

**SOCIETY**

**FOR**

**THE**

**STUDY**

**OF**



# **MIDWESTERN LITERATURE**

Newsletter  
Volume Seven  
Number Three  
Fall, 1977



Society for the Study of  
Midwestern Literature

Newsletter

Volume VII

Number Three  
Fall, 1977

The Eighth Annual Conference

The Eighth Annual Conference, a symposium on "The Cultural Heritage of the Midwest," will be held at the Kellogg Center, Michigan State University. In addition to a variety of papers, the conference will include exhibits of Midwestern art and folk art, books, and manuscripts, readings by Midwestern authors, and a production of "the Runner Stumbles," by Milan Stitt. One of the ten best plays on Broadway in 1976, it is set in Michigan in 1912. The production will be followed by a discussion with the author and others. A full program will be mailed soon.

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The Conference on "The Life and Culture of the Upper Mississippi Valley."

This first conference was held at Western Illinois University on September 30 and October 1, chaired by Timothy Frazer. Featured were the following papers:

Bernard F. Engel, Department of American Thought and Language, Michigan State University: "Regional Poetry: Giving the Midwest a 'Usable Past.'"

Hazel Garcia, Department of Journalism, University of Michigan: "Communications as a Factor in Settlement History: A Kentucky Case Study."

Richard Payne, Department of English, University of Chicago: "A Word Geography of the North Central States."

Richard Jensen, The Center for Family and Community History, Newberry Library: "Social History in the Middle Western States."

Roald D. Tweet, Department of English, Augustana College: "Finding the Midwest: The Augustana M.A. in Regional Studies."

David D. Anderson, Department of American Thought and Language, Michigan State University: "The Midwestern Town in Middle Western Fiction."

Victor Hicken, Department of History, Western Illinois University: "Western Illinois in the Intellectual Revolution of 1890-1920."

Harold B. Allen, Department of English and Linguistics, University of Minnesota: "Linguistic Geography in the Upper Midwest."

John Fraser Hart, Department of Geography, University of Minnesota: "Three Generations of Urban Places in the Upper Mississippi Valley."

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Election of Officers

The annual ballot will be mailed with the Spring issue. If you have suggestions for nominees for President, Vice President, or member of the board (2 places), send them to Dave Anderson.

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Dues are due and payable January 1. A dues form is enclosed for your convenience.

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MidAmerica V is in press. It will appear in January. Included are the following:

"The Varieties of Humor in John Hay's Pike County Ballads," John E. Hallwas

"Edward Eggleston and the Evangelical Consciousness," Madonna C. Kolbenschlag

"Lucy Monroe's 'Chicago Letters' to The Critic, 1893-1896," James Stronks

"'Awakened and Harmonized': Edgar Lee Masters' Emersonian Midwest," Ronald Primeau

"Mid American Poetry in Midwestern Little Magazines," Philip Greasley

"Dispersion and Direction: Sherwood Anderson, the Chicago Renaissance, and the American Mainstream," David D. Anderson

"Striving for Power: Hemingway's Classical Neurosis and Creative Force," Jacqueline Tavernier-Corbin

"The Divine Average: Contemporary Missouri Verse," Robert L. Kindrick

"Whatever Happened to Willard Motley? A Documentary," Ray Lewis White

"The Annual Bibliography of Midwestern Literature: 1976,"

Donald S. Pady, Editor

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The Third Coast: Contemporary Michigan Poetry. Edited by Conrad Hilberry, Herbert Scott, and James Tipton. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976.

In cooperation with the Michigan Council for the Arts, Wayne State published this volume as a Bicentennial project. Out of 165 Michigan poets who answered a call for poetry in 1975, the editors of this volume selected 30 for publication and included an average of a half-dozen poems for each poet. It was a sizable project undertaken by the editors with results generally worthy of praise.

First of all, the title of the book is interesting because it is a commentary upon the state of cultural affairs in America. It suggests that for a long time, perhaps for too long, we have associated culture, art, poetry, with our two coastlines, the Atlantic and the Pacific, New York and California, and have tended to forget, ignore, or not take too seriously what goes on in between the two. I should not say we, the people, have done this, but I do wish to suggest that they, the publishing-industrial complex have been subject to this kind of thinking. So, the "Third Coast," like the Third World, necessarily declares its existence in the face of indifference.

