

**Seeking New Landscapes:  
The Regional Literary Journal and the Aesthetics  
of Regional Cartography**

By

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Requisite to any development of the literary journal as a regional voice is a working definition or at least keen understanding of region. The Geographic Educational Standards Project of 1994 provides a valuable definition from which to begin an examination of region, explaining region as:

a concept that is used to identify and organize areas of Earth's surface for various purposes. A region has certain characteristics that give it a measure of cohesiveness and distinctiveness and that set it apart from other regions. As worlds within worlds, regions can be used to simplify the whole by organizing Earth's surface on the basis of the presence or absence of selected physical and human characteristics. As a result, regions are human constructs whose boundaries and characteristics are derived from sets of specific criteria." (qtd. in Stoddard 167)

Regions are "a multilevel mosaic" of human construction (167). As such, what is notable here is that even geography, a science whose terminology denotes hard, factual data, defines "regions" as "human constructs," the boundaries and characteristics of which are subjectively determined.

If not by map, how then and according to what criteria does literature establish a region? Does an editor look back through the centuries, to times before the establishment of modern states, to times when people identified with others through kinship other than territoriality? Or does an editor adopt a modern,

nation-state view that suggests that the territoriality or region as defined by governing forces is the most powerful force in "engendering group identity?" (Stoddard 168). By creating regions as human constructs, the Great Plains region might be denoted by its oldest surviving family lines, or by common interests of its populace in agriculture or World Championship Wrestling. Defined by its governing forces, Kansas is a region comprised of sub-regions that are counties, and so on. The group identity resultant from such an ordering principle is no more complicated than grouping according to two-letter county abbreviations on the drivers' licenses of the region's citizens.

Neither a kinship view nor a state view addresses another dilemma of region, which is the need to define the concept of "homeland." Geography scholar Robert H. Stoddard notes that, grouped together, people who share a common culture "often including a language, religion, and history [have] often occupied a particular territory for hundreds of years, have developed a strong sense of attachment to that land, and believe that the area belongs to them" (Stoddard 169). Problematic and paradoxical here is the fact that one national or regional group may, at some later date, view members of another group as outsiders, even when the group members of the perceived "foreign" group have lived their entire lives within the same political boundaries of state, and according to the same common-interest bonds or kinship as the those of the group which perceives itself as the "insiders."

Problematic, too, in geographical mapping of region are the contradictory trends of modern culture: on the one hand, fierce nationalism, regionalism, and ethnic identifications divide the existing nations and states into ever smaller and more homogenous units. Meanwhile, on the other hand, "economic,

environmental, and political forces" (169) dictate the creation of "superstate" trading unions and judicial organizations such as the EEC, NAFTA, the United Nations, and various multinational corporations (Stoddard 169). In the end, then, the best we can conclude is something such as Stoddard does when he says that "people construct regions to interpret Earth's complexity" (172).

For the editor of a regional literary journal, this gives rise to several other questions: What are some of the complexities the editor wishes to examine and explore by constructing a regional journal? And, according to what principle does the journal define or "map" its region, both in terms of its reader base and the body of literature and art which will comprise its issues? The regional literary journal maintains, in spite of the contradictions of geographical definitions, a dedication to some tenet of spatial region. This means, in part, that a regional literary journal seeks writing about, and sometimes authored by those living within, a distinct geographical locus. The aesthetics of that writing, its voice, constitute the most difficult part of defining a regional journal. Aesthetically, the journal should seek new approaches to and images of the region and its people. This principle is, of course, predicated upon the notion that region is a concept, an ethos, relative and ever in flux.

This paradox of regional definition may be bridged, in part, by the work of architecture scholar Richard Etlin in his analysis of aesthetics and the spatial sense of self. Etlin asserts that the spatial and the aesthetic cannot be divorced conceptually from one another. "Space," Etlin writes, "is an integral constituent of the self. Our psychological sense of self-hood has a spatial dimension which we recognize in our feelings of comfort or unease in response to the places that we visit and inhabit" (Etlin 1). Arguable in discussing

region is how Etlin maintains that "our aesthetic response to scenes of nature and to works of art, to their qualities of line, form, and mass is a composite sentiment that involves a bodily sense of self which also has its spatial dimension" (1). Our composite response or aesthetics are derived from the three concepts which are not unique to Etlin, but which he terms "personal space," "lived space," and "existential space" (1).

