Living Within the Balance:

Regionalism, Literature and Ecology

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Chapter One: On Regionalism

> In the end,...everything found at the end of one's senses -- the high note of the wren, the thick perfume of propolis that drifts downwind from spring willows, the brightness of wood chips scattered by beaver --...all this fits together. The indestructibility of these associations conveys a sense of permanence that nurtures the heart, that cripples one of the most insidious of human anxieties, the one that says, you do not belong here, you are unnecessary (p.149-50).
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> One of the great dreams of man* must be to find some place between the extremes of nature and civilization where it is possible to live without regret (p.178).
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> -- Barry Lopez, Crossing Open Ground.

One of the major issues raised by the emergence of environmentalism in the past three decades is the definition of a "proper" or "natural" human relationship to the rest of the natural world. The argument is polarized between extreme environmentalists who would like to make the human impact on the earth's environment as minimal as possible, and industrialists, who see the earth as a mass of raw materials, existing principally for human exploitation. In other words, humans are either an aberration whose effect on the planet cannot be justified, or they are the masters of the earth with the ability to control and effect whatever changes on the earth they see fit. The polarity of views on the human role in the world is perhaps best represented by Earth

* Although I will not emend any quotations I take from sources, I will make a concerted effort to use non-sexist, non-exclusionary language throughout my discussion.

First! member "Feral Darryl" Cherney's comment, "If you want to call someone something bad, call him human," (Parfit p.198) and the 1988 policy statement of the Colorado Farm Bureau, "natural resources are here for the use and enjoyment of mankind" (Campbell p.208). Both of these views seem to me strangely extreme. At the core of this debate is the notion that humans are somehow separate from nature. Whether denigrating human existence, or advocating industrial exploitation, neither side of the debate conceives of humans as part of the whole called nature.

Wendell Berry points out in his essay, "Getting Along With Nature," that all forms of life will necessarily change nature to the extent that they depend on it for nourishment and habitat. Thus, nature is not a vague "otherness," separate from human existence, but instead, "the sum of the changes made by all the various creatures and natural forces in their intricate actions and influences upon each other and upon their places"(Berry p.7). In light of this definition, we must necessarily include humans and human culture in what we call nature and recognize that the only sustainable state is the one where all the elements balance each other out. The essential questions we must ask ourselves are: In what ways has human culture damaged the balance in nature? And: What in human culture could help restore this balance?

Berry argues: "If the human economy is to be fitted into the natural economy in such a way that it may thrive, the human economy must be built to proper scale"(p.16). The notion of proper scale implies that humans must not disrupt the balance among all elements of nature. At present, the human economy operates largely

on the principles of endless expansion and ever-climbing profit curves. Because humans possess the faculties of reasoning and consciousness, we have been able to bypass natural population controls such as disease and over-used habitat that govern other organisms. Even further, we have gone on to develop technology beyond the demands of necessity and into the realm of superfluity. Our ability to desire more than we need for survival has resulted in the neglect of the needs of the rest of the biotic community. This in turn leads to an imbalance in nature which is ultimately harmful to all living creatures. The obvious implication here is that human existence has gone beyond its natural limits. Nonetheless, to regard human consciousness simply as an incongruous and destructive element in the world, even in light of the destruction we have caused, is simple-minded nihilism. Perhaps the earth *could* get along without the human race, but what is the point of that if we are capable of living *within* the balance of nature?

Although human culture is responsible for the long list of environmental crises that threaten the natural world, Berry argues that there can and must be a continuity between the "natural" economy and the "human" economy. This continuity depends upon the ability of humans to take the greater natural world as an instructor, and not to force an inappropriate human ideal into a placc where it is incongruous with what already exists. In an essay entitled "Preserving Wildness," Berry formulates three questions which he says "must be asked, with respect to human economy in any given place:

1. What is here?

2.What will nature permit us to do here?

3. What will nature help us to do here?

(Berry, p.146)

When asking thses questions, we must keep in mind that a natural region as an entity is identifiable because it tends to regulate itself in a state of equilibrium, or balance. Therefore, when we ask, "what will nature permit?" and, "what will nature allow?" we mean, "what can we do within the limits of nature's balances without violating them?"and "how can these natural balances help us to live?" If these questions, using nature as a yardstick, point to a healthy and stable approach to human endeavor in the natural world, then it stands to reason that elements in our culture that are in tune with this perspective should be healthy and useful. It also seems that elements in our culture that ignore the necessity of balance in nature are harmful and should be reexamined.

Berry ultimately favors a provincial existence, stressing the importance of being familiar with and loyal to the land where one lives[1]. He speaks specifically of the value of the "family farm" and the mutual benefits received by humans and nature when the land is cultivated within the limits of its natural capacity. This relationship occurs when people take the time to understand and work within the

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[1]It is not merely coincidental that the word "provincial" has acquired a pejorative connotation in the midst of an increasingly transient, global world culture. Rather, it is consistent with this age of multinational corporations and world markets for loyalty to a particular place to be seen as "counterproductive." The members of what Berry refers to as the "prestigious class of rampaging professionals...will permit no stay or place to interrupt their personal advance. They must have no local allegiances...In order to to be able to desecrate, endanger, or destroy a *place*, after all, one must be able to leave it and forget it"(Berry, p.51).

larger patterns of nature. The first step in this process is paying attention to the land around us, to all the things that make up the various regions where we live. Certainly, with global population what it is now, not all families can have farms. But we could all stand to become knowledgeable about the various regions where we live -- how they work and where we fit into them -- and then use this knowledge to guide our decisions as a society.

The concept of "region" is very important, and deserves clarification. Derived from the Latin *regere* , meaning, "to rule," "region" originally meant a geographical region ruled by a particular political power, then gradually came to mean any distinct area. A definition given by the Oxford English Dictionary is helpful here: A region is "a more or less defined portion of the earth's surface...esp. as distinguished by certain natural features, climatic conditions, a special flora or fauna or the like." To be more concise, our understanding of a region must mean the inclusive recognition of all the various elements existing there and of their relationships to and influences upon each other. This inclusiveness distinguishes "region" from other synonyms like "area" and "place." The concepts of rule and order from *regere* are still here if we understand that the natural elements within a region tend towards a state of equilibrium, of balance, resulting in the self-defining totality of a region.

If my definition of "region" sounds suspiciously like Wendell Berry's definition of nature, it is because nature occurs in regions. The equilibrium that occurs in the Mojave desert is not the same as the equilibrium in the Olympic Peninsula. This is because the various elements within those regions have different relationships

with each other and influence each other differently. The idea of balance in nature is not simply a romantic, pastoral notion of natural harmony. It is the cornerstone of the science of ecology. When we see that the tendency for natural systems to move towards an equilibrium, or balance, has been revealed through the rigorous investigative processes of scientific method, the notion of "living within the balance" is brought out of the nebulous, mystic realm of philosophy and into the practical world of experience. It also becomes clear that it is imperative for human culture to assimilate into the balance of nature if we expect human culture to survive. Although science is not an ultimate source of truth, Barry Lopez explains, "Science's flaws as a tool of inquiry are relatively minor, and it is further saved by its strengths" (p.200). Knowledge of the natural world enhanced by an understanding of the principles of ecology can help us guide our decisions and behavior to "live with the balance."

