

IOWA AND THE MIDWEST EXPERIENCE

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FROM WARM CENTER
TO RAGGED EDGE

THE EROSION OF MIDWESTERN
LITERARY AND HISTORICAL
REGIONALISM, 1920-1965

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For Jason Duncan,
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and Mark Milosch

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CHAPTER THREE
THE DECLINE OF MIDWESTERN HISTORY

The high water mark of midwestern regionalism during the interwar era was made possible, in part, by the emergence of a notable contingent of midwestern historians who were dedicated to studying their region. These historians, who formalized their efforts in the first decades of the twentieth century, built a field of study premised on intraregional academic cooperation, enlivened by a regional esprit de corps, unified by means of annual meetings in midwestern cities, and equipped with an association, a scholarly journal, and institutional support from midwestern universities. At the beginning of the 1940s, one midwestern historian thought his field might be on the “verge of a small boom.”¹ Similar to the efforts of other midwestern regionalists, however, the work of these early twentieth-century historians of the Midwest and their organized movement was disrupted by World War II and the Cold War, the transformation of the postwar university, academic trends, cultural and intellectual forces that caused its diminishment and demise, and a final loss of organizational coherence. Along with the persistence of the village revolt school of thought and the resulting neglect of regional literary voices, the collapse of midwestern history contributed to the sinking stature of the Midwest, whose “nadir” came in the 1950s.² The demise of the midwestern history project further relegated the Midwest to the margins of the American historical imagination, and, given the transformation of the historical profession in the postwar era and its new priorities, the region had little chance of recovering its once-prominent historical voice.

The father of the midwestern history movement was Frederick Jackson

Turner, a son of Wisconsin who moved to the East to earn his PhD at Johns Hopkins during the 1880s and recognized, quite quickly, the domination of the historical profession by those who focused on the eastern seaboard and Europe to the neglect of the American interior. Turner observed that historians had to date “come from the East, and as a result our history has been written from the point of view of the Atlantic coast.”³ Historians in the East, he thought, were “hardly aware of the country beyond the Alleghenies.”⁴ Turner’s misgivings about the neglect of his region were embodied in the comment of one Brown University historian who simply pronounced that “Western history is stupid.”⁵ When he returned to Wisconsin after graduate school, Turner responded to this neglect and hostility by dedicating himself to studying his home region.⁶ He wanted to “see American history considered more broadly than earlier writers, especially eastern writers, were disposed to treat it.”⁷ Turner also worked in tandem with the Wisconsin Historical Society, which provided critical institutional support for the study of the Midwest.⁸ Other historical societies in the region, which emerged in the late nineteenth century as the Midwest’s stature grew, also advanced the cause of chronicling the history of the region.⁹ By studying the history of the nation’s “great interior,” said the Wisconsin-born and Wisconsin-trained historian Orin Libby from his post at the University of North Dakota, an “altogether different viewpoint” could be revealed.¹⁰ It would be possible, said the then University of Iowa historian Allan Bogue to University of Kansas historian James Malin, to overcome “Ivy League prejudice” and the predominance of an eastern perspective on American history.¹¹ Grounded in such sentiments, the work of midwestern historians and the literary regionalists active during the early twentieth century greatly “complemented” one another and together served as sturdy and intertwined strands that bound and gave form to midwestern identity.¹²

Following Turner’s leadership at the University of Wisconsin, other midwestern universities began to focus on midwestern history and—with the guidance of professors at the University of Iowa and the University of Illinois and staffers from the Nebraska Historical Society—in 1907 launched the Mississippi Valley Historical Association. Soon after, the MVHA launched its regionally oriented journal entitled the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, which focused on publishing historical research on the Midwest. Working collaboratively and through the MVHA and using the pages of the *MVHR*, a group of mostly midwestern-born and midwestern-raised historians—“nearly

all of them came from rural or small-town backgrounds”—steadily advanced the study of the history of the Midwest.¹³ The MVHA’s “moral center was divided between Madison, shrine of the Turnerian mystique, and Lincoln, the locus of the ‘Nebraska matriarchy,’” a reference to the Lincoln-based secretary of the MVHA, Clara Paine, who administered the organization for nearly a half century and whose husband first organized the MVHA.¹⁴ The unified “spirit” of the MVHA was based, said the Iowa-born Benjamin Shambaugh, on the “common experiences and common interests” of its regionally oriented historians.¹⁵ In keeping with the essential ingredients of the various artistic forms of regionalism, which were premised to a great extent on consciousness of regional history and a general “reverence for the past,” these historians focused on the settlement and origins of the Midwest, land uses, farming, and the small details of the daily life of what Ruth Suckow called “the folks” on the prairie and less, following Turner’s early criticism, on war, high diplomacy, politics, and the doings of eastern elites.¹⁶ While committing themselves to the value of analyzing local, state, and regional history, they began the first focused studies of agrarian Populism, chronicled the economic development of midwestern towns, examined (without the scorn of the village rebel school) the role of religion in the Midwest (a “universally pervasive force” in the region), and generally attempted to give the Midwest a central place in the broader arc of American history.¹⁷

