Myth and History in William Kennedy's "Improbable City" of Albany, New York[1]

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In his own words, William Kennedy—Pulitzer Prize-winner author of fiction and nonfiction—"never stopped being a journalist" ("Interview" 12:05). He has shaped his body of work by incorporating journalism and history into his novels, transforming them to myth through his larger-than-life tales (Lance xii). Across this elevation into myth, Kennedy's works are united by a common place: his hometown of Albany, New York. Kennedy was born in the city in 1928 and has come to define himself as one of Albany's finest storytellers. Albany serves as a setting for his novels, the subject of his essays and historical work, and in a deeper sense, as a muse for the myths that he creates. Through his fiction and nonfiction alike, Kennedy fuses history with myth to create narratives that reveal the city's true spirit to the reader. Thus, the sum of his œuvre is this polyphonic representation of the city, elevating individual narratives to stories of undeniable historic importance.

Although William Kennedy's literary career began in 1969 with the publication of *The Ink Truck*, which was inspired by his time as a reporter for the *Albany Times Union*, this essay focuses on Kennedy's "Albany Cycle," which encompasses the rest of his fiction. My research and analysis specifically center on Kennedy's novels *Legs*, *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game*, and *Ironweed*. *Ironweed* particularly brought Kennedy attention and acclaim as the winner of the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for fiction (Croyden). The same year as *Ironweed*, Kennedy also published *O Albany!: Improbable City of Political Wizards, Fearless Ethnics, Spectacular Aristocrats, Splendid Nobodies, and Underrated Scoundrels*, which serves as a contrast to the Albany Cycle's

fictionalization of history. Through all its grandiose lyricism, *O Albany!* is Kennedy's version of Albany's history. His framing of the city as "improbable" is the genesis of my project, tracking the way that myth and history operate and inflect each other in Kennedy's work. What does it mean for a city to be "improbable?" How can centralizing its "improbability"—or the strange luck to find all these diverse stories within its bounds—color our understanding of the Albany Cycle? Following this, the rest of Kennedy's full title for *O Albany!* defines the improbable city by marking the colorful characters that occupy it. This leads us to analyze the individual narratives that make up this city and mirror the Albany Cycle, a collection of disparate novels with intersecting narratives. Taking these two versions of historical writing, we can explore Kennedy's ultimate project to represent Albany in his novels.

Kennedy's Albany Cycle is not only a loose umbrella for his novels set in Albany, but an intentioned exploration of various moments in the city's history. In his 1976 "Statement of Plans" for his Albany Cycle, he closes by saying:

> I will pursue [the novels]…attacking whichever element asserts itself most desperately and most strangely in my imagination. I feel certain, however, that there will be a unity of meaning about the life of my own time in the diverse finished products, if I… carry through to the finish line what I now consider the raw material for a life's work. ("Statement" 3)

Kennedy's words reveal his plans to fuse the city's history with his own imagination in surprising and compelling ways. The finished novels show many different sides to the city, rejecting a singular story in favor of multiple coexisting narratives. Each novel is a testament to this rejection. As the Albany Cycle developed, Kennedy moved further from specific historical bases. Even as his novels enter more fantastical realms, with gifts of prophecy and ghostly encounters, Kennedy continues to demonstrate his devotion to journalistic fidelity. His works capture truth in the human experience, using myth and history at once to foreground the many narratives of Albany. It is through this simultaneity that we see the different versions of Albany his characters experience come alive in the text. Even though the novels are set in similar times, the Albany of each work is strikingly different. In Kennedy's words, this is where he ultimately

finds "meaning about the life of his own time." He sees an importance in the stories that he tells. As he reinvents Albany, weaving a written tapestry of the city, he sets himself up not as the source of the stories, but their mouthpiece; he is the epic poet, and Albany is his muse. By viewing the Albany Cycle as a collection of the many versions of Albany, we see that Kennedy's works are not at odds with each other, but that each enhances the others as he tells the many stories of his city.

Kennedy closes *O Albany!*'s first chapter writing that his greatest hope for his literary project is to illuminate "this always-shifting past" to discover how it has become our present; he is interested in the *life* of stories and the ways that they transform (*O Albany!* 7). In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes states that the crux of myth is that it "transforms history into nature" (129). It retroactively ascribes nature to a historical origin. Yet the myths that Kennedy creates are more improbable than inevitable. As his myths grow from historical stories, he does not try to *explain* them but rather *relive* them, accentuating their narrative qualities. Often, Kennedy editorializes or uses suggestions to refract the way that a reader sees history. In his fiction, meanwhile, Kennedy pulls on familiar concepts such as classical myths. There is still a sense of playfulness in Kennedy's use of myth, just like his use of history. Kennedy's invocations of myth do not change the laws of nature within the text, but they illuminate their narratives. Characters become larger-than-life but remain human—they become no less flawed. Kennedy is not only interested in the myths of heroes' journeys, but also the moments that give more life to his characters. As he mines narratives from these mythical and historical sources, he enters the same tradition as Faulkner with Yoknapatawpha County and Joyce with Dublin, situating himself firmly in Albany, New York. He orchestrates the city's improbability himself, directing at once the many voices he hears in the city.

