

# THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XXXII

ISSUED IN MARCH 1951

No. 3

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## By Way of Introduction

From its beginnings, much of the literature of the United States has been regional in character and emphasis. The fathers of our national literature were regionalists — Washington Irving in his stories of the Hudson Valley, James Fenimore Cooper in his novels of the Western New York frontier — because they wrote of those aspects of the national life which they knew best. So were John Greenleaf Whittier and — most emphatically — Nathaniel Hawthorne. So were the too little appreciated founders of our national literature in the South, James Pendleton Kennedy and William Gilmore Simms. Henry David Thoreau was a dyed-in-the-wool regionalist in the texture of his writing, for all the cosmic range of his thinking.

Regionalism as such was sunk in strident sectionalism in the years just preceding the Civil War. It speedily recovered, however, to become a major phase of our literature in the last third of the nineteenth century: with Bret Harte and Mark

Twain writing of the West; George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, and many others in the South; and in New England Whittier again, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Even William Dean Howells and Henry James were regionalists in parts of their work.

Again regional writing was submerged at the beginning of the present century, by the flood of historical romance and by the popularity of the "muckraking" novels. But in the second decade of the century the regional movement was renewed, to continue to the present time: first in the Middle West, with the work of Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and many others; then in the South, with DuBose Heyward, Julia Peterkin, Caroline Miller, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, and many others; in New England, with Kenneth Roberts, Gladys Hasty Carroll, and on to John P. Marquand; on the Pacific Coast, in the Northwest, in the Southwest. This latest regional phase of our literature has been pre-eminently rich in the South; William Faulkner, currently the nation's most prominent writer of fiction, is the most intensely regional of them all.

It is our purpose in this article to consider one sharply narrowed portion of this major aspect of our national literature. We shall examine the fiction devoted to the presentation and interpretation of a single phase — farming — of the life of a single state, Iowa.

The American critic James Gibbons Huneker says in the introduction to his autobiographical work *Steeplejack* that the critic is obligated to give his reader a full account of himself, a *precis* of his experience, in order that the reader may be able to apply proper discounts and allowances to what he says. Without taking this injunction too literally, it may be pertinent to record the fact that I was born and grew up on an Iowa farm — a rather small and poor farm, duly equipped with a mortgage. And although I no longer live in Iowa, there has been no year in the more than fifty since I was old enough to ride the horse hoisting hay in which I have not done a considerable amount of common farm work with my own hands.

It has been a rich experience rereading some books after a lapse of as much as thirty years; trying to see the body of work as a whole, to evaluate it item by item, to recognize its common qualities and the general lines of emphasis.