IN QUEST OF THE MAIN CURRENTS OF PENNSYLVANIA LITERATURE*

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IT WOULD be a mistake, in drawing the bounds for a study of Pennsylvania literature, to limit it too severely either to the so-called creative genres and formal modes of literary expression or to those writers whose lives were largely spent within our political boundaries. Certainly the private letters of James Logan to Thomas Story, for example, have the depth and dignity to warrant their inclusion, as do the choicest public papers of James Buchanan or numerous examples of private diaries. And as far as personalities are concerned, Philip Freneau, Edgar Allan Poe, John Greenleaf Whittier, Bronson Alcott, Walt Whitman and others were hardly more than transients in Pennsylvania, but they contributed to the collective force of Pennsylvania’s creative history.

What we are really seeking here is more than a mere chronicle of names, works and dates. The subject matter involves more than a museum collection of scientifically measurable objects. Here we are tangling with forces out of which the measurable history of events evolves, and those events in turn cast their spell on the spirit of man and stir up new impulses and ideas. A thrust-and-balance, charge-and-countercharge movement. To mirror this spiritual evolution, the changing shadows of man’s mind, no pat critical formula will suffice.

Admittedly, sheer instinct must play a large part in the process—not only in drawing the boundaries of the study, but in evaluating and interpreting its substance. Those of us who know Pennsylvania

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as home have an intuitive sense of what belongs to the name of Pennsylvania. Luckily, that sensitivity to home and heritage is still common to all peoples who, in spite of the magnetism of metropolitan culture and the chaos resulting from international fratricide, remain firmly anchored in their community. We who have a home in the full sense of the word know that place is still important. It gives us additional security, adds a third dimension to our understanding, and serves as a psychological bridge from the individual to the whole framework of man and nature.

That intuition must then be the spiritual mechanism by which we test what belongs to a region, a place. But one must admit that there is a great variety of “place” within the confines of Pennsylvania. There are at least five distinctive and definable cultural regions within our political boundaries. Metropolitan Philadelphia, the pastoral southeastern counties, the anthracite area, the northern and central mountain areas, and that complex industrial web spreading out from Pittsburgh—all have special characteristics of their own. How is it then that, aside from their political union, we seem to sense a common factor in all of them. We find ourselves strangely responsive to the scene, at special moments, whether we are ferrying across to Philadelphia, walking down Clinton Street on a summer’s evening, watching the coming of Spring to the hills of York County, driving past mountains of mine waste and the curious skeletons of coal tipples in the Anthracite, moving up the moonlit highway along the Susquehanna, or speeding on a night train past the awesome blast furnaces west of Pittsburgh. And of course there are great differences between the Irish cop in Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania German farmer near Lancaster, the Welsh miner in the Anthracite, the Yankee hillman in northern Pennsylvania, and the Slavic steel puddler in Pittsburgh. But somehow we have a feeling they all belong here, as much as we do. The underlying unity that we sense, being intangible and psychological, cannot be defined—except, perhaps, by a poem or a story still to be written. Even if that unity is merely a figment of our imagination, it is still, as such, a vital component of our story.

That intuitive sense of what belongs to an environment, whether it is a book or a factory, cannot always be depended upon as the ultimate point of reference by which we evaluate the quality of
the environment's products. Its purpose is primarily to bridge the gap between the product and the locale, to see what the connection is and what force exists in the spiritual discharge between the two. M. Taine, the father of modern sociological literary criticism, identifies "three primordial forces"—race, surroundings and epoch—which produce that "elementary moral state" which in turn determines the nature of a people's creative products. For our purposes here all three forces may be included in the not too accurate, but fully suggestive, term environment. But can interpretive history stop here?