With this understanding of myth and history as narrative tools that Kennedy invokes to tell his stories of Albany, this study focuses on Kennedy's individual works as intersections between these two forces. By centering on the different voices through which myth and history emerge, I will offer William Kennedy's Albany Cycle as an example of literary polyphony. The term, first used by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to the novel's capability to

harbor many voices and a "dialogic conception of truth" (Morson). I do not contend that Kennedy's novels are polyphonic works; rather, each presents a specific perspective and genre in which he explores history and myth. Taking the Albany Cycle works together, however, I hope to demonstrate them as a polyphonic representation of the city. This approach mirrors the history that Kennedy presents in *O Albany!*, and pushes it further. The works of the Albany Cycle center on the depiction of particular historical moments in Albany, giving the truth revealed more clarity than a historiography. Kennedy's polyphony illuminates the potential for stories told through myth and history in diverse and improbable corners of the city. Each novel offers a wholly unique voice in this ensemble, creating, in sum, a story of Albany that can only be understood altogether as the polyphonic whole.

I. Kennedy's *O Albany!* as a Sum of Narratives

In 1983, months after publishing *Ironweed*, William Kennedy published *O Albany! Improbable City of Political Wizards, Fearless Ethnics, Spectacular Aristocrats, Splendid Nobodies, and Underrated Scoundrels*. Even though it is framed as a history, *O Albany!* delivers on the promises of its hyperbolic title: it is not a historical textbook. Kennedy instead uses his fictional style to craft a unique historic register that establishes a narrative sensibility in the accounts that he gives. This kaleidoscopic voice fuses history, memoir, and novel by presenting both historical and personal moments on the same stage of Albany. Kennedy also uses *O Albany!* to paint himself into the narrative, marking himself as another inhabitant of the history that he is weaving. Thus, Kennedy develops his persona as a historian collecting stories of Albany. In his own words, the city became "inexhaustible context" for his stories, "abundant in mythic qualities" (*O Albany!* 5). Invoking myth in the same breath as both historical recording and his own imagination. *O Albany!* manifests as a storyteller's extraordinary attempt to singularly make sense of his city—an inherently plural place—by presenting it as the sum of the stories that populate it.

Kennedy's historic register pervades all of *O Albany!*, but an incredibly vivid example of its effect is in its full title. In the first part, Kennedy refers to the city in the second person, evoking a classical appeal to a muse. This immediately marks the book's unique and

subversive way of telling history—Kennedy *sings the praises* of Albany rather than simply recounting events. The book's title emphasizes the particular and memorable characters that populate the city. Kennedy promises to tell the history of Albany's "political wizards" and "spectacular aristocrats," but the history emphasizes the entire city as Kennedy puts the individual first. Even the "nobodies" are "splendid." All of these details lie within his framing of Albany as an "improbable city." This adjective is perhaps the most charged and important in the entire book. Its effect on the reader encapsulates Kennedy's persona and voice: it renders Albany *almost* fantastical. The city appears to the reader to be larger-than-life and truly "abundant in mythic qualities," but, in spite of this, it exists (*O Albany!* 5). Kennedy's voice centers Albany's improbability, and the history in the book conveys this quality.

The authoritative and imaginative power of *O Albany!* comes from its speaker, William Kennedy, taking on the persona of a historian waxing poetic about his city. He begins by marking his subject not as simply a place, but as a "state of mind," as the first chapter's title indicates (*O Albany!* 3). Establishing his voice in his opening paragraph, Kennedy writes that he does not see himself as a "booster" or "apologist" for Albany, but "as a person whose imagination has becomes fused with a single place, and in that place finds all the elements that a man ever needs for the life of his soul" (*O Albany!* 3). This description serves as much as a disclaimer for the text as it does as a thesis. According to Kennedy, the history of Albany is passionately linked to the individual stories—nonfiction and fiction alike—that inspire him to champion his city. His manner of telling, however, remains the same in this "state of mind" between fiction and nonfiction. In other words, Kennedy approaches nonfiction in a similar way to fiction—the city of Albany becomes more than a backdrop for the exploration of character; it becomes a character itself, inextricable from the individuals that populate his writing. Simply approaching *O Albany!* as a unified historical narrative would not accomplish his vision, for it is the stories that populate the city that give it its literary power.

Throughout the episodes that he recounts in *O Albany!*, Kennedy elevates and mythologizes historical fact into historical narrative. By ascribing narrative structure to the stories that he tells, Kennedy suggests that Albany is an essential setting for American

myth. One of the most compelling instances of this is when Kennedy discusses President-Elect Abraham Lincoln's 1861 visit to the city. In addition to the political importance of this visit, he dwells particularly on the fact that John Wilkes Booth was in town the same day acting in a play. While no historical records indicate that anything of note was actually exchanged between the two, Kennedy positions this as a foreshadowing confrontation between two legendary figures of American history. After describing how the press reported each of their visits, Kennedy suggests the possibility of a physical encounter, asking, "Had Lincoln noticed Wilkes-Booth? Had the President and his assassin-to-be made eye contact, perhaps? Albany asked itself such preposterous questions for an age to come" (*O Albany!* 69). Kennedy only speculates this possibility, but the city's "improbability" shines because of Kennedy's interjection. Without making any ahistorical claims, his voice nonetheless goes beyond history to suggest what he sees as the more compelling story.

