

The Belated Frontier: H. L. Davis and the Problem of Pacific Northwest Regionalism

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Abby Williams Hill. *HORSESHOE BASIN, AFTERNOON*. 1903. Oil. 25" x 36". Reprinted with permission from Ronald Fields, University of Puget Sound professor of art and author of *Abby Williams Hill and the Lure of the West* (1989).

THE BELATED FRONTIER: H. L. DAVIS AND THE PROBLEM OF PACIFIC NORTHWEST REGIONALISM

JOHN CLEMAN

The relative obscurity of the Oregon poet and novelist Harold Lenoir Davis seems an inevitable starting point for any discussion of the author and his work. Although he won a Levinson Poetry Prize in 1919 and the 1935 Harper and 1936 Pulitzer prizes for his first novel, *Honey in the Horn* (1935), and although his stories and sketches appeared in such well-known periodicals as *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *American Mercury*, H. L. Davis is today virtually unknown except to a few specialists in literature of the American West. It is tempting to suggest that his literary reputation has been diminished by the general neglect of western writers at the hands of a critical establishment still dominated by eastern urbanites or that as a White male ex-cowboy he does not fit any of the categories of exclusion fueling recent recuperation and canon revision projects.

However, as Richard Brodhead has argued in *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993), there is a need to go beyond a simple "critique of exclusion" and the egalitarian "wish for inclusion that has fueled recent canon interrogation" (107, 109). He urges, instead, "an inquiry into the history of literary access"—one that takes into account differences in the "drives and gifts" of individual authors and in the "expressive power" of individual works but recognizes that "assertions of authorship are always staged within particular cultural settings" (109, 111). In positing late nineteenth-century regionalism as "an especially instructive instance of the history of literary opportunity," Brodhead's arguments have interesting implications for Davis, who is usually identified as a regionalist writer, especially in his best-known novel, *Honey in the Horn* (115). "Authors," Brodhead asserts, "*made* themselves authors of different sorts by the way they accepted or resisted the values constellated around this form" (174). Like Sarah Orne Jewett and Charles Chesnutt, who serve as Brodhead's representative regionalists, Davis became a certain sort of author and his work acquired a particular character as he accepted or resisted the values surrounding the regionalist vogue of his day. Also, if Davis's place in the national literary canon is considerably smaller than

that of Jewett and Chesnutt (and a good many other regionalists as well, such as Kate Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, George Washington Cable, Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and Mary Austin), that obscurity can be attributed, at least in part, to the distinctive character of his work and its cultural shaping. Moreover, as illustrated by *Honey in the Horn*, the limitations of Davis's achievement appear curiously entangled with features of the region itself, especially the problem of defining regional identity.¹

In several respects, the terms of Davis's access to authorship parallel those of the regionalists of the 1880s and '90s. As Brodhead points out, regionalism required less formal literary sophistication than other modes, made "familiarity with some cultural backwater" an asset, and tended to reward with publication the writer's first efforts (117). Davis's cultural backwater was the life he had known growing up in small towns and remote areas in Oregon and then working variously as typesetter, shepherd, cowboy, packer, deputy sheriff, and surveyor. Because his father was a country schoolteacher, there was some emphasis on learning in his life, but he had no formal education beyond high school. Nevertheless, he read extensively and taught himself several languages on his own, and what appear to be his first serious effusions were published in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine, earning him the Levinson Prize in 1919. Insofar as it was dedicated to the "new," *Poetry* provided literary access not only to such international, cosmopolitan, or modernist writers as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens, but also to such "westerners" as Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg. By 1919, in fact, Monroe and her magazine were attacked by some British and eastern American critics as overly nativist, promoting undeserving western writers at the expense of others who were better, that is, more literary (Williams 233–37). Although these attacks were both confused and exaggerated, Paul Bryant seems correct in observing that Davis's reception in *Poetry* was grounded on his bringing "the common people and the Western landscape" into art (*H. L. Davis* 28). Even more concretely, in his 1936 review of *Honey in the Horn*, Robert Penn Warren identifies "'the regional movement'" and "'the proletarian movement'" as the two "current rationalizations and rituals" in vogue for discovering new literary material and ideas, with Davis's novel obviously fitting the first category (629).