The efforts of midwestern historians peaked about the time of World War II, when midwestern history still benefitted from the leadership of historians at prominent midwestern universities. At the University of Iowa, Louis Pelzer—who earned his PhD at Iowa, had written several midwestern history books, and served as president of the MVHA—was editing the *MVHR*.¹⁸ Pelzer was “closely identified” with Iowa and the Midwest—as an Iowa farm boy, Pelzer had “absorbed” the value of “hard work, loyalty, and integrity” and became devoted to his region—and in his historical work was “particularly concerned with the development of the Middle West.”¹⁹ At the University of Minnesota, the Minnesota-born and Minnesota-trained Theodore Blegen persisted in his regional history efforts and published a book making the case for the work of midwestern historians intended to rebuff the “taunt of provincialism, once so easily leveled at the champions of regionalism.”²⁰ At Indiana University, John D. Barnhart—a product of Decatur, Illinois, who earned his PhD under Turner and taught in Minnesota and Nebraska but mostly at Indiana—maintained

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Kenneth Winkle, “‘The Great Body of the Republic’: Abraham Lincoln and the Idea of a Middle West,” in *The Identity of the American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001), 113 (quotations); David D. Anderson, “The Dimensions of the Midwest,” *MidAmerica* vol. 1 (1974), 7–8; Jon K. Lauck, “Why the Midwest Matters,” *Midwest Quarterly* vol. 54, no. 2 (Winter 2013), 171–73.
- 2 Bernard DeVoto, *The Literary Fallacy* (Boston, Little, Brown, 1944), 157.
- 3 Oscar Lovell Triggs (ed), *Selections from the Prose and Poetry of Walt Whitman* (Boston, Small, Maynard & Company, 1898), 194–95.
- 4 Albert Bushnell Hart, “The Future of the Mississippi Valley,” *Harper’s Magazine* vol. 101 (February 1900), 413. On the region’s prominence during this era, see also Cameron Blevins, “Space, Nation, and the Triumph of Region: A View of the World from Houston,” *Journal of American History* vol. 101, no. 1 (June 2014), 129.
- 5 Anderson, “A New Testament,” *Little Review* vol. 6, no. 6 (October 1919), 6. *The Little Review* was founded in Chicago by Margaret Anderson, who was from Columbus, Indiana.
- 6 Turner to Carl Becker, March 10, 1916, in Wilbur Jacobs, *The Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1968), 143 (quotation); Turner, “Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History,” *Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association* vol. 3 (1909–1910),

- 159–84. Turner’s work was “widely recognized at the time as a formal proclamation that the Middle West had reached cultural maturity and must henceforth be taken into account in the world of art and ideas as well as in the world of business and politics.” Henry Nash Smith, “The West as an Image of the American Past,” *University of Kansas City Review* vol. 18 (1951), 36.
- 7 See chapters 2 and 3 in Jon K. Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2013).
- 8 Peter Y. Paik, “Introduction,” in Marcus Paul Bullock and Peter Y. Paik (eds), *Aftermaths: Exile, Migration, and Diaspora Reconsidered* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2008), 3 (uprootedness); Anne Firor Scott, “On Seeing and Not Seeing: A Case of Historical Invisibility,” *Journal of American History* vol. 71, no. 1 (June 1984), 8 (vision, unseen); Michael O’Brien, “On Observing Quicksand,” *American Historical Review* vol. 104, no. 4 (October 1999), 1202 (etiolated); Edward Watts, “The Midwest as a Colony: Transnational Regionalism,” in Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz (eds), *Regionalism and the Humanities* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 168. On the “lack of a vocabulary” or a “critical category” for understanding regionalism in contrast to the categories of race, class, and gender, the academic “zoning restrictions” that inhibit regional studies, and how a regional focus can be a “kiss of death” for writers, see Michael Kowaleski, “Writing in Place: The New American Regionalism,” *American Literary History* vol. 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 174–76 (quotations); Alvin Kernan, *In Plato’s Cave* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999), 246–50. On how the training of professional historians “inculcates an indifference to place,” see David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 112 (quotation); John A. Jakle, *My Kind of Midwest: Omaha to Ohio* (Chicago, The Center for American Places, 2008), 47.
- 9 Herbert Krause, “A Note on the Possibilities of South Dakota Writing” [1955], in Arthur R. Huseboe (ed), *Poems and Essays of Herbert Krause* (Sioux Falls, Center for Western Studies, 1990), 208; James McManus, “Your What Hurts?” in Becky Bradway (ed), *In the Middle of the Middle West: Literary Nonfiction from the Heartland* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003), 15. There has been, Michael Rosen says, “no cachet to being a midwestern writer.” Michael J. Rosen, “Is There a Midwestern Literature?” *Iowa Review* vol. 20, no. 3 (Fall 1990), 100. Edward Watts argues that midwesterners are “written out” of scholarship, owing to the “self-referentiality of the coastal cultural,

