

5-1991

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Publication Info

1991.

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'FAVORED IN MY BIRTHPLACE:'

LOCAL ROOTS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN VICTORIAN WRITING

by Patrick Scott

Among our nineteenth-century literary legacies is the highly-charged language of cultural geography. It is within such conflicted terms as "local," "regional," "national," "cosmopolitan," "peripheral," "central," "universal," "parochial," and "provincial," that we still map our connection to (or self-distancing from) local particularities and geographical rootedness.

In the nineteenth century, this language of place acquired also a metaphoric significance for wider cultural issues. When Matthew Arnold condemned the Victorian middle classes for their "note of provinciality," he was objecting not so much to their provincial pride in such cities as Birmingham, Manchester or Sheffield, as to their religious rooting in nonconformist sectarianism and their political commitment to what he saw as partisan sectional interests.

Yet even in his own time, Arnold's teasing cosmopolitanism did not go unquestioned. As Robin Gilmour has recently pointed out, Arnold's young contemporary, Thomas Hardy, read the Oxford lectures and jotted in his notebook: 'Arnold is wrong about provincialism. . . . A certain provincialism of feeling is invaluable, . . . that crude enthusiasm without which no great thoughts are thought, no great deeds done.'

Now that Arnold's claim for a central cultural tradition of

"correct taste, correct judgment" is so frequently discredited on political grounds, it is worth looking again at the vocabulary he bequeathed us for describing where we come from, our geographical roots and their relation to cultural identity. It may be that, in reconsidering such obvious, literal questions, we can reconsider the polarities of the recent anti-Arnoldian attack on traditional culture.

There are, of course, non-literary, historical reasons why it was in the nineteenth century that the vocabulary of place took on new cultural significance. People were moving around much more, and they were much more likely to move permanently. Changed agricultural practices, industrial growth, urban expansion, and a constantly improving transportation network made "internal migration" an increasingly normal experience for nineteenth-century Britons. Because economic growth was widespread through countless centers in the midlands and north, not just around London, the old eighteenth-century polarity of metropolis versus provinces rapidly proved inadequate.

English writing became preoccupied with the question of locality. The framing instances--Wordsworth's Lake District, Hardy's Wessex--are obvious, but we could all make our own list of other favorites--the Scotland of the Waverley novels, Austen's Hampshire, the Brontes' Northern Moors, even Dickens's London. Beyond these actual settings there are equally persuasive fictional localities such as Trollope's Barsetshire or Margaret Oliphant's Carlingford. What was at stake here? Why did place matter so much? And above all, what was happening when this aggressive literary localization was repackaged as "regional

literature," in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

The very familiarity, ubiquity, of nineteenth-century literary geography conceals its function and its duality. On the face of it, the literature of place should be read as resistance, a geographical metaphor for the Romantic assertion of the transcendent, the timeless self, against the contingencies of contemporary social dislocation. In it, readers could find a model of imaginative permanence to counterbalance their own experience of cultural dislocation. In his Guide to the Lakes, Wordsworth presents his home district as an "ideal society, . . . regulated by the mountains which protected it," providing continuity and stability over a period of "more than five hundred years" to families of the same "name and blood."

Yet the nineteenth-century literature of place is also, openly or covertly, concerned with change. Often, as indeed in Wordsworth's Guide, the timelessness of physical place is invoked only to be framed off or elegized as a world now lost; like Scott's Waverley, Wordsworth's "mountain republic" was now "sixty years" gone. Eliot's Middlemarch is set back a full forty years. Many features of Hardy's Wessex, as he teasingly tells his readers in the preface to Far from the Madding Crowd, "would perhaps hardly be discernible to the explorer," because of a recent and "fatal" "break of continuity in local history."

From the writer's point of view, this manoeuvre insulates private imaginative ground from envious outsiders, maintaining the locality's (and by implication the individual's) specialness against metropolitan scorn. If readers accepted the

inaccessibility of the author's privileged territory, they were in a sense accepting the ordinariness of their own lives. The very remoteness of literary locality served to encourage accommodation to historical and social change, rather than resistance.

Not surprisingly, Victorian readers were reluctant to accept this exclusion; hence the urge to identify in the present the "real" places authors had immortalized in literature. From William Howitt's Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets (1847) onwards, there was a constant stream of guidebooks for the literary pilgrim. Hardy might describe his Wessex as "partly-real, partly-dream," and warn readers it had almost disappeared, but his late Victorian fans wanted Wessex to be permanent, a solid provincial locality reassuringly available to the antiquarian or the excursionist. But this too is a kind of accommodation; we cope better with change if the world we have lost can still be visited.