Understanding and preserving the balance of nature has not been a major issue in our cultural development. As a student of literature, I have seldom had the opportunity to examine the idea of balance in a real, physical world academically. Literature, like most art, is traditionally considered an autonomous embodiment of the human spirit, an independent expression of Truth or some other elusive abstraction that we must ponder to find meaning in existence. The literary canon, as it is handed down in universities today, is extremely anthropocentric, focusing on the "universal human dilemma." I have been taught how to deconstruct a structuralist reading of a post-modern novel to find that words

independently carry meaning beyond the limits of text and subtext into an echoing wind tunnel of subjectivity wherein the individual is prevented from possessing any real knowledge. Somewhere beneath all these layers of thought the natural world becomes obscured; theories and ideas supercede the realities of everyday existence.

This is a good point to ask Berry's three questions again:

1. What is here?
2. What will nature permit us to do here?
3. What will nature help us do here?

If these questions point to a more localized scope for human life, based on an understanding of our position in relation to the natural world, then why should literature, as a part of human life, be any different? If knowing about the land around us is fundamental to living within the balance of nature, then a literature that reflects an attempt to understand the many elements of a region is ultimately a continuity between nature and humanity. As William Stafford says:

> All events and experiences are local somewhere, and all human enhancements of events and experiences -- all the arts -- are regional in the sense that they derive from immediate relation to felt life. It is this immediacy that distinguishes art. And paradoxically the more local the feeling in art the more all people can share it; for that vivid encounter with the stuff of the world is our common ground(Love, p.25).

In Berry's terms, our common ground is just that -- the ground we live on. The fact that we must live someplace unites human culture with the rest of the natural world in a very concrete way. By looking past human boundaries to see the totality of a region, we may better

understand how to live within the balance of that region. Regional literature provides this link between human culture and nature.

Although the term "regional" has long been a term of contempt or dismissal in the literary "establishment," it becomes the highest of praise when we look at it with an ecological understanding of balance in natural systems. The key to understanding why regionalism is important lies in the concept of "a balanced relationship with nature." The notion of equilibrium and balance among the elements of nature brought forth by ecology echoes Berry's definition of nature: "the sum of all the various creatures and natural forces in their intricate actions upon each other and upon their places"(Berry p.7). Thus, because nature is necessarily made up of many *equally* important parts, we are forced to reconsider the traditionally accepted meaning of literary "regionalism." David D. Anderson cites the definition of regionalism suggested by the late John T. Frederick in 1944:

> A good regional writer...uses the literary substance he knows best...in a country so vast and varied as ours the regional writer gives special service to the nation as a whole by revealing and interpreting the people of his own region to those of other regions. He serves most significantly if he can reveal and interpret the people of his region to themselves(Anderson, p.11).

The above definition of regional writing is traditional in its emphasis on "the people of...[a]...region." However, for a region to be natural in light of our knowledge from ecology, it must include more than simply people. It could be traditionally argued that a story firmly fixed in Manhattan is just as regional as a story firmly fixed in the Oregon high desert. Yet, there is practically nothing in Manhattan that is not of human fabrication. The very topography of the land

has been overwhelmed and replaced by skyscrapers. Thus, when we talk about a story set in Manhattan we can say it is very geographically and culturally specific, but we can hardly say it is regional, because it focuses only on the human realm. Stories set in intensely urbanized areas are not regional, because humans and the trappings of human culture are their sole elements. That is, they are set in places where the human element lives out of balance with its surroundings. A regional story is really only possible in a place where the diverse natural elements of a region still are still fairly intact. Truly regional writing recognizes the diversity of a region and places equal value on its various human and non-human elements. Manhattan is an extreme example because of the sheer extent of urbanization there. But at the least, a regional writer's view necessarily reaches out to the non-human elements of a region and attempts to see the relationships between its diverse elements. This is not possible if the diversity of natural relationships has been eliminated. By ungrudgingly moving humans from the center of the universe and revealing the interdependence of all elements of a region, regional writing represents the ecologically-informed understanding of nature that is "living within the balance."

Indeed, regional writing must do more than simply recognize the diverse elements of a region. Barry Lopez explains, "One learns a landscape...not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it... The difference between the relationships and the elements is the same as that between written history and a catalog of events" (p.64-5). In other words, a writer cannot truly evoke a region unless he or she listens to the

land and attempts to understand all its complexities. Whether or not a writer truly listens to the unique story of his or her region determines whether the landscape, with all its relationships, becomes part of the story, or becomes simply a backdrop for human exploits. If being truly regional represents a more balanced existence in nature, then the fact that human culture, and more specifically, the literary establishment, have largely ignored this balance is troubling.

The term "regional" as I use it in this discussion is different from its traditional usage. The term has most often been used to describe fiction specific to a certain geographical location and the distinct cultures which exist there. Thus, Flannery O' Connor, Eudora Welty, and Willa Cather, to name a few, have been slow to gain recognition in literary circles because they have been labeled "regional writers."[1] I think that regionalism, as I have defined it, is more aptly used to describe much of the writing that has been glibly labelled "nature writing." This does not necessarily mean that all writing now called "nature writing" can be reclassified in a wholesale fashion, but rather that there are certain characteristics of a kind of writing that takes as central to its substance an understanding of the system of relationships and influences among the many elements of a region. Such writing is usually in the form of creative non-fiction, but need not be so necessarily. Most importantly, regionalism thus redefined provides an intelligent term for discussing the increasing

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[1]The fact that all these authors are women, and that they suffer from the pejorative associations of the term "regional," while male authors, like William Faulkner, whose writing is just as geographically and culturally specific, are canonized, is another issue, and one that needs to be pursued. This kind of discussion, however, is not within the scope of this project.

instances of such writing without having to revert to vague and largely nondescriptive terms like"nature writing." Above all, "regionalism" is a pluralistic term, indicating that to understand a region, and human existence in the world, many things need to be considered and understood.

In order to elucidate the concept of regional writing, I see three issues that need to be addressed: 1.) What is the nature of literature that listens to the land? 2.) What happens when we write about the land without listening to it? 3.) Why has the literary establishment been deaf to the land for so long? These issues certainly have a relevance that ultimately extends beyond the boundaries of literature. I suggest that we push the traditional boundaries of literature out a bit. Hopefully, examining regional writing -- writing that has not been traditionally accepted as canonical literature -- can help us to see things in new ways. Beyond its direct relationship to literature, regionalism represents a way of looking at the world that will become increasingly important as the global environmental situation persistently worsens. I hope that the discussion in the following pages will be a step towards seeing the relationship between the conception we have of ourselves as humans and the effects of our actions in the world.

Chapter Two:
Listening to the Land

What I have in mind when I talk about listening to the land is perhaps best illustrated by Barry Lopez. In a transcribed forum featuring Lopez and Edward O. Wilson, Lopez talks about an experience he had traveling with "native people":

> ...this man said that animals and people were parallel cultures. He saw the culture of bears or the culture of wolves or the culture of any animal developing in parallel to human cultures. I began thinking about these parallel systems, where, if the two cultures were traveling side by side, you could make inquiries across the chasm...To my thinking that is...what the scientist does, and the writer in another way. They reach across some dangerous chasm, where they are at great risk, to inquire of a parallel culture, to ponder another order, for how it might illuminate some part of their own culture (p.17 Lueders).

When a regional writer reaches out to the elements of his or her region that are not usually associated with the human sphere, that writer is inquiring across the chasm, listening to what the land has to say. Rather than "revealing and interpreting the people of his own region to those of other regions," as John T. Frederick puts it, the regional writer looks to the natural landscape of the region, the parallel culture that surrounds him or her, to illuminate his or her own culture.

