WENDELL BERRY

# Writer and Region

I first read *Huckleberry Finn* when I was a young boy. My great-grandmother's copy was in the bookcase in my grandparents' living room in Port Royal, Kentucky. It was the Webster edition, with E. W. Kemble's illustrations. My mother may have told me that it was a classic, but I did not *know* that it was, for I had no understanding of that category, and I did not read books because they were classics. I don't remember starting to read *Huckleberry Finn*, or how many times I read it; I can only testify that it is a book that is, to me, literally familiar: involved in my family life.

I can say too that I "got a lot out of it." From early in my childhood I was not what was known as a good boy. My badness was that I was headstrong and did not respond positively to institutions. School and Sunday school and church were prisons to me. I loved being out of them, and I did not behave well in them. *Huckleberry Finn* gave me a comforting sense of precedent, and it refined my awareness of the open, outdoor world that my "badness" tended toward.

That is to say that *Huckleberry Finn* made my boyhood imaginable to me in a way that it otherwise would not have been. And, later, it helped to make my grandfather's boyhood in Port Royal imaginable to me. Still later, when I had come to some knowledge of literature and history, I saw that that old green book had, fairly early, made imaginable to me my family's life as inhabitants of the great river system to which we, like Mark Twain, belonged. The world my grandfather had grown up in, in the eighties and nineties, was not greatly changed from the world of Mark Twain's boyhood in the thirties and forties. And the vestiges of that world had not entirely passed away by my own boyhood in the thirties and forties of the next century.

My point is that *Huckleberry Finn* is about a world I know, or knew, which it both taught me about and taught me to

imagine. That it did this before I could have known that it was doing it, and certainly before anybody told me to expect it to do it, suggests its greatness to me more forcibly than any critical assessment that I have ever read. It is called a great American book; I think of it, because I have so experienced it, as a transfiguring regional book.

As a boy resentful of enclosures, I think I felt immediately the great beauty, the great liberation, at first so fearful to him, of the passage in Chapter I, when Huck, in a movement that happens over and over in his book, escapes the strictures of the evangelical Miss Watson, and, before he even leaves the house, comes into the presence of the country:

> By-and-by they fetched the niggers in and had prayers, and then everybody was off to bed. I went up to my room with a piece of candle and put it on the table. Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whippoorwill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me.

It is a fearful liberation because the country, so recently settled by white people, is already both haunted and threatened. But the liberation is nevertheless authentic, both for Huck and for the place and the people he speaks for. In the building and summoning rhythm of his catalogue of the night sounds, in the sudden realization (his and ours) of the equality of his voice to his subject, we feel a young intelligence breaking the confines of convention and expectation to confront the world itself: the night, the woods, and eventually the river and all it would lead to.

By now we can see the kinship, in this respect, between Huck's voice and earlier ones to the east. We feel the same sort of outbreak as we read:

> When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Con-

> cord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the work of my hands only.

That was thirty years before *Huckleberry Finn*. The voice is certainly more cultivated, more adult, more reticent, but the compulsion to get *out* is the same.

And a year after that we hear:

> I loaf and invite my soul,
> I lean and loaf at ease . . . observing a spear of summer grass.

And we literally *see* the outbreak here as Whitman's line grows long and prehensile to include the objects and acts of a country's life that had not been included in verse before.

But Huck's voice is both fresher and historically more improbable than those. There is something miraculous about it. It is not Mark Twain's voice. It is the voice, we can only say, of a great genius named Huckleberry Finn, who inhabited a somewhat lesser genius named Mark Twain, who inhabited a frustrated businessman named Samuel Clemens. And Huck speaks of and for and as his place, the gathering place of the continent's inland waters. His is a voice governed always by the need to flow, to move outward.

It seems miraculous also that this voice should have risen suddenly out of the practice of "comic journalism," a genre amusing enough sometimes, but extremely limited, now hard to read and impossible to need. It was this way of writing that gave us what I understand as regional*ism*: work that is ostentatiously provincial, condescending, and exploitive. That *Huckleberry Finn* starts from there is evident from its first paragraph. The wonder is that within three pages the genius of the book is fully revealed, and it is a regional genius that for 220 pages (in the Library of America edition) remains untainted by regionalism. The voice is sublimely confident of its own adequacy to its own necessities, its eloquence. Throughout those pages the book never condescends to its characters or its subject; it never glances over its shoulder at literary opinion; it never fears for its reputation in any "center of culture"; it reposes, like Eliot's Chinese jar, moving and still, at the center of its own occasion.