What is good and bad about the poetry in this collection turns out to be good and bad about poetry written anywhere in the U.S. The bad is bad because it is predictable, overly cautious, studied, cliched, embarrassed. One has to wonder why a few of the poets were included. Their work is, in a word--common. There is a place for common poetry--undergrad literary magazines, house organs of one kind or another, mimeo anthologies in the poetry-writing classroom--but not I think in an important anthology.

The good poetry in this volume, and there is much of it, is represented by some high energy types like Hugh Fox, Donald Hall, and Jim Harrison; by long-time steady writers of fine verse like Barbara Drake, Dan Gerber, Robert Hayden, Dudley Randall, Herbert Scott, James Tipton, and John Woods; and by the promising work of some younger poets like Cynthia Nibbelink and Eve Shelnutt.

The range of subject and form represented

by these poets defies classification. The variety in their writing is as rich as this state's topography, this nation's topography, as rich and varied as contemporary poetry written throughout the U.S. Not one of them can be called a regional poet, although many times their subjects are uniquely Midwestern. Taken together they do not point toward a "Michigan School of Poetry," are not part of a "Detroit Renaissance" or an "Ann Arbor Movement." Most were not born in Michigan and many will probably not die in Michigan. They are in Michigan the same way most people are in any state--for love or money--but being the kind of people they are, Michigan is better for having them. To a great extent they are, like the title of the book suggests, Americans in exile from the East and West coasts, proclaiming that good poetry--even great poetry--may and will be written wherever poets are--even on the Third Coast.

Paul J. Ferlazzo  
Michigan State University

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Concern/s: Essays & Reviews 1972-1976  
by Tom Montag. Pentagram (P. O. Box 11609, Milwaukee, WI 53211). 258 pp. \$4.50 paperback.

For the past several years Tom Montag, poet and former-editor of Margins, has been giving a great deal of attention to contemporary literature, chiefly as it appears in the small presses. His critical essays and reviews have been widely published. For those interested in Midwestern literature this collection contains many individual pieces on poets of the region (Harley Elliott, William Kloefkorn, Ted Kooser, and John Woods--to name only a few) as well as several overviews of the literary scene. Even when discussing other topics, Montag often returns to the idea of a regional literature, one written by Midwesterners for a Midwestern audience that does not depend upon the eastern press or eastern critics. Hence his concern with the economic state of the small press--its duties, its rewards, and its dangers.

But the collection is national, even international, in scope. Here one also finds essays on the Haitian poet Jacques



Roumain and on Canadian literature. The k's in the index give some indication of the author's range. Kaleidoscope (an underground paper in Milwaukee), Margaret Kaminski, Bill Katz, Kayak (magazine), Deborah Keenan, Hugh Kenner, Maurice Kenny, Joshua Kesselman, David Kherdian, Kierkegaard, Russell Kirk, The Kissing Man (by George Elliott), Herbert Klein, William Kloefkorn, John Knoepfle, John Kois, Ted Kooser, Henry Korn, Peter Kostakis, Richard Kostelanetz, Georgia Kouklis, Paul Krassner, Henry Kreisell, Diane Kruckow, ktaadn molehill (a small press), Arthur Kunkin, Greg Kuzma, and Kenn Kwint.

Montag is a prolific critic, open to diverse literary experiences. Though he advocates a poetry based directly upon the author's life, he can nevertheless appreciate other types.

"And yet, for all this, reading and re-reading Alvin Turner as Farmer, I see life and truth for our own age suggested by another time and place, I see the figures of my grandfather and great uncles silhouetted against the rolling horizon, I see half-dreams and memories of my own: if Kloefkorn has not lived as Alvin Turner, his grandfather did, and my grandfather, and countless other men..."

He reacts in kind: a straightforward book like Kloefkorn's calls forth a straightforward response; a sophisticated book evokes a sophisticated reading.

"The importance of the Sot-Weed Factor, I should think, lies in its disjunction of history and 'actuality,' of identity and language: the novel leaves us with the clear impression that we are not seeing out of both eyes clearly when we look around ourselves, or that we may be peering through the wrong lenses, that we cannot, even at great effort, find 'identity' in the words with which we would define ourselves, not necessarily find 'meaning' in our culture and history, that what lies outside ourselves may ultimately be more complex than all the artifice of

words and grammar can grasp, that what we call 'reality' may be only another culturally-perpetuated illusion we have been living all along."

In Concern/s such insights abound.