Simultaneous to putting the history of Albany into narrative, Kennedy writes himself into the action of *O Albany!*, emphasizing his own relationship to events or locations and linking himself to their importance. The book's second chapter, "Legacy from a Lady," begins, "I awoke in the libraries of the city" (*O Albany!* 8). This introduction is fitting as Kennedy invites his reader in with a familiar story of learning to love literature in a local library. This allows him to tell of the historic Pruyn Library and his encounters with Huybertie Pruyn, daughter of the library's namesake. He intersperses historical facts with grandiose descriptions, calling the building "as much a cathedral to [his] ten-year-old self as was Chartres" (*O Albany!* 9). By evoking his own experience, Kennedy explicitly links his genesis as a writer to a fixed place in Albany. His "awakening" in the library becomes a mythic origin for himself as the storyteller of *O Albany!*. Kennedy's editorialization of his own memories also lets him take the opportunity to comment on his own place as someone "whose imagination has become fused with a single place" (*O Albany!* 3). He mentions how in his youth during the Great Depression, the Pruyn Library was a "haven of warmth" for down-and-outs with no other place to spend their days (*O Albany!* 10). He then turns to the reader to imagine, "If I ran a library, I would recruit aged vagrants… It would give the place tone. It would keep me reminded of the need to preserve what I can of the receding past, and of my function as a

keeper of universal and not merely elitist verities" (*O Albany!* 11). In this moment, Kennedy all but directly refers to his project in writing *O Albany!*—he stops just short of calling his history of the city to be a "universal verity." Even as he champions the everyday Albanian—the "splendid nobody" that we later see in *Ironweed*—Kennedy is elevating himself and his own voice. He marks himself as a keeper of Albany's history, inextricably tying himself into the myths that he writes.

Kennedy's identification with the history of Albany continues through *O Albany!*'s final chapter, in which he concludes his ode to his city with a personal story. In the chapter, titled "Albany as a Pair of Suspenders and a Movie," Kennedy shifts from Albany's recent political history to the personal. The final story that he tells is of his parents' courtship in 1921. Kennedy references postcards that his father sent his mother, including one that reads: "Sometime when you are at leisure, if you care to let me know, we will step out" (*O Albany!* 384). And from this message, Kennedy concludes *O Albany!*, writing: "I take it this message was not received negatively on Colonie Street. I take it Mary McDonald found a way to let Bill Kennedy know she was at leisure. And they did step out. I am here to tell about that" (*O Albany!* 384). With this ending, William Kennedy himself is what lies at the end of the present history of Albany. This ending both links back to the first chapter's promise and exceeds it—he is not just a man whose imagination is tied to the city, but whose imagination allows it to be recorded, told, passed down, bastardized, set straight, and more. He is literally giving himself the last word on the city's history. After creating so many narratives from the historical facts that he knows, this conclusion feels earned. Kennedy invites his reader into this intimate moment that led to him becoming a part of Albany. By asserting himself as an equal part to this history, Kennedy proves his power as a storyteller, historian, and mythmaker.

O Albany! documents the potential of historical fact to create a compelling and malleable literary form. William Kennedy sets out to write a biography of the city and does so by taking on a voice that elevates Albany much as his fiction does. In *O Albany!*, he gives fanfare to all the wildly disparate stories that he can find to tell the unique and plural story of Albany. I argue below that Kennedy's novels explore all the complexities of a single story, thus limiting each

novel's image of Albany to only the experiences of its characters. His novels collectively represent Albany as a sum of narratives in a polyphonic fictional world. By centering Kennedy's vision of Albany on these representations, we witness how his fiction casts an ensemble of voices to explore the intersections of myth and history that illuminate the city.

II. *Legs* and Mythmaking Through Narrative Persona

Published in 1975, *Legs* became the first novel in Kennedy's Albany Cycle. Among Kennedy's novels, its subject and characters are the most factually historical, making *Legs* the ideal place to begin considering Kennedy's imagination and creation of historical narrative in his novels. It centers on Jack "Legs" Diamond, a real-life gangster who lived and died in Albany in the 1920s and early 1930s. The novel does not purport to tell the complete and accurate history of Jack Diamond. Rather, *Legs* is told through the eyes of Jack's attorney, Marcus Gorman—a fictional narrator. Similar to the persona that Kennedy takes on to tell history in *O Albany!*, Marcus's voice tells Jack's story by combining factual truth with metaphysical ones; he elevates his subject to a mythic level by both reporting the events of Jack's life while also building onto his intangible legacy. Marcus uses his unique access to Jack's life to enter his legacy, implicitly asserting himself as the most qualified storyteller of the myth of Jack Diamond. His intimate relationship with Jack corresponds to the intimacy that he develops with his reader, hiding his own faults and rejecting other versions of Jack's story. In this way, Kennedy places Marcus's voice at the center of *Legs*. Through this narrator we experience the Albany of Jack Diamond, and we discover how Jack Diamond lives on in the minds of readers.

Born out of William Kennedy's fascination with Jack Diamond, *Legs* is a novel that is occupied with the continuation of the gangster's life through stories. Marcus speaks the novel's first line, telling his friends Packy, Tipper, and Flossie, "I really don't think he's [Jack's] dead" (*Legs* 11). This thread of being dead or alive pervades the entire novel. Although Marcus's narrative ultimately centers on his relationship with Jack leading up to his death, he depicts Jack's continued life in the minds of others. When he returns to this framing scene near the novel's end, Marcus talks about how in the forty-three years since Jack's death, there had been numerous

attempts to tell his story, but "accuracy about Jack wasn't possible" (*Legs* 310). Instead, he closes the penultimate chapter with one particularly fantastic story. In a brief anecdote, Packy recalls how he once saw Jack Diamond send his dog up the hotel elevator to retrieve his sweater, and when it took too long, they went to Jack's suite and found the dog mending a button. While this is obviously a fabrication, Marcus feels that this mythical story is more true than any other attempt to fully depict Jack and his power over others. Marcus calls "Packy's dog story . . . closer to the truth about Jack and his world than any other word ever written or spoken about him" (Legs 310). For Packy, this is how Jack's memory stays alive. Juxtaposed with the dog anecdote are Flossie's interjections, each making another extraordinary claim about Jack. She says, "Jack could turn on the electric light sometimes, just by snapping his fingers. …Jack could run right up the wall and half across the ceiling… Jack could tie both of his shoes at once" (*Legs* 311). Like Packy's story, these moments highlight Jack's extraordinary influence on others. They attest to his legacy—the legacy that compels Marcus to set the story straight decades after his death. They prove that the myth of Legs Diamond is far from dead.