What is often revealed to the regional writer listening "across the chasm" is the system of interdependent relationships that run through all aspects of the natural world, binding these parallel communities together. The fundamental element necessary for this

inquiry is respect. In order to truly listen to the natural landscape, the regional writer must respectfully acknowledge it as an equal. As is often the case, the illumination the regional writer gains from the region itself is the notion that there is a logic in the way things happen outside human influence. By paying attention to the logic of the non-human elements of his or her region and assimilating to the principles of balance in the larger natural world, that writer is living within the balance.

Dayton Hyde's Don Coyote illustrates the concept of listening to the land, because it is directly about the author's gradual realization of how his region functions and how he fits into it. It seems that all the pieces had been right in front of him -- he had simply not put them together. Hyde is a rancher in Southern Oregon. He tells the story of how he came to accept and love the coyotes on his land, despite the fact that ranchers and sheepherders are notorious for their execration of this predator. Hyde's initial reaction to a particular coyote that follows him on his chores about the ranch is one of resentment, spawned by his peer group of ranchers and herders. He tries to follow a neighbor's advice to shoot the coyote, but finds he hasn't the heart to kill the animal. He eventually befriends the coyote, dubbing him Don Coyote for his peculiar habit of charging after a shiny pop can, much the way Don Quixote charged windmills. Don Coyote is eventually hit by a hunter's bullet, ending Hyde's close association with the animal, but his acceptance of the coyote serves as a catalyst for Hyde to reexamine his relationship not only with the coyotes on his ranch, but also with the ranch itself.

A while before Hyde meets Don Coyote, an epidemic of meadow mice hits the area, and Hyde's ranch is nearly destroyed. No amount of pest control seems to work; poisons only result in killing birds and small mammals, while the meadow mice get stronger. Eventually, overpopulation ends the epidemic, where no amount of human effort could. This gives Hyde pause:

> 'God's work, the whole disastrous epidemic,' some said. But there were those who felt that the whole catastrophe was the price of our inability to understand natural checks and balances, inevitable reparation not only for our war on predators, but for our refusal to ally ourselves with the forces that keep nature's forces working.

At this point, Hyde is beginning to listen to the land, but he has not yet put all the elements of his region together in his head.

Throughout the book, Hyde goes into the forest to his "worry log," an old log where he sits to sort out his problems. Just after the mouse epidemic, he buys the ranch from his uncle, and becomes the owner as well as the manager. Although he is glad to own the ranch at last, he realizes that he has a vested interest in the land more than ever before. Another "natural disaster" like the meadow mouse epidemic would ruin him. Sitting on the old log, he sees a coyote hunting for ground squirrels:

> he dug furiously, tearing up the meadow, as though it were his turf, not mine. I had to understand suddenly that I wasn't the only owner of that ranch...I had to understand the land as I never understood it before. It was time to recognize that, like so many other ranchers, I'd been fighting my land too much (75,76).

From this point forward, Hyde begins paying attention to the land and listening to what it has to tell him. He spends a lot of time observing coyotes, and comes to realize that their role as predator is

a decisive one in the natural balance of the region. Coyotes control the rodents that destroy meadows, preempting a chain of destruction which starts with pasture deterioration and overgrazing, then leads to a host of other problems, all resulting in the general degradation of the ranch.

When Hyde resolves to "stop fighting my land too much" he essentially asks Wendell Berry's three questions. First, he asks "what is here?" when he simply starts observing the goings on of the natural elements of the ranch -- wildlife, native plants, etc. This is Lopez's idea of "inquiring across the chasm" to parallel cultures. Second, he asks, "what will nature permit us to do here?" as he looks for a solution that will stay within the natural realm of his ranch; he openly asks how the other cultures on his ranch -- coyotes, birds -- can illuminate his culture. Third, he asks, "what will nature help us to do here?" He gains illumination of his own culture as he comes to understand the shortcomings of his past management practices. He accordingly starts to use his region's system of natural checks and balances to make his ranch a more stable and productive entity.

The first step in his program of following the land's advice is to reinstate coyotes to his land. The coyote population had been severely hurt by predator control measures, such as poisoning and hunting, instituted by neighboring ranchers. The reinstitution of the coyote restores the natural balance of the food chain on his land. He continues to think regionally, to include the totality of his region in his comprehension of it, as he begins to look at its actual topography in new ways. Walking near a canyon on his ranch formed by centuries of spring snowmelt, he comes upon an old Indian fishnet

weight, indicating that the canyon had been a lake thousands of years before. An inspection of the geology of the canyon confirms the previous existence of a lake. He thinks of reinstating the lake by damming up the canyon, but is careful to assess the impact of his plan within the bounds of his region:

> Looking up at the round dome of the butte, I wondered if the spirits of the mountain knew or cared about the dramatic changes I contemplated...If I fought against Nature...whatever I could build would be temporary. The mountain had the power to wash away the grandest edifice I might construct, just as it had destroyed a lake ages back in time. As I looked toward the mountain, a feeling of warmth came over me and I felt that I would be allowed to rebuild the lake that time had erased (p.162).

The fact that Hyde feels he will be "allowed" to rebuild the lake indicates that he has carefully assessed the limits of his region and feels that reinstating the lake will not cause an imbalance in its equilibrium. Hyde pays similar attention to the limits of his region when he develops a new system of irrigation for the pastures on his ranch. Rather than emptying a pasture of irrigation water the moment it looks murky, he allows it to sit in the uphill pastures for several days, collecting biomass and solar energy, before distributing it over the rest of the lower pastures. He also lets the native grasses grow back. The result is increased feed for his cattle, with plenty of hunting habitat left over to satisfy predators. The solar energy radiating from the irrigation water prevents nighttime frosts for a good part of the growing season, allowing more species to flourish. Hyde actually changes the climate, but within the limits of his region, resulting in greater biodiversity and production. Similarly, the increased water fowl population gathering at the lake helps him by

reducing the threat of insect infestations. He eventually finds that he has no need for chemical poisons and fertilizers. Hyde profits from the natural diversity of the region because he has decided to work within its limits.

The book might sound more like a handbook on ranching than a work of literature, but in a sense it is both. The story centers on Hyde's gradual recognition of the unity of the elements of his region. Once he decides to let the region -- the self-regulating and self-defining totality of the place where he lives -- take control, he begins to understand the limits of his activities within that region. He adopts the rhythms of nature to govern his ranch rather than making nature fit into the schedule of the ranching business. We can see the difference in rhythms between the business of ranching and the balance of nature when Hyde resolves to let his irrigation water sit and warm according to its own biological schedule:

> I rode off, letting the water take a few more days of sun, encouraging the brew to thicken.
>
> It was like having the day off. I rode on down the valley, no longer moving methodically from dam to dam, but drifting, enjoying (p.167).

Hyde is pleasantly amazed by the difference between the natural rhythm of his region and the regimented rhythm of traditional human endeavor. At this point, he sees his ranch from a regional perspective. He reflects on the plants and animals around him: "I saw them all as part of a totality. Whether they moved in water or in air, what did it really matter?" This is certainly a long way from the rancher who attempts to shoot a coyote at the beginning of the book because of the stories ranchers had told about it .

Hyde provides an excellent, concrete illustration of how one can come to see the totality of a natural region and perceive one's position in it. It is certainly not the case, however, that everyone has the opportunity to test the limits of his or her region and influence its biodiversity in such a direct way. The most important thing to glean from Hyde's transformation of perception is a way of seeing. He moves from a solely human perspective to a regional perspective. Once we listen to the land, we begin to see it pluralistically, to perceive the diverse elements that create the totality of a region. The ability to perceive the diversity of things is a central element in regional thinking. It is also an ability not fostered by Western human culture, for the most part. Hyde's gradual recognition of the totality of his region in Don Coyote is testimony to the need we have to learn to listen to the land and to be able to recognize the totality of a region in order to "live within the balance."

