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Appalachian Literature

A Region Awakens

This essay and the poem that follows, "Appalachian Kentucky and the Cycle of American Literature," appeared together in 1993 in Across the Ridge: The Newsletter of the Appalachian Civic Leadership Project. A version also appeared the same year as the afterword to A Gathering at the Forks: Fifteen Years of the Hindman Settlement School Appalachian Writers Workshop, edited by George Ella Lyon, Jim Wayne Miller, and Gurney Norman.

Back in the 1940s and 1950s, Lawrence County, Kentucky, native Cratis Williams attempted to find a university where he could write a doctoral dissertation about the literature of the Appalachian South. He couldn't find a graduate English department in his home state, or in North Carolina, where he was living, or in any other southern state that would permit him to undertake the serious study of Appalachian literature.

In those days the very term "Appalachian literature" struck most graduate English professors as a contradiction in terms. Why, there was no such thing! At the very most, a few folk tales and ballads. The most tolerant response that Williams received was: "If you want to study Appalachian literature, take a couple of weeks off and read it!" Either there was no such thing as Appalachian literature, or, if there was, there wasn't much of it; and however much there was, it wasn't of a quality to merit serious study.

The attitude that Cratis Williams encountered was nothing new in the American experience. The English once denied that there was such a thing as American literature—at least, any worth reading. In 1820 an English critic asked derisively, "Who reads an American book?" At that moment most of the people were living who would produce what we now know as

the literary flowering of New England, that body of work created by Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, and others.

But by 1930 Europe recognized American literary achievement by awarding Sinclair Lewis the Nobel Prize. And since then Nobel Prize winners in literature have frequently been Americans: Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and, most recently, Saul Bellow.

American literature came of age. But the process was slow. Not only was England naturally reluctant to discover that a former colony—the United States—had a significant national literature, but we Americans ourselves were slow to recognize our own literature. The American literary historian and critic F. O. Matthiessen recalled that when he entered Yale University as a freshman in 1917, Melville's great novel *Moby-Dick* was shelved in the university library under the heading "cetology"—the study of whales.

We lose our writers in America. We mislay them, like a pair of glasses.

After we realized there was such a thing as American literature, we doubted the existence of anything that could be called southern literature. In 1917, when Matthiessen was discovering *Moby-Dick* in the Yale library, the journalist H. L. Mencken wrote an essay on the intellectual aridity of the American South entitled "The Sahara of the Bozart" (he was punning on the French phrase *beaux arts*, the fine arts, pronounced *bozart*). In it he quotes a southern poet, J. Gordon Coogler, who wrote, "Alas, for the South! Her books have grown fewer. She never was much given to literature!"

Mencken's timing was as poor as that of the English critic who had asked, a century earlier, "Who reads American books?" For the South was on the verge of a remarkable literary quickening which gave us such writers as William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote. Even Mencken did not fail to notice his error. Mencken republished "The Sahara of the Bozart" a few years later, when the South could claim a number of well-known writers. This time he prefaced the essay with a note in which he attempted to claim credit for the South's literary progress. "There is reason to believe," he wrote, "that my [1917] attack had something to do with that revival of Southern letters which followed in the middle 1920's."

Like American literature and southern literature, of which it is a part, Appalachian literature has been recognized late and often grudgingly. Cratis Williams played a critical role in identifying and spreading the word about the literature of his native region. But he had to go outside his region for formal study of his region's literature. Williams studied Appalachian literature in an American Studies program at New York University. In 1961 he completed a three-volume, 1,641-page dissertation entitled "The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction," for which he received a special citation from the New York University Board of Regents. Williams demonstrated the existence of a large body of writing about and from the Appalachian region. And he showed that just as southern literature is American literature with a difference, Appalachian literature could be considered a variety of southern literature, the literature of the upland or mountain South.

But Cratis Williams also miscalculated. When he completed his dissertation in 1961, he said he thought he was "putting the mountaineer to bed." In the last section of his study, he wrote that Harriette Arnow's novels "complete the story of the Southern mountaineer." Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, Williams wrote, "traces the dissolution of the highlander who abandons his dying native land for the lure of the Northern industrial city."

But just as Williams was putting the mountaineer to bed, books like Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s and Jack E. Weller's *Yesterday's People* and Lyndon Johnson's *War on Poverty* once again focused national attention on Appalachia. The southern mountaineer rose up from his bed, and Cratis Williams discovered that his region was suddenly "a nest of singing birds." A generation of native-born Appalachians began to take an interest in their region, in traditional and contemporary mountain life, in Appalachian history, culture and heritage. They began to discover their region's older writers, and many of this younger generation began to write themselves.

Today we can distinguish various periods of Appalachian literature: the period before 1880, when southern mountain people were generally not distinguished—in fiction or nonfiction—from pioneers; a period from 1880 to about 1920, when southern mountaineers tended to be presented either in a humorous vein or as examples of "local color"; a period from 1920s

to the present, which has seen the emergence of many writers native to the Appalachian region.

