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REGIONALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE¹

PERHAPS NO TOPIC currently discussed by readers and critics of American literature is more controversial than regionalism. And no commentator on regionalism is more pungent than our own Mr. James Gray of St. Paul. Wittily he writes:

That militantly American doctrine called regionalism, which has tended in recent years to make of local prejudice something vaguely resembling a religion, would probably hold that the heavenly Muse does herself over, with protean variability, each time that she crosses a state line. No doubt the conviction is strong in the true believer's heart that when one of the inspirational sisters finds herself in Minnesota, she wearily gets out her make-up kit and prepares for a lugubrious session celebrating the sorrows of the soil and of the soul. The costume, assigned to the Minnesota Muse, in the regionalist's handbook, is a decent, though shabby, Mother Hubbard. She sings exclusively of ruined wheat harvests and she sings of them with a strong Swedish accent.²

Such a movement, obviously, needs looking into. What is this regionalism; what are its origins; who are its exponents?³

¹ This paper is based on remarks made before a conference of Minnesota teachers of English and school librarians in May, 1938, and over radio station WLB in April, 1939.

² "The Minnesota Muse," in *Saturday Review of Literature*, vol. 16, no. 7, p. 3 (June 12, 1937). This article is not primarily an attack on regionalism, but an exposition of the cosmopolitanism of Minnesota authors.

³ For a vigorous assault on regionalism, see P. R. Beath, "Regionalism Pro and Con: Four Fallacies of Regionalism," in the *Saturday Review*, vol. 15, no. 5, p. 3, 14, 16 (November 28, 1936). Typical defenses of the movement are found in Allen Tate, "Regionalism and Sectionalism," in

With any critic who contends that the greatest literature interprets life in the terms of all humanity rather than the terms of any specific nation, we all agree. We agree also that whatever immortal books have been written in the United States record life in universal terms. Thus *The Scarlet Letter* is an assured masterpiece not so much because Hawthorne presents a brilliant analysis of Puritan character as because he deals with a situation which is understood by readers in every civilized country. And *Moby Dick* is taking its place among world classics, not so much because Melville there tells us all that any lady or gentleman needs know about Yankee whalings, as because he writes a powerful allegory of that terrific battle which we call living.

Authors who cannot reach this high plane of universal appeal may still make themselves useful and even memorable by a humbler service—by recording, as did Hawthorne and Melville in passing, the character, mind, and manners of a people. Such a record, if set down with bias and animus, obviously becomes dangerous: today we need look no farther than the continent of Europe to see the fine arts transformed into weapons for chauvinism and aggression. But when transcripts of the life of a nation are made sanely and critically, they serve well not only that nation but all humanity. In the realm of letters, therefore, a man can be simultaneously a good citizen of the United States and of the world.

the *New Republic*, 69: 158-161 (December 23, 1931); Joseph E. Baker, "Regionalism Pro and Con: Four Arguments for Regionalism," in the *Saturday Review*, vol. 15, no. 5, p. 3, 14; Donald Davidson, "Regionalism and Nationalism in American Literature," and Robert Penn Warren, "Dont's for Literary Regionalists," in the *American Review*, 5: 48-61, 8: 142-150 (April, 1935, December, 1936); and particularly Donald Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (Chapel Hill, 1938). Invaluable to the student of literary regionalism is a résumé of the historical, geographical, economic, sociological, and aesthetic aspects of the general movement in Howard W. Odum and Harry E. Moore, *American Regionalism* (New York, 1938). Many of the topics presented in this paper are more fully discussed in these articles and books.

How, then, shall this second aim of literature be achieved? How shall American society be put into prose and verse? Most inclusive, of course, is the international approach. A century ago, James Fenimore Cooper, returning from a seven years' residence in Europe, bluntly pointed out the inferiority of American to foreign society in a series of books now long forgotten, and was brutally cudged by the critics. A half century later, Henry James as a resident of Europe did the same thing with infinitely greater skill and suavity, and is now recognized as the most successful of all American exponents of the international point of view. In our own century, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and various tourists and expatriates carry on the tradition, as frequently with animus as with insight. To study American society as a segment of world civilization is truly illuminating; but it is a task for which few authors have either the necessary endowments or the needed experience. Such a treatment, furthermore, leaves many elements of American character and experience untouched.

