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Regionalisms

Penny Fielding

‘Region’ is both a specific and an indeterminate concept. From the Latin *regere* (to direct), a region is a territory, and throughout its history the term has been used to mean a space determined by administration and regulation. In this sense, a region is something bounded and mappable. In another way, a region is more loosely defined, and has come to imply something quite different from, and often opposed to, the first sense. A region can be an area identified by any form of homogeneity—language, ethnicity, climate, customs. Regionalism is a question of relations, but more specifically of different relational configurations that take on political and cultural contours that change according to historical demands. Are regions determined by a centre/periphery model (‘London and the regions’)? Or is it something more like this definition from the philosopher of place, Edward Casey: ‘any given place serves to hold together dispersed things, animate or inanimate; it *regionalizes* them, giving them a single shared space in which to be together’?¹ In geographical terms an example might be ‘the Lake District’--a more centripetal model in which the region is defined by something at its centre, for example the experiences of the people who live there. In this second sense, ‘regionalism’ has in the nineteenth century and onwards taken on the role of challenging what has been seen as the violence of imposed or authoritarian geographies such as urbanisation, nationalism, or imperialism.²

Regions are seen as organic outgrowths of the people who live there, each region being a distinct chronotope made recognisable by its inhabitants. Yet this same model of singularity can also turn back into a universalising one when the way in which a region is imagined in literature becomes synecdochal for the nation itself as an essential expression of, for example, Englishness.

To complicate matters further, 'regional' sits in a nexus of terms that have been freighted with political and cultural values. It exists somewhere on a spectrum with 'parochial' and 'provincial', terms that themselves fluctuate with geographical and historical values. Ian Duncan points out that until the 1870s, regions were distinct localities, whereas the term 'provincial' carried an exemplary national role that began thereafter to pass into the realm of 'unpolished' or uncultivated: 'while "regional" implies a neutral or even positive set of multiple local differences, "provincial" connotes a negative difference [...] expressed as a generic or typical identity, within which any particular provincial setting may take the place of any other.'³

As a geographical term, then, a 'region' tends to expand or contract according to the political or social ideas that measure it and, as Victorian cultural geographies take on the contours of modernism, we can see how different concepts of the region both merge with and oppose each other in a series of encounters. Modernism does not mark a clear-cut break between older forms of local regionalism and a new international modernity. In fact, as a recent study of modernisms puts it, we should acknowledge in the period a 'tension between recognizing local movements and drawing connections

across borders.’⁴ Our period, tracing the move from Victorian to modern culture, recognises that no territorial boundaries are fixed or impermeable. What we may think of as separate regions are crossed by movements of peoples, languages, texts, and modes of transport, and any given locality may be read in a wider geography. A poem by Robert Louis Stevenson, written in 1890, introduces this idea:

About, on seaward-drooping hills,
 New folds of city glitter. Last, the Forth
 Wheels ample waters set with sacred isles,
 And populous Fife smokes with a score of towns.⁵

This extract seems to define a region—South-East Scotland where Stevenson grew up--and the poem resonates with alliterative and assonant Scots place names that give a local, linguistic contiguity: Halkerside, Allermuir, Caerketton. But Stevenson’s panoramic vista positions us above these local details, suggesting that places can only be known in their wider contexts or represented on a map. And the poem’s own wider geography is an international one. Stevenson is writing in the Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati) in the South Pacific, and, as he thinks about his first home in Scotland, ‘Continents / And continental oceans intervene’ to remind of this global, colonial perspective, where the sense of belonging to a locality is crossed with emigration and world-wide commerce.

In terms of genre, the expansion and contraction of space in the period, and the differing conceptions of the region, are seen most clearly in novels.

