

Regionalism in American Fiction: *Defect or Necessity?*

R O B E R T D R A K E

SOME TIME AGO an old friend told me that Larry McMurry, the author of *The Last Picture Show* and other novels of the Southwest, had a tee shirt emblazoned across its front with the phrase "Minor Regional Novelist," a classification, I gather, he was woefully fed up with in his reviews. And I can sympathize. When my first book of stories appeared, one of my earliest reviewers, after saying what I thought were some extremely perceptive, even downright flattering things about it, concluded that "perhaps a religious or a regional audience would find it palatable." I should have liked to reply, after the fashion of Flannery O'Connor to a reader who wrote that one of her stories had left a bad taste in his mouth, that, well, he wasn't expected to eat it! But of course I just marked it all up to the old critical smear tactics: if you don't like the world or the culture an author writes about, you dismiss it by calling it *regional* and thus sign its death warrant as being out of the mainstream of contemporary life and thought. And then nobody has to worry about it.

But what do such critics really mean when they relegate a novel or a play or a story to the lumber room of regionalism? Well, among other things, they are thus confessing that it depicts a world which is foreign to them and perhaps not a little frightening but a world which they really need not worry about because, after all, there are far more of them than there are of it. And one is reminded of Emily Dickinson's poem which proclaims that, as in everything else, it's the majority which prevails in deciding who is sane and who is not. (One might even recall Mr. Pickwick's advice about what the stranger should do

when confronted with two vociferous political factions: shout with the largest! And that is indeed always very good advice for the children of this world, who are always wiser in their generation than the children of light.) Furthermore, such critics are confessing, without knowing it, what their own worlds are really like—and just how limited they are.

Most of the literary criticism written (and read) at the present time is the work of urban dwellers, inhabitants of a highly mobile society, with few if any commitments to the traditional pieties of blood and place and history. It is the work of critics with few loyalties beyond themselves other than to such abstractions as sympathy and compassion or tolerance and understanding, to give them an even more modish cast. And it's all in their heads, not in their hearts. In their culture of surfaces, which emphasizes the topical and timely, they have little understanding of loyalties, to say nothing of affections, which may go deeper into the present, further back into the past. And so when a writer comes along who does profess such allegiances, it frightens them and threatens their tenuous hold on power, a hold based largely on numbers, on the fact that in the modern world *they* are in the majority. And so they call such work regional, and that's supposed to be the end of it. It would never occur to them that a novel about urban "street people" or teenage gangs or even adultery in suburbia might be considered regional; yet these subjects, in turn, might seem a very far country indeed to the folks in darkest Mississippi.

I suppose that, as a Southerner, I may have a chip on my shoulder, if not an ax to grind, about the question. Perhaps I still

suffer from post-Confederate defensiveness or something of the sort. Yet it has been the South, largely, which has mounted the opposition, even the counter-offensive against the prevailing or New York view that the norm (and one should never mistake averages for norms) is an urban, rootless society which looks neither before nor after and cares not a fig for either geography or history. And for this opposition many Southern authors have been dismissed (or, even worse, ignored) as regional. Faulkner is, by and large, too big for them to handle. And indeed he even anticipates such hostile outside intelligences in Shreve, Quentin's Canadian roommate at Harvard, in his masterpiece, *Absalom, Absalom!* But the New York crowd (and by New York here I mean the typical urban audience) have had their fun with Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, to say nothing of lesser lights.

And perhaps that should be no surprise. What can the ordinary, garden-variety critic (often a professor in the large corporate structure of a university) know of such characters—and such assumptions—as Sister's, the postmistress-narrator of Miss Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," when she declares: "And that's the last I've laid eyes on any of my family or my family laid eyes on me for five solid days and nights"? Now nobody in New York is going to think that's funny or significant except insofar as it suggests an aberrant mentality or a decadent culture: they can go from one year to another without seeing any of their kinfolks (if indeed they will admit to having them) and no sweat. But Sister is telling us a great deal here—some of it without knowing it: she's telling us—and New York too—that China Grove, which is "the next to smallest P.O. in the State of Mississippi," does, for her, constitute, in a phrase typical of Miss Welty, "the whole wide world." And she tells her "side" of the domestic fracas in which her family has been engaged as though she were relating the history of the Trojan War. And thus the comedy. Yet Sister is also defending some "positive" values too: blood, home, community, and, incidentally, geography

and history. And these are values little regarded in the Big Apple and the culture it represents.

Flannery O'Connor provides an even greater provocation because, in addition to the Southern pieties already cited, she professes the truth of the Christian Gospels, which she apparently believes deeply and wholeheartedly. And furthermore, there's nothing deodorized or intellectualized about her Savior: for many of her characters, he is quite literally a "bleeding stinking mad shadow," whom they rebel against but finally cannot let alone. And all this seems like a veritable *terra incognita* to Mencken's professor-doctors. Well, they can't altogether write her off as merely regional: the Christian religion exists in other places besides the Bible Belt South. (Miss O'Connor was herself a Roman Catholic but wrote mainly about Protestant fundamentalists.) But her brand of Christianity does seem unintelligible and, I suspect, threatening to the main-line urban reader; and she has made a number of them definitely uneasy. (Many of her biggest villains, significantly, are intellectuals.) And by and large, she stands behind her culture: it may be grotesque, it may be violent, but she never holds it at arm's length, she never makes fun of it. Prone to excess it may be, but then so is the Christian religion, which often brings not peace but a sword.