Most familiar from behavioral psychology and visual proxemics is Etlin's concept of "personal space." This is a function of our interactions with others, and we know it as the spatial distance deemed appropriate in a given context for certain interactions. The concept of personal space derives from culture, and culture, as has already been discussed, is a determining factor of region. How personal space manifests itself in a literary work may not at first be readily apparent, which is why the analogy of cinema and other visual arts is helpful. Cinema utilizes the cultural connotations of personal space both in the placement of elements within the frame of a shot, and in the proxemic patterns of the camera itself in relation to the subject matter. In painting, too, an artist "impart[s] significant information about the nature of human relationships by manipulating the distances between figures or on a canvas" (Etlin 2). The painter may also choose to "engage the viewer directly through compositional features" (2) which thrust subject matter toward the viewer or draw the viewer (and thereby, the viewer's personal space) toward the subject matter itself. Anyone who has ever backed away from and then walked toward Impressionist paintings at an exhibit has experienced this latter manipulation of personal space.

A regional, literary aesthetic, then, necessitates some depiction of personal space as it is uniquely used

or experienced by characters within a region. Similarly, movement from one spatial zone within a story may signal emotional change or development of character. The degree to which the reader can assess that change may be, in fact, a function of the reader's understanding of the proxemic patterns of a region. The degree to which an artist may have captured a region may be in exactly this depiction of personal space. The personal space depicted in Grant Wood's famous painting, "American Gothic" represents such a captured regional proxemic. Regionalists such as Wood and Thomas Hart Benton used personal space between depicted characters to convey the aesthetic of a region and time. Very different regional imagists such as Asher B. Durand, Thomas Cole, and Albert Bierstadt saw the American landscape and its native people as a region of God, and sought to draw the viewer into those massive and fantastical canvases for which the Hudson River School painters are now so remembered. Both painting movements in this country used personal space to map the aesthetic of the regions the artists sought to depict: one in *what* was depicted, the other in *how* it was depicted.

Just as changes and developments in the character of American regions may be plotted by the changing images that depict them, so also may a movement across a body of literary work be plotted, over time, from one spatial zone to another. As occurs at character-level in a story, such movement in regional writing over time may signal a change in the emotional tenor of the region itself. Thus, the use of personal space is a means by which literature can aesthetically quantify and qualify a region, both at the text-level of the individual work and at the genre- or period-level of a collection of works. It may as well represent a means of analyzing and placing within a context for understanding the authors themselves. Scholar David

Marion Holman argues in his book on Midwestern and Southern regionalism that, in fact, American writers are best understood not by chronology, but by their placements within specific locales (121).

Richard Etlin suggests that "lived space" refers to "our psychological relationship with the appearance of things in the world around us and to the aesthetic response which these things . . . prompt in us" (5). Somewhat differently, "existential space" references the sense of self that a person has either when merely standing in a place or when moving through various spaces (7-8). Inhabitants of a spatial region may feel secure or sheltered, confined, even exultant as a result of their relation to an experienced space or the experience of moving through a sequence of spaces. Obviously, these concepts serve effectively in establishing aesthetics for architecture. Less initially obvious is the fact that these concepts of spatial relationships also serve to further delineate the region a writer or artist may wish to depict. Writing that takes as its subject the author's aesthetic response to the geography of a region is strong, regional writing. Strong regional writing may also be defined as that writing which treats the geography of place as it makes the author *feel*, whether as static, back-drop landscape (what we might call the "diorama" of region in vignette), or as a series of images which might occur in a journey across region or from one region to another.

All of this discussion, with relation to geography and spatial aesthetics, leads to the most important element of regional writing, which is that such writing is strongly visual. The chief means by which most of us, after all, experience space is visually. Tactile sensations and the aural play of a region's language are essential to regional writing. These are secondary experiences, however, as most humans are overwhelmingly visual creatures. Francois Rigolot

traces the etymology of the word *energie* from the Aristotelian usage where it references "the paradox of producing a powerful lifelike effect through words" (103). Later, in Roman usage, the term undergoes an etymological transformation, and "the words *energeia* and *enargeia* are semantically conflated" (104). Thus, Rigolot argues, "[i]n poetic theory the two meanings combine" such that *energy*, that term previously denoting the artistic power to represent reality, becomes "necessarily linked with *sight*," the *noble sense* associated with light and creativity." Henceforth, Rigolot maintains that "the writer's ability to describe inanimate things as if they were animate is expressed in visual, iconic terms" (104). Rigolot is not the first to argue that, in the pictorial analogy, the portrayed subject "regains the 'exquisite truth' of Nature itself" (104). Mary Lou Emery points out that visuality as a literary strategy is a means by which an author may set forth an original, personal vision as a means of subverting images of a dominant visual culture, manifest in such as forms as paintings, film, or popular media (260). This "power" of which Emery writes lies in what Murray Krieger calls "the miracle of gaining access to a reality beyond language, yet represented within it" (qtd. in Emery 263). Krieger argues that "the language of visual signs has traditionally seemed a more 'natural' language, closer than words and their arbitrary linguistic relations to the 'real' beyond language" (Emery 263).