Beyond the novel's framing, Marcus's position as an active character in *Legs* transforms the narrative from a recitation of facts about Jack Diamond to a deeply subjective work of a self-interested narrator marking himself as Jack's definitive storyteller. As readers, we see Marcus constructing Jack's mythic legacy as an attempt to communicate the gangster's seeming magnetism as a universal experience among all those who met him. Later in the first chapter, Marcus calls Jack "a singular being in a singular land, a fusion of the individual life flux with the clear and violent light of American reality, with the fundamental Columbian brilliance that illuminates this bloody republic" (*Legs* 14). In this hyperbole, the reader also becomes acutely aware of what Marcus's voice accomplishes in the moment of narration. As Jack's attorney, Marcus's job relies on his ability to tell a story and draw his audience in to agree with him. This aspect of his character is crucial to understanding his voice, especially as it differs from Kennedy's persona in *O Albany!*. The history we learn through *Legs* is quite different, as it seeks to explore the more quotidian details of Jack Diamond's story by entering on the level of Jack's milieu, even if the stories that Kennedy explores in the text are

his own inventions. In his article "The Lawyer as Narrator in William Kennedy's *Legs*," Stephen Whittaker locates the significance of Marcus's day job in how it casts the novel's readers as jurors. In his words, "reader, narrator, and character all engage in the same process" of "culling and balancing… competing interpretations" of the facts that the narrative offers (Whittaker 158). While Whittaker reads Marcus as a narrator who *complicates* the facts of the novel by "present[ing] to us… several Jack Diamonds," it is this plurality of voices—a plurality expressed even in Marcus's voice alone—that gives the novel its power. In *O Albany!*, Kennedy's voice both directly editorializes historical fact and uses subtle suggestion to weave narrative structure; in *Legs*, Marcus makes use of this power of suggestion to seduce the reader just as he is seduced by Jack Diamond.

As Marcus keeps Jack alive in his storytelling, he also continually marks himself as a fundamental part of the narrative. After recounting his first day working for Jack, Marcus says that "everything seemed quite real as I stood there, but I knew when I got back to Albany the day would seem to have been invented by a mind with a faulty gyroscope. It had the quality of a daydream after eight whiskeys" (*Legs* 73). Reflecting on this "unusual resonance," Marcus makes a connection between the figure of Jack and that of Gatsby. It is a brief moment, but full of potential to draw parallels. Marcus largely talks about the surface-level comparisons between the two and Jack's connections to Arnold Rothstein (*Legs* 74). This juxtaposition that Marcus sets up also implies the role of the narrator, with Marcus becoming the Nick Carraway to Jack's Jay Gatsby. As the speaker of Jack's story, Marcus aligns himself with Nick. He too speaks as an outsider to the world that his subject inhabits and shrinks from his true involvement in the story. While Gatsby and Jack are the subjects of their respective stories, the narrators form their continued legacies. This becomes most clear in the final line of *Legs*. Mirroring the first line, Marcus writes Jack as speaking from beyond the grave. He addresses him, as Marcus writes: "'Honest to God, Marcus,' he said going away, 'I really don't think I'm dead'" (*Legs* 317). The entire novel has led up to this moment—Jack the ghost affirms that he is still alive. Even when the historical Jack ceases to be, the myth of Jack cannot be dispelled. The novel ends

here because Marcus's mission is complete, and Jack is resurrected in myth. As Marcus's charisma persists, so does Jack.

In addition to the position of Marcus's voice, a reader must also consider how Kennedy establishes physical rules for his narrator in the novel. For much of the novel, Marcus narrates his own experiences through his unique perspective. There are moments, however, in which Marcus narrates events where he was not present, including the Hotsy club scene and the Streeter Incident. Even though Marcus would have logically heard about these events as Jack's attorney, he narrates them in scene, giving them a sense of immediacy. This choice implies that he is the most qualified character to tell the story. Marcus has access to all of the *facts* and sets himself apart as the storyteller that will piece these facts together. In the novel's framing, Marcus gathers his friends together to hear "some of their truths [and] secret lies" about Jack in order to write about him (*Legs* 15). By combining his identity as an attorney with that of a storyteller—the *definitive* storyteller—Kennedy invites a greater suspension of disbelief regarding the information that Marcus has access to. This sense is amplified and augmented in the novel's surreal conclusion. The final chapter of *Legs* appears to once again break the narrative rules that Kennedy has set. Marcus both narrates and is physically present in the final scene in which Jack is aware of "his new condition: incipiently dead" (*Legs* 315). Marcus's first-person account continues even as Jack becomes a specter and speaks with the ghosts of his past. This casts Marcus as a figure that truly has the *last word* on Jack. Even if the reader has lost their trust in Marcus to tell the factual story of Albany's Legs Diamond, he has at this point gained their trust to conclude the story of Jack the *character*. His is the sole voice that can achieve this, combining known history with novelistic narrative.