Not so such writers as Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, or Tennessee Williams, who are more or less, to my mind, following the lead of Erskine Caldwell and other lurid practitioners of what has come to be known as Southern Gothic: heap up the horrors and hope for the best—or the worst. Carson McCullers, born Lula Carson Smith in Columbus, Georgia, was in many ways a very gifted writer; but, after she had plugged in to the New York main line, whose darling she became, she said she had to go back home every few years to renew her sense of outrage. (One has only to reflect briefly to conclude what Flannery O'Connor would have said about the outrageousness of New York. She also said that perhaps Southerners were the only

people left who recognized a freak when they saw it—and her freaks weren't all down South either.) And Capote and Williams seem to take the same line, despite some occasional moments of tenderness and beauty: they hold up the South and its inhabitants—at arm's length or under the microscope—and proceed to examine the exotic specimens, in all their grotesquerie, as representatives of a degenerate but perversely intriguing culture. They really aren't committed to it, such writers as these—or, one suspects, to anything else unless it's themselves. And so nobody has ever called them regional: if they haven't joined the opposition, they have at least concluded a highly profitable truce with it. They tell it what it wants to hear.

Regionalism is thus the ascription given, often invidiously, those who write from inside a culture, not so much to defend it or apologize for it but as being committed to it, involved in it, come what may. In many cases, as I've suggested, I think it's a false or misleading characterization, at least as applied in derogation. Rather, it seems simply inevitable as long as a writer remains inside his own skin. Can he deny his culture (it doesn't matter whether he *likes* it or not: think of Joyce) without denying his own genius, his own soul? I think not. What he can also do, of course, is to exploit his region as a commodity ("O come see the quaint down-home folks!" or else "O come see the hooded horrors!") for export; and that way of course lies the end of truth-telling, certainly the end of dispassionate artistic observation. And that's what I think Tennessee Williams and Company are often up to. And that *is* regionalism of the worst sort. Region, place, culture, used as ends in themselves, can be as disastrous for literature as they are for truth; but as the inevitable conditioners of one's vision and his art, they are definitive yet, paradoxically, liberating. True regionalism, then, defines; but it does not confine. It sees both inside and outside itself, never sacrificing one vision for the other.

In general, the farther outside his culture a writer tries to remain, the more

liable he is to lapse into such practices as those deplored above. Such tactics, often unintentional, I think, are noticeable in many of the local color artists of the American nineteenth century: Bret Harte, Thomas Nelson Page, George Washington Cable, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary N. Murfree, and others, at their less fortunate moments. Indeed, it is often the essence of their strategy to tell their tales in an envelope form, with the literate outside narrator providing the contrast with the down-home folks inside the tale and all the while assuring us, who stand altogether outside the tale, that really the natives are not too bad: they hardly even smell at all, they may even be palatable! But there's always a danger here that the outside narrator's distance from the tale may be too great, may run him headlong into that condescension toward his characters, which is always fatal to artistic truth, into a very narrow and pernicious regionalism, which Allen Tate suggested might more properly be denominated provincialism. In the nineteenth century the local colorists were writing mainly for the folks back in the urban East, who had an understandable curiosity about the lives and ways of the natives on the expanding frontier or in the quiet backwaters closer to home. The situation is not appreciably different now. And again, much of it may ultimately resolve itself into a question of numbers: who is in the majority or, as Humpty Dumpty says, which is to be master.

Provincialism is what I sometimes think the big literary guns of New York may well stand convicted of. Nobody on earth is more narrowly regional and often ignorant of other times, other places than they—and the other urban corporate dwellers in the world of the arts. And yes, for certain of the arts—for example, opera, ballet, symphony—New York or something like it is indispensable. But I think it's more a publishing center, a disseminator or purveyor rather than a creator of the arts. And yes, they do have all the *facilities* there. Their one big mistake is simply assuming that their own regionalism, which is very real and very

much committed, paradoxically, to the urban anonymity of no-place-but-here, no-time-but-now, is the norm and everything else, with the possible exception of the West Coast, a "regional" anomaly. And once again, as in politics, we have a *sec-tional* interest passed off as the *national* interest—or, where the arts are concerned—a universal concern. But Middle America still lives, though, as someone put it a while back, to the people from the Northeast, it's just the part of the country they fly over to get to California! And the reason all that sort like a strong central government is, as one of my friends remarked, that they are the ones who are running it! Again, much of the controversy may ultimately resolve itself into the question of whose ox is getting gored.

The South, rural, agrarian, traditional, religious, has been one of the last holdouts, maybe even constituted something of a loyal opposition to the majority opinion in the arts as well as in politics. But now it too seems to be going, as the Sun Belt booms with technology, *farming* gives way to *agribusiness*, and the tentacles of Atlanta spread ever farther abroad. (In my part of the world you can't go to Hell without changing planes there!) Yet, speaking more for myself than anybody else, I know I owe to it whatever may be my resources as a writer: its geography, its history, its sense of community, and, above all, its tradition of talk and tale-telling. Such cultures,

rooted and abiding, provide for any writer, I am convinced, something to write about larger than himself. Yet at the same time they give him greater knowledge of himself—who he is—because they make him understand where he is and when he is. They give him an identity, the lack of which is perhaps the most sinister of modern malaises, whether in the arts or in life. They provide for him, too, a heterogeneity, a variety of life in three dimensions that feeds the arts. And when all these go, I think the arts go, the really creative ones, that is, though the performing arts may linger for a while. A gloomy prospect, I admit, but one which I view as all too possible.

I can, of course, speak for no other sensibility than my own. But I believe it's because I know my own country so well—or at least one part of it, a small town in west Tennessee—that I feel in turn that I know the wider world as well as I do. And I can see more deeply into cultures other than my own because, I believe, I know it so well. And this "doubleness" of vision is what any good "regionalist," any good writer constantly strives for: it is what makes, finally, for universality. Some years ago an acquaintance observed to me that I was the only person he had ever known who made the whole world seem like a small town! I don't know whether it was intended as such, but I felt that I had never been paid a higher compliment.