A second approach is national. Here again only a few authors possess the necessary breadth of vision. Most successful in the nineteenth century was Walt Whitman, who toiled long and courageously at his portrait of the national spirit. Too honest to reduce that spirit to a single term or a single element, he patiently catalogues different sections and different states, and the numerous varieties and sub-varieties of native character. Although these catalogues are frequently too heterogeneous to move our emotions, occasionally Whitman in heroic ecstasy breathes into them the breath of life and we see America. In our century the task of putting the United States between the two covers of a book has become vastly more difficult, not only through the increased complexity of our life but through the apparent inadequacy of old symbols to express the new age. Such an author as John Dos Passos, therefore, is doubly handicapped by the immensity of the American scene which he

attempts to transcribe in his trilogy, *U.S.A.*, and by the necessity (or so it seems to him) of inventing a new literary technique for that transcript. And it is not difficult to understand how such a poet as Hart Crane, simultaneously wrestling in Whitmanesque manner to find the common denominator of Christopher Columbus and Coney Island, struggling to create new symbols fit to vision forth his concepts of America, and battling in Freudian fashion to free his own soul, should eventually give up the three terrific conflicts and drop quietly overboard—from his steamer, and from life.

It should now be evident that, fruitful as are both the international and the national approach, both are beset by extraordinary difficulties. Today, therefore, an overwhelming majority of authors who seek to portray America are forced, consciously or unconsciously, to choose one or several of the more limited points of view. Here the possibilities are almost infinite, for the United States may be divided horizontally, vertically, or diagonally: by occupations, by emotions, by decades, by race, by what you will. In recent years, for example, an essentially novel and particularly provocative point of view has emerged in proletarianism, with its attempt to split American literature along lines of social cleavage. Equally provocative is regionalism. It commands attention today not as the only or as the best method of recording our life. It is neither. But it is emphatically an approach to be reckoned with and one to which, it appears, native authors will turn more and more frequently in the future.

A backward glance at American literature explains the inevitability of regionalism. The earliest writings on this continent were colonial—the work of English men and English women in a new land which for many generations had little influence on their prose and verse. Once a new nation was born, its citizens vociferously demanded a national literature. When such a literature eventually emerged, it

was the creation of a group of Americans living in a narrow strip of land not many miles wide and barely two hundred and fifty miles long—the strip of Atlantic seacoast from Salem, Massachusetts, to New York City. Irving, Bryant, and Cooper, Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Whitman of course drew distinctions between New York and New England; the early Knickerbockers were contemptuous of Yankees and the Brahmins counted themselves definitely superior to mercenary New Yorkers. During the first half of the century, however, regional differences had not yet become acute; Boston was not wholly divorced from Manhattan; the literary capital moved from New York to Boston to New York again; and literature was distinctly and avowedly nationalistic. (I am not forgetting Poe; but I am remembering that, even though his roots strike more deeply into native soil than most observers realize, his characters dwell not in the Southern states but in a world of their own, “out of time, out of space.”) When *Leaves of Grass* and *The Scarlet Letter* and *Walden* were published, the situation here was comparable to that in a European country; regional literature was identical with national literature, for a single region (or, if one prefers, two small and homogeneous regions) produced it all.

During the second half of the century, the picture changed completely. Distinctions between the literature of New England, of New York, and of the South now became sharp and unmistakable. Meanwhile, the Midwest was exploited and the Far West was opened to the world. Thereafter, the emergence of regionalism was only a matter of time. No longer were writers in the East the authentic spokesmen of the entire nation; they were merely the voice of a highly important section. Very naturally, New Englanders were slow to realize and slower to confess this change; during the later decades of the century they erroneously but blandly continued to assume that their writings and American literature are identical. In our century, the delusion is firmly,

and in certain respects disastrously, intrenched in Manhattan, where it is too frequently assumed that when the metropolis writes, America writes. I, for one, am unwilling to accept the utterances of any one region as the utterances of all the states; but if I were forced to adopt such a biased view, I should admit that the diversified writers of New York City, drawn as they are from all points of the compass, may more nearly speak for all America than can the authors of any other section. But, very fortunately, we are not thus restricted; to know America, we now turn to authors in all the states. The literary self-sufficiency of Manhattan, therefore, is today an anachronism, an ill-informed acceptance of the European conception of national literature, or, to speak more frankly, a polished but none the less real provincialism. And an obvious and a major barrier to the normal growth of regionalism is continued subservience to this antiquated New York idea by writers in the hinterland, and their resultant unwillingness to be themselves or to express their own region lest they fail to write in the Manhattan manner.