Victor Contoski  
University of Kansas

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NABOKOV

Validimir Nabokov (1899-1977): aristocrat, snob, emigre and immigrant, logophile, comedian, puzzle-lover, a writer who enriched contemporary literature in English by exploring resources of language that are forfeited by realists and naturalists. Living in an age of the plain style, Nabokov adopted the mask of the plain-spoken man who detests symbolism, yet with scorn aforethought he gave fuel to some of the foxiest of our symbol-hunters. In his books one sees a lepidopterist of the word, running across summery fields, his net poised to swoop onto that shimmering winged creature that always tantalizes, the precise word for the thing itself, the event in its wholeness, the state of mind in all its multitudinous ambiguity.

Like few of us to whom the language is native, Nabokov knew that "anything" is not the same as "everything," and gave his characters an interest in such questions as whether there is an exact term for "the little cup in which you place the diamond" and "a nice special word" for pigling" and "the right word for the break in a boy's voice at puberty." (For the curious: Nabokov supplies "dop" for the first and "ponticello" for the third; if he had given the "nice" term for a small pig, would he have said "shoat"?).

But though smitten with words, Nabokov was not such a fool as to hold that the word is everything. "We think in images, not in words . . . since most of life is mimodrama," he writes, as though cautioning himself. But, he goes on, "We certainly do imagine words when we need them." This power of summoning up a word for the thing, for whatever we would "compose, recall, or refashion," is related to our apprehension of the word.



We imagine the word "just as we imagine everything else capable of being perceived in this, or even in a still more unlikely, world." The word is not the thing, but it is an embodiment which enables us to handle, so to speak, the thing in our minds.

I quote from Look at the Harlequins! (1974), neither his best nor his most daring work but one that in its cleverness, humor, and see-through disguise of the author himself as well as in the reversal of expectation in its ending is typical of Nabokov enjoying his profession at the height of his powers.

LATH, as the main character calls the book during reflective moments, purports to be a memoir of a Russian emigre writer Vadim Vadimovich (compare Nabokov's own surnames Vladimir Vladimovich) who in the course of a long career finally accumulates enough money to support himself after publishing an account of a transcontinental trip with a nymphet. The guise is a put on within a put on--Nabokov would never be happy with a merely obvious mask--because though his fictional character can voice opinions Nabokov presumably would not want to set down his own name, the reader must be on guard because surely not all these sometimes outrageous aperçus are Nabokov's own. Determining what is the author's own stance of course demands close acquaintance with more than his writing: admirers of Nabokov are almost a cult, able to confound those of us not privy to all the author's personal ways.

In LATH, what purports to be the serious thread is a strain of madness in Vadim which causes him to be confused about the relation between space and time, to be able to imagine walking down the street, and then walking back up it, but unable to conceive of the moment when down becomes up, when the reversal takes place. Since such a quirk is not likely to impede the life of anyone but a theoretical physicist (and such scientists, Vadim remarks, succeed in keeping people "happy" only "until the next chap snatches the chalk") it of course does not support the major philosophical argument that the unwitting reader might try to find in it.

The point of the book, perhaps, is rather in the same paragraph's remark that a commonsensical explanation of the matter

is an "exquisite quibble." Life, Nabokov feels, is a delightful and cunning game: his characters find themselves running or stumbling after the odd but colorfully exciting butterflies of fate and circumstance. The point is not whether the capture is ever achieved--sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't--but in the excitement, the fortune and misfortunes, the "exquisite" thrill of the chase.

Nabokov's narration is often fragmented, ricocheting from one target to another in a manner at first reminiscent of writers who with determined--Nabokov might say deadening--seriousness experiment with time (Faulkner, Barth, Gardner, et al). But an apple is not an orange even though both are round. Nabokov is not so much experimenting with time sequences as he is turning now here, now there, in pursuit of that mundivagant bug. This ordering of his materials all allows him to digress, to at times stand on a platform and survey the ludicrous errancies of his fellow wanderers, to express his crotchety comments on Freud (he despises him), art critics (ditto), Soviet Russia (1917 was not a revolution but only a coup), social pretension (his own Russian aristocracy was too far above such pretenders as "Japanese barons" and "New England patricians" even to be amused by them). He was, indeed, an autocrat of not the breakfast but the dinner table, an Oliver Wendell Holmes sophisticated by a century of disappointments and marvels.

Emphasis on the marvels. Nabokov is always the imaginative, the artistic, the literary man. The primary offense of the Soviets is not political--though their politics offend--but esthetic: the banishment of certain literary works by Lenin and Stalin "represented the greatest indictment, absolute and immortal" of their regime. Even in so fond a memoir as "Mademoiselle," an essay recalling the French governess of his childhood in St. Petersburg, Nabokov's problem is not the recollection (memory always spoke easily to him), but the possibility that he may fail at the artist's task of discovering that "something in her" that "was far more she than her chins or her ways or even her French . . ."