Warren's identifying Davis's appeal with his use of regional materials reveals one of the problems of his work noticed by critics from the outset. In *The Role of Place in Literature* (1984), Leonard Lutwack points

out that “[r]ealistic writing is philosophically committed to the faithful rendering of actual places in order to qualify as realism, and certainly regionalism is bound by definition to do justice to the geographical particularities of a specific area” (29). That Davis felt so bound in *Honey in the Horn* is apparent from the novel’s design in which the central character, young Clay Calvert, searches for maturity, viable employment, and a worthy community through most of Oregon’s major sub-regions, each of which is described in abundant detail. In a prefatory note much like Twain’s “Notice” in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Davis asserts the fictionality of the characters and events and the alterations to topography, but Clay’s journey is essentially that of the Davis family from southwestern Oregon through the coastal valleys, across the Cascades to Antelope, and north to the Columbia at The Dalles. He devotes particular attention to the specific flora and geography of the different locales, using these details to characterize and differentiate the places and even, by carefully noting transitions in plant life and land feature, to generate a sense of motion. In this respect, the novel reads something like a meticulous travel guide, and, as Lutwack notes, the appeal of such writing is often to please the reader with a sense of the familiar. “When their power to attract grows primarily out of extra-literary satisfactions,” he argues, “landscape and geography cannot be wholly assimilated to the texts in which they appear” (30).

Put simply, Davis, especially in *Honey in the Horn*, has been accused of falling into the regionalist trap (usually denigrated by the phrase “local color”): a preoccupation with the specific details of a particular locale at the expense of a coherent plot, complex characters, and universal themes. Davis himself insisted that while “[l]andscape counts in the character of a place, . . . people count more,” but for some his approach to writing social history did not entirely escape the limitations of his regionalist impulse (*Collected Essays* 91).² John R. Milton, for example, argues that

Davis has a vision, and it concerns the land as well as the people, but ultimately we must question his kaleidoscopes of characters, families, and conflicts on the grounds of diffusion and obscurity, the result of an obsession with scattered details at the expense of control. Local legends add a regional richness but refuse to support a major theme which strains to go beyond the limits of the region. Davis as amateur historian, as collector of locally interesting characters and events, is at odds with Davis the artist. (306–7)

To whatever extent we can accept this as a fair characterization of weaknesses, many readers will find in *Honey in the Horn*, it again raises questions about the specific historical dimensions of those weaknesses. As indicated by his asserting the value of human history over geography, Davis was well aware of the dangers of regionalism and, therefore, might be expected to have made concerted efforts to avoid them. If he did not entirely avoid them, to what extent is that a matter of his giving in to his obsessions or a simple failure of artistry? Or is it more a matter of his trying to negotiate the terms of authorship available to him, including the character of the region central to his literary project?