These complexities can be traced back to the beginnings of nineteenth-century literary regionalism. In Wordsworth, the Romantic recentering of literature upon the author was geographical as well as psychological, but the recentering was never absolute. Wordsworth asserts, against traditional metropolitan ideas of culture, the centrality of his own geographical origin. In The Prelude, he claims, not only that he was "most favored in my birthplace," but that he grew up beside "the fairest of all rivers." Yet his determining experiences are not just from the Lake District, but from Cambridge, and London, and France, and the Alps, and Salisbury Plain, and Wiltshire; the

culmination of The Prelude is not on the Lakeland fells, but in Wales, on Snowdon. Even Wordsworth's self-rootedness was an after-the-fact discovery about himself, most clearly recognized when the earth was all before him.

In the early and mid-Victorian period, the Romantic legacy of glamorous, privileged imaginative origins shifted to more distanced, often ironic, descriptions of unglamorous provincial life. The remoteness of Scotland or the Lakes yields place to unromantic midland settings, where the inhabitants were conditioned less by nature than by the manmade landscape and the built environment. Whether affectionately, as in Mrs. Gaskell's Cranford, or astringently, as in George Eliot's Middlemarch (set in Warwickshire, subtitled "A Study in Provincial Life"), literature had moved closer to home, and more difficult questions were now being asked.

Arnold's insight was to recognize that Wordsworth's idea of local self-rootedness, however therapeutic, was ultimately regressive, an unsustainable special case. What he didn't do was to provide an alternative mode of locating oneself. Evocative as Arnold's writings are in elegizing privileged localities (Oxford, the Cumnor Hills, Switzerland), he never writes about his own geographical origin (in George Eliot country), and his career, as a peripatetic inspector of schools, kept him untypically placeless for much of his adult life. His writings, indeed, often show a rather touching desire that literature or culture or religion can provide the kind of psychological resting-place that geography had denied him. But in his critique of provinciality, he does not condemn all local rootedness. Instead, he argues

that "to get rid of provincality is a certain stage of culture,
... the positive result of which we must not make of too much
importance." And of course, the centripetal forces of late
Victorian social change were on Arnold's side. As both
Wordsworth and Hardy ultimately recognized, the locally-rooted
self can hardly be understood without knowledge of other places.

The mid-Victorian debate over place and culture left local
writers with a sharp choice. They could write about local life,
preferably the vanishing continuities of country life, as a kind
of sanctioned therapeutic escapism, accepting the limiting label
of "regionalist." Or they could struggle to use their local
setting in dialectic with other regional or national cultures, to
reach a clearer understanding of the values by which they
themselves had been shaped, and to assert the continuing validity
of those values. I'm thinking not just of Hardy, but of later
Scottish novelists as George Douglas Brown or Lewis Grassie
Gibbon.

The searching and stubborn knowledge of one's own
provincality becomes one of the major threads in modern British
poetry, in Philip Larkin's treatment of Hull, or Seamus Heaney's
early poems about farming in the north of Ireland. The post-
Hardyan tradition in England has been much more self-
critical, more aware of the moral and intellectual complexity of
local self-assertion, than regional literatures elsewhere, and
this has been its strength. It provides in some ways a model of
how we can hold on to our cultural roots, geographical and
otherwise, knowing of other cultural regions and learning from
them without surrendering our identity to them.

it is in the dialogue with other cultures that we first recognize our own cultural rooting. Basing his analysis on the interrelation of Greek and Latin literature, Bakhtin argued that "it is possible to objectivize one's own particular language, its internal form, the peculiarities of its world-view . . . only in the light of another language belonging to someone else." Within national language groups, between geographic regions, something similar is also possible. Matthew Arnold would surely have approved of Bakhtin's formulation. But as so often in Bakhtin, the assertion yields less ground to cultural pluralism than at first might appear, for the focus of self-knowledge remains "one's own particular language." The Victorians rejected the Romantic assertion of a privileged or unique cultural origin, and argued the benefit of contact with a culture beyond one's own. In their imaginative writing, however, through the treatment of place and provinciality, they and their successors have returned time and again to the stubborn particularities of our cultural grounding. It is an aspect of the Victorian cultural debate from which we can still learn.

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