If it does, the danger lies in limiting our vision too much to those intellectual products which do not penetrate beyond environment and society. It seems to me that this is precisely the fault, if it be such, of our liberal and left-wing interpreters; because their view is earth-bound, they do not have the capacity for interpreting those rare flights of the human mind into that which is boundless and timeless. The late Vernon Louis Parrington, for example, was at a loss to explain the minds of men like Jonathan Edwards and Edgar Allan Poe as other than anachronisms. Parrington's admittedly great work, *Main Currents of American Thought*, did indeed inject into American criticism a long overdue recognition of the relationship between literature and socio-political ideas, but in following a pat Jeffersonian line he, as other liberals since, developed curious blind spots which prohibited an adequate understanding of spiritual and mystical elements outside a sociological frame of reference. A great deal of the ideological history of Pennsylvania—early Quaker and German mysticism, nineteenth century Gothic escapism, even the non-revolutionary classicism of the eighteenth century—cannot be snugly fitted into a socio-political pattern of interpretation.

To evaluate, qualitatively, those unusual variants will require something more than a reference to environment and the earth-bound tendencies of the human mind. We must go to their source, which is moral and spiritual experience beyond the boundaries of all we can include in environment.

The inherent, fundamental and most enduring qualities of a literature are those which have a more than local or regional application to human experience. Stephen Foster, for example, may have been very much a child of his times and his local environment, but
the chords of tenderness and nostalgia—that which is most memorable about his music—strike an almost universal response. Environment may be responsible for the special flavor and elaboration of a work of art, or serve as subject matter, but its intrinsic value as an expression of human experience, if it has any elements of greatness, floods over the boundaries of time and place.

In like manner, the character of a region's literature by no means depends predominantly upon the character of the geo-ethnic region itself, but invariably takes its key from a more universal frame of reference. "Regionalism" or provincialism in literature—the Irish renaissance being perhaps its most perfect example—is not so much an inspired dependence upon the immediate environment for its spiritual content as the expression of a tendency at work throughout western civilization. Literary provincialism—and we have a full share of it today in Pennsylvania—is, therefore, a mode, not a critique of literature.

We dare not, I believe, assume a chauvinistic patriotism about the products of our region, much as we love it. And the first step of interpretation requires a recognition of the fact that the enduring monuments of our regional experience, at least in the realm of the intellect, were built upon the bedrock of universal aspirations. The tendencies of western civilization supply our theme; the local environment and individual personality add the counterpoint and variations.

It is precisely at this point that the intellectual habits of so many of us who concentrate upon the field of local and regional history have played us false. So much of our historical writing about Pennsylvania extracts events and developments from the context, from the spiritual substratum, out of which they arose. And when we do this, we cook up a weak and diluted pap of antiquarianism rather than the strong and salty broth of history. Some of us have even limited our historical vision further by assuming a false patriotism and an uncritical attitude out of a mistaken faithfulness to our heritage ("Pennsylvania has everything!") made still more arid by a sanctimonious regard for what is old merely because it is old.

We can rationalize these shortcomings. In a sense we can even justify them as a defense against the inescapable fact that Pennsylvania's creative Golden Age passed away with our great-grandfathers. As the authors of a collective creative effort, we have long
since fallen from grace. Luckily though, there continue to be notable exceptions to these limitations in vision both among our historians and our creative writers, enough exceptions at least to keep high our hopes for better things to come.

But the shortness of vision in too much of our historical writing has been one of the chief reasons why so many of the creative products of Pennsylvania’s past continue to lie in obscurity. Particularly is this true of our literature. Few areas have suffered so proportionately at the hands of the historians of American ideas. Hence most casual readers, even among literate Pennsylvanians, are hard pressed to identify a half dozen personalities whose literary work helped to forge, from a Pennsylvania vantage point, the cast of “the American mind.” We do not need a careful documentation of anthologies and literary histories to reveal how seriously Pennsylvania’s creative life has been underrated.

There are reasons for this, of course, aside from our own faulty methods of interpreting Pennsylvania’s creative life. In the first place, American literary historians have adopted a rather inflexible regionalization with New England in the dominant rôle and the South, especially the Richmond-Charleston axis, the Midwest and the West as antiphonies on the main theme. One must admit the teachable simplicity of this geo-literary system, the readiness with which these cultural areas can be contrasted. But as a result, an area like Pennsylvania, so relatively complex and varied in its intellectual patterns, is barely sampled. Moreover, it is too often inferred that Pennsylvania, indeed the whole Mideast, lacks the cohesiveness and integration necessary to pack a solid wallop in America’s intellectual battles. In a sense this is true; the ethnic and geographic diversity of Pennsylvania and the Mideast prohibited a regional singleness of purpose. But by no means did this diversity, at least up to the latter part of the nineteenth century, result in an arid culture or a lack of spiritual force. To assume otherwise is merely a confession of professional laziness.