Before the nineteenth century drew to a close, the newer sections of the republic made themselves heard in what may be described as a prelude to regionalism, that is, in the local color movement. First to capitalize effectively on localisms and sectional peculiarities was Bret Harte on the Pacific coast. Then George Washington Cable, Mary Murfree, Grace King, and James Lane Allen explored the picturesque South, while Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Alice Brown rediscovered New England. The movement was widely popular but it soon declined, because its roots never struck deeply into American life. Professedly realistic, the local colorists were actually superficial and commonly sentimental. They remained on the surface, where they concentrated on the odd, the curious, and the picturesque. They naturally did not survive the emergence of twentieth-century naturalism.

A connecting link between local color and regionalism may be found in the work of Willa Cather, who, I hasten to add, transcends both those movements. As an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, she came under the spell of Sarah Orne Jewett, who gave her personal advice and counsel and to whom Miss Cather dedicated *O Pioneers*. Here and in others of Miss Cather's early novels appear descriptive passages which do not advance the narrative or illuminate the characters. That is local color. In Miss Cather's middle period, she enlarged her vision to record national rather than sectional scenes, as in *One of Ours* and *The Professor's House*. The majority of our literary critics hailed this change as growth, but others were distressed, fearing that Miss Cather had succumbed to the contemporary American mania for overexpansion and that her canvases were now too large. She apparently agreed with the second group of observers, for her most recent and to my mind her more successful novels are again sharply restricted in setting: *Death Comes for the Archbishop* to the Spanish Southwest and *Shadows on the Rock* to French Canada. To call the author of these novels a regionalist and nothing more would be sadly misleading: she deals with various regions, not one; and she is most deeply concerned with human, not local, values. And yet, in certain aspects of her work, Willa Cather is, in the broadest and best sense of the word, a regionalist; subtract the setting from one of her early or one of her late novels and what is left?

What, then, is this regionalism? It may be identified in the writing of any author by one or more of four characteristics, none of which was dominant in the work of the local colorists of the last century.

First, regionalism is profoundly concerned with both the past and the present. This concern is notably more realistic and rational, less emotional and romantic than was local color. And this interest in earlier days takes the form of a

search for "a usable past," not merely admirable in itself but serviceable for us.

Secondly, regionalism establishes its own organs and its outlets to the public. Occasionally Manhattan publishers are willing to print a distinguished book at a financial loss; but in the main, regional writings are assured of publication in New York only if the publishers are assured of at least an opportunity for profit. A few regional magazines and presses are therefore necessary, to demonstrate constantly to New York that regionalism may be profitable, to subsidize worthy but nonprofit-making works, and to reach local audiences.

Thirdly, regionalism, especially when hard pressed by its foes, develops a program and a platform, becomes a conscious movement, and even attacks its critics.

Finally, regionalism today rarely comes to full expression in literature alone. Rather, literary regionalism is accompanied by and co-operates with parallel trends in the other arts, in history, and in the social sciences. The movement thus possesses vastly more depth and more substance than did local color.

Regionalism appeared earliest and flourishes most vigorously in the South, fortunately "reconstructed but unregenerate." A major center of regionalism is the Carolinas, where conditions are highly favorable for such activity. Here may be observed a concern alike with the past and the present—an interest colored, of course, by local pride but guided by scientists, particularly at Duke University and the University of North Carolina. The movement has many ramifications, including the South Carolina Poetry Society, the North Carolina Folk Lore Society, the South Carolina and especially the North Carolina Historical Society, and vigorous sociological organizations. Ready at hand were outlets for regional writers: the Carolina historical quarterlies, the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, and, near by, the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Thus sociology, literature,

history, and anthropology have co-operated, centering their activity about Negro folklore and folk culture. It was inevitable that in such an environment, Du Bose Heyward and Julia Peterkin should create distinguished regional novels.