Earlier in the nineteenth century the dominant model for the geography of the novel had been the national tale (and its variants) made popular by Walter Scott and Maria Edgeworth. These novels tend to follow a naïve young hero from the national centre (usually London) to the Celtic peripheries of the Kingdom: rural Ireland or the Highlands of Scotland. In a genre closely related to the travel narrative, the protagonist acts as a kind of unconscious ethnographer—describing the stranger parts of Britain to a metropolitan readership—and underwrites national unity by a literal marriage with a woman from Scotland or Ireland. Later in this chapter we will see how these locations mutated and sub-divided, and by mid-century the national space of the novel was dividing into new locations: the Brontës’ Yorkshire, the Dorset of Anthony Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* and the Cheshire of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*. Amid this changing novelistic topography, an opposition emerges between a traditional, rural version of the nation, and the encroaching modernity of the industrial city. The title of Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855) introduces this idea as the Hale family move from rural Hampshire to Milltown (a fictionalised Manchester). Gaskell expresses the transition from the felt, personalised local to the homogenised nation as a transition from experiential time, understood by individuals and communities, to the standardised national timetables of the railways: ‘Railroad time inexorably wrenched them away from lovely, beloved Helstone, the next morning. They were gone’.⁶

North and South is a complex interrogation of how this opposition is produced by political ideas and their influence on the cultural imagination, but the acceleration of industrialisation in nineteenth-century Britain gave rise to a defensive form of regionalism that identified traditional but distinctive forms of national identity pitted against the sameness of industrial modernity. For Alfred Austin, the much-derided successor to Tennyson as Poet Laureate, the idiosyncrasies of the English countryside were a last defence against the sameness of modernity. The region is here singular and local, but also synecdochal for something that can only be understood as a whole. The English landscape is individualistic and irregular, in opposition to the collectivism of modernity, but it is at the same exemplary of *all* of England:

One cannot well drive about England with one's eyes open, without observing indication after indication of the strong, independent individuality of the English character, which may yet prove our best safeguard against that exotic 'Collectivism' of which we hear so much. The very landscape, its shapeless fields, its irregular hedgerows, its winding and wayward roads, its accidental copses, its arbitrariness of form and feature, are a silent but living protest against uniformity and preconceived or mechanical views of life.⁷

Such views crystallised into a sub-genre that became known as 'the regional novel', whose characteristics were later parodied in Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) as a mixture of primitive passions, archaic customs and dialect language tied to a specific locality. The popularity of many

regional novelists was intense, if sometimes brief. All of Constance Holme's Westmorland-set novels were published in the *Oxford World's Classics* series; they embody intense experience of rootedness to the land, filtered both through the consciousness of the educated landowner, and the everyday life of dialect-speaking tenants and farmers, all expressed as a conservative bulwark of tradition and hierarchy in which the local stands for the national:

Into a seething world of clashing interests and warring classes the tale of the Northern property, where the flower of ancestry still sprang purely as well from yeoman and peasant stock as from patrician, where law was less than loyalty, long service a matter of course, friendship and understanding things born of inbred knowledge — dropped like a mediaeval, blazoned shield into the arena of modern warfare.⁸

What we think of as the 'regional novel' is oddly poised between an exaggerated ruralism that embodies conservative values, and the attempt to establish a realist mode that could trace the relation of place to character as a general proposition about the relation of people to environment. Phyllis Bentley, herself a writer of regional fictions, sees these novels as the coming together of local description and naturalism, a movement that sought to reflect in fiction the determining effects of environment and hereditary. Naturalism was a controversial mode associated particularly with French writing that emphasised the animalistic aspects of human beings, but in English fiction these qualities were diffused into a sense of local realism. Bentley describes this realism as: 'A detailed faithfulness to reality, a conscientious presentation

of phenomena as they really happen in ordinary life on a clearly defined spot of real earth, a firm rejection of the vague, the high flown and the sentimental, an equally firm contact with the real: these are the marks of the regional novel.’⁹

This emphasis on phenomena—how characters experience their locality in specific forms of consciousness—brings us to the most famous literary region in our period, Thomas Hardy’s ‘Wessex’. Hardy’s sense of the local grows out of the complex exchange of different geographies and different sense of space that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

On the one hand, Wessex is a bounded, mappable space—Hardy included a map of Egdon Heath in the first edition of *The Return of the Native* (1878)—and it is marked by frequent references to its historical past. On the other hand, Hardy evokes a place that precedes all forms of cultural understanding, or even inscriptions of any kind. At the end of a chapter in which he tries various forms of personification and association to describe Egdon Heath, Hardy moves back from these to suggest that the heath has a material singularity that cannot be known even through its own features:

The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained. [...] With the exception of an aged highway, and a still more aged barrow presently to be referred to—themselves almost crystallized to natural products by long continuance—even the trifling irregularities were not caused by

pickaxe, plough, or spade, but remained as the very finger-touches of the last geological change.¹⁰

Elsewhere Hardy asks us to think about a place that is empirically knowable *only* to the people who live there. John Barrell describes the local geography of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) as 'a way of knowing, so intense, so full, so detailed, that it cannot be acquired in more places than one, and cannot be exported from one place to another: it is not knowledge elsewhere.'¹¹ John Plotz takes this a step further, and argues that Hardy is not a regionalist novelist at all, as his novels 'might be called "localist" by virtue of their obsession with registering how differently various individuals make sense of the world.'¹² Tess experiences her locality as a personal topography: 'Every contour of the surrounding hills was as personal to her as that of her relatives' faces.'¹³ The novel's effect is to oscillate between this hyperlocal knowledge, available to Tess, and its positioning of her in a much larger perspective available to the reader. The image of the face is picked up later in the novel when Tess and her friend Marian are picking turnips, viewed in a wide angle between a featureless brown earth and white sky:

So these two upper and nether visages confronted each other, all day long the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls crawling over the surface of the former like flies.¹⁴

The women remain in their rural ‘region’ but now it expresses the alienation and atomisation associated with modernity. Tess and Marian have no human connection to the land on which they work and their individuality is lost in the huge, blank panorama.

Regionalism in the novel, then, is not always best served by thinking in the generic terms of the ‘regional novel’.¹⁵ Similarly, we should draw back from making a clear distinction between a rural regionalism and the global city. There has been a tendency to associate modernism with a wearied acknowledgement that the sameness of urban existence has enervated social life and alienated individuals from the possibly of experience itself. Most famous are T. S. Eliot’s ‘unreal cities’ of *The Waste Land* (1922) where the former citadels of world empire, trade or religion appear as ghostly versions of themselves reduced to a list that denies them spatial identity of any kind:

Falling towers

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

Vienna London

Unreal[.]¹⁶

But cities were equally depicted as distinct regions. George Gissing’s *The Nether World* (1889), a picture of working-class life, is set almost entirely in the London district of Clerkenwell, a specificity that gives the novel the ethnographic boundedness that we associated with regionalism. Observing this, Raymond Williams’ Marxian reading traces in Gissing’s London-based novels of the 1880s and 1890s the tendency of the regional novel to focus on a

specific groups or class and to ignore the wider social and economic forces that produce that class: ‘For one of the essential constituents of East End life was the existence—pressing and exploiting but of course by definition not locally and immediately visible—of the *West End*.’¹⁷ Other novels put pressure on the regional model by showing the interconnectedness of places. The fragility of the defensive or recuperative model of literary regionalism is brilliantly exposed in H. G. Wells’ *Tono-Bungay* (1909) which shows how the geography of England is torn between the imagined regionalism of aristocratic tradition and a new world of commercial progress. The son of a housekeeper, George Ponderevo, grows up in Bladesover House subject to an ideology that naturalises the social hierarchy of rural England as the whole nation, or what George calls ‘a closed and complete social system’:

All about us were other villages and great estates, and from house to house, interlacing, correlated, the Gentry, the fine Olympians, came and went. The country towns seemed mere collections of shops, marketing places for the tenantry, centres for such education as they needed, as entirely dependent on the gentry as the village and scarcely less so. I thought this was the order of the whole world.¹⁸

When George grows up and leaves the patrician estate, he realises that this is indeed a generalised order of privilege, not in the sense that this kind of rural location typifies Englishness, but in the demystification of such an assumption. Bladesover is everywhere not because it is a synecdoche for

England but because national geographies are always structured according to social class:

And as I have gone to and fro in London, in certain regions constantly the thought has recurred, this is Bladesover House, this answers to Bladesover House. The fine gentry may have gone; they have indeed largely gone, I think; rich merchants may have replaced them, financial adventurers or what not. That does not matter; the shape is still Bladesover.¹⁹

The London to which George Ponderevo moves to join his Uncle Edward is antithetical to the boundedness of the traditional regional space. It is part of a fantastically unstable global economy—the Ponderevos speculate on international stock and George turns from marketing the quack elixir Tono-Bungay to an equally useless product mined in West Africa—and marked in the novel by restless movement and the atomisation of its inhabitants. E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, published the following year in 1910, chronicles the city as a state of mutability, lacking any essential identity that can be derived from place: 'It was the kind of scene that may be observed all over London, whatever the locality--bricks and mortar rising and falling with the restlessness of the water in a fountain, as the city receives more and more men upon her soil.'²⁰ The distinction between rural and urban experience was itself rendered unstable by the growth of the suburb, which had the effect both of attempting a transformation of the city into a quasi-countryside by offering the assumed rural characteristics of fresh air and a quiet life, and blurring the boundaries of

place altogether by creating a liminal space in what should be a clear border between a city and its rural hinterland.

The publishing boom in genre fiction in the late nineteenth-century took advantage of the increasing interactions between countryside and city to proliferate a Gothic motif in which the rural regions are no longer havens of safety and familiarity. In Conan Doyle's detective fiction, the frequent train journeys taken by Holmes and Watson from London to the countryside are journeys into strange and uncanny territories. In the classic novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), Watson's first sight of the Dartmoor in which secrets are buried is 'like some fantastic landscape in a dream'.²¹ In *Dracula* (1897), the Count first lands at Whitby on the Yorkshire coast before making his way to London. The ghost stories of M. R. James, which appeared in collections between 1904 and 1925, frequently evoke the distinctive ghostly seascapes of the East Anglian coast, where unwary visitors are driven to death or distraction by supernatural forces. Arthur Machen's *The Three Imposters* (1895) moves between London and the Welsh Borders where traces remain of a strange primitive race.

At the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the city and the countryside were increasingly mirroring each other in aesthetic terms. One of the best-known literary regions of the early twentieth century comprises Arnold Bennett's 'Five Towns' of the industrial West Midlands. In the following scene, Bennett combines the 'romantic' aesthetic of the sublime, usually associated with spectacular natural sights, with the idea that regions

produce and are produced by their inhabitants. After an extended description of the sublime, we are reminded that this aesthetic is contingent on the outside eye (a technique also used by Hardy to characterise the inhabitants of his Wessex):

Still more distant were a thousand other lights crowning chimney and kiln, and nearer, on the waste lands west of Bleakridge, long fields of burning ironstone glowed with all the strange colours of decadence.

The entire landscape was illuminated and transformed by these unique pyrotechnics of labour atoning for its grime, and dull, weird sounds, as of the breathings and sighings of gigantic nocturnal creatures, filled the enchanted air. It was a romantic scene, a romantic summer night, balmy, delicate, and wrapped in meditation. But Anna saw nothing there save the repulsive evidences of manufacture, had never seen anything else.²²

At the same time, it was precisely in cities that the idea of regionalism became recognised in the early twentieth-century in the fields of environmental planning, architecture, and local government in town and city planning. Patrick Geddes, who re-developed much of Edinburgh's Old Town, believed in a symbiotic relation between a district and its inhabitants, and argued that towns should be planned by reference to the occupations of their citizens and following an organic model of settlement.²³ Even the most industrial regions could be seen to develop in this way. In *Anna of the Five Towns*, Bennett uses another natural metaphor to describe the

interconnectedness of the regional towns: ‘Trafalgar Road is the long thoroughfare which [...] runs through the Five Towns from end to end, uniting them as a river might unite them’(29).

The literary map of Britain had become a fluid geography, in which the city and countryside moved between opposition, connection, and mirroring, and Victorian distinctions were breaking down. But the spaces of national geography could still take on their character from older cultural divisions. Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, national regions that had formerly constituted the settings of the national tale at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had altered geographically and politically. The Land Acts of the 1880s and 1890s began gradually to shift the ownership of property away from the Protestant Anglo-Irish class in Ireland, and in all three nations extensive emigration throughout the nineteenth century had changed the distribution of population in ways that visibly altered the landscape.