The regionalism vogue of the 1920s and '30s that Warren describes shared most of the formal properties of late nineteenth-century regionalism—"a setting outside the world of modern development," "ethnologically colorful" characters, and "an extensive written simulation of regional vernacular"—but it differed in its ideology and, therefore, in the cultural work it performed (Brodhead 115, 115, 116). Brodhead persuasively characterizes late nineteenth-century regionalism as a form of literary tourism, a genre placed "in a literary culture projected toward an American upper class coming together as a social entity" and playing "to this audience by rehearsing the leisured outlook that differentiated it as a social group" (144). Linked to the progressive, populist, and agrarian movements, early twentieth-century regionalism was a revolt against that very "coming together," against even more broadly what was perceived as the abstracting, homogenizing tendencies of modern life. As historian Robert L. Dorman observes, "[T]he *region* was more concretely, indeed, programmatically envisioned to be the utopian means for reconstructing the nationalizing, homogenizing urban-industrial complex, redirecting it toward an accommodation with local folkways and local environments" (xii). In attacking modernity, the regionalists shared some perspectives with the cosmopolitan modernists of the 1920s, especially the resistance to mass culture and the tyranny of the genteel. The movement included such well-known figures as William Faulkner, Robert Frost, Thomas Wolfe, and Georgia O'Keeffe, but many went beyond "personal confrontation with local culture, tradition, or landscape . . . to fashion regionalism into a democratic civic religion, a utopian ideology, and a radical politics" (xiii). Individuals such as Lewis Mumford, B. A. Botkin, Howard Odum, Mary Austin, and Donald Davidson, according to Dorman, "sought not just to render aesthetically the unraveling of traditions, the dissolution of the familial and communal, and other bleak symptoms of modernity, but . . . proposed to reverse those processes, to ameliorate and heal them

ideologically" (xiii). In this curative process the "folk," which sometimes included Blacks and Indians as well as European pioneers and rustics, were looked to as a source of older and more sustaining universal values surviving into the modern age. Hence, "the pains at which the searchers for the American folk were often put in order to find a usable past underscore the essential *myth-making* dimension of their cultural project" (93).

Davis's relationship to this cultural project and the regionalist vogue was problematic in a number of ways. As suggested above, Davis, like most regionalists, sought national recognition for his work. This is made most evident in the purposefully outrageous pamphlet *Status Rerum: A Manifesto, upon the Present Condition of Pacific Northwest Literature Containing Several Near-Libelous Utterances, upon Persons in the Public Eye*, composed with fellow poet James L. Stevens and privately printed in 1927. After excoriating by name the "poets, posers, and pismires" dominating the schools of creative writing and literary journals in the region who indiscriminately celebrate all things local, Davis and Stevens offer as a more meaningful standard of recognition the "Eastern editor" whose "desk . . . has felt the glory of the writings of such men as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, James Branch Cabell,



Abby Williams Hill. *PIONEER HOME*. 1895. Oil. 18" x 13 3/4". Reprinted with permission from Ronald Fields.

Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg—men of whom American literature may be proud” (*Collected Essays* 365). This formulation of a national literary culture to which Davis aspired was significantly not the “high” moral and intellectual culture of Jewett’s Boston, for example, or the equally high European Modernism in which Faulkner’s work resonates. Like Dreiser and Sandburg, Davis both drew on popular or folk culture for his literary materials and envisioned a wide range of “ordinary” people as his primary audience. He makes this argument specific in “Status Rerum—Allegro Ma Non Troppo,” an abbreviated and softened sequel to the earlier diatribe, published in H. G. Merriam’s *The Frontier*. Davis asserts that the only literature produced in the Northwest was the anonymous “old songs” remembered by the “people among whom I live.” However, it is not a new folk literature that he is advocating, or a literature *about* the folk, but a literature that speaks to the folk: “That is how all literature is made—Chaucer, and the Norse saga-men, and the Greeks wrote as these song-makers wrote: for their people. That, and not accident of scene or residence, is what ties literature to a locality.” Here Davis seems to posit a version of the folk as a repository of universal values, but his conflation of the people with whom he lives and the people as a broader cultural audience—*his* people with *the* people—remains a problem. Invariably, it seems, Davis registers the abiding genius of the old song-makers in some version of the “cow-puncher singing . . . as he peddled out hay in a feeding corral” (70).