In such writing Nabokov puts in the shade all those humbugs who write in numbered paragraphs and a castiron vocabulary of freeing a "self" that is somehow separate from everything one is or does. Nabokov is richly vigorous and alive. For him, the world is, as Marianne Moore said of the mind, "an enchanted thing / like the glaze on a / katydid wing." The self-pity of those who feel shackled by society or parents or fate, and, equally, the patronizing of those who see others as thus shackled, is not for him. There are poor, one cannot deny that misery may lie at the doorstep; but let's leave commiseration to those useful cabbages who are interested in it. As for you and me and our fellow jasmines and hibiscuses--if we hurry, we can make the night boat that is just around the corner, ready to sail for Muscovy, perhaps for the Czar's enchanted island in the Baltic where the statues are golden, the surprising oak tree is a fountain crafted by metalsmiths, and opulent roses bloom even after the mainland is deep in snow.

Is Nabokov only another James Branch Cabell, an exotic to be cried up in his lifetime, cried down soon after? No, and not only because even a Cabell is not as bad as current opinion holds. The last chapter of Literary History of the United States (3rd edition, 1963) classifies Nabokov as among writers portraying the pathos of the grotesque. The 4th edition (revised, 1974) describes his love of play but observes that his admirers tend to be "experimentalists, absurdists, or clever nihilists" who find in his "antics" a "reflection of their own void." Both editions, that is, dismiss him.

Nabokov's main character is always something of an emigre, no longer welcome in the land of his birth and yet never at home in his adopted terrain. Similarly, the Nabokov hero is always an outsider, never a figure of the mainstream.

But Nabokov is a man of gusto, overriding all the weak and weepy, the fashionably mawkish, with his vitality, his richness, his pursuit of the alate flame. And in that pursuit, one may argue, he demonstrates that he is the opposite of the nihilist, that he believes, strongly, in values more profound than those of the sociopolitical realm. The cabbage is more nourishing

than the jasmine. But it would be a poor life that served up only cabbages.

Bernard F. Engel  
Michigan State University

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From a Midwest Notebook:  
THE WOODS AND THE RIVER

The twenty-acre woods on our farm was, and ever remained, to me a wonderland. Something in every boy, I suspect, seeks association with nature undisturbed by man, and I liked the woods, in all seasons. There was a good deal of big timber in it, white oak, red oak, bur oak, pin oak, white ash, black ash, hickory, elm, and sugar maple, but my father cut trees only when he needed poles for a straw-shed or lumber for some structure. It was more economical to buy wood or steel fence posts, but sometimes a dead oak or walnut went to make a corner anchor. The rest of it was firewood, and there were always tops and fallen trees for cutting.

My father liked a clean woods, and the livestock kept the brush in check. Every spring and summer there were hogs or cattle, or both, in the woods, the hogs being always greedy for acorns, and both hogs and cattle making clear trails through the brush. In summer the milk cows were pastured there, and, though they had to be driven on the road some distance to the barn, I didn't mind going after them and didn't care if I had to hunt them out of the thickets.

For it was a joy to walk in the woods, on the sod at its edges, on the cushiony grass of swampy spots, on the moist dark loam of its shady center. Here is the spring were dogwood and hawthorn and black-haw blossoms and a profusion of wild flowers: spring beauties, wild pansies ("Johnny-jump-ups"), blue, yellow, and white violets, sweet williams, buttercups, yellow, pink, and white daisies, field onions, May apples, jack-in-the-pulpits. Many open spaces, before the livestock trampled them, were carpeted with ground ivy. Wild mustard was everywhere, as were stickseeds, whose little burs cling tenaciously to trouser legs in summer and fall. On



the paths one's feet were brushed by the ferny fronds of yarrow. Wild grapes and wild raspberries grew thickly, and there were wild blackberries and wild gooseberries too. But I was no botanist, ever, and to me they were all one, simply natural life in abundance. The details of nature no more found their way into my heart than into the heart of Peter Bell.

If I were caught in the rain while on my errand, I did not care, for I could keep nearly dry by standing close to a big tree, and one of the pleasantest sights of the countryside is the shimmer of rain against foliage, one of the pleasantest sounds the drumming of rain drops on leaves. The rain would probably stop suddenly, just as it might come in late afternoon; and, as I urged the cows, who would as lief be wet as dry, toward the gate, I would look on a fresh green world--seeing it, however, with only half-seeing eyes, for in those days I was thinking always of other things than I had to do with on the farm, thinking of what I wanted of life, what I wanted to have and do and be.

