In his study *Renegade Regionalists*, art historian James M. Dennis wrote that "Wood, Benton, and Curry were entirely capable of hitting upon visual ideas of immediate social-political relevance." Regionalism, he asserted, is a reductive misnomer for a body of work that is, in fact, highly modernist and engaged with issues of national, even international importance.³⁷ Dennis's argument applies with special force to *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*, a Kansas painting that captured the doubts and divisions of an entire nation as it struggled to "remember" the First World War—and as it contemplated the approaching storm clouds of an even worse conflict. [KH]

37. James M. Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 8.