In the realization of our historical heritage we in Pennsylvania have too often failed in one most important perquisite—the identification of the data of our cultural life with the broader and more universal traditions and tendencies which are the life blood of the whole of western civilization. This larger heritage is the framework upon the superstructure of individual, local and regional
elaboration is built. If we fail to see that hidden framework, the face of things is relatively meaningless.

In the large, the history of those intellectual traditions which have in the march of time cast their spell upon this Commonwealth is a drama that illustrates nearly every spiritual condition in man's experience. Mystic and classicist, revolutionist and conservative, realist and escapist—all played their parts on this stage at their appointed times. When the intellectual climate is right, the tradition blossoms, bears its fruit, then withers in the blast of new forces, only, perhaps, to spring into life generations later.

It is certainly not without significance that the founder of the Commonwealth himself, as brilliantly perhaps as any other man of his era, brought into focus all of the basic spiritual elements of his century and, more than that, announced in his now neglected writings some of the most enduring principles of thought and action which determined the character of the age to follow. Those principles of life that we now take for granted—freedom of conscience, right of fair trial by jury, government by consent of the governed, religious toleration—were boldly proclaimed by Penn in the face of an hostile age. He developed the most liberal frame of government devised up to the eighteenth century. He was perhaps the first to envision an international organization for the preservation of peace. He attacked the lifeless traditionalism of Christendom, both Catholic and Protestant, championed the return to Apostolic principles, rephrased the message of Continental mysticism, and generally pricked the jaded conscience of his age.

He was indeed a world figure, whose enormous intellectual scope exceeded all bounds of province and nation. His fabulous learning penetrated virtually all corners of western culture, pagan and Christian, ancient and modern. As his mind was the origin of much of our own early intellectual history, or reflected the subsequent spiritual tendencies of the province, through him Pennsylvania became at the outset a participant in the continuum of civilization rather than an isolated part of history. Because of his just eminence in the history of western culture, he was our spiritual as well as our political founder.

William Penn, himself an intellectual offspring of a European mystical tradition virtually unbroken since the beginnings of Christendom, prepared the way for that curious, unworldly heritage of
medieval mysticism which the first German immigrants transplanted to the Pennsylvania wilderness. By no means a spiritual “freak,” the mysticism of Johannes Kelpius and his band, of Conrad Beissel and the Ephrathites, of the Moravians, and even, a whole century later, of George Rapp and the Harmonists in western Pennsylvania, illustrates a deep and persistent seeking after the purity and inner peace of primitive Christianity. Pennsylvania turned out to be the real proving ground of the mystical tradition; nowhere else in the New World did it flower so fully. And in spite of its seemingly isolated character, its influence probably had larger ramifications than most of our historians seem to admit. Washington, Franklin and most colonial leaders were familiar with our mystical communes, and nearly every touring European of consequence visited them. If they served no other purpose in American life, they at least tempered its rawness by preserving intact not only the finest fruits of European medievalism but also the music and crafts of the Old World.

Can we say that this nearly forgotten tradition is dead? It failed of popular appeal because America was young, lusty and growing fat with material wealth. But the heritage is still there for those who will seek it. Modern American mystical movements—from the ancient Rosicrucian Order to the disciples of Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley—can still find nourishment from these Pennsylvania antecedents and their original Old World sources. In the return to mysticism, now gathering force to counteract the hopeless prospect of atomic war and attempting to fill the meaningless void created by scientific materialism and Marxian dialectic, the Pennsylvania antecedents may again prove their enduring worth.