In Tennessee the Nashville group developed, centering about Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom (now removed to Ohio). The members of the group appear to have been originally attracted to each other by a common interest in poetry, an interest which came to expression in their journal, *The Fugitive*. Later they found a second point of agreement in their opposition to the industrialization of the South, whereupon they, with the aid of kindred minds in other states, published a vigorous manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, by twelve Southerners. This was, in brief, a plea for an enlightened agrarianism in the South. The Nashville group, therefore, was concerned simultaneously with art, economics, and sociology, or, as some might prefer to summarize all three, with the good life.

In the Southwest interesting stimuli to regionalism have appeared. First the section was exploited by Eastern artists, an event in itself calculated to discourage healthy regionalism. Several of the invaders, however, remained, became true citizens of the Southwest, and are now among the authentic interpreters of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Thus the splendor of the Spanish past and the color of the Indian past are contributing to the richness of the American present. A brilliant young editor (now at Princeton University) made the University of Oklahoma Press one of the most successful of all regional outlets, while the *Southwest Review* and other journals freely published the work of local, as well as national, writers.

Through one of the laws promulgated by the late Huey Long, abundant funds are made available to the Louisiana State University for a press, which has particularly distinguished itself by the high quality of one of its publications, the *Southern Review*. Since its able editor, Robert Penn

Warren, prefers to think of the *Review* as Southern rather than Louisianian and even as American rather than Southern, no one can justly describe his quarterly as a mere regional organ. Of regionalism itself, Mr. Warren approves with reservations: "It is not a cure-all," he justly remarks, "and provides the writer no substitute for taste or intelligence."⁴ But the *Southern Review* encourages authorship in the deep South and adds to the literary prestige of that region; and Mr. Warren himself has recently published a brilliant local novel of life in Kentucky. He and the *Review*, then, may be counted among the assets of the regional movement, so long as that movement does not degenerate into a fad.

The Middle West, endowed with no glamorous tradition comparable to that of the South, has capitulated more frequently to the metropolis. Thus Midwesterners have derided their homeland for the edification of Manhattan and, incidentally, to the profit and improvement of the Midwest. As the years pass, however, we grow more and more interested in our own modes of life, and occupy ourselves more and more with the history of Middle Western culture and with the directions which it is taking today. And the state which is at the moment most articulate in literature is one for which few observers in the early century would have predicted such achievement, the state which, according to one of its native sons, Ellis Parker Butler, spends twelve dollars for fertilizer every time it spends one dollar for literature—Iowa. In the field of painting, Grant Wood is immortalizing Iowa Gothic both in architecture and in character. Such periodicals as the *Prairie Schooner* and *Midland*, now superseded by *Prefaces*, have encouraged numerous young authors. The State University of Iowa offers elaborate encouragement to young writers. A long and very solid series of sketches, stories, and novels of local life have

⁴ Warren, in *American Review*, 8: 150.

been written in the state. And the best-known of Iowa authors, Ruth Suckow, has developed a theory which should interest regionalists in all parts of the country — the theory that the arts should concern themselves not with folk themes of the past but with “the folks” of our own day.⁵

Finally, an isolated but admirable phenomenon may be observed in Idaho, where, without any extensive movement behind it, a successful local press has established itself. There the Caxton Printers publish the work of Vardis Fisher, of lesser Rocky Mountain authors, and of writers in all parts of the country. This wholesome decentralization of publishing, which must become more common if a balance is to be maintained between region and region, is reminiscent of conditions in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, when every important town had its local printer and practically every printer was a book publisher. It should not be necessary to enumerate the further manifestations of regionalism which have appeared in other parts of the country; the evidence already presented makes the general nature of the movement clear.

There are, it is apparent, regionalists — and regionalists. Three varieties are most evident. First are the pseudo regionalists: sentimentalists who search out the quaint and the picturesque. They may be local people capitalizing on local lore, urbanites amusing themselves among the peasants (we have glanced at this type in the Southwest), or hard-working story writers earning a living from popular and uncritical magazines. These gentry are twentieth-century descendants of the nineteenth-century local colorists. They would be negligible did they not tend to cast disrepute on authentic regionalism and afford critics specious arguments for discrediting the movement.