George Brosi, in *The Literature of the Appalachian South* (Eastern Kentucky University, 1992), distinguishes four generations of native Appalachian writers:

- A first generation emerging during the 1920s, which includes Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Thomas Wolfe, Harriette Arnow, Mildred Haun, Jesse Stuart, Don West and James Still.
- A second generation emerging during World War II, which includes Byron Herbert Reece, Hubert Skidmore, Mary Lee Settle, John Ehle and Wilma Dykeman.
- A third generation born in the 1930s and early 1940s, which includes Gurney Norman, Lee Smith, Fred Chappell, Jim Wayne Miller and Robert Morgan.
- A fourth and youngest generation, which includes Breece Pancake, Denise Giardina, George Ella Lyon, Rita Quillen and Pinckney Benedict.

In 1905 Emma Bell Miles, in *The Spirit of the Mountains*, expressed the belief that a literary renaissance would come to Appalachia when mountain people awakened “to consciousness of themselves as a people.” Since that time Appalachian people have been awakened—by the “dynamite roar” (as Jean Ritchie puts it in her powerful song “Black Waters”) of mining, dam and road construction, by the thunder of war, by the noise of sawmill, locomotive, and factory whistle, by change playing its loud tapedeck.

Change has awakened people all over the vast Appalachian region and made us conscious of ourselves as a group with a shared history and heritage—and perhaps with a shared future. One might think that rapid change would erode any sense of group identity that existed. But as George Brown Tindall writes in *The Ethnic Southerners*, “We learn time and again from the southern past and from the history of others that to change is not necessarily to disappear. And we learn from modern psychology that to change is not necessarily to lose one’s identity; to change, sometimes, is to find it.”

Appalachian writers—poets, short story writers, novelists, dramatists,

writers of nonfiction—all have expressed the collective experience of Appalachian people in their work. That experience is characterized by a sense of the past working still in the present; by a sense of close attachment to the earth; by a determination to endure. One sees all these themes in James Still's poem "Spring," where he writes:

Not all of us were warm, not all of us

 Not all of us were warm, though we hugged the fire
 through the long chilled nights.

We have come out
 Into the sun again, we have untied our knot
 Of flesh: We are no thinner than a hound or mare,
 Or an unleaved poplar. We have come through
 To the grass, to the cows calving in the lot.

Still's poem is about enduring, about coming through adversity to regeneration of life.

And so is Robert Morgan's "Affliction," in which he takes the chestnut blight as a symbol of the Appalachian region's history:

On the slopes where the old
 blighted years ago
 new
 chestnuts sprout and
 thrive until the age of saplings, then
 blossom and die

 after decades still trying to break through
 and establish hold.

 Like us straining to ascend,
 immortal
 only in dirt.

In Morgan's poem we see the same themes of endurance, perseverance, and affirmation despite hurt and scarring. These are themes that every Appalachian person can recognize as a true expression of the experience of Appalachian people. Reading such writing, we come to know ourselves better, to understand who we are and how we got to be the way we are.

And as Appalachian literature becomes better known throughout the country, as its relation to southern literature and to American literature is better understood, the country will know itself better. The growth and development of American literature can be understood as a process in which writers have discovered the land and life of our different geographical and cultural regions: New England, the South, the Midwest, the Far West. The writers and their works have then been discovered by other parts of the country, with the result that we have a heightened sense not only of our national diversity but also of what our core identity is. A distinctive part of American literature, Appalachian literature, according to Wilma Dykeman, is "as unique as churning butter, as universal as getting born." Appalachian literature is a part of our ongoing discovery of America.

Appalachian Kentucky and the Cycle of American Literature

American literature was born a periwigged old gentleman,
a bit hard of hearing, who spoke in English accents
and peered at Wilderness through opera glasses.

American literature was Washington Irving touring.
In the fall of 1835 Irving looked at frontier forests
and thought he saw stained glass, cathedral columns.
Wind in the trees he fancied organ music.

Whitman heard America singing.
American literature grew young and open-collared,
took to the open road, afoot, light-hearted,
participated in vigorous, varied life
beyond the settled areas of the east—
life Emerson, sitting in his parlor

in New England, could only point to:
 “Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics . . .
 the wrath of rogues . . . the pusillanimity of honest men.”

The cycle was repeated in Kentucky:
 Our writing was born genteel and mannered, too,
 wearing a ruffled collar and lace cuffs.
 An early Kentucky poet wrote in Latin.
 Even when translated into English,
 Stephen Theodore Badin’s “Epicedium,”
 published in Lexington in 1812, mistakes
 frontier Kentucky for a manicured English province.
 As if he’d glimpsed the people and the land
 from the window of a touring-coach, he wrote:
 “’Twas late in autumn and the thrifty swain
 In spacious barns secur’d the golden grain.”

Over a hundred years would pass before
 Kentucky writing grew muscular and young.
 Then Jesse Stuart spoke. Like Whitman, he had eyes
 to see, ears to hear, and a tongue to say
 a land and people. It was as if Badin’s
 thrifty swain, in a sweat-soaked shirt,
 had undertaken to write his own dispatches
 in rough-and-ready verses that began:
 “I am a farmer singing at the plow.”

Jim Wayne Miller
 December 1992