I should add too that the outbreak or upwelling of this voice, impulsive and freedom-bent as it is, is not disorderly. The freeing of Huck's voice is not a feat of power. The voice is enabled by an economy and a sense of pace that are infallible, and innately formal.

That the book fails toward the end—in the 67 pages, to be exact, that follow the reappearance of Tom Sawyer—is pretty generally acknowledged. It does not fail exactly into the vice that is called regionalism, though its failure may have influenced or licensed the regionalism that followed; it fails into a curious frivolity. It has been all along a story of escape. A runaway slave is an escaper, and Huck is deeply implicated, finally by his deliberate choice, in Jim's escape; but he is making his own escape, as well, from Miss Watson's indoor piety. After Tom re-enters the story, these authentic escapes culminate in a bogus one: the freeing of a slave who, as Tom knows, has already been freed. It is as though Mark Twain has recovered authorship of the book from Huck Finn at this point—only to discover that he does not know how to write it.

Then occurs the wounding and recovery of Tom and the surprising entrance of his Aunt Polly who, true to her character, clears things up in no time—a delightful scene; there is wonderful writing in the book right through to the end.

But Mark Twain is not yet done with his theme of escape. The book ends with Huck's determination to "light out for the Territory" to escape being adopted and "sivilized" by Tom's Aunt Sally. And here, I think, we are left face to face with a flaw in Mark Twain's character that is also a flaw in our national character, a flaw in our history, and a flaw in much of our literature.

As I have said, Huck's point about Miss Watson is well taken and well made. There is an extremity, an enclosure, of conventional piety and propriety that needs to be escaped. A part of the business of young people is to escape it. But this point, having been made once, does not need to be made again. In the last sentence, Huck is made to suggest a virtual identity between Miss Watson and Aunt Sally. But the two women are not at all alike. Aunt Sally is a sweet, motherly, entirely affectionate woman, from whom there is little need to

escape because she has no aptitude for confinement. The only time that she succeeds in confining Huck, she does so by *trusting* him. And so when the book says, "Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before," one can only conclude that it is not Huck talking about Aunt Sally, but Mark Twain talking, still, about the oppressive female piety of Miss Watson.

Something is badly awry here. At the end of this great book we are asked to believe, or to believe that Huck believes, that there are no choices between the "civilization" represented by pious slave-owners such as Miss Watson or lethal "gentlemen" such as Col. Sherburn, and lighting out for the Territory. This hopeless polarity marks the exit of Mark Twain's highest imagination from his work. Afterwards, we get *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, a fine book, but inferior to *Huckleberry Finn*, and then the inconsolable grief, bitterness, and despair of the last years.

It is arguable, I think, that our country's culture is still suspended as if at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, assuming that its only choices are either a deadly "civilization" of piety and violence or an escape into some "Territory" where we may remain free of adulthood and community obligation. We want to be free; we want to have rights; we want to have power; we do not yet want much to do with responsibility. We have imagined the great and estimable freedom of boyhood, of which Huck Finn remains the finest spokesman. We have imagined the bachelorhoods of nature and genius and power: the contemplative, the artist, the hunter, the cowboy, the general, the president—lives dedicated and solitary in the Territory of individual adventure or responsibility. But boyhood and bachelorhood have remained our norms of "liberation," for women as well as men. We have hardly begun to imagine the coming to responsibility that is the meaning, and the liberation, of growing up. We have hardly begun to imagine community life, and the tragedy that is at the heart of community life.

Mark Twain's avowed preference for boyhood, as the time of truthfulness, is well known. Beyond boyhood, he glimpsed the possibility of bachelorhood, an escape to "the Territory,"

where individual freedom and integrity might be maintained—and so, perhaps, he imagined Pudd'nhead Wilson, a solitary genius devoted to truth and justice, standing apart in the preserve of cynical honesty.

He also imagined Aunt Polly and Aunt Sally. They, I think, are the true grownups of the Mississippi novels. They have their faults, of course, which are the faults of their time and place, but mainly they are decent people, responsible members of the community, faithful to duties, capable of love, trust, and long-suffering, willing to care for orphan children. The characters of both women are affectionately drawn; Mark Twain evidently was moved by them. And yet he made no acknowledgement of their worth. He insists upon regarding them as dampeners of youthful high spirits, and in the end he refuses to distinguish them at all from the objectionable Miss Watson.