Barry Lopez's writing directly addresses the issue of seeing pluralistically, of recognizing the diversity that makes up the whole. In his essay, "Children in the Woods," he discusses the ability he has noticed in children to see regionally, pluralistically. He tells of how he has changed the way he acts with the children of friends who come to visit him at his forest home. He often takes the children on walks through the forest, acting as a guide:

> In the beginning, years ago, I think I said too much. I spoke with an encyclopedic knowledge of the names of plants or the names of birds passing through in season. Gradually, I came to say less. After a while the only words I spoke, beyond calling attention quickly to the slight difference between a sprig of red cedar and a sprig of incense cedar, were to elucidate single objects (p.148).

He realizes, eventually, that there was no need to tell the children everything about the land when the land could speak for itself. The children, for their part, listen, and are capable of seeing the relationships that make up the region with a small amount of interpretation from Lopez:

> What takes a lifetime to learn, they comprehend, it is the existence and substance of myriad relationships: ...the high note of the wren, the thick perfume of propolis that drifts downwind from spring willows, the brightness of wood chips scattered by beaver...all this fits together (p.149-50).

It seems that as we grow older, we become products of human culture more than we realize; we become entangled in our individual human viewpoints. Even in trying to see the unity of a region, it is possible to let our inquiry itself limit what we see. The children Lopez takes to the woods are not seeking sheer knowledge in a quantitative way. They are simply open to the diversity that lies before them. Being receptive to diversity is a fundamental aspect of regional writing.

Central to Lopez's writing is the notion that there are necessarily many ways of perceiving the world, because there are so many things in the world to be perceived. His essay, "The Lives of Seals," examines diversity of perspective and its relevance to regional thinking. The piece discusses a scientific research expedition in the Arctic Ocean, which he joins as a research assistant and journalist. The main purpose of the expedition is to study the effects that oil exploration and drilling would have on wildlife in the region. A major part of the research involves the killing of seals in order to examine their digestive systems, thereby giving clues into

the food web of the region. The killing of seals is a source of division amongst the crew of the ship and the scientists. Many have ethical reservations about killing seals in order for humans to gain knowledge. But as the expedition progresses, the various individuals attempt to remain open to the diversity of perspectives on board the ship. The wide variety of viewpoints enables everyone on board to gain a fuller understanding of the expedition:

> Over a period of weeks...our cumulative experience of the region -- immense flocks of migrating waterfowl, the open pack ice, pods of feeding gray whales, the long lingering of orange and purple light at dusk, the piggish odor of walrus, the sudden appearance of a polar bear in the water on a foggy morning -- all this nourished a sense of the biological richness of the region (Lopez p.158-9)

In other words, the scientific aspect of the expedition, which includes the killing of seals, is not the only aspect of the total realm of perception of the members of the expedition. As the various people on the ship begin to share perspectives, Lopez senses "an aura of mutual regard. The dignity of each person's task, the dignity of their occupations, emerged" (p.161). Each individual perspective on the expedition serves to illuminate the others as they all examine the relationships among the many elements of the region. In this sense, human perception is intrinsically linked to the totality of a region a writer tries to disclose, another element among a diversity of elements. To deny this link, Lopez claims, is to "deny something fundamental: our acts, the consequences of our seemingly dissimilar lives, are irrevocably intertwined" (p.163). This is the regional writer's task -- to elicit the unity inherent in diversity.

The attention paid by the writer to the specific elements of a region is the groundwork for the unity of narrative, the whole called a story. A story firmly planted on the groundwork of regionalism possesses a balance like the balance of the region itself. Kim Stafford's book, Having Everything Right: Essays of Place, provides an excellent example of this balance. The first section of the book explains the title:

> The Kwakiutl people of the northwest coast had a habit in their naming. For them, a name was a story...For them, a place-name would not be something that is but something that happens. I want to live in that place in the water the Kwakiutl call...*he'lade*. This name means "Having Everything Right." It is a place where people gather abundant berries and make good life. From that gathering, they gain time at..."Place of Meeting in Winter," to dance and trade stories. Berries by summer, stories by winter round and round (p.3,6).

This whole process of naming seems to ask Wendell Berry's three questions. First, and above all, it asks "what is here?" by allowing the natural state of the land to suggest a story or name. Then it chooses the name by following the second two questions, "what will nature allow here?" and "what will nature help us do here?" The name describes the region's "story," and is inclusive of the human element. The whole process represents an attempt to assimilate into the equilibrium of the region. Stafford takes this process of "listening for stories" as the groundwork for his entire book of "essays of place." The result is a series of "essays," (although the term"essay" belies the creative and expressive prose that makes them up) that bring out the individuality of each of the places he discusses rather than simply the individuality of the narrator.

Stafford's concern with propriety in each place reflects a fundamental regionalism -- deference to the region as a whole. His concern with existing within the bounds of a region leads him to feel almost guilty for scaring off a group of buzzards that had collected around him in anticipation of a meal while he lay sleeping on a hill near the ocean, "I was afraid...that I might scare them off by moving too soon, too soon to fully live out...the necessary accomplishment of my bones" (p.72). Although in this case Stafford's individual identity is subsumed to the region, the "story" of a region need not necessarily present the human role as simply that of biomass in the food chain. Human participation in a region holds much for humans who can exist within its bounds. In the essay, "The Separate Hearth," Stafford remembers the story of a place he knew as a child. He often went alone to the woods near his home. He took boughs, ferns, moss, a fallen tree and solitude, all of which the forest freely provided, and fashioned a shelter for himself. The description of the "den" coalesces the various elements of the forest into a single entity, "the roof became a knob of the earth itself" (p.86). He formed a ring of stones where he built a small fire. He explains, "I had made my own portable world in the world. The small fire talked, it warmed, it required care and responded well... as evening darkened around us its coals were the small landscape of my thought" (p.86). Stafford's "world within the world" is the region of the forest, which he has entered on its own terms. There is a balance in this region that goes beyond biology. The diverse elements he assembles in his den create a stable unity that is a comfort to him throughout the turbulent years of his youth. He realizes that the feeling of being part of a

region, part of a unified whole, is what he must encourage others to find. He concludes, "Part of our love must be to teach each other how to live alone" (p.89). He does not mean we should all be hermits, but rather that we need to feel at home with ourselves. A regional perspective fixes human existence in a logical position in the world and can help us to fashion our own inner balance.

The way that human participation[1] in a region can come to presence through narrative -- through letting the story of a region come forth -- is brought out most stirringly, I think, in the final piece of the book, "The Barn and the Bees." This essay describes the author's salvaging of an old barn. Apparently the fire department has condemned the barn, and the owner is trying to get it torn down and hauled away. The owner tells Stafford that if he will get rid of the beehive in the old relic, he can have all he wants from the barn. Although the owner sees only dangerous bees, a fire hazard and a potential fine in the barn, Stafford sees the story behind the barn as he begins to use the wood to construct his own place:

> Whenever I hefted a timber so heavy I feared for my collarbone, or teased a splinter from my palm, I remembered how these boards stood face-to-face in a forest harvesting nineteenth-century light, how they slid through the saws side-by-side, how the green-chain grader's crayon marked them with a C for clear or an S for standard.
>
> Clinched together in the first barn-shape, wood had a memory, and the boards in my yard now curved again up for sun and water with a tree's wish...