Then come the propagandists of regionalism: its prophets and its defenders. Their role is at once difficult and

⁵ “The Folk Idea in American Life,” in *Scribner's Magazine*, 88: 245-255 (September, 1930).

unprofitable—difficult because they easily fall into rancor and sectionalism; unprofitable because they commonly till the soil for others but themselves reap only scanty harvest. The pronouncements of these self-conscious regionalists, sometimes more courageous than tactful, are perhaps the major cause for the disfavor with which the term “regionalist” is viewed in many quarters and for the unwillingness of certain authors to be thus labeled. But literature today stands in need of these propagandists; only with their encouragement will authors in every corner of these states venture to speak out, and only after these defenders of the movement have fought its critical battles will artists be left entirely free for creation.

Central to the entire movement are the spontaneous regional artists. They may or may not be aware of their regionalism; it is, in either case, innate and natural rather than calculated or predesigned. Even though certain of them insist that they are no regionalists but metropolitans or Marxians or nationalists or proletarians, each has deep roots in his own region. Their predecessor was Mark Twain. Their company today includes, among others, Ellen Glasgow and Thomas Stribling, William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, Elizabeth Roberts, Paul Green and Marjorie K. Rawlings in the South; in the East, Robert Frost, Joseph Hergesheimer and James Boyd, Mary Ellen Chase, James Gould Cozzens, and J. P. Marquand when he chooses to write regional tragedy, Walter Edmunds, John Dos Passos, and the numerous chroniclers of Manhattan (for, in all truth, writers who limit themselves to the boroughs of New York are as truly regional as Julia Peterkin or Ruth Suckow); in the Midwest, Carl Sandburg, Louis Bromfield, Phil Stong, Bess Streeter Aldrich, Dorothy Thomas, Edna Ferber, Albert Halper, and James Farrell; and in the Far West, John Steinbeck, Oliver La Farge, and Robert Cantwell—all authors who not only paint regional manners but achieve, at least momentarily, universal appeal.

And what of Minnesota? We have here no propagandists for regionalism and we need none; the gospel has been fully expounded elsewhere. We have not, but we need, a local organ for the encouragement of young writers and of experimental writers—a modest, even an ephemeral, journal will serve. We have an excellent university press, in no sense merely regional yet always interested in works which concern the Midwest and the Northwest. We have a substantial nucleus of regional novels; the works of the late O. E. Rølvaag, Martha Ostenso, Sinclair Lewis in certain moods, Margaret Culkin Banning, Grace Flandrau, Herbert Krause, and others. And in *Shoulder the Sky*, James Gray has given us an admirable example of the novel which combines local significance with wide appeal—a book primarily cosmopolitan but, if its author will permit me to say so, incidentally regional. We have, it is evident, made a beginning at a literary transcript of the various cultures in our state, but we shall not complete the task until we attain a higher degree of healthy self-knowledge. The exploration of Scandinavian folk lore, the collecting of Indian legends, the recording of the feats alike of the voyageurs and of Paul Bunyan, the reconstruction of local history, and similar investigations conducted by scholars at the University of Minnesota, in the Minnesota Historical Society, and elsewhere, together with such popular undertakings as the WPA state guide to Minnesota have already contributed to our self-education and are beginning to contribute to our literature.

Since regionalism is dangerous only when abused, it is patent that the chief dangers in the growth of self-consciousness in Minnesota will be local prejudice and parochialism. It is on these weaknesses in regionalism rather than its successes that Mr. Gray has commented. Such strictness as his, however, should be encouraged, for no literary movement can come to its finest flowering until its errors are ruthlessly pruned away. And if attempts at such pruning finally fail, if authorship in our state gives itself over to mere localism,

if it is ever suggested that Minnesota authors must all speak with "a strong Swedish accent," we shall then seize our shovels and help Mr. Gray dig the grave of regionalism.

Let us hope, however, that even as wise authors are able to retain their citizenship both in world society and in the United States, so may discreet authors be simultaneously Americans and Midwesterners. As long as the republic of letters remains free, there should be room and a need and an audience for national and for regional writers, for ruralists and for urbanites, for one and for all—provided (and this condition cannot be made too emphatic), provided no one group attempts to impose its ideals and its methods on any other group. Let us listen, then, not to Manhattan alone or to Minnesota alone, but to all these states, each region chanting its own chant with its own voice, and out of them all a chorus rising and blending until, with Whitman, we "hear America singing."

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