- academic, and publishing centers of the nation.” Watts, “Re-centering the Center,” *American Literary History* vol. 21, no. 4 (Winter 2009), 860. On intellectuals who feel “stuck” in the Midwest, see Robert Hellenga, “Rural Writers,” in Bradway (ed), *In the Middle of the Middle West*, 200.
- 10 Willa Cather, *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as Art* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 94.
- 11 August Derleth, *Three Literary Men: A Memoir of Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters* (New York, Candlelight Press, 1963), 33 (quoting Anderson).
- 12 Ben Zimmer, “‘Bicoastalism’: A Long Flight to ‘Mad Men,’” *Wall Street Journal*, April 18, 2014. See Diane Johnson, *Flyover Lives: A Memoir* (New York, Viking, 2014); Jon K. Lauck, “Born in a Small Town,” *Claremont Review of Books* (Summer 2014), 1–3; Cary W. de Wit, “Flyover Country,” in Andrew Cayton, Richard Sisson, and Christian Zacher (eds), *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2007), 66–68; Matthew Wolfson, “‘Flyover Country’ Is an Insult to Midwesterners Like Me. So Is ‘Heartland’ Sentimentality,” *New Republic*, March 22, 2014; Luke Rolfes, *Flyover Country* (Georgetown, Kentucky, Georgetown Review Press, 2015); Cheryl Unruh, *Flyover People: Life on the Ground in a Rectangular State* (Emporia, Quincy Press, 2011) and *Waiting on the Sky: More Flyover People Essays* (Emporia, Quincy Press, 2014); Will Weaver, “Midwestern Voice: Still Listening,” *Middle West Review* vol. 2, no. 1 (Fall 2015), 123–28.
- 13 David D. Anderson, “Notes toward a Definition of the Mind of the Midwest,” *MidAmerica* vol. 3 (1976), 9. Anderson, an Ohio native, found the cartoon “peculiarly unfunny.”
- 14 Robert L. Dorman, *Hell of a Vision: Regionalism and the Modern American West* (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2012), 13–14 (resistance); Frederick Jackson Turner, “Is Sectionalism in America Dying Away,” *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 13, no. 5 (March 1908), 661–62; Donald G. Holtgrieve, “Frederick Jackson Turner as a Regionalist,” *Professional Geographer* vol. 17 (May 1974), 159–65; Donald Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 13–17; Richard W. Etulain, *Re-imagining the Modern West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art* (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1996), 107; David M. Wrobel, “Beyond the Frontier-Region Dichotomy,” *Pacific Historical Review* vol. 65, no. 3 (August 1996), 420, 426.

- of Christopher Lasch,” *Great Plains Quarterly* vol. 32, no. 3 (Summer 2012), 183–205.
- 239 Lasch, “Ordeal of Van Wyck Brooks,” 2. On Brooks’s later criticism of intellectuals who inhabited a “small closed world, walled in from the common world,” see Brooks, “Reflections on the Avant-Garde,” *New York Times Book Review* (December 30, 1956).
- 240 Lasch, “Ordeal of Van Wyck Brooks,” 9.
- 241 Lasch, “Ordeal of Van Wyck Brooks,” 10.
- 242 Lasch, “Ordeal of Van Wyck Brooks,” 15.

CHAPTER TWO

- 1 Van Wyck Brooks, *On Literature Today* (New York, E. P. Dutton, 1941), 23, 15.
- 2 Buley to Bernard DeVoto, May 24, 1944, FF 160–162, Box 8, DeVoto Papers, Stanford University.
- 3 “The literature of the rebels and renegades has survived and has come to be taken as a complete picture” of the 1920s, Malcolm Cowley observed, and did not include the portrayals of the nation’s “smiling parts, the broad farmlands, the big Sunday dinners after coming home from church.” Cowley, “In Defense of the 1920s,” *New Republic*, April 24, 1944.
- 4 Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 143.
- 5 Edward Krickel, “The Study of the Expatriates,” *South Atlantic Bulletin* vol. 35, no. 3 (May 1970), 30–31.
- 6 Brooks to Frederick Manfred, March 4, 1946, Box 13, Manfred Papers, Upper Midwest Literary Archives, University of Minnesota.
- 7 Bernard DeVoto, *The Literary Fallacy* (Port Washington, New York, Kennikat Press, Inc., 1944), 30, 42.
- 8 DeVoto, *Literary Fallacy*, 150; Wallace Stegner, *The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard DeVoto* (Salt Lake City, Peregrine Smith Books, 1988), 182–83, 251–59. DeVoto’s criticism was first set forth in a series of six lectures at Indiana University in 1943 and then published collectively as *The Literary Fallacy* in 1944. R. Carlyle Buley to John T. Flanagan, January 10, 1947, Flanagan Papers, University of Illinois; Richard Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel*