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[1]"Participation" is an inclusive term. It implies that when someone participates in a region, he or she has acknowledged its diversity and is attempting to "live within the balance" of that region.

> I sawed the rot-softened wood away, planed each curve straight, measured the length of firm timber, and began to build the barn again (p.187-88)

The barn becomes part of a region through the story it suggests. The place of the original barn continues through Stafford's efforts. This is Berry's idea of continuity between humans and the rest of nature in its fullest sense. The story of the boards, and the trees before them shines through to suggest how Stafford should act -- he must use no more than he needs. He imports their story to his own land to recreate the same harmonious region. The actual location may be different, but the region -- the unity -- is the same. He ends the piece and the book with an image of the wholeness of the region that springs from his salvaging efforts:

> At five a.m. in 1984, I am in the loft. Dust-colored rafters join in marriage above me. The hay-beam behind my head points toward sunrise. Soon the blackberry pasture out this window will blossom. Soon the bees, daughters of the daughters of the bees I took care of will winnow out from their white box beyond the pear tree into sunlight (p.188).

In this final image, nothing has been wasted. Even the bees, which the former owner saw as a nuisance, have been brought along to retain the unity of the region. The image of blossoms yet to come gives the feeling that this region can continue to be recycled indefinitely through the efforts of a concerned person. Stafford's salvaging of the barn to create a harmonious region is not unlike Berry's husbanding of the land to create richer, healthier topsoil. Both activities exist within the balance of nature because they do what nature suggests. This is the quintessence of regionalism -- listening to the system of life immediately around you, and realizing that you are but a single part of that diverse system.

Chapter Three: The Barrier

I have already suggested that "regionalism" is a helpful alternative to "nature writing" to describe writing that listens to the land. But how is writing that listens to the land any different from literature in which the natural world figures prominently? The main difference is in perspective. The regional writer's view of the world is focused outward, attempting to perceive unity in the diversity of a natural region by being receptive, by listening to the land. Not all writing that discusses the landscape displays this receptiveness, however. Gretel Ehrlich's The Solace of Open Spaces provides an excellent example of culturally and geographically specific literature in which the natural world is conspicuous, but in which the essence of a region -- the self-defining unity of diverse natural elements -- is not present.

Ehrlich's first essay is devoted to giving a broad overview of Wyoming as she knows it. The first few paragraphs offer an introduction to the vast topography and harsh climate of the area. The text then narrows, centering on the way humans have staked out an existence in the midst of the grand landscape. This movement from the background of the vast landscape as a reference point to the specific human culture existing against it is characteristic of Ehrlich's perspective. Although the landscape to a large degree has shaped the human culture in Wyoming, the human culture itself, as a distinct entity from the rest of the landscape, is the focus of the book. This perspective leads her to describe "Most of Wyoming" as having a

"lean-to look. Instead of big, roomy barns and Victorian houses, there are dugouts, low sheds, log cabins and sheep camps" (p.3). In other words, "Most of Wyoming" is where humans live. The rest of the natural elements of the region are included mainly to give a fuller illustration of human life there; the landscape is more a setting than a character in the narrative.

Because Ehrlich's point of view is grounded in human culture, when she looks out at the landscape it takes on a different aspect from that found in regional writing:

> Most characteristic of the state's landscape is what a developer euphemistically describes as "indigenous growth right up to your front door" -- a reference to waterless stands of salt sage, snakes, jack rabbits, deerflies, red dust, a brief respite of wildflowers, dry washes, and no trees (p.3).

The above description resembles a catalogue of discrete entities, rather than the diverse elements of a system. There is no indication of the relationships between these many elements. That the relationships in the landscape are not the main focus does not mean that Ehrlich has incorrectly described what she sees. It simply means that her perspective is not regional. Rather than using the relationships in the landscape as the foundation for her language, Ehrlich uses her prose as the foundation upon which she selectively places certain aspects of the landscape:

> In the Great Plains the vistas look like music, like Kyries of grass, but Wyoming seems to be the doing of a mad architect -- tumbled and twisted, ribboned with faded, deathbed colors, thrust up and pulled down as if the place had been startled out of a deep sleep and thrown into a pure light (p.3).

Perhaps the "architect" here is Ehrlich, who builds a beautiful description out of pieces of the landscape. Artistic volition seems to

be the central element in the above description more than the tangible relationships between elements of the landscape; the prose is the substance, the landscape is inspiration.

Dayton Hyde's reaction to the plants and animals of his region provides a good contrast to illustrate the way a regional writer looks at the land: "I saw them all as part of a totality. Whether they moved in water or in air, what did it really matter?" (p.167). Hyde knows that he is a part of that totality, because he has worked within nature's limits to influence the fecundity of his region. For a regional writer, the actual relationships between the elements of the landscape form the writer's language. This is listening to the land, letting its story come forth.

Despite the fact that the landscape permeates the ranching culture Ehrlich discusses, ranching is clearly separate from the rest of the landscape. Ehrlich explains that she came to Wyoming at a crossroads in her life, with only a vague idea of what the landscape held for her:

> I suspect that my original motive for coming here was to 'lose myself' in new and unpopulated country. Instead... life on a sheep ranch woke me up. The vitality of the people I was working with flushed out...a hallucinatory rawness inside me...The arid country was a clean slate (p.4).

The "arid country" does not seem to be the clean slate so much as do the new people she lives and works with. The landscape of the region does not revitalize her; rather, the human culture she finds in the landscape does. The fact that she feels a part of the human culture in her region rather than a part of the region as a whole is apparent when she says, "for someone who lives in a remote

spot...coming to town is a cause for celebration" because it is an opportunity to "emerge from isolation" (p.5). This indicates that she identifies herself primarily with the human culture in the area, not with the many plants and animals that are part of the region in "isolated" areas. Indeed, "isolation" here means "away from humans." How different this is from Stafford's discussion of isolation from human culture in his essay, "A Walk in Early May":

> Solitude is the scientific method of the human spirit. If you decide not to take a map or to follow a trail, the path you make through broken country will be a chain of sensations. If you decide to take no warm covering for the night, you will change with the world, from warm and light, to cold (p.67).

Stafford sees the opportunity of being alone, that is, away from other humans, as an opportunity to assimilate into a region, to "change with the world." On his "Walk in Early May," Stafford is not really alone. He is constantly "inquiring across the chasm," as Lopez puts it, to the parallel cultures of the natural world, trying to perceive his relationship to the creatures around him. Thus, he can see himself from the vultures' point of view as he lies asleep on a hilltop, "I was a shape stunned by sunlight, inert, compact, my motive exhaled and done....Know this as they do: first the eyes -- by them confirm possession -- the the softer flesh about the mouth, and then the rest with time as rot makes easy" (p.72). By seeing himself as a vulture might -- as food -- Stafford puts himself on equal footing with the rest of the region. Similarly, he notes the feeling of becoming part of the region as he lies shivering on the bare ground, attempting to pass the night without shelter. As he does throughout <u>Having Everything</u>

Right, he lets the land suggest the story. By listening, he becomes part of the region:

> Something comes to one when alone...A song like water...The tree has a way, a secret way. Sometimes another may hear it. Something came to me shapeless. Then it had a shape and I belonged (p.76).

The "shapeless" thing he describes is a tacit recognition of his relationship to that region, a recognition of his place in the diversity around him. For a regional writer, being away from humans does not mean being alone. It simply means that the company one shares includes the non-human cultures of the region.