The Real Charlotte (1894) by Somerville and Ross (the pen name of Edith Somerville and Violet Florence Martin) echoes the earlier national tale model of Maria Edgeworth in ironic mode. The young metropolitan hero is now a Dublin woman—Francie Fitzpatrick—who comes to stay with her cousin Charlotte in West Cork. But, unlike the protagonist of the national tale, Francie is not a character through whom the reader explores an unfamiliar and romantic landscape. Rather we witness, through the machinations of Charlotte, a nation in which land-ownership has become contested, and the Anglo-Irish aristocracy can no longer exert proprietary rights over the land. The novel

reverses the national tale's optimistic belief in the improvement of the land under enlightened British control. Now 'ignorance, neglect and poverty'²⁴ is the destination of the land, rather than a condition from which it may be redeemed.

The older associations of the Celtic areas of Britain with primitivism fragmented into different forms at the end of the century. The Welsh writer Caradoc Evans populated his short stories, starting with *My People* in 1915, with characters brutalised by their primal desires and material ambitions in a deliberate reversal of the trope of the Romantic 'peasant' who could bear national history. Evans was a controversial writer whose stories were seen as anti-Welsh, but his insistence on stripping the rural working class of any nostalgia and his often ironic narration associate him with a modernist voice.²⁵ Evans' Wales can be compared with a different form of regionalism in the form of what is sometimes called 'Celticism' (discussed in chapter [x] of this volume). Celtic regions are layered spaces in which ethnographic specificity leads into locations of archetypal symbolism—sacred woods, holy wells, hollow hills. The imagery of water, fire and vegetation recur in the poetry and plays of W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge, while at the same time new ideas in anthropology, notably in the work of J. G. Frazer, identified in the folk practices of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales the remnants of myths that had global uniformity. These supernatural places have a varying relation with the larger space of the nation. For Yeats, at least in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Celtic myth was a form of revival that could breathe new

life into Ireland in an act of imaginative national renewal. For the Scottish writer William Sharp, who adopted the female writing persona Fiona McLeod, the Western Islands of Scotland were the last refuge of a dying spiritual culture. In the novella *Pharais* (1895), the Gaelic-speaking hero Alistair is seemingly reborn from the sea only to go mad and die.

In Scotland, a distinct form of the regional, rather than national, novel had become popular in the late nineteenth century. The ‘Kailyard’ school was parochial in the literal sense in that its novels are generally set in country parishes in the Lowlands of Scotland. But it was held to be parochial in an evaluative sense in that the Kailyard quickly became associated with a nostalgic and sentimental depiction of rural life that resisted both Scotland’s demographic and industrial change and the experiments with naturalism that had entered into the wider stream of the novel. More recent critics have challenged this dismissal of the genre, pointing to the self-conscious narratives and generic diversity of ‘Kailyard’ novels,²⁶ but the most remarkable feat of the tradition was George Douglas Brown’s powerful anti-Kailyard novel of 1901, *The House with the Green Shutters*. This novel explodes the centripetal model of regional fiction as, in the words of Cairns Craig, it ‘constructs for us the model of a society in which the creative imagination and the community which it has to express are utterly sundered from one another’.²⁷

The novel’s antihero, John Gourlay, has made a small fortune as a carrier in the town of Barbie, but his business is now threatened by the coming of the railway, a development that most of the townsfolk and traders see as a

way of increasing their profit. The novel is a culmination of the uneasy relation that the regional novel has with railways. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* this is made explicit: 'Modern life stretched out its steam feeler to this point three or four times a day, touched the native existences, and quickly withdrew its feeler again, as if what it touched had been uncongenial.'²⁸ Hardy's Wessex, as we have seen, is a negotiation between the sense of a single, bounded region and the place of all regions in larger social and economic networks. But in Brown's novel this delicate relationship is shattered. The community is merely a collection of interests seeking to maximise material gain. 'The Scot', the narrative voice remarks sardonically, has 'the forecasting leap of the mind which sees what to make of things—more, sees them made and in vivid operation. To him there is a railway through the desert where no railway exists, and mills along the quiet stream.'²⁹ Amid this historical flux, Gourlay remains a fixed point but, unlike the characters in other regional novels, who are constructed by their environment in a naturalist mode, or who interact in a community, Gourlay acts and thinks out of 'brute force of character'³⁰ and is impervious to argument or feeling. Resistant both to change and to locality, the novel traces his ruin as he destroys his son and himself.