Cattle and hogs in the woods had water at the pond until late summer, when, if rainfall had not been greater than normal, it would be dried up. If they ran then in the hill pasture as well--the snake fence between was easily opened--they were watered from a spring in the next field, near a great twin-trunked wild black cherry tree. Here the water had to be dipped by bucket, for this spring was simply a hole in the middle of a swamp, which my father had dug out and fenced around.

There was a well within the woods, and, though it eventually failed, it served many summers, while the hill field was being tilled and livestock were confined to the woods alone. When it was in use a 250-gallon tank was kept there, and one of my duties was to fill it daily. When there were steers in the woods as well as the cows, they drank a tankful every day. But there was a small reward for the hard and tedious job of pumping: after I had pumped until the cattle had drunk all they wanted for the time being, sometimes I would undress and immerse myself in the clear, cold water.

In the middle of the woods were hawthorn and black-haw and spice thickets, some so dense that even the cattle did not go through them. There were a couple of sizable open spaces in the midst of trees, and at a time when life exacted so many compromises that I was sick of them all I thought of building a little house in one, using bricks from the abandoned schoolhouse in the adjacent field and myself doing the masonry. But this, like so many other of my projects, never came to realization.

My other haunt, the river, was almost as inviting. Fishing was dull, but to row up and down in my boat was a pleasure, and I often did that for no purpose except to be on the water. My German shepherd bitch delighted to stand in the prow, and nearly every fine day of summer, until the dog days came and it was clogged with algae, we were some time there, either in the boat or tramping the banks. Rowing north to the Bend, I might have to stand and push the boat off one of the big rocks that were clustered in the shallows south of the east hook. At low water many were above the surface, and both the dog and I might sit on one sunning ourselves like the turtles I could see from the bank. Then, it is likely, we would go on around the Bend, overhung on both sides by great trees, elm and shagbark hickory and sycamore and locust, with many buckeyes and hackberries and crab apples and elders and a few green ashes and bur oaks, the lower banks dense with scrub maples, to where the river straightened and, with the road running close by, lost much of its interest. Here, where the current struck the south bank, was the "deep hole," which I had been cautioned to beware of from childhood. It took the length of an oar to reach its mud bottom.

In the past time the river seemed always at its best just after a rain--not a downpour or an all-day drizzle, which turned its banks to thick and slippery mud, but a brief summer shower, which freshened the leaves of trees and wild grapevines and all the tangled foliage that grew on the broad south and west banks at the east hook. It was then I liked best to tramp there, for no purpose and going nowhere, but making my way cautiously through this maze of undergrowth as if it were the threshold to some



great adventure. Near a big sycamore I thought was the ideal place to find or deposit buried treasure. I never found any, but once I chose a spot, directly under the fork of a limb, and buried ten pennies in a tin can. I drew a map, appending instructions to drop a string from the fork, as in "The Gold Bug" (but also gave the compass direction and the distance from the tree for certainty), and put it into a book for somebody to discover.

The books of those years are dispersed, and perhaps another imaginative boy has tramped the banks of the Scioto seeking romance and a sycamore tree.

William B. Thomas

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Programs in the coming year include presentations at MLA, MMLA, and PCA. If you're interested in participating, please write Dave Anderson.

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#### Indexer Needed

After yeoman (-person?) service in the cause, Susanna Harmon has found it impossible to continue. She has completed the index of the Newsletter through Volume 4, and it will appear soon. If you're interested in following an act that is certainly hard to follow, please volunteer.

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#### ANNOUNCING:

Ohio-Indiana American Studies Association,  
21-22 April, 1973, Miami University,  
Oxford, Ohio. Address: Joe Trimmer,  
Program Chairman, English Department,  
Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306

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#### AMERICAN LITERARY MANUSCRIPTS

*A Checklist of Holdings in Academic,  
Historical, and Public Libraries, Museums,  
and Authors' Homes in the United States*  
Second Edition