When Ehrlich speaks of the inhabitants of Wyoming, she means the human inhabitants. Although she sees Wyoming as a wild place, she does not question the notion that humans are the primary inhabitants of the region, "Territorial Wyoming was a boy's world. The land was generous with everything but water. At first there was room enough, food enough for everyone" (p.9). When she says "everyone" here, Ehrlich refers to humans, not the diverse totality of species occurring in Wyoming. This human-centered perspective persists throughout the book and prevents us from calling The Solace of Open Spaces an example of regional writing.

An unavoidable hazard of Ehrlich's focus on the human culture in a region with such an extreme climate as Wyoming's is the romanticization of human endeavor as being tragically noble. She writes,"People [in Wyoming] still feel pride because they live in such a harsh place, part of the glamorous cowboy past" (p.3). The pride Ehrlich alludes to is grounded in a fundamental opposition to the natural elements of the region; Wyomingites relish the fact that they

can endure whatever nature has to dish out. This pride turns existence into a competition between humans and the landscape.

In his book, "The Comedy of Survival," Joseph Meeker explains how a competitive orientation toward the natural world is linked to literary tragedy. Meeker argues that what we see as heroic in tragic heroes is their insistence on individual autonomy, their determination to persevere on the basis of conviction, even if that conviction is ultimately misinformed and results in destruction. Western human culture tends to see this individualistic conviction as noble -- to "die for what you believe in" is a central thread in our traditional moral fiber. At the same time, Meeker acknowledges the necessity of diversity for a region to be ordered and healthy, "no individual and no species can survive well unless all other species survive, for all are ultimately dependent on the completeness of the environment as a whole" (p.29). The problem is that the idea of the tragic hero and the idea of interdependence among species are incompatible. Meeker explains, "Humanistic individualism has encouraged Western man to ignore the multiple dependencies necessary to the sustenance of life... the tragic tradition in literature and the disastrous misuse of the world's resources rest upon some of the same philosophical ideas" (p.59). Hence, when we ennoble the human culture that lives in opposition to the land, we have been seduced by the charm of the tragic hero. By glorying in human incongruency in a region, we support the devestation of that region. The "humanistic individualism" of the tragic hero is apparent in the complaint of Frank, the irrigator, in Ehrlich's essay, "On Water":

> Irrigating is a contemptible damned job. I've been fighting water all my life. Mother Nature is a bitter old bitch, isn't she? But we have to have that challenge. We crave it and I'll be goddamned if I know why (p.82).

The challenge Frank feels comes from a refusal to adequately listen to the land. Any difficulties he encounters spur him on, rather than indicating to him that his activities overstep the limits of the land. If we were to ask Berry's questions in this case, perhaps we would find that the climate is too dry to grow hay and other crops without fighting the natural capacity of the region. Perhaps the water diverted onto fields has harmed the biotic diversity of the region by eliminating water habitat or preventing areas downstream from receiving the water that flowed there for centuries before white settlers came. Perhaps the water table has been lowered, contributing to the aridity of the region. Perhaps, as Berry suggests, the scale of human economy must be built to proper scale, according to the limits of the region, in order for it to thrive.

The resolve to "do it anyway," despite whatever difficulties the natural limits of a region might present, leads people to glory in whatever success they do achieve. This is harmful because that success ignores the relationships between the many elements of the region and therefore comes at the expense of the natural diversity of the region. A regional perspective, on the other hand, would seek to understand the region by asking Berry's three questions. These questions would necessitate that we acknowledge the diversity of the region, then seek to undertake any endeavor in that region in such a way that its overall unity and balance would be preserved.

There is a place in The Solace of Open Spaces where Ehrlich borders on regionalism, but it is situated curiously in the text. In the essay, "Friends, Foes, and Working Animals," Ehrlich discusses the many domestic animals associated with ranching, then inserts a line to break what follows from the preceding text. She then writes:

> What we may miss in human interaction here we make up for by rubbing elbows with wild animals. Their florid, temperamental lives parallel ours, as do their imperfect societies (p.68).

She then gives an extensive view of the variety of wildlife inhabiting the country near her home. The interesting thing about her discussion of wild animals is that it is practically devoid of human interaction with them, even though she claims to "rub elbows with them." The only human appearance in the section is in the paragraph dealing with rattlesnakes -- she carries a shotgun to protect herself from them when working in the fields. The tone here is different from Stafford's "A Walk in Early May." Whereas Stafford participates in the region, Ehrlich is mostly an observer. Her descriptions are prefaced by "I watched," "I saw" (p.68), and "I heard" (p.70). There is an invisible barrier between Ehrlich and the totality of the region; she cannot put humans all the way into the picture. The fact that she physically divides her discussion of domestic ranch life from her discussion of wild animal life with a line symbolizes the division she feels between humans and the rest of the region. It seems that she has to step out of the discourse of human culture to talk about the other of the inhabitants of the region, but even then she feels the division; she only observes the region, she does not participate in it.

The invisible barrier between humans and the rest of the natural world Ehrlich feels is the fundamental barrier that prevents people from listening to the land, from perceiving a region as something within the limits of which they can reasonably exist. This barrier has been a long time in the making. A comprehensive discussion of the development of cultural attitudes towards nature is far beyond the scope of this discussion. A discussion of why regional writing has been largely ignored by the literary "establishment," however, is in order, because this same barrier between people and the land has kept regional writing in a marginal position. The traditional assumption in the American literary establishment has been that anything from the non-human side of the barrier is not intellectually important, and has little relevance to human existence. Regionalism seeks to erase the barrier between people and the land, which puts it at odds with intellectual tradition. Yet, as ecology helps us to understand, this gesture towards the rest of the natural world is vital, because it moves us closer to a sustainable existence within the balance of nature.

Chapter Four: Regionalism, Theory and Reality

As I mentioned in the first chapter, "regionalism" has traditionally been a word used in the realm of American literature to dismiss a work as marginal, as not dealing with the central elements of existence. Apparent in this attitude are certain ideas about what is truly central to existence. These ideas have been developed in a relatively specific and cultural situation -- that of urban, east coast universities and publishing houses. Most writing traditionally referred to as regionalism, has been classified as such because it values different things than those which are important to the urban, intellectual humanism which dominates the literary establishment in America. Writing from the American West has frequently fallen into this category[1]. Wallace Stegner describes the plight of the Western writer as:

> a box with booby traps on both ends. His box is booby trapped at one end by an inadequate artistic and intellectual tradition [in the West], and at the other end by the coercive dominance of attitudes, beliefs, and intellectual fads destructive of his own. The fact that these attitudes control both the publishing media and large portions of the critical establishment is more important than the fact that publishing is concentrated in another region (Stegner p.170).

Thus, we see that the pejorative sense of the term "regionalism" has arisen in the literary establishment in reaction to literature that does not reflect the values of that establishment. Insofar as it does not

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[1]As a general rule, the American West is usually considered to be the land lying west of the hundredth meridian.

reflect the urban, humanistic values of literary establishment, regional writing as I have defined it conforms to the traditional, pejorative sense of the term. However, it differs from the writing traditionally classified in this manner in the specificity of its scope: A regional writer seeks to understand the diverse natural elements of a place, which, in their relationships to each other and influences upon each other, form a self-defining totality. It so happens that writers working in this way have generally come from the American West, but this is by no means a rule.

As Stegner emphasizes, the failure of regional writing to be recognized by the literary establishment is not primarily an issue of geographical chauvinism, of east versus west. It is rather an issue of different intellectual values, of different ways of understanding the world. A central issue in the division between regional writers and the majority of the literary community is the difference in the way each camp conceives of reality.

