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## WRITING WITH A CHIP ON YOUR SHOULDER: SOME NOTES ON REGIONALISM

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Over the years, I've written a lot having to do with the idea of "regionalism" in one way or another—a term which, when applied to the Midwest often becomes pejorative, as in seeing the region as an empty "flyover" between the coasts. Speaking specifically of the part of the Midwest known as the Great Plains, for example, Ian Frazier has noted:

Since their days as a Great Desert, the Great Plains have also been the Frontier (supposedly of such importance in the formation of the American character), the "newer garden of creation" (Whitman's phrase), the Breadbasket of the world, the Dust Bowl, Vanishing Rural America. The Great Plains are like a sheet Americans screened their dreams on for a while and then largely forgot about.<sup>2</sup>

It's no surprise that synonyms frequently associated with the idea of *regionalism*, especially when related to the Midwest, all too often suggest the insular, provincial, quaint, homogeneous, complacent, and locally colorful. The regional is almost always seen as rural, too, and defined by its

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Frazier, *Great Plains* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 9.

past more than the present. “Regional” sections in bookstores tend to suggest second rank, as does the term “regional author” (as opposed to a “national” one, whatever that might mean). In that regard, New York writers (and New Yorkers in general) don’t think of themselves as regional, though of course they are—attitudes, idioms, and customs have marked them indelibly. As the poet William Stafford once said, “In America a national artist is a local artist living in New York or Boston.”<sup>3</sup>

There’s no doubt that many of us like to think we have something called a national culture in this country, which today might be more accurately called a media or electronic culture. But America has always been a country of regions, especially when it comes to literature and the arts. When one thinks of our most notable authors, for instance, it’s hard to imagine Twain without Hannibal, Dickinson without Amherst, Faulkner without Yoknapatawpha, Louise Erdrich without the Turtle Mountains of North Dakota, or Robert Bly without the “chaos, space, and ecstasy” of Western Minnesota farmland. It’s equally hard to imagine Grant Wood separated from Iowa, Georgia O’Keeffe from Taos, or Andrew Wyeth from Chadds Ford. In that sense, regionalism has always meant a kind of decentralization, emphasizing the fact that even if the so-called capitals of culture are New York and Los Angeles, excellent artists and writers may spring up just about anywhere, fostered by the region itself and such things as the proliferation of local galleries, theaters, concert halls, and MFA programs.

In his prophetic 1938 book *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States*, Donald Davidson railed against what he saw as the increasing standardization of American culture and the totally erroneous perspective that puts “regional art” at odds with “national art.” Davidson was also a member of the Southern Agrarians—a dozen writers who joined together to write the pro-Southern regional manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*. He saw the regionalist movements of the 1920s and 30s as a self-conscious phase, a necessary reaction to the increasingly “interchangeable parts” of the modern age, and an equally necessary discovery of one’s own identity as an artist, as opposed to accepting a “condescending urban idea of regional culture.” Davidson also believed there was a strain of regionalism in the arts that was merely “documentary, antiquarian, or picturesque.” What he stressed was fellow Southern Agrarian Allen Tate’s definition of a

<sup>3</sup> William Stafford, “A Writer’s Sense of Place, A Symposium and Commentaries,” *South Dakota Review* vol. 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), 47.

“proper” regionalism: “the immediate, organic sense of life in which a fine artist works.” To Davidson, the important kind of regionalism was unselfconscious in nature, providing healthy growth and perspective for artists and writers. “National literature is the compound of regional impulses,” he said, “not antithetical to them, but embracing them and living in them, as the roots, branch, and flower of its being.”<sup>4</sup>

While I can disagree with much of what the Agrarians wrote, these basic definitions have remained both useful and appropriate, especially as reminders of ways to approach the whole idea of American culture. Likewise, the concept of the regional in America always includes the idea of *rootedness*, and linking the particular and the universal, the local and international. Thomas McGrath builds upon that idea—for poetry but also for the creative arts in general—when he says, “a sense of place is a way anchoring the poem somewhere. . . . many poems grow out of place even though they may be on subjects that seem to have nothing whatsoever to do with place.”<sup>5</sup> For me, personally, then, a “proper” regionalism begins with the term *sense of place*—one that avoids the unwieldy and negative connotations of *regional* and *regionalism*. Becoming aware of *place* is to discover not only the richness of material it provides to the writer or artist, but also a powerful source of energy and purpose far beyond movements or “isms.” And it seems to me that no one has summed this idea up better than legendary American writer Frank Waters: “The rooted artist has found his own center: his geographic homeland, his race, his time. . . . For just as his work faithfully reflects his own microcosmic background, so does it reflect the macrocosmic; the human, emotional, psychic background of all humanity.”<sup>6</sup>