J. Albert Robbins, editor

Praised by scholars and critics alike,

*American Literary Manuscripts* has served for the last seventeen years as the only national guide devoted wholly to the manuscripts of major and minor authors and quasi-literary figures. After ten years of preparation, the new *American Literary Manuscripts* is available, representing the work of a large national corps of scholars and librarians, this second edition is a complete re-survey, not merely a supplement to or revision of the 1960 edition. *American Literary Manuscripts, Second Edition*, reflects massive library acquisitions since 1960 and covers 400 more authors and 327 more libraries than the previous edition. This new volume encompasses not only academic, historical, and public libraries, but includes the manuscript possessions of museums, foundations, and authors' homes. Using the basic format of the earlier edition, the present volume contains several new features that enhance its value for those beginning and pursuing literary research. In addition to providing item-counts of manuscripts of creative works, journals, letters sent, letters received, documents, and books with authors' marginalia, *American Literary Manuscripts, Second Edition*, reports additional items of interest to scholars: proof-sheets, audio, video, and film recordings, and memorabilia. Important new features include references, keyed by number, which record detailed published checklists of authors' manuscripts in individual libraries, and a substantial bibliography of other works to aid those who use the manuscript materials. *American Literary Manuscripts, Second Edition*, is an essential guide to the primary materials on key figures in American literature, publishing, magazine editing, children's literature, literary criticism, drama and theatrical history, and American, ethnic, and women's studies.

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#### IN TIME AND PLACE

*Some Origins of American Fiction*  
Floyd C. Watkins

While such studies as Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* and R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* have investigated recurring patterns in American literature, no book heretofore has dealt specifically with the complicated relationship between the



American writer and his native ground. In this fascinating study Watkins assesses the verity with which eight twentieth-century novels portray their cultural and geographical roots. The writers considered are John Steinbeck, William Styron, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, William Faulkner, Scott Momaday, and Margaret Mitchell. Watkins's method is to explore completely the culture, folklore, anthropology, religion, mores--in short, the daily lives--of the people who inhabit the actual place and time of each novel and then to examine the way each author creates fiction out of the lives of these people. His discussions of these novelists lead Watkins to conclude that a writer's knowledge and understanding of his people affect his treatment of their dignity, his ability to create depth and tragedy, his verisimilitude, and the authenticity of the details of daily living among the characters in the fiction. Seeing as he does the dependence of first-rate fiction upon culture, Watkins despairs for the future state of fiction in a country where specific cultures and peoples are rapidly disappearing. Watkins explores the mysterious chemistry that works between the artist and his society with great wisdom and great skill" Walter Sullivan.

\* \* \*

#### THE IMMODERATE PAST

*The Southern Writer and History*

Wesleyan College Lamar Memorial Lectures  
C. Hugh Holman

*The Immoderate Past* deals with the southern writer's preoccupation with history, concentrating on representative novelists from three major periods. Finding the origins of this preoccupation in the antebellum period when most American novelists wrote in the mode of Sir Walter Scott, Mr. Holman examines the Revolutionary romances of William Gilmore Simms. With the coming of realism to American fiction after the Civil War, the southern writer turned to a combination of the realistic method with the novel of manners in order to describe the way of life in the South during the nineteenth century. The Civil War replaced the American Revolution as the crucial event in the novels of this second period and was seen as disrupting the quality and texture of antebellum southern life. To illustrate the southern novel in the realistic tradition, Mr. Holman discusses Ellen Glasgow's

*The Battleground*, DuBose Heyward's *Peter Ashley*, Stark Young's *So Red the Rose*, Allen Tate's *The Fathers*, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*. Since the 1930s writers in the region have experimented with modernistic techniques, distorting reality in order to make special statements about the nature and meaning of the southern experience. To illustrate this latest development in southern writing, Mr. Holman turns to William Faulkner's *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*; Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, *World Enough and Time*, *Brothers to Dragons*, and *Wilderness*, and William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*. *The Immoderate Past* closes with a consideration of the extent to which southern novelists have persisted in using time as a major dimension in their fiction, whereas time has tended to be displaced by space in the standard American novel.

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Society for the Study of Midwestern  
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#### Editorial Office:

181 Ernst Bessey Hall  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, Michigan 48824

Edited by David D. Anderson

Assistant Editors: Paul J. Ferlazzo  
Nancy Pogel

Managing Editor: Sue Cook

#### Editorial Assistants:

Martha Brown	Pat Mask
Joan Brunette	Bonnie Trotter
Raija Manning	

Cover Artist: Dan Preston

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## Regional Reality: An Approach to Fiction

At a recent symposium on twentieth-century Canadian culture, the principle speaker was Professor Northrup Frye of the University of Toronto. In an incisive discourse of the kind we have come to expect from Frye, he examined the growth of Canada as "what was an inarticulate space on a map..." [as it] is now responding to the world with the tongues and eyes of a matured and disciplined imagination." In speaking of Canada in these terms he is not only speaking of the growth of a Canadian culture--or more properly, in his terms, Canadian cultures--in the little more than a century of Canada's confederation; he is talking about the development of literatures in countless other countries and regions, as well. In the context of his talk, Frye points out an important fact about the relationship among politics, economics, and technology on one hand and culture and literature on the other:

"...Cultural movements are different in direction and rhythm from political and economic ones. Politically and economically, the current of history is toward greater unity, and unity in this context includes uniformity. Technology is the most dramatic aspect of this development: one cannot take off in a jet plane and expect a radically different way of life in the place where the plane lands. But culture has something vegetable about it, something that increasingly needs to grow from roots, something that demands a small region and a restricted locale. The fifty states of the Union are not, in themselves, a cultural entity: they are a political and economic entity that provides a social background for a great variety of cultural developments. We speak for convenience of American literature, but its real cultural context usually turns out to be something more like Mississippi or New England or Chicago or an expatriate group in Paris. Even in the much smaller Great Britain we have Thomas Hardy largely confined to "Wessex," Dylan

Thomas to South Wales, D.H. Lawrence to the Midlands. Similarly in Canada: as the country has matured, more and more of its local areas have come to life imaginatively."

As Frye suggests, American literature has produced far more Main Streets and Winesburg, Ohios than it has U.S.A.'s, and that phenomenon is likely to endure as the relationship between culture and fiction takes on manifestations other than those between geographic locale or region and fiction exclusively, as the growth of Jewish American and Black American fiction, among others, suggests. But as ethnic distinctions disappear--and they are disappearing in America, Michael Novak notwithstanding--it is logical to suppose that regional or other cultural contexts related to geography will combine to produce the bulk of American fiction; indeed, such is the suggestion that provides the controlling rationale of Floyd C. Watkins' new book, In Time and Place: Some Origins of American Fiction (University of Georgia, 1977).

Watkins expresses in his study the conviction that the majority of works of American fiction treat particular cultures in ways that reveal the authors' relationship to those cultures, including his knowledge or ignorance of them, cultures that may be either contemporary or historical, as the authors chose them for subject matter. Watkins' analysis of eight novels by seven authors--Willa Cather is examined in her relationship both to pioneer Nebraska and to the Spanish Catholic Southwest--leaves much to be desired, and his choice of authors and works is difficult to justify (in spite of Leslie Fiedler, it is still difficult for me to take Gone With the Wind seriously as a subject for literary study). But he does make a statement that not only parallels Northrup Frye's but goes further in his insistence that ultimately one must recognize that much national literature must be examined in relationship to its regional or other origins--and in relationship to the author's relationship to that cultural background--if it is to be understood:

"Without doubt a chief distinction of American literature has been its diversity in cultural subject matters.



A map of the United States drawn by a cultural geographer generally corresponds with what a linguistic or literary map would be. In five major cultural regions there are a total of twenty-five subregions and regions of "uncertain status." Fiction set in any one of these should differ in race, language, customs, and general culture from fiction written about any other. The variety of American literature springs in part from the variations in these areas. One author differs from another not only individually but in heritage and tradition. Cultural dimensions as well as geographic size give breadth to the national literature. The literature of comparatively homogeneous Ireland could never have so great a range as American fiction. Breadth may or may not be a desirable trait in literature, but in countries like Russia and America is it inescapable."

The cultural complex out of which the work comes is, then, its reality, and the critic or scholar who would deal with the work must understand that reality. In fact, as Stanley Hyman suggested in The Armed Vision a decade ago, the ideal critic of modern American literature must be like the man of the renaissance or the eighteenth century; he must, in Frye's and Watkins' context, be as thoroughly familiar with the cultural background out of which a work has come as he is with his own.

Too often critics have approached works without that knowledge, without, in other words, the knowledge which a writer has the right to demand we possess, and the result is inept interpretation, misinterpretation, or worse. Thus we have, all too often, the kind of criticism, made respectable by the New Critics, now fortunately aging, that permits a critic to neglect his homework. In some cases, in fact, as in Susan Sontag's unfortunate description of Winesburg, Ohio as being so bad that it is nearly laughable, we have had examples of critics at work who seem unaware of the fact that homework is required of them.

From a practical point of view we cannot,

of course, require critics to know everything, but we can require them to know something. Some years ago, for example, I was smugly pleased when, in initial reviews of Anthony Burgess's A Clockwork Orange, reviewers who should have known better praised Burgess for the remarkable argot he had invented and put in the mouths of his young psychotics; however, that argot was actually an adaptation of simple Russian, as I had already discovered after doing a bit of homework while reading the novel.