As Marcus filters many versions of Jack's story, however, his self-presentation becomes more obscured. The reader sees him become more ensconced in Jack's criminal underworld even as he claims to be resisting it. After they return from a much-publicized trip to Europe, Marcus reflects on his own recent actions. He recognizes his transformation from a "voyeur at the conspiracy" to an "accessory," and yet he denies accountability (*Legs* 106). He remains nonchalant even as he recounts sexually assaulting a woman on the ship—an event that he calls his "excursion into quasi-rape"

while maintaining that "underneath, I knew I was still straight" (*Legs* 122). Because this assertion so strongly contrasts with his actions, the reader very clearly sees the holes in this "straight" self-view. In the same line Marcus says that he is "still balancing either/or while Jack plunged ahead… toward the twin peaked glory of bothness." In comparison, Marcus "[feels] suddenly like a child" (*Legs* 122). Even as Marcus is in denial of the true impact of his actions, he is clearly fascinated and drawn to Jack's life. Marcus's fascination betrays him. The source of the story that he is telling is what accentuates the flaws in his own self-presentation. Whittaker reads the novel as a "final defense of [Jack] that is freighted with [Marcus's] self apology," centering on Marcus's agency (Whittaker 162). I find this reading reductive; even as Marcus does speak the last word on Jack, *Legs* is full of both his and other characters' versions of Jack's story. Marcus centralizes the ways in which history is transformed into myth. By crafting a flawed narrator that lives and acts alongside the novel's subject, Kennedy is better able to approach history as a narrative. Like Marcus, we as readers are drawn to the "lies" in our search for truth, for they form the most compelling story (*Legs* 15).

Marcus's implicit self-assertion as the ideal storyteller for the legend of Legs Diamond extends to psychological readings of his subject. This analysis is most prevalent during the "Streeter Incident," when Jack kidnaps and interrogates a bootlegger named Streeter who he fears is encroaching on his turf in the Catskills. As Marcus describes the exchange between Streeter and Jack, who is particularly bothered by Streeter's feigned ignorance, his narration deftly moves into Jack's mind, to a memory of Jack's earlier court case that Marcus witnessed. He links these moments for the reader, saying, "in the courtroom [Jack] knew how empty [his] smile was, how profoundly he had failed to create the image that he wanted to present to the people of Philadelphia" (*Legs* 201). The Streeter Incident is one of the novel's most climactic scenes because the reader sees the return of the shocking depravity they knew was in Jack. His nature was hidden because readers—along with Marcus—had become charmed with him. The intensity of the scene and Marcus's psychological narration bring the explicit and implicit conflicts of the novel together through Jack's outburst. Marcus has earned the reader's trust to include this deeper exploration of character while recounting a dramatic moment. Interestingly, when

Marcus gives a toast to Jack near the novel's conclusion after he is acquitted in the Streeter case, his narrative enters Jack's own mind directly. In tandem with this narrative shift, Kennedy enters a third-person perspective, writing about "when Marcus gave his victory toast" (*Legs* 288). Punctuated by excerpts of the toast, Kennedy's lyrical prose gains a new quality. As readers, if we are still to accept the novel's framing, then at this moment we feel that he has earned the ability to voice Jack's thoughts. *Legs* presents a plurality of stories of Jack, and as Marcus mediates all of these stories and voices at once, he elevates his subject to a new and mythic height.

Legs is the first novel of Kennedy's Albany Cycle, and it represents a near-complete exploration of the myth of Jack "Legs" Diamond through a deeply subjective narrator. The voice of Marcus invites the reader's engagement by demonstrating how myth and history are not opposites. In *Legs*, all forms of fact become narrative; narrative itself then begins to border on the fantastical. This construction shapes the way that history is told. *Legs* is not a historic kaleidoscope in the way that *O Albany!* is, but it too uses a multitude of narratives to tell a singular story. Kennedy dramatizes the creation of mythical stories as Marcus culls from many competing narratives to shape his own. As Kennedy continues to alter his modes of storytelling and his engagement with fact, the voices that occupy the Albany Cycle continue to change as well. With the singularity he crafts his novel about Jack Diamond, Kennedy also creates a very specific image of Albany, New York. This image will change as new voices enter the conversation and continue to reveal threads of Kennedy's polyphonic tapestry of the city.

III. *Ironweed* Exemplifying the "Splendid Nobody"[2]

The genesis of William Kennedy's 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Ironweed* goes back to the 1960s to Kennedy's tenure as an investigative journalist for the *Albany Times Union*. Along with photographer Bernie Kohlberg, Kennedy wrote a series on the slums of Albany and met a man named Buddy, whom he interviewed several times. *Ironweed*'s original iteration, titled *The Lemon Weed*, was a piece of fiction based on Buddy's experiences. In a draft of a preface for *The Lemon Weed*, Kennedy wrote that "the articles [featuring Buddy] seemed to touch many readers. One man was repelled but fascinated that we could get such people to reveal

themselves to us" ("Preface" 1). These words show the sense of immediacy that Kennedy sees in Buddy's story and in the countless others like his. Kennedy first endeavored to write a piece of nonfiction, but he shares that he was unable to write this book for fear that any exposé he wrote would have negative consequences for the real people involved ("Preface" 2). Nevertheless, Kennedy still believed that this story was imperative to be told. He followed the same path he took in his treatment of Jack Diamond and turned it into fiction. In this way, *The Lemon Weed* does have an authentic factual background for its historical moment. This outline, however, remains very different from those of Kennedy's other novels. Here, the history being presented is not an event or a figure, but a context—life on the streets of Albany during the Great Depression.

Thus, in 1983, after thirteen rejections from publishers, William Kennedy published the third novel in the Albany Cycle: *Ironweed* (Croyden). This novel represents a moment of culmination for the series, taking Kennedy's developments and experimentation from *Legs* to greater levels, producing a new and vivid depiction of Albany. Here, the story is centered on Francis Phelan, returning to Albany twenty-two years after dropping and killing his infant son, Gerald. Kennedy situates Francis within an Albany that is occupied by characters from his other novels, but through Francis, the reader experiences a wholly unique social and economic context of Great Depression Albany. In this, Francis becomes his own storyteller. The thread of mythologization that Kennedy explored in his prior novels now becomes one of *self-mythologization*; Francis is both the poet and subject of his own epic as he works to reclaim the life that he had lost. Following Catholic imagery, allusions to classical myth, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Francis works desperately to both understand and regain control of his story and to expiate the guilt he harbors for his past deeds. In this construction, Kennedy turns the ordinary to the improbable and aligns Francis, an everyday man, with the epic hero.