As with mysticism the classical tradition in American life also came into full flower in eighteenth century Pennsylvania, perhaps more completely than in any other New World area, even the tidewater South. But the fact that classicism, as a guiding discipline in creative expression, has been out of fashion since the early part of the last century has left both the personalities and the ideas they represented in an unjust obscurity. In the South, and to some extent in Pennsylvania, the tradition found its truest medium in architecture (Philadelphia is still curiously plagued with adaptations of Greek Renaissance building). But in the written word the classical tradition found no finer New World representation than
James Logan, the much misunderstood secretary to Penn and the province whose greatest writings seem to be all but lost; John Dickinson, the middle-of-the-road revolutionary writer; Francis Hopkinson, the affable aristocratic essayist; and that busy "lay preacher," Joseph Dennie, whose *Port Folio* was the best American literary periodical before the Civil War.

In spite of the fact that a series of revolutions (political, industrial, social, artistic) toppled the classical temple, one may still find echoes of the old benignity, the balance of intellect and style, the true gentleman's regard for scholarly investigation and other characteristics of the classical motif in some of our most characteristic writing today. The persistent classical attitude may be labelled "Pennsylvania conservatism," but the well is far deeper than that!

Ever since the late 1760's the intellectual climate of America was simply too brash, shifty and uncomfortable for the classical tradition to prosper further. Early America's anchorage in the time-worn institutions of the past and the patterns of thought that supported them was broken once and for all by the storm of revolutionary romanticism. The levelling tendencies of the new tradition left ancient barriers crumbling, not only in the realm of political life but in religious, scientific and institutional affairs as well. At the time he framed Pennsylvania's laws, Penn himself, advancing even beyond his friend John Locke, extended the spiritually revolutionary tendencies of Quakerism to include political democracy (perhaps to his later regret). David Lloyd, arch-enemy to the proprietary interest, increased "the harsh rumblings from below."

The greatest early American scientists who were, most of them, political theorists as well—Franklin, Rittenhouse, the Bartrams, Benjamin Rush, Alexander Wilson, Audubon, Priestley and Thomas Cooper—threw their collective weight on the side of revolutionary romanticism and "natural democracy." Thomas Paine, from a Pennsylvania vantage point, electrified the Colonies with his pamphlets.

The intellectual battle of the revolution continued into the nineteenth century, as the professional scribblers came to the aid of levelling forces. "That rascal" Freneau, in poetry and journalism, was a thorn in the side of all Federalists; Charles Brockden Brown, the brilliant "father of the American novel," spun his eerie philosophical
tales of the Philadelphia scene out of the web of revolutionary romanticism; Robert Montgomery Bird and James Nelson Barker tried, not without some success, to banish dictation by British and European critics; Hugh Henry Brackenridge, whose great satire of "Modern Chivalry" is so sadly neglected today, was groomed in the same school of revolutionary democracy.

The revolutionary romantics, abetted by the enormous opportunities of post-revolutionary America, won their battle—and the literary phase of that battle concentrated in Pennsylvania. By the 1830's the classicists were almost completely silenced. But as with all conquests, the force of victory was blunted by time and by the variant tendencies latent within it. Before mid-century the romantic tradition lost its revolutionary characteristics and, in the face of the uncomfortable conviction that the harsh new realities of American materialism were poor soil for the philanthropic dream of the Revolution, slipped into escapism. The banished old guard, of course, entered into the newly-formed ranks, lending the movement a certain dignity and general acceptance in the upper strata.

The tradition of escapist romanticism in Pennsylvania is complicated by its many variations—some, indeed, persisting to this day. Though some of its connections can be traced to New England transcendentalism—via Bronson Alcott in Germantown, Whittier's close connections with the Quaker city, and especially Walt Whitman during his sojourn in Camden—the transcendental movement found little nourishment here. Pennsylvania romanticism followed less impressive tendencies.

In the upper social registers these tendencies became frankly sentimental. In literature they too often appeared like the inorganic decorative devices of Victorian architecture. Godey's Lady's Book, a really first-class magazine in its limited way, was its perfect medium. Sometimes the sentiment became edged with bitterness, as in the case of Sumner Lincoln Fairfield, the mentally-sick and poverty-ridden poet. But perhaps the truest expression of escapist romanticism was the Gothic revival, taking its cue from the non-political works of Philip Freneau and Charles Brockden Brown but without their revolutionary implications. The mentally aberrant George Lippard applied the Gothic novel to Philadelphia with the strangest results possible. Edgar Allan Poe came to live in Philadelphia during this period; with him was a small circle of devotees,
including the much too neglected poet, Henry Beck Hirst. In up-state and western Pennsylvania the extremities of romanticism blossomed most truly in the ballad and found consummation in the work of Stephen Collins Foster.