Watkins accepts the critic's responsibility to an extent that seems to me to be beyond the call of critical duty, particularly in the thoroughness of such treatments as that of the literal, historical background of Georgian slavocracy before and during the Civil War in his essay on Gone With the Wind. Although he is then on critically safe ground in accusing Margaret Mitchell of treating "both northern and southern cultures falsely," not only is the work itself not worth the research, but the demands he places by implication upon the novelist may be more properly addressed to the historian. The artist in any medium must be permitted the transmutation of fact into fancy which is the essence of art. A writer may, indeed, often must, lie about the facts, as Sherwood Anderson commented; his responsibility is to record the truth that lies beyond the facts.

What I am suggesting is the responsibility of the critic to come to the work with all the available critical tools at his command. The critic must be learned; he must be a scholar; he must be a man of integrity, refusing to evaluate something about which he knows little or nothing, and, when necessary, he must admit that he knows little or nothing. Fortunately, when critics of the stature of Northrup Frye recognize the significance of the relationship between the cultural context of a work and the work itself, when he points out that much of that context is regional rather than national, when we have Floyd C. Watkins and countless others particularly in this Society, emphasizing the significance of that relationship as we explore it, we may expect the generation of critics now coming of age



to recognize their responsibility to the writer and to his own craft, to do their homework, and to make clear the regional reality that underlies much fiction in America and elsewhere. Then we can expect criticism that contributes to understanding and appreciation of literary art rather than the cleverness that, we may hope, has run its course.

David D. Anderson

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#### FROM MAIN STREET TO STATE STREET Town, City, and Community in America Park Dixon Goist

The study of how a small town concept of community was adapted to meet the demands of a changing urban reality. As our industrial nation became ever more urbanized after 1890, the dominant image of community remained the small town. It was praised for its relaxed neighborly togetherness and cohesive social stability. The town was seen as the ideal social form guaranteeing this kind of group solidarity. But what were the possibilities for community in large cities? Would the basis of group association be the same in Chicago and New York as South Prairie?

Professor Goist analyzes a fascinating array of materials in discussing both the dominant myth of the town and various efforts to locate the basis of community in the city. Literature, advertising, sociology, social work and reform, journalism and city planning are among the activities which the author investigates in his study of this modern "search for community."

In the first part of the book the image of the town as ideal community is explored in the literary works, early advertising copy, and in the cultural anthropology of Robert and Helen Lynd. Part two presents the urban perspective of diverse figures.

Park Dixon Goist (Ph.D., University of Rochester) teaches American Studies at Case Western Reserve University, where he is an Associate Professor. Originally

from Seattle, co-editor of *The Urban Vision* (1970), Professor Goist has written numerous articles for *MidAmerica II*, *American Quarterly*, *American Studies*, the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* and others. Active in the American Studies Association, he currently serves on the executive board of the Ohio-Indiana ASA. He is a member of the Society.

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#### SSML Meeting at MLA

The annual Society meeting at MLA will be held on December 28 at 10:15 in Room 724 of the Palmer House in Chicago. Members are urged to attend. Papers to be presented are "The Carl Sandburg Centennial," by Paul Ferlazzo; "Midwestern Novels and Literary Populism," by Nancy Bunge; "Fitzgerald's Midwest," by Barry Gross; "Midwestern Writers and the Myth of the Search," by David D. Anderson. President Gerald Nemanic will preside.

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#### SSML Meeting at PCC

During the annual national Popular Culture Association meeting at the Netherlands Plaza Hotel in Cincinnati, April 19-22, 1978, the Society will meet and present the following program: "David Grayson's Friendships," by Eugene Huddleston; "Midwestern Household Poets of the Nineteenth Century," by Bernard Engel; "Constance Rourke and the Midwestern Heritage," by Nancy Pogel; "William Jennings Bryan and the Rhetoric of a Reluctant Revolutionary," by David D. Anderson. All members are invited to attend.

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## Ohio-Indiana ASA

The annual meeting of the Ohio-Indiana American Studies Meeting at Miami University on April 21-22, 1978, will focus on "The Old Northwest and the New Regionalism. Tentative panels are scheduled to explore the following topics:

Art in the Territory  
Horatio in the Heartland  
Territorial Landscapes  
The Midwestern Sense of Place in Fiction  
Education in the Territory  
Transportation in the Territory  
The Nations in the Territory  
Midwestern Poets and Their Poems.

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