There is, then, something stunted in *Huckleberry Finn*. I have hated to think so, for a long time I tried consciously *not* to think so, but it is so. What is stunted is the growth of Huck's character. When Mark Twain replaces Huck as author, he does so apparently to make sure that Huck remains a boy. Huck's growing up, which through the crisis of his fidelity to Jim ("All right, then, I'll *go* to hell") has been central to the drama of the book, is suddenly thwarted first by the Tom-foolery of Jim's "evasion," and then by Huck's planned escape to the "Territory." The real "evasion" of the last chapters is Huck's, or Mark Twain's, evasion of the community responsibility which would have been a natural and expectable next step after his declaration of loyalty to his friend. Mark Twain's failure or inability to imagine this possibility was a disaster for his finest character, Huck, whom we next see, not as a grown man but as a partner in another boyish evasion, a fantastical balloon-excursion to the Pyramids.

I am supposing, then, that *Huckleberry Finn* fails in failing to imagine a responsible, adult community life. And I am supposing further that this is the failure of Mark Twain's life, and of our life, so far, as a society.

Community life, as I suggested earlier, is tragic, and it is so because it involves unremittingly the need to survive mortal-

ity, partiality, and evil. Because they so clung to boyhood, and to the boy's vision of free bachelorhood, neither Huck Finn nor Mark Twain could enter community life as I am attempting to understand it. A boy can experience grief and horror, but he cannot experience that fulfillment and catharsis of grief, fear, and pity that we call tragedy, and remain a boy. Nor can he experience tragedy in solitude or as a stranger, for it is only experienceable in the context of a beloved community. The fulfillment and catharsis that Aristotle described as the communal result of tragic drama is an artificial enactment of the way a mature community survives tragedy in fact. The community wisdom of tragic drama is in the implicit understanding that no community can survive that cannot survive the worst. Tragic drama attests to the community's need to survive the worst that it knows or imagines can happen.

In his own life Mark Twain experienced deep grief over the deaths of loved ones, and also severe financial losses. But these experiences seem to have had the effect of isolating him, rather than binding him to a community. The experience of great personal loss, moreover, is not much dealt with in those Mississippi books that are most native to his imagination: *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Life on the Mississippi*. The only such experience that I remember in those books is the story, in *Life on the Mississippi*, of his brother Henry's death after an explosion on the steamboat *Pennsylvania*. Twain's account of this is extremely moving, but it is peculiar in that he represents himself—though his mother, a brother, and a sister still lived—as Henry's *only* mourner. No other family member is mentioned.

What is wanting, apparently, is the tragic imagination that, through communal form or ceremony, permits great loss to be recognized, suffered, and borne, and that makes possible some sort of consolation and renewal. What is wanting is the return to the beloved community, or to the possibility of one. That would return us to a renewed and corrected awareness of our partiality and mortality, but also to healing and to joy in a renewed awareness of our love and hope for one another. Without that return we may know innocence and horror and grief, but not tragedy and joy. Not consolation or for-

giveness or redemption. There is grief and horror in Mark Twain's life and work, but not the tragic imagination or the imagined tragedy that finally delivers from grief and horror.

He seems rather to have gone deeper and deeper into grief and horror as his losses accumulated, and deeper into outrage as he continued to meditate on the injustices and cruelties of history. At the same time he withdraws farther and farther from community and the imagining of community, until at last his Hadleyburg—such a village as he had earlier written about critically enough, but with sympathy and good humor too—becomes merely a target. It receives an anonymous and indiscriminate retribution for its greed and self-righteousness—evils that community life has always had to oppose, correct, ignore, indulge, or forgive in order to survive. All observers of communities have been aware of such evils, Huck Finn having been one of the acutest of them, but now it is as if Huck has been replaced by Colonel Sherburn. "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" is based on the devastating assumption that people are no better than their faults. In old age, Mark Twain had become obsessed with "the damned human race" and the malevolence of God—ideas that were severely isolating and, ultimately, self-indulgent. He was finally incapable of that magnanimity that is the most difficult and the most necessary: forgiveness of human nature and human circumstance. Given human nature and human circumstance, our only relief is in this forgiveness, which then restores us to community and its ancient cycle of loss and grief, hope and joy.