But the passing of a generation modified these several extremities of the romantic temper. The fundamental psychological aim of escape persisted, but under the benign influence of Tennyson and Browning, perhaps, the Pennsylvania romantic tradition, though lacking fibre, achieved something like maturity. The lush poetry of George Henry Boker, the strange variety of interests of Charles Godfrey Leland, the scholarship of Henry Charles Lea, the remarkable abilities of Bayard Taylor are all memorable examples of our latter-day romanticism. But though they were not uninfluenced by the clash of political and social ideas of the Civil War era, they remained essentially divorced from the dramatic changes that were taking place in America.

Even those who first returned to local subject matter, like Weir Mitchell in Philadelphia and Frank Cowan in western Pennsylvania, did not apply their pens to the socio-economic revolution that was gathering force—the trek to the city, the rise of the factory system and large-scale industry, standardization and all the other economic factors that changed the face of America after the Civil War. Lloyd Mifflin alone, whose poetry has suffered the most unjust neglect from today's anthologists, seems to have bridged the gap from escapist romanticism to modern critical awareness, though very far indeed from realism.

The last decades of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth centuries demonstrated conclusively the intellectual and spiritual emptiness that had come to Pennsylvania, at least so far as collective expression is concerned. The land was grossly exploited, working conditions in the new industrial leviathan were bad indeed, and political chicanery was at its worst. Yet no strong voice cried out against the apathy. The rise of critical realism, growing with such force in other areas, hardly touched us. We had some very competent craftsmen—Frank Stockton, Richard Harding Davis and a number of others—but they either left our intellectual barrens, like Christopher Morley later, or lacked depth and vision.

The spiritual paralysis left its mark to this day. And though we can claim a host of sound literary craftsmen still at work among us or writing about us, particularly in the historical novel, somehow
the great part of our current literary production seems to lack endur-
ing power and impact. Our best literary craftsmanship today finds its most natural medium in the historical novel or the personal
and reminiscent essay. As a matter of fact, we seem to have been seduced into looking backward to the days when our spot of earth was charged with more direct meaning for mankind. The works of Joseph Hergesheimer, Hervey Allen, Agnes Turnbull, Conrad Richter, Elsie Singmaster and others attest to our competency in dealing with the past creatively. And of course no one can deny the value of looking backward—providing of course the final distillation of meaning is clearly applicable to the conditions of our time. Unfortunately this is all too often not the case. Even those few who write about us with a critically contemporary meaning use this environment principally as a stage setting. Their implied or direct criticisms of our arid spirit lose force because so many of them really do not (perhaps for lack of tolerance and understanding, perhaps because of our own apathy) live among us.

All the signs seem to point to the fact that our generation as a whole, in Pennsylvania, is not producing a "body" of writing capable of living beyond our times. Out of the spiritless void have emerged a few individual writers that our grandchildren will read, but—we might as well admit it—our spirit-soil has been worn thin, and our social and institutional life does precious little to renew its vigor. Hence we have sunk into the habit of aping forms, ideas and critical attitudes which are not endemic or inherent in us. (How drearily is this true, for example, of our many otherwise competent little theatres which year after year persist in trying to transplant Broadway onto Main Street.) But there is enough good writing among us yet to keep us looking for signs and portents for the new life that inevitably must come after so long a fallowness.

To find the forms and concepts, the spirit and vigor, the type of vision and craftsmanship which have historically proven most natural in our environment can be an important part of the necessary fertilizing process. But perhaps even more necessary is the rediscovery of those elements of our spiritual and intellectual life and heritage which bring us into the mainstream of western civilization as a whole. Many believe, not without some justification, that we have slipped into a backwash. But a true reappraisal of our culture heritage, of which literature is only a part, will, I honestly believe, show trace elements of that mainstream of history even in our fallow periods.