Ironweed is a novel of redemption, and this redemption is structured through both the lenses of Catholic imagery and secular stories. In the novel's opening, as Francis walks through Saint Agnes Cemetery just north of Albany, the reader hears ghosts of Albany and of Francis's family making observations about him. They reach a high point when he approaches Gerald's grave. Kennedy writes:

> In his grave…Gerald watched the advent of his father and considered what action might be appropriate for their meeting. Should he absolve the man of all guilt, …for the abandonment of the family, for craven flight when the steadfast virtues were called for? Gerald's grave trembled with superb possibility. (*Ironweed* 17)

In this moment, Kennedy grants life to Gerald beyond the grave in order to give the charge that will guide Francis's search for redemption throughout the novel. As this scene progresses, the Catholic imagery and diction becomes more apparent. At last, Gerald "[imposes] on his father the pressing obligation of the final acts of expiation for abandoning the family" (*Ironweed* 19). As Kennedy's prose explains these mysterious acts, they seem to resemble a penance for Francis and for his soul. Then, in Gerald's voice, the true purpose of his penance becomes clear: "when these final acts are complete, you [Francis] will stop trying to die because of me" (*Ironweed* 19). This line introduces a sense of duality to Francis's purpose. There is clearly a Catholic undercurrent running through the text. The redemption story, however, remains earthly. Francis's guilt is explored through ghostly encounters in the novel, but it is not a metaphysical guilt—it is a very real and human emotion that has driven his flight from his family into his current situation. Like Kennedy's invocation of myth or historical figures in his other works, the religious aspects of the story serve as touchstones to convey Francis's story at the heart of the novel.

As he elevates himself to a mythic status, Francis's character does not become more removed, but rather more human. In addition to the basic Catholic imagery that pervades the text, several scholars have written about the structure of *Ironweed* and its parallels to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Edward Reilly's article "Dante's *Purgatorio* and Kennedy's *Ironweed*: Journeys to Redemption" tracks this parallel and its literary ramifications for the text. Reilly links structural elements between the two works, such as *Ironweed* taking place between Halloween and All Souls Day, while Dante's *Divine Comedy* takes place between Maundy Thursday and Easter (Reilly 5). He also discusses the theme of redemption between the works. Noting *Ironweed*'s epigraph from *Purgatorio*—"To course o'er better waters now hoists sail the little bark of my wit, leaving behind her a sea so cruel"—Reilly examines how *Ironweed* is the story of a character "in transit

toward redemption" (Reilly 6). This motif of movement, seen in both Francis's flights from and return to his family, becomes critical to the novel. Reilly's ultimate argument is not that *Ironweed* is simply a retelling of the Divine Comedy, but rather that these resonances evoke the themes of this timeless story of redemption. He concludes,

> if Dante becomes the medieval Everyman who must find redemption, then Ironweed depicts the modern world and Francis Aloysius Phelan is a twentieth-century Everyman who, despite the ironies, chaos, and tragedies in the modern world, must reestablish meaning and significance in his life. (Reilly 8)

Reilly's analysis hints at the sum of Kennedy's literary project. On one hand, *Ironweed* is simply the marriage of Buddy's story—a story similar to numerous others during the Great Depression—with the *Divine Comedy*, forging a sense of importance for Francis's journey as an individual. As in every piece of Kennedy's Albany Cycle, the novel's sense of place cannot not be diminished. A reader must not cast *Ironweed* as simply being allegorical; the story of Francis Phelan follows *Legs* in an attempt to be an authentic rendering of Albany, New York. Even as Francis encounters literal ghosts from his past, his status as an Everyman creates a sense of specificity in the text. Harkening back to Kennedy's words in his preface to *The Lemon Weed*, his choice to turn the story into fiction allows him to tell the truest story that he can, with literary melodrama injected into the drama of Francis's very survival on the fringes of Albany.

As Kennedy brings together classical structures through allusions to Dante in Francis Phelan's redemptive journey, he puts his character in a unique position. The earlier sections explored how Kennedy makes myths out of history through his storyteller figures within the Albany Cycle. *Ironweed* tells myth in a new way—the reader sees multiple iterations of Francis's self-mythologization. Riding the trolley to Albany with his friend and fellow bum Rudy after leaving the cemetery, Francis remembers his first flight from Albany when he encounters the ghost of Harold Allen, a scab in the 1901 trolley strike that Francis killed with the throw of a baseball-sized stone (*Ironweed* 25). On the trolley in the novel's present, Francis converses with Harold Allen out loud while he imagines his interlocutor's responses. The reader sees Francis contend with his guilt and grow angry as this ghost calls him a "coward" for running (*Ironweed* 26).

This moment reveals the significance of Francis's reclamation of his life story. Driven by these ghostly encounters, Francis starts to confess more about his life to Rudy, as he does later when he tells Helen about Gerald's grave, or when he tells the strangers in the "jungle"—the novel's "visual manifestation of the malaise of the age"—about Gerald (*Ironweed* 63, 208, 215). In a narratological sense, these confessions are *Ironweed*'s analogues to Marcus's moments of direct storytelling. But now, Francis is his own subject. For him, contending with guilt is the only way his story of redemption will be complete.