And so it seems to me that Mark Twain's example remains crucial for us, both for its virtues and its faults. He taught American writers to be writers by teaching them to be *regional* writers. The great gift of *Huckleberry Finn*, in itself and to us, is its ability to be regional without being provincial. Provincialism is always self-conscious. It is the conscious sentimentalization of or condescension to or apology for a province. In its most acute phase, it is the fear of provinciality. It is what I earlier called "regionalism." There is, as I said, none of that in the first thirty-two chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*. (In the final eleven chapters it is there in the person of Tom Sawyer,

who is a self-made provincial.) Mark Twain apparently knew, or he had the grace to trust Huck to know, that *every* writer is a regional writer, even if he or she writes about a fashionable region such as New York City. The value of this insight, embodied as it is in a great voice and a great tale, is simply unreckonable. If he had done nothing else, that would have made him indispensable to us.

But his faults are our own, just as much as his virtues. There are two chief faults and they are related: the yen to escape to the Territory, and retribution against the life that one has escaped or wishes to escape. Mark Twain was new, for his place, in his virtue. In his faults he was old, a spokesman for tendencies already long-established in our history. That these tendencies remain well-established among us ought to be clear enough. Wallace Stegner had them in mind when he wrote, in *The Sound of Mountain Water*:

> For many, the whole process of intellectual and literary growth is a movement, not through or beyond, but away from the people and society they know best, the faiths they still at bottom accept, the little raw provincial world for which they keep an apologetic affection.

Mr. Stegner's "away from" indicates, of course, an escape to the Territory. And there are many kinds of Territory to escape to. The Territory that hinterland writers have escaped to has almost always been first of all that of some metropolis or "center of culture." This is not necessarily dangerous because it is not necessarily an escape. Great cities are probably necessary to the life of the arts, and all of us who have gone to them have benefitted.

But once one has reached the city, other Territories open up, and some of these *are* dangerous. There is, first, the Territory of condescension and retribution toward one's origins. In our country, this is not just a Territory but virtually a literary genre. From the sophisticated, cosmopolitan city, one's old home begins to look like a "little raw provincial world." One begins to deplore "small town gossip" and "the suffocating proprieties of small town life"—forgetting that gossip occurs only among people who know each other, and that propriety is a dead issue only among strangers. The danger is

not just in the falsification, the false generalization, that necessarily attends a *distant* scorn or anger, but also in the loss of the subject or the vision of community life, and in the very questionable exemption that scorners and avengers customarily issue to themselves.

And so there is the Territory of self-righteousness. It is easy to assume that we do not participate in what we are not in the presence of. But if we are members of a society, we participate, willy-nilly, in its evils. Not to know this is obviously to be in error, but it is also to neglect some of the most necessary and the most interesting work. How do we reduce our dependency on what is wrong? The answer to that question will necessarily be practical, and will be correctable by practice and by practical standards. Another name for self-righteousness is economic and political unconsciousness.

There is also the Territory of historical self-righteousness: if *we* had lived south of the Ohio in 1830, *we* would not have owned slaves; if *we* had lived on the frontier, *we* would have killed no Indians, violated no treaties, stolen no land. But the probability is overwhelming that if we had belonged to the generations we deplore, we would have behaved deplorably. The probability is overwhelming that we *belong* to a generation that will be found by its successors to have behaved deplorably. Not to know that is, again, to be in error and to neglect essential work, and some of this work, as before, is work of the imagination. How can we imagine our situation or our history if we think we are superior to it?

There is the Territory of despair, where it is assumed that what is objectionable is "inevitable," and so there too the essential work is neglected. How can we have something better if we do not imagine it? How can we imagine it if we do not hope for it? How can we hope for it if we do not attempt it?

There is the Territory of the national or the global point of view, in which one does not pay attention to anything in particular. Akin to that, is the Territory of abstraction, a regionalism of the mind. This territory originally belonged to philosophers, mathematicians, economists, tank thinkers, and the like, but now some claims are being staked out in it for literature. At a meeting in honor of *The Southern Review*, held in the fall of 1985 at Baton Rouge, one of the needs identified,

according to an article in *The New York Times Book Review*,[1] was "to redefine Southernness without resort to geography." If the participants all agreed on any one thing, the article concluded,

> it is perhaps that accepted definitions of regionalism have been unnecessarily self-limiting up to now. The gradual disappearance of the traditional, material South does not mean that Southernness is disappearing, any more than blackness is threatened by integration, or sacredness by secularization. If anything, these metaregions . . . , based as they are upon values, achieve distinction in direct proportion to the homogenization of the physical world. By coming to terms with a concept of regionalism that is no longer based on geographical or material considerations, *The Southern Review* is sidestepping those forces that would organize the world around an unnatural consensus.