Regional writing is by necessity grounded in a real, physical landscape. Despite whatever the writer brings to a piece of regional writing, the land is primary and real. It is perhaps this realism, in the face of literary fashion directed largely against realism, that has made regionalism slow to gain acceptance in the literary establishment. In his article, "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast," Tom Wolfe traces the steady decline of realism in twentieth-century literature. Wolfe's main purpose is to show the inadequacy of the non-realistic approaches to literature that have arisen largely since the sixties. Wolfe is concerned principally with urban realism, with showing the reality of human society in all its glorious diversity.

Although showing the full spectrum of human society is certainly not the concern of regional writers, disclosing the full spectrum of the reality of the natural world is. Wolfe claims that the intelligentsia's scorn for realism is powered by the fact that "the intelligentsia have always had contempt for the realistic novel -- a form that wallows so enthusiastically in the dirt of every day life" (Wolfe p.47). Historically, at the core of this movement away from realism is a determined attempt to move away from the actuality of every-day physical existence. It was simply too banal. Wolfe explains:

> By the mid 1960's the conviction was not merely that the realistic novel was no longer possible, but that American life itself no longer deserved the term real.. American life was chaotic, fragmented, random, discontinuous; in a word, *absurd*. Writers in the university creative writing programs had long, phenomenological discussions in which they decided that the act of writing was the real thing and the so-called real world of America was the fiction, requiring the suspension of disbelief. The *so-called real world* became a favorite phrase (Wolfe p.49).

In the wake of this attitude has followed fiction that became increasingly detached from the "so-called real world," and which has loosely been described as "post-modernism." The epitome of the break from the "so-called real world" is perhaps best represented by the "Neo-Fabulists," who wrote books "in which the action, if any, took place at no specific location"(p.49). Although Wolfe takes a flippant tone, he is certainly accurate in describing the peculiar manifestation of scorn for a commonly accepted reality. The bulk of post-modern literature and post-structuralist theory has been founded upon the notion that reality and meaning are so entirely subjective, so completely locked within individual experience, that it

is impossible to communicate objectively, if at all. Given the way that regional writing revels in the objective reality of landscape, it is no coincidence that it has been excluded from fashionable literary circles.

Wolfe accuses contemporary fiction writers of asserting that the act of writing is the only reality. This notion is in accord with the assertions of semiotics: Words have no inherent meaning, but are simply "referents" to an understood meaning. Hence, only the person assembling words can really know what he or she means; others decoding these words will match them with their own particular understandings of the words. Since each individual's sense of the meaning of words is subjective and unique, it is impossible for us to know what anyone really *means* ; communication -- language -- is inaccurate and flawed at best. Herein lies the fundamental difference between regional writing and post-modern literary trends: While deconstruction and semiotics dismantle"texts" to reveal their inability to mean anything beyond the relative experience of language, regional writing seeks its foundation in the common reality of the natural world[1]. As Barry Lopez puts it, the writer "inquires across the chasm" to parallel cultures of plants and animals in nature. The regional writer could not do this without believing that those parallel cultures are real, and have meaning in and of themselves. The regional writer's task is to put these other cultures into terms

[1] In post-structuralist theory, anything, even the natural world, is a "text," which we can attempt to understand only in the framework of our flawed and inaccurate language.

humans can understand -- to find the unity in diversity which conveys a region intelligibly to humans.

If the post-modern fiction writer asserts that the individual act of writing is the only fundamental reality, the nature writer by no means denies the fact that writing is a personal and subjective act. The difference for a regional writer is that there is a connection between the reality of the natural world and the writer's language. Lopez offers valuable insight into the changes that have become apparent in the language of the "post-modern era". In "The Stone Horse" Lopez recounts his his experience of viewing an ancient stone horse arranged by pre-historic peoples on the desert floor of California. He reflects on how people through the ages might have reacted at the sight of this pre-historic art:

> A few generations ago, cowboys, cavalry quartermasters, and draymen would have taken this horse before me under consideration and not let up their scrutiny until they had its heritage fixed to their satisfaction. Today, the distinction between draft and harness horses is arcane knowledge, and no image may come to mind for a blue roan or a claybank horse. The loss of such refinement in everyday conversation leaves me unsettled. People praise the Eskimo's ability to distinguish among forty types of snow but forget the skills of others who routinely differentiate between overo and tobiano pintos. Such distinctions are made for the same reason. You have to do it to be able to talk clearly about the world. (Lopez, P.11)

It seems that by losing touch with the physical facts of the world, we lose the ability to describe them. When we do not understand our surroundings, naturally we tend to formulate abstract notions about existence. Without a knowledge of what the tangible, biological facts of existence are, it is difficult for us to feel as though language has

any tangible aspects. Thus if the post-modernist sees merely a hollow referent to a generic hike in the woods upon reading,

> Toward midday, after a long tingling scramble through copses of hazel and ceanothus, I gained the summit of the highest ridge in the neighborhood; and then it seemed to me that it would be a fine thing to climb one of the trees to obtain a wider outlook and get my ear closer to the Aeolian music of its topmost needles(Ronald p.117)

then he or she obviously has never had the kind of intercourse with the natural world that allows a tacit identification with the experience John Muir describes here[1]. The writer's language becomes a particular way of disclosing the tangible, natural world, rather than simply a disclosure of the writer's imagination. Nature writing is not an attempt to encompass the entire world, but rather the specific region in question. The aim is, as Lopez puts it, "to ponder another order, for how it might illuminate some part of [the writer's] culture"(p.17).

Thus, it seems that regional writing differs markedly from most popular literature of the "establishment" in its insistence on reality. These different ways of viewing reality are so greatly at variance with each other as to make them seem irreconcilable; the abstract world of theory and the concrete world of the regional writer have been defined by people with differing motives.

However, Sue Ellen Campbell has tried to show links between post-structuralist theory and ecology in an article entitled, "The Land and Language of Desire: Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism

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[1]The fact that most post-modernism has been developed in urban settings is surely related to the sense of alienation which results in "the so-called real world" described by Wolfe.

Meet." This article illustrates the differences between the literary trends of the establishment and regional writing quite well. Campbell claims that theory and ecology have a "shared critical stance and...shared beliefs about the nature of reality" (Campbell p.202). She goes on to describe these similarities in increasingly less definite language until it seems that perhaps theory and ecology do not share a "critical stance and...beliefs about the nature of reality," but rather that the methods of inquiry they employ mirror each other structurally.

Campbell prefaces her discussion of the way each camp discerns reality with the disclaimer, "A common critical stance, of course, need not imply common ideas" (p.204). If we grant the theoretical framework that claims that all experience is a "text" that we must read, we arrive at theory's fundamental assertion about the nature of reality, "when we read, we create meaning. Without a reader, the words on the page mean nothing -- we give them life with our...subjectivity" (p.204). This works if we are simply discussing the act of reading words on a page, but when theory extrapolates the meaning of "text" to mean all experience, the possibility of a common reality becomes impossible. Campbell tries to show that ecology's basic notion of reality posits a similar dependency on the agency of the observer, but acknowledges that the similarity is more cosmetic than substantive, "for ecology, the belief that we affect what we observe most often means simply that our actions reverberate farther and longer than we can know" (204). This does not mean that by simply looking at an orange we create the reality of the orange. It does mean, however, that if we buy an

orange grown with chemical pesticides we are directly supporting groundwater pollution and contamination of the food chain. These two ideas differ in that, for theory, the human mind creates physical reality through an abstract act, whereas for ecology, the human mind can influence physical reality by causing human action, but cannot physically create reality out of abstractions. For ecology, the fact of physical reality is self-evident, we must simply learn about its nature. Later in her argument, Campbell makes a veiled concession to the fact that she is not pointing out a commonality of ideas as much as a common form of inquiry between the two camps, saying, "At this point...the comparison gets a bit complicated" (205). The "common critical stance" has been replaced by a "comparison" of ideas that have structural, not substantive, similarities.