The theme of reclamation is also at the center of *Ironweed*'s emotional heart, specifically Francis's return home to his family on North Pearl Street in Albany. He faces his wife, Annie, his children Billy and Peg, and Peg's son, Danny. Back in his home, Francis is faced with the impossibility of atoning for twenty-two years of abandonment. The greatest challenge to this reclamation of his story is from Peg—she likens Francis to "a ghost we buried years ago" that has returned (*Ironweed* 179). This both recalls the image of the dead returning from the novel's opening in Saint Agnes Cemetery and the way that myth functions in *Legs*. For Jack Diamond, Marcus's words mimic his life and ultimately establish an undying myth. Even if Francis has not yet fully taken charge of his story, he has resurrected himself in the eyes of his family. Just before the exchange with Peg, Francis has another ghostly encounter, seeing numerous men from his past building bleachers in the Phelan backyard to watch the family drama play out. Francis speaks to them as he did on the trolley, insisting, "You're all dead, and if you ain't, you oughta be. I'm the one is livin'. I'm the one puts you on the map" (*Ironweed* 177). Even though he is still being haunted, this life-affirming moment is a step toward Francis refusing to be consumed by his past. It is also a long way from Francis' thought in the cemetery that "being dead here would situate a man in place and time" (*Ironweed* 13). *Ironweed* does not, however, end in redemption at the family home, but with Francis on the run again, merely dreaming of the "holy Phelan eaves" (*Ironweed* 225). While the final scene of *Ironweed* does remain vague, Kennedy juxtaposes Francis's last thought of Danny's "mighty nice little room" with the primum mobile, "the utmost and swiftest of the material heavens" of the *Divine Comedy* (*Ironweed* 227). Even though Francis will never fully come to terms with Gerald's death, he is

successful as he is no longer preoccupied with it; he is searching for a place to run to rather than run from. By returning to Albany, Francis has come back to life, restored himself in his city's history, and completed his mythic journey.

By aligning Francis Phelan with classical myth but placing him in *Ironweed*'s historical time and place in Albany in 1938, Kennedy casts him as an epic hero at the center of a novel. Through this unique construction, *Ironweed* becomes a profound and stirring reinvention of Buddy's story. This is a story that becomes *true*, not because it factually tells of Buddy's experience, but because it reveals the strife that people like him faced in Albany—the same city that readers saw radically different sides of in *Legs*. Setting Francis Phelan's story here, Kennedy mythologizes the anonymous of Albany, asserting that the "splendid nobody" is truly essential to the city's complete story. Coupled with this point of access to the city is an increased sense of experimentation in the text, which resonates with Kennedy's original plans to write "whichever element asserts itself most desperately and most strangely in [his] imagination" ("Statement" 3). *Legs* has an explicitly historical subject, and *Ironweed* casts an anonymous, down-on-his-luck Everyman, making his way in Albany in 1938. Francis Phelan is not a real person, but in the role of the epic hero, he is elevated. His story is not historical, but Kennedy's aim is to make it as true as history, for he feels that it is a story that must be told. Forming the original trilogy of the Albany Cycle, these novels offer divergent but harmonizing versions of Albany's history. They intersect in moments, but more critically they reach unique windows that shine on this sprawling, kaleidoscopic history.

IV. Conclusion: The Polyphonic Ensemble of William Kennedy's Albany Cycle

In each novel of the Albany Cycle, Kennedy carefully crafts a powerful and evocative voice that marries historical context with mythic content. As these voices sing together, they form a polyphonic whole, representing the "improbable city" of Albany, New York. These stories join together in the same way that the historical stories Kennedy presents in *O Albany!* do: as corners of a tapestry for a reader to focus on. The histories are not linear or even fully contained within themselves, nor do they need to be read in any

particular order. Rather, each narrative—each sum of narratives—only amplifies the other. This is where we find Albany's "improbability." Kennedy's words attest to the power in the many genres that he works with to bring together a great body of stories into one improbable and polyphonic whole.

As Kennedy's literary legacy has grown, he has mythologized the very origins of his Albany Cycle, just as he had placed himself into history in *O Albany!*. In "Prelude in a Saloon," a short piece of fiction that serves as a preface to the Albany Cycle, he casts Francis Phelan's grandson, Daniel Quinn, as a stand-in for himself. It begins: "If Daniel Quinn had interviewed the old gangster, the interview would have been arranged by Quinn's uncle, Billy Phelan. Quinn would have been writing his second novel and having a difficult time with it; for it kept growing larger with his discoveries" ("Prelude" vii). This initial framing in the conditional tense turns the preface into a hypothetical scene. Kennedy positions his literary characters to fit his story, just as he does with historical figures. As the scene develops, we hear Quinn's interview with Morty Besch, a gangster who once worked with Jack Diamond. Soon, Quinn realizes that he recognizes names from Billy's life story. Kennedy writes that "he should write about that too, …a logical extension of the life and times of Jack Diamond" ("Prelude" viii). In this construction, the natural links between Kennedy's Albany Cycle novels become even clearer. Then, Kennedy crystallizes the aim of Quinn's literary project. He says that he "[had become] obsessed with Albany's history" and endeavored "to write one large book that would tell everything about the town" ("Prelude" ix). He explains how it would wrestle with history going back to Albany's origins and tying in literary and historical figures. The paragraph ends: "He would find a way to bring in his grandfather Francis Phelan, the baseball hero, …and hey, he would put himself someplace in the middle of it all" ("Prelude ix). Through Daniel Quinn's hypothetical book, Kennedy recounts his own journey through the Albany Cycle. Considering that Daniel Quinn is ten in *Ironweed*, this puts him at the same age as Kennedy, who was born in 1928. Casting himself, this preface fictionalizes Kennedy's personal history in order to show how the many voices of the Albany Cycle intersect.