Elsewhere in Scottish fiction, John Buchan was exploiting the geographic freedoms afforded by genre fictions. Buchan's thrillers can be global, local, and regional all at the same time. Richard Hannay, the hero of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) and later novels, is geographically complex. Born in Scotland, he grows up in South Africa, and through his father's

contacts he speaks fluent German. Wrongly suspected of murder, Hannay escapes London by train to hide out in Scotland. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* gestures towards Scotland as a region of status, safety and recuperation—the rural working people who take Hannay in have ‘the kindly shyness of moorland places’ and ‘the perfect breeding of all dwellers in the wilds’.³¹ But *The Thirty-Nine Steps* also acknowledges the provisional status of all such spaces. The novel repeatedly insists that identification with place can simply be a trick of the mind—Hannay disguises himself as a local roadmender by thinking himself into the role and the place, and the trick is given an imperial context when we learn that this is a technique Hannay picked up in Southern Africa:

I remember an old scout in Rhodesia [...] once telling me that the secret of playing a part was to think yourself into it. [...] So I shut off all other thoughts and switched them on to the road-mending. I thought of the little white cottage as my home, I recalled the years I had spent herding on Leithen Water, I made my mind dwell lovingly on sleep in a box-bed and a bottle of cheap whisky.³²

The idea of the organic region characterised by the inherent nature of its inhabitants is challenged by the idea that all associations of people with place are performative—individuality is not given by a place, but rather subjects can take on the characteristics of any given place by conscious association rather than natural evolution, rendering all spaces provisional and fictional.

The Thirty-Nine Steps was published in 1915 but set a year earlier on the eve of the First World War. The novel ends with Hannay fighting off a German invasion, but the whole story falls under the shadow of coming war that gives Buchan's ideal landscapes a ghostly, haunted quality:

I swung through little old thatched villages, and over peaceful lowland streams, and past gardens blazing with hawthorn and yellow laburnum. The land was so deep in peace that I could scarcely believe that [...] in a month's time, unless I had the almightiest of luck, these round country faces would be pinched and staring, and men would be lying dead in English fields.³³

The war, as might be expected, fostered forms of nostalgia for the idealised rural regions that had grown up in opposition to industrial Britain and popular regional fiction continued to sell well. But the trauma of war and its consequent sense of spatial dislocation enters into literature, straining the sense of therapeutic or comforting regionalism. Rupert Brooke's apparently sentimental poem 'The Soldier' makes its idyllic vision of its speaker 'breathing English air, / Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home' conditional on his death. This is a projection in the future: the poem starts 'If I should die, think only this of me' and details how he wants others to remember him rather than an actual memory.³⁴

In the work of Edward Thomas, all of whose poetry was written during the first world war, this dislocated sense of a familiar but imaginary England is marked. Thomas is sometimes thought of as a regional poet, his poems

capturing the landscapes particularly of the South Downs chalklands in Hampshire and Sussex. But as Stan Smith points out, these localities are often suspended from precise meaning or geographical certainty. It is not always possible to decide of what larger space they are a region: 'His landscapes repeatedly offer of metonymies of a totality that cannot be grasped. At the heart of such metonymies is dispossession.'³⁵ Thomas's poem 'The Chalk Pit' seems at first to reach out to a regional identity: the chalk pit could signify a spatial homogeneity based on work and the resources of the land. We could think back to Hardy's *Return of the Native* in which the 'Reddleman' Diggory Venn is dyed crimson by the red ochre he deals in. But Thomas's poem works to make its locality difficult to know. 'The Chalk-Pit' is a dialogue between two speakers, one of whom seems to be asking the way in a location he has previously either lived in or visited. The poem progresses through hesitant questions about people who may have lived and worked there, although the speaker is not sure if he really remembers the place or if 'another place / Real or painted, may have combined with it.' We are not given a precise location or history for the chalk pit although the poem seems always on the verge of admitting the stories it cannot trace or substantiate. The poem ends with the second speaker:

You please yourself. I should prefer the truth
 Or nothing. Here, in fact, is nothing at all
 Except a silent place that once rang loud,
 And trees and us--imperfect friends, we men

And trees since time began; and nevertheless

Between us still we breed a mystery.³⁶

The poem's last piece of dialogue starts by splitting the location into two possibilities for knowing it: the truth or nothing. But then Thomas acknowledges that these two may not be opposed but may form a dialectic that indicates a modernist inclination to speculate on the metaphysics of nothings or the possibility that we exist only in our own consciousness. The location is empty and silent in that it cannot be the bearer of continuous history or even constitute a stable reality outside the thoughts of the speaker. The trees are intimately involved in human experience, but not in a rational or incremental way. Like the modernist invocation of primitive time to set against the linear history with which modernism breaks, the trees represent a 'mystery' with its sense of a sacred space not available to rational science. Thomas is a regional poet and a modernist poet. The characteristics of regional writing that we have seen throughout the period—the relations of human beings to the land, the division of the nation into homogeneous regions, the centripetal pull of associative places—are here transformed into something much less solid and much more questioning.

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⁸ Constance Holme, *The Lonely Plough* (London: Mills and Boon, 1914), 327.

⁹ Phyllis Bentley, *The English Regional Novel* (London: Allen and Unwin/PEN Books, 1948), 45.

¹⁰ Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, ed. Simon Gatrell and Nancy Barrineau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

¹¹ John Barrell, 'Geographies of Hardy's Wessex', in K. D. M. Snell (ed.), *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 101.

¹² John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 92.

¹³ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, ed. Simon Gattrell, Juliet Grindle, and Penny Boumelha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 42.

¹⁴ Hardy, *Tess*, 304.

¹⁵ Raymond Williams points out the dangers of lumping all regional novels into the satirical orbit of *Cold Comfort Farm*, arguing that in making too sharp a distinction between romance and parody we miss what many rural novels of the nineteenth century have in common: 'the loss of a credible common world that we see in Hardy.' Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 253.

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber: 1969), 73.

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983), 234.

¹⁸ H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, ed. Patrick Parrinder and Edward Mendelson (London: Penguin, 2005), 15.

¹⁹ Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, 100.

²⁰ E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 1983), 59. See Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and*

Geography in Modernism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 46-79.

²¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, ed. Christopher Frayling (London: Penguin, 2001), 55.

²² Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns*, intro. Frank Swinnerton (London: Penguin, 2001), 73.

²³ See Volker M. Welter, *Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the City of Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

²⁴ Somerville and Ross, *The Real Charlotte* (London: Capuchin Classics, 2011), 52.

²⁵ See Katie Gramich, "Creating and Destroying 'The Man Who Does Not Exist': The Peasantry and Modernity in Welsh and Irish Writing," *Irish Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (February 2009), 19-30.

²⁶ See Andrew Nash, *The Kailyard and Scottish Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

²⁷ Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) 63.

²⁸ Hardy, *Tess*, 204.

²⁹ George Douglas Brown, *The House with the Green Shutters*, ed. Dorothy Porter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 98.

³⁰ Brown, *House with the Green Shutters*, 44.

³¹ John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, intro. John Keegan (London: Penguin, 2004), 28.

³² Buchan, *Thirty-Nine Steps*, 53.

³³ Buchan, *Thirty-Nine Steps*, 40.

³⁴ *The Complete Poems of Rupert Brooke* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1934), 148.

³⁵ Stan Smith, “‘Literally, for this’: metonymies of national identity in Edward Thomas, Yeats and Auden’ in Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (eds.), *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 115.

³⁶ Edward Thomas, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, ed. Edna Longley (Tarncliffe, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books), 89.