The last major similarity Campbell discusses is the idea that "networks" are more important than individuals in both theory and ecology. Hence, "human beings are no longer the center of value or meaning" (208), but merely single elements of the network. This is true, but the ways that each camp conceives of what networks are and how the individual is related to them are entirely different. Campbell illustrates this herself:

> Theory sees everything as textuality, as networks of signifying systems of all kinds. Foucault sees an idea like madness as a text; Lacan sees a human being as a text; Derrida argues that everything is a text in the sense that everything signifies something else. But ecology insists that we pay attention not to the way things have meaning for us, but to the way the rest of the world -- the non-human part -- exists apart from us and our languages.

Theory's notion of "textuality" asserts that humans, as the readers of texts, impose an order on networks simply by "reading" them as texts. Without a reader, there are no texts, and therefore no reality. Despite theory's claim that the notion of networks prevents humans from being the centers of value and meaning, the fact that these networks are in themselves texts shows that human consciousness, which has identified them as texts, is really the center of reality. In contrast, ecology does not require a theoretical apparatus to assert a reality apart from human existence. The networks in nature are real, tangible. They exist physically in a watershed filled with interdependent plants and animals. We can perceive these networks and attempt to find our relationship to them. The difference between these two perspectives is so fundamental that it makes theory and ecology, postmodernism and regional writing, irreconcilable.

If we look at Wendell Berry's three questions again, we see theory's inverted approach to reality. Instead of first assuming the independence of the natural world from individual human perception, then letting it suggest a meaning, theory comes forward with a construct -- "the natural world is a text" -- then filters everything through that construct. The regional writer's "naive" trust of his or her ability to perceive reality in an external landscape is central to the values fundamental to regionalism. Specifically, these values insist that humans are but a single part of any region they enter and must attempt to understand their relationship to the rest of that region in order to exist within it. Here again, Lopez is helpful. In his essay, "Landscape and Narrative," he discusses what

he terms the "interior landscape" of individual thought and the "exterior landscape" of the entire natural world. Both of these landscapes are made up of sets of relationships: "the speculations, intuitions, and formal ideas we refer to as 'mind' are a set of relationships in the interior landscape" (p.65) while the exterior landscape consists of "all elements of the land, and...the relationships between them" (p.64). Lopez asserts that these two landscapes are inseparable: "The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes" (p.65). By letting the exterior landscape into the interior, the regional writer listens to the land, lets the region come forth.

The notion of listening to the land in order to let a story come forth is perhaps a disconcerting idea to a literary movement that thinks "the act of writing words on a page...[is]...the real thing and the so-called real world...[is]...the fiction" (Wolfe p.49), because it denies the primacy of the writer. Regional writing rests on the idea that an author's writing is not superior to the region being written about. The desire to keep humans -- writers -- at the center of reality is perhaps a significant reason for the relative lack of recognition given to regional writers in the literary establishment.

Joyce Carol Oates' essay, "Against Nature," embodies the fear of losing control over reality, which results when humanism meets something that isn't human-centered. Oates is disdainful of the indifference of the natural world to an attack of paroxysmal tachycardia she suffers while jogging. The biological fact of her

mortality surges upon her, a troublesome reminder of her link to rest of the natural world:

> Moving through space and time by way of your own volition you inhabit an interior consciousness, a hallucinatory consciousness, it might be said, so long as breath, heartbeat, the body's autonomy hold; when motion is stopped, you are jarred out of it. The interior is invaded by the exterior. The outside wants to come in, and only the self's fragile membrane prevents it (Oates p.237).

Oates' terms are, remarkably, the same as Lopez's, yet her attitude towards the "exterior" landscape is radically different from Lopez's. Lopez believes that our link to the exterior landscape is enriching and fulfilling. Oates acknowledges the link between the interior and exterior landscapes, yet seeks frantically to keep them divided. The problem is, she can't. She admits, after all, that her "interior consciousness...[is]...a hallucinatory consciousness (p.237). Oates prefers the natural world to be:

> brilliantly fictionalized in the service of a writer's individual vision...in which case it becomes yet another, and ingenious, form of storytelling. The subject is *there* only by the grace of the author's language (p.239).

The emphasis here is on the writer as the storyteller. The land cannot suggest a story because it "is *there* only by the grace of the author's language." Oates insists on the primacy of the writer because she desperately wants to remain in control of her "interior" world, with no troublesome interruptions from the "exterior" reality which so rudely seizes the reins of her life from time to time. Because Oates' view is centered on the human realm, any representation of the natural world that does not pertain directly to the author is incomprehensible: "Nature as the self's (flattering)

mirror, but not ever, no, never, Nature-in-itself" (p.240)[1]. Relationships between elements in the natural world simply do not exist for Oates, because these relationships do not refer specifically back to her. Although Oates' stance is extreme, it effectively illustrates the prejudice against the regional perspective engendered by a human-centered view. Like Ehrlich, Oates senses the barrier between human culture and the rest of the natural world, but instead of stepping out of human culture to take a look, Oates seeks to add bricks and mortar.

If we consider the disparity between regionalism and the literary establishment to be analogous to the gap between ecology and the majority of human culture, it can be disturbing. A human culture that considers itself independent from the natural world within which it must exist is myopic at best. But perhaps we do not need to step out of human culture to get around the barrier humanism has placed between humans and the rest of the natural world. Perhaps regionalism is a means of bridging the gap, of "inquiring across the chasm to parallel cultures," so that we might learn more about ourselves in learning how to "live within the balance."

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[1]The parenthesis in this quotation is Oates', not mine.

Afterword

The notion that we can learn more about ourselves by learning about the natural world is perhaps the most important implication of regional writing, for it helps us address the issue raised by Barry Lopez: How can we "find some place between the extremes of civilization and nature where it is possible to live without regret[?]" (Lopez p.178). Certainly, it is too late to debate whether or not humans belong on the earth. We are here, and nothing short of global catastrophe will change that. It is not too late, however, to reconsider the role we want to play in the world. What makes humans unique in the world is the fact that we alone have the choice of whether or not to live within the balance of nature, the choice of whether or not we want to be the cause of global catastrophe.

If literature has traditionally been thought of as an embodiment of Truth, a glimpse into the very issues of existence, then it is nowhere more true than in regional writing. By reaching out to the diversity of life that surrounds us, and attempting to find a human place within that whole, regional writing seeks out the very essence of existence on the earth: All the respective regions of the earth, with all their diverse elements, comprise a totality. We must conduct ourselves in such a way that does not disrupt the equilibrium of this totality if we expect to sustain life.

The fact that we must not disrupt the balance of nature does not preclude human action. We see from Dayton Hyde's example that human activity can take place on a grand scale and be ultimately beneficial to the region. The key is in paying attention to the

demands and limitations of the region where each one of us lives. Regional writing contains an implicit call for an active existence: In order to truly live, we must participate[1] in the regions where we live, and try to understand them. If regional writing can serve as a link between human language and the natural world, perhaps the effort to understand the world can be a form of beauty, of art, more vital to life itself than has ever been realized.

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[1]See footnote #1, page 21.

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