Parts of that statement are not comprehensible. Blackness, I would think, *would* be threatened by integration, and sacredness by secularization; dilution at least is certainly implied in both instances. We might as well say that fire is a state of mind and thus is not threatened by water. And how might blackness and sacredness, which have never been regions, be "metaregions"? And is the natural world subject to limitless homogenization? There are, after all, southern species of plants and animals that will not thrive in the north, and vice versa.

This "metaregion," at any rate, this region "without resort to geography," is a map without a territory, which is to say a map impossible to correct, a map subject to become fantastical and silly like that Southern chivalry-of-the-mind that Mark Twain so properly condemned. How this "metaregion" could resist homogenization and "unnatural consensus" is not clear. At any rate, it abandons the real region to the homogenizers: You just homogenize all you want to, and we will sit here being Southern in our minds.

And akin to that, in turn, is the Territory of artistic primacy or autonomy, in which it is assumed that no value is inherent in subjects, but that value is conferred upon subjects by

[1] Mark K. Stengel, "Modernism on the Mississippi: *The Southern Review* 1935-85," *The New York Times Book Review*, November 24, 1985, pp. 3 and 35.

the art and the attention of the artist. The subjects of the world are only "raw material." As William Matthews writes in a recent article:[2] "A poet beginning to make something needs raw material, something to transform." For Marianne Moore, he says,

> subject matter is not in itself important, except that it gives her the opportunity to speak about something that engages her passions. What is important instead is what she can discover to say.

And he concludes:

> It is not, of course, the subject that is or isn't dull, but the quality of attention we do or do not pay to it, and the strength of our will to transform. Dull subjects are those we have failed.

This apparently assumes that for the animals and humans who are not fine artists, who have discovered nothing to say, the world is dull, which of course is not true. It assumes also that attention is of interest in itself, which is not true either.

In fact, attention is of value only insofar as it is paid in the proper discharge of an obligation. To pay attention is to come into the presence of a subject. In one of its root senses, it is to "stretch toward" a subject, in a kind of aspiration. We speak of "paying attention" because of a correct perception that attention is *owed*—that, without our attention and our attending, our subjects, including ourselves, are endangered.

Mr. Matthews' trivializing of subjects in the interest of poetry industrializes the art. He is talking about an art oriented exclusively to production, like coal mining. Like an industrial entrepreneur, he regards the places and creatures and experiences of the world as "raw material," valueless until exploited.

The test of imagination, ultimately, is not the territory of art or the territory of the mind, but the territory underfoot. That is not to say that there is no territory of art or of the mind, but only that it is not a separate territory. It is not exempt either from the principles above it or from the country below it. It is a territory, then, that is subject to correction—by, among other things, paying attention. To remove it from

[2] William Matthews, "Dull Subjects," *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly*, Winter 1985, pp. 142-152.

the possibility of correction is finally to destroy art and thought, and the territory underfoot as well.

Memory, for instance, must be a pattern upon the actual country, not a cluster of relics in a museum or a written history. What Barry Lopez, following Yi-Fu Tuan, calls "the invisible landscape" of communal association and usage must serve the visible as a guide and as a protector; the visible landscape must verify and correct the invisible. The invisible landscape, alone, becomes false, sentimental, and useless, just as the visible landscape, alone, becomes a strange land, threatening to humans and vulnerable to human abuse.

To assume that the context of literature is "the literary world" is, I believe, simply wrong. That its real habitat is the household and the community—that it can and does affect, and in practical ways, the life of a place—may not be recognized by most theorists and critics for a while yet. But they will finally come to it, because finally they will have to. And when they do, they will renew the study of literature and restore it to importance.

Emerson, in "The American Scholar," worrying about the increasing specialization of human enterprises, thought that the individual, to be whole, "must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers"—a solution that he acknowledged to be impossible. The result, he saw, was that "Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things." The solution that he apparently did think possible was a return out of specialization and separateness to the human definition, so that a thinker or scholar would not be a "mere thinker," a thinking specialist, but "Man Thinking." But this return is not meant to be a retreat into abstraction, for Emerson understood "Man Thinking" as a thinker committed to action: "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man."