"Prelude in a Saloon" recontextualizes the Albany Cycle and allows Kennedy to demonstrate how he plays with history by writing

inside of his invented Albany, letting his fictional characters become every bit as historical as Franklin Roosevelt or Jack Diamond. They are all equal members of this "improbable" collective. As he speaks of Francis Phelan, Daniel Quinn "[looks] back at an early story he'd written about Francis, who wasn't really his grandfather in that old story" ("Prelude" x). He then provides a brief excerpt of Kennedy's own first iteration of Francis in an abandoned novel titled *The Angels and the Sparrows*. Taking Francis as a real person within the reality of the text that Kennedy presents, his evolution in Quinn's body of work demonstrates Quinn-as-Kennedy's freedom with history. In the version that Quinn hopes to write—what will later become *Ironweed*—Francis is a much different person. The preface flashes back to the present interview, but the powerful depiction of Quinn's imaginative power of reinvention stays in the reader's mind. Quinn acknowledges that there is still much that he needs to learn as a writer, but his formulation as a stand-in for Kennedy is complete ("Prelude" xii). With Francis, Kennedy shows the malleability of one's story, and with Quinn, he shows how close this story can be to what we think of as the truth. He places himself in the storyteller's position. Like Kennedy's other storytellers, he too is thrust into myth.

Taking the Albany Cycle together, its polyphony becomes clear. In Kennedy's "Statement of Plans" for the Albany Cycle, written one year after *Legs* was published and cited in the Introduction of this essay, he wrote: "I feel certain, however, that there will be a unity of meaning about the life of my own time in the diverse finished products, if I have the strength and imaginative resources to indeed carry through to the finish line what I now consider the raw material for a life's work" ("Statement" 3). The "Prelude in a Saloon," written twenty years later, proves his words. As Kennedy conjures Daniel Quinn's future, he says that he "would stop thinking that he was writing individual stories about individual people" and "see that he was creating an open-ended cycle of lives: the story of one man or woman begetting another, all of them counting time in the shared continuum of common ground, common history" ("Prelude" xi). This idea embodies the Albany Cycle. Its crux, he says, is to "access history not in order to replay it, or revise it, but to *inhabit* it" ("Prelude" xi, my emphasis). Kennedy's cycle of novels seeks to construct an authentic depiction of Albany

by binding together individuals and their stories within a unifying place. He invites us to live in these stories alongside his characters. The Albany Cycle has no beginning or end because it places the city at its center. By nature, it is not singular. Kennedy writes that Quinn would intentionally write about vastly different subjects, pointing to the unique and disparate life stories of Jack Diamond, Billy Phelan, and Francis Phelan, "and yet the books would be as kindred as blood: a mosaic of space, a collage of time that would continue as long as he did, and no longer" ("Prelude" xi). It is in these words that we find the Albany Cycle's polyphony. Each individual work shines, but together in their simultaneity they enhance each other and reveal the plurality of narratives that occupy the city. In this way, the "Prelude in a Saloon" demonstrates the fullness of the polyphonic ensemble of the Albany Cycle that sings the city's constantly evolving history.

Through this study's diverse explorations of Kennedy's work, I demonstrate the sense of unity in historicized myth and mythologized history in Albany. Taking Kennedy's œuvre together as an example of literary polyphony, we are able to identify how Kennedy works with myth and history within each of his works and how they harmonize in concert with each other. Together, these intersections of myth and history form the polyphonic ensemble that William Kennedy created. It attests to his love for his city and for storytelling. By bringing together the many voices of the city, he truly makes each one of them a part of Albany's history.

To return to Kennedy's words in the first chapter of *O Albany!*, Albany truly is "an inexhaustible context for [his] stories…abundant in mythic qualities" (*O Albany!* 5). Ultimately, it is this abundance that gives the city its improbability. The amount of stories that Kennedy has found in the city is fantastical. We must remember Kennedy's literary origins as a journalist. In January 2024, I had the opportunity to meet and interview William Kennedy for my research. As we spoke about how his love and obsession for his hometown came about, he revealed what I see as the heart of his writing and the Albany Cycle. Even as he developed as a novelist, Kennedy told me, "I never really moved away from journalism. I still consider myself a journalist. Even as a writer, I feel like a reporter. I'm always reporting on what I'm going to write about, but I'm reporting out of my head." ("Interview" 12:05). His words demonstrate how myth and history can coexist fully and powerfully

in the Albany Cycle. Kennedy sees his work as always beginning in fact—even if it is a fact that he invented—and then finding the story that follows this genesis. No matter if these stories concern high-profile gangsters, small-time gamblers, or vagrants in search of redemption, they are worth telling. Each story unfurls a new side of Albany. Finding all of these stories in one single place is improbable, but they are tied together as they are undeniably human. This is its mythic improbability; Albany is home to so many individuals, and thus it is home to a near-endless number of stories and voices. William Kennedy, like the storytellers of his Albany Cycle, takes on this plurality of voices and transforms it into a beautiful whole. The city is at once his setting and muse and hero, and his body of work invites us to share his love and wonder for his improbable city.

Notes

[1] This project was supported by the Nissley Grant through the Franklin & Marshall College Committee on Grants

[2] In the longer version of this study, I examine the second novel in Kennedy's Albany Cycle, *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game*. The novel, published in 1978, centers on two men—gambler Billy Phelan and newspaper columnist Martin Daugherty—navigating Albany's nightlife in 1938. I argue that this novel marks a transitory point at which Kennedy began to focus on his invented characters while staying within a historical framing.

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