My own experience as a writer, editor, and teacher has certainly involved a process of discovery very much related to a sense of place. Imaginative writing is grounded in the *image*, in the specific, and the first fruitful steps young writers usually take in discovering their craft is in the direction of the specifics which surround them—which can also help to lead them away from epithets and clichés. As Louise Erdrich points out, “By the close study of a place, its people and character, its crops, products, paranoias, dialects, and failures, we come closer to our reality. . . . Location, whether it is to abandon it or draw it sharply, is where we start.”<sup>7</sup> But the process also involves

<sup>4</sup> Donald Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1962), 228-239.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas McGrath, from an interview with Mark Vinz in *Voyages to the Inland Sea 3*, ed. by John Judson (La-Crosse, WI: Center for Contemporary Poetry, University of Wisconsin, 1973), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Waters, *South Dakota Review*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Louise Erdrich, “A Writer’s Sense of Place,” in Michael Martone, ed., *A Place of Sense, Essays in Search of the Midwest* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), 43.

realizing that a healthy sense of the regional is not one that seeks simply to elevate one region over another—or, as William Stafford says, “There is no rootless art, but there is no special place for that root to grow.”

No doubt many of us have been guilty of writing with some kind of chip on our shoulders, especially as we’ve endured the ways the concept of *regional* so often gets misused, and especially in terms of the Midwest. Too often, writers and artists associated with a particular region are simply ignored—not just by the coasts, but by their neighbors. Several have lamented the fact that appreciation and support within a region is too often lacking, for the audience has been conditioned to look elsewhere—e.g., to the coasts—and thus to overlook what is right in front of them. Part of this, of course, has to do with the so-called centers of American culture being located far from the Midwest. Wallace Stegner has noted rather skeptically that “when publishing is concentrated in one American city with two or three subsidiary centers. . . , then talent flows away from the provincial places where it was born, and regionalism is what is left after the brain drain.”<sup>8</sup> Being aware of what a region has to offer and supporting its “talent” has never been more necessary.

As a kind of corollary, arguments for a proper regionalism are in no way meant simply to condone what’s done in the region, either. Regionalism can indeed degenerate into boosterism, provincialism—what Wendell Berry calls a perspective “narrowed by condescension or pride.”<sup>9</sup> If writers and artists become lost in their own landscapes, then the negative critiques of regionalism indeed become justified. The region fosters all kinds of art, and, as anywhere else, everything depends on how effectively writers and artists are aware of and *use* their materials, taking into account both the positive and negative, the contradictions and complexities. One can’t stress enough that works of literature and art need to be evaluated according to their intrinsic merits, regardless of the subject matter, approach, or the particular places which inspire and help to shape them.

Now, in what many have called an era of increasing placelessness, we need more than ever to be aware of a proper sense of the regional. Scott Russell Sanders, one of our most articulate Midwestern voices, adds another useful term to the discussion:

The writer who is steadfast rather than footloose risks being dismissed as regional or quaint. What could be more backward than staying put in a culture that rushes about? How can you see the big picture from a small place? I find the beginning of an answer in the word

<sup>8</sup> Wallace Stegner, *South Dakota Review* vol. 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Regional Motive,” *Southern Review* vol. 6, no. 4 (Autumn 1970), 974.

*stead* itself, which derives from an Indo-European word meaning to stand. To be steadfast is to stand by someone out of a conviction that what you are committed to is worth loving and defending.<sup>10</sup>

As in many of his others, I find a special kind of hopefulness in this passage—especially as being *steadfast* might help those all-too-familiar chips begin to disappear from our shoulders.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Russell Scott Russell Sanders, *Writing from the Center* (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1995), 160.