And action, of course, implies place and community. There can be disembodied thought, but not disembodied action. Action, embodied thought, requires local and communal reference. To act, in short, is to live. Living "is a total act. Thinking is a partial act." And one does not live alone. Living is a communal act, whether or not its communality is acknowledged. And so Emerson writes:

> I grasp the hands of those next me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct, that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech.

Emerson's spiritual heroism can sometimes be questionable or tiresome, but he can also write splendidly accurate, exacting sentences, and that is one of them. We see how it legislates against what we now call "groupiness"; neighborhood is a given condition, not a contrived one; he is not talking about a "planned community" or a "network," but about the necessary interdependence of those who are "next" to each other. We see how it invokes dance, acting in concert, as a metaphor of almost limitless reference. We see how the phrase "to suffer and to work" refuses sentimentalization. We see how common work, common suffering, and a common willingness to join and belong are understood as the conditions upon which speech is possible in "the dumb abyss" in which we are divided.

This leads us, probably, to as good a definition of the beloved community as we can hope for: common experience and common effort on a common ground to which one willingly belongs. The life of such a community has been very little regarded in American literature. Our writers have been much concerned with the individual who is misunderstood or mistreated by a community that is in no sense beloved, as in *The Scarlet Letter*. From Thoreau to Hemingway and his successors, a great deal of sympathy and interest has been given to the individual as pariah or gadfly or exile. In Faulkner, a community is the subject, but it is a community disintegrating as it was doomed to do by the original sins of land greed, violent honor, and slavery. There are in Faulkner some characters who keep alive the hope of community, or at least the fundamental decencies on which community depends, and in Faulkner, as in Mark Twain, these are chiefly women: Dilsey, Lena Grove, the properly outraged Mrs. Littlejohn.

The one American book, that I know, that is about a beloved community—a settled, established white American community with a sustaining common culture, and mostly beneficent toward both its members and its place—is Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. The community that the book describes, the coastal village of Dunnet, Maine, and

the neighboring islands and back country, is an endangered species on the book's own evidence: a lot of its characters are old and childless, without heirs or successors—and with the twentieth century ahead of it, it could not last. But though we see it in its last days, we see it whole.

We see it whole, I think, because we see it both in its time and in its timelessness. The centerpiece of the book, the Bowden family reunion, is described in the particularity of a present act, but it is perceived also, as such an event must be, as a reenactment; to see is to remember:

> There was a wide path mowed for us across the field, and, as we moved along, the birds flew up out of the thick second crop of clover, and the bees hummed as if it still were June. There was a flashing of white gulls over the water where the fleet of boats rode the low waves together in the cove, swaying their small masts as if they kept time to our steps. The plash of the water could be heard faintly, yet still be heard; we might have been a company of ancient Greeks . . .

Thus, though it precisely renders its place and time, the book never subsides into the flimsy contemporaneity of "local color."

The narrator of the book is one who departs and returns, and her returns are homecomings—to herself as well as to the place:

> . . . the first salt wind from the east, the first sight of a lighthouse set boldly on its outer rock, the flash of a gull, the waiting procession of seaward-bound firs on an island, made me feel solid and definite again, instead of a poor incoherent being. Life was resumed, and anxious living blew away as if it had not been. I could not breathe deep enough or long enough. It was a return to happiness.

Anyone acquainted with the sentimentalities of American regionalism will look on that word "happiness" with suspicion. But here it is not sentimental, for the work and suffering of the community are fully faced and acknowledged. The narrator's return is not to an idyll of the boondocks; it is a reentrance into Emerson's "ring." The community is happy in that it has survived its remembered tragedies, has reshaped itself

coherently around its known losses, has included kindly its eccentrics, invalids, oddities, and even its one would-be-exile. The wonderful heroine of the book, and its emblem, Mrs. Elmira Todd, a childless widow, who in her youth "had loved one who was far above her," is a healer—a grower, gatherer, and dispenser of medicinal herbs.

She is also a dispenser of intelligent talk about her kinfolk and neighbors. More than any book I know, this one makes its way by conversation, engrossing exchanges of talk in which Mrs. Todd and many others reveal to the narrator their life and history and geography. And perhaps the great cultural insight of the book is stated by Mrs. Todd:

> Conversation's got to have some root in the past, or else you've got to explain every remark you make, an' it wears a person out.

The conversation wells up out of memory, and in a sense *is* the community, the presence of its past and its hope, speaking in the dumb abyss.