As Rigolot suggests and as our own experience bears out, what is "animate" is often what is "seen," and the image we see often bears testament to some innate truth beyond the words which might have conjured for us the image in the mind's eye. Taken together, the work of these scholars suggests that regional writing may be not simply a function of voice, but of image. The images of region become that

region's truth, its legacy. As the parameters of region are explored, then, it is relevant to discuss the cultural connotations evidenced in certain images. Cinematic imagists have long employed the use of color as a subconscious element, using lighting, costuming, and color set design to create moods about and within a film that the audience absorbs almost as "truth," a subtext too subtle to be immediately grasped. The "mood" of a film is almost always a function of its lighting and use of color. So, too, might it be said that the "mood" in literary depictions of region is a function of the images the writer has chosen, the degree of light, of space, of color in a story.

This last element for determining region is perhaps the most crucial. Knowing, even as we might, all these means of mapping a region through literature, it is inevitable that regional literary journal editors find themselves at odds with the images they actually see in their regions, and with the images of their regions that writers choose to employ *in art*. A popular chorus, despite the burgeoning number of regional literary journals, is "Regionalism is Dead." Further aesthetic study suggests, however, that regionalism is not dead. Arguably, what has happened is that popular culture has simply stopped seeing regions as they *are*, and has stopped attempting to map them in literature and art. By depicting what we *wish* we saw rather than what is really there, we have stopped creating and defining region in our literature. Sally Schaumann maintains that we have, regionally and nationally, no images in or from art to inform our vision of the modern pastoral. When many think of a region such as the Great Plains, or any non-urban region, they conjure peaceful images they know from art, much of it from the turn of the century. Reserved for depictions of urban settings are images of industry, litter, and decay (Schaumann 181). Schaumann attributes this inability to "see" actual

landscapes to the fact that "the American public has diminishing opportunities to experience an actual agrarian landscape" (182). Some of this regional "blindness" may also be attributed to the fact that regional literature has not attempted to reflect the world, such as it is, as matter or as meaning to any aim-seeking subject.

If regional writing is, in fact, dead, it may well be because writers are not creating enough of it with responsible and accurate images of the land and its use. This amounts to more than a nostalgia-market serving laziness on the part of the writing community. It amounts to a cultural irresponsibility. One of the means by which we know our world and ourselves is through the art our culture has produced. Thus, when regional writing fails to create images reflective of the spatial landscape as the writer experiences it, the writing lies. Schaumann's questions as an environmentalist are the same as the regional journal editor's: "If our aesthetic notions are not based on actual experience, what then is the basis for our aesthetic beliefs about the American countryside? What are the dimensions of this aesthetic expectation? Is it only a nostalgic one?" (183). The answers to these questions are important, because, as Schaumann points out, "our aesthetic expectations" for a given landscape or region "directly relate to what we actually allow ourselves to 'see' in the countryside, and ultimately how 'we' as individuals and collectively as society manage" a given region or landscape (183).

Schaumann explains that when we choose to see the "best" images of a region, we are choosing to see the "best of us." "We retrieve fanciful countryside from a deep and old repertoire of comfortable pastoral aesthetic notions rather than suffer the creation pains of a contemporary aesthetic that fits reality" (183). In writing of a journey to modern Berlin, Richard

Shusterman points out that "the now absent wall dividing East and West remains in many ways the structuring principle of [the now] unified city, just as the divided cities of East and West Berlin were [before] defined essentially by their contrasting absent parts" (Shusterman 741). We might say that, in much this way, our modern-day regional writing has been structured around a kind of "aesthetic of absence." The strong visual images and sense of spatial relationships that should mark the new regionalism of areas such as the Great Plains has lain dormant beneath the images of its history: cattle and windmills; the lonely, empty road stretching to a three-quarter skyline horizon; boys and dogs. Perhaps, then, the best work that the regional literary journal can do is to publish writing that is marked as much by what is *not* there, visually and spatially, as what *is*. The images the editor chooses, after all, are what create the region's boundaries and flesh out who its residents are, and the power of publishing them is not one an editor should take lightly.

"Region" is an arbitrary demarcation of space, real or imagined. It connotes homogeneity and discreteness, even while embracing diversity and inclusiveness. The city, for example, is a discrete category or "region," while its defining characteristic is its diversity. Regional art and literature, then, are those works that reflect somehow the constructed spatial systems by which humans group themselves. Regional work is the representation of place. It is marked by images synonymous with a particular geography: plains, mountains, seas. And, by images created by the lives resultant from those geographies: agricultural, alpine, nautical. Paradoxically, writing in the regional literary journal must transcend those images and seek to carve within the reader a place that the reader experiences as real.

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