- from Main Street* (New York, Random House, 2002), 474. Sinclair Lewis attacked DeVoto in response to his book (and surely in response to DeVoto’s earlier criticism of Lewis), and Van Wyck Brooks, still friendly with the then much less rebellious Lewis, applauded Lewis’s “masterpiece of demolition.” Lewis, “Fools, Liars and Mr. DeVoto,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 15, 1944; Brooks to Sinclair Lewis, April 23, 1944, Box 46, FF 462, Lewis Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University; Bernard DeVoto, “Sinclair Lewis,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, January 28, 1933; Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1961), 712. On DeVoto’s largely forgotten critique, see Fred Siegel, “The Anti-American Fallacy,” *Commentary* (April 2010). Henry Nash Smith (see chapter 3), a critic of Frederick Jackson Turner and midwestern agrarian “myths,” “violently” hated DeVoto’s *The Literary Fallacy*. Smith to Copley Morgan, November 9, 1949, FF 17, Box 1, Smith Papers, Bancroft Library. Also note, in conjunction with DeVoto’s critique, Archibald MacLeish’s criticism of intellectuals for abandoning the “common culture.” “The Irresponsibles,” *Nation* (May 18, 1940), 618–23; *The Irresponsibles: A Declaration* (New York, Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1940). MacLeish, born in Glencoe, Illinois, was considered, in part, a “poet of the Midwest.” Graham Hutton, “Hawkeye, Huck Finn and an English Boy,” *Chicago Sun Book Week*, May 4, 1947. Irving Dillard of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* highlighted MacLeish as a “native of Illinois.” Dillard to Stanley Pargellis, February 15, 1947, NL 03/05/06, Box 2, FF 46, Pargellis Papers, Newberry Library. On MacLeish’s criticism of intellectuals during the 1930s, see Eleanor M. Sickels, “Archibald MacLeish and American Democracy,” *American Literature* vol. 15, no. 3 (November 1943), 226–27. Van Wyck Brooks agreed with MacLeish that the writers of the era had been “drugged by fatalism.” Scott Donaldson, *Archibald MacLeish: An American Life* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 335.
- 9 DeVoto to Van Wyck Brooks, August 2, 1943, Folder 743, Brooks Papers, Annenberg Library, University of Pennsylvania.
- 10 Bernard DeVoto, “They Turned Their Backs on America: Writers of the Twenties Missed the Real Meaning of the Times,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 8, 1944.
- 11 DeVoto to Frederick Manfred, May 8, 1953, Box 16, Manfred Papers, Upper Midwest Literary Archives, University of Minnesota. As a writer, Manfred saw himself as a “Midlander with Midland American themes.” Manfred to Brooks,

- West, 193; Nancy Bunge, “Two Midwestern Teachers: William Stafford and Frederick Manfred,” *Northern Review* vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 11–16.
- 47 Wallace Stegner, “The Trail of the Hawkeye,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, July 30, 1938, 17.
- 48 Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s* (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2011); and Jon K. Lauck review, *Omaha World Herald*, July 17, 2011. See also Marvin Bergman, “Reconsidering the Heartland: A Review Essay,” *Annals of Iowa* vol. 72 (Summer 2013), 161–67.
- 49 Quoted in James R. Shortridge, “The Emergence of ‘Middle West’ as an American Regional Label,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* vol. 74, no. 2 (1984), 215.
- 50 Terry Teachout, *The Skeptic: A Life of H. L. Mencken* (New York, HarperCollins, 2002), 219.
- 51 Cynthia Ozick, “The Buried Life,” *New Yorker*, October 2, 2000.
- 52 Daniel Joseph Singal, “Towards a Definition of Modernism,” *American Quarterly* vol. 39, no. 1 (Spring 1987), 21. Marcus Klein saw the critics as acting “along the idols that are already fallen, searching through the potsherds for something still substantial enough to smash yet once again.” Klein, *After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-century* (Cleveland and New York, World Publishing Company, 1964), 29.
- 53 Cynthia Ozick, “Against Modernity: Annals of the Temple, 1918–1927,” in *A Century of Arts & Letters* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998), 82.
- 54 Ozick, “Against Modernity,” 82.

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