Davis’s approach to the problem of truly transcending the accidents of scene or residence reflects the influence of the national literary figure who had the greatest impact on his career, H. L. Mencken. As Glen A. Love argues, Mencken influenced the work of both Davis and Stevens in a number of ways, not least in publishing their poetry and prose in his *American Mercury* in the 1920s and ’30s. His interest in the young writers can be seen as part of his rewriting “the American literary canon during the ’teens and twenties, devaluing the New England school and elevating the realists working in the colloquial tradition of Mark Twain” (332). *Status Rerum* (and to a lesser extent Davis’s sequel) is thoroughly Menckonian in style and may, in fact, have been a response to Mencken’s encouragement to Stevens to “shake off the literary ladies” of his region (qtd. in Love 332). Love compares *Status Rerum* to Mencken’s “Sahara of the Bozart” not only as a specific literary model, but in its function of stimulating the “region’s literary flowering” by shaking “Northwest writing out of its arrested development into self-awareness and the beginnings of a firm cultural identity” (338). Both *Status Rerum*s, in other words, seem conscious echoes or specific

applications of Mencken's broad-scale attacks on gentility, and as such they reflect the degree to which Davis's literary aims and practice begin in a principle of negation, in debunking. Even the "good ones" among "all the books on the West," he wrote, illustrate "the theory that every good book is written as a revulsion against some vast accumulation of tasteless and sentimental trash" (*Collected Essays* 20, 21).³ Of course, irony and satire, exposing folly and pricking pomposity, are main ingredients in the Twainian colloquial-realist tradition, but encouraged, at least, by Mencken, Davis's debunking seems almost reflexive, leaving him wary of all myth-making, perhaps of all affirmation. In slightly different terms, the *idea* of realism that constituted the grounds of Davis's place in a national literary culture did not offer a solution to the problem of universalizing the local and may, in fact, have contributed to it.

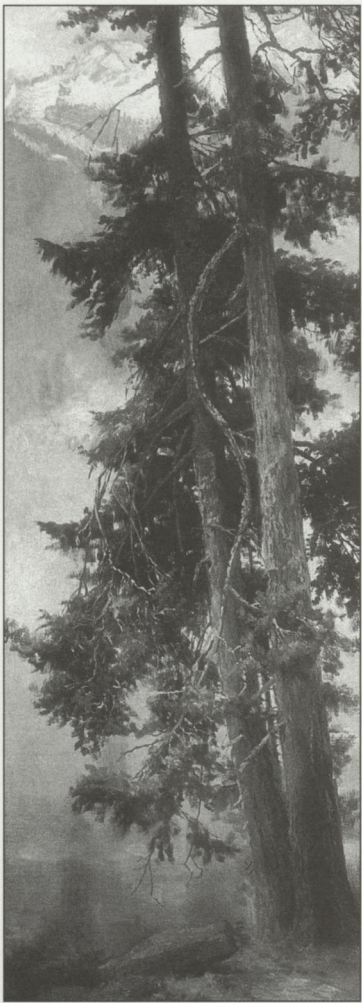
However, the problem of writing regionalism that *Honey in the Horn* represents also involves—perhaps more significantly—certain features of the Pacific Northwest region itself. By this I do not mean some sort of environmental determinism or landscape imperative shaping the work, although many Northwesterners have viewed themselves in these terms. Carlos Schwantes, for example, observes:

The most repetitive theme in the region's literature is the interaction of people and their natural environment; much of the region's history is played out against a backdrop of dramatic landforms. Not surprisingly, Pacific Northwesterners commonly translated their sense of place into a belief that natural environment determined the types of people who settled Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Rugged mountains and gargantuan trees called forth strong-willed, self-reliant individuals to match them, or so Northwesterners have often claimed. (7)

To the degree that Davis recognized "this romantic notion" as a characteristic of his region, it reflects one dimension of the literary problem confronting him in *Honey in the Horn*. He does suggest the impact of environment on some of the characters' lives—such as the compulsive talkativeness of the lonely Cascade Mountain settlers, the indolence of the peoples enjoying coastal abundance, or the "tradition" of "female domination" in the sagebrush country—but his intent seems to be to undercut any notion of a heroic landscape creating heroic individuals (259). One reason for this is that the Oregon landscape Davis describes does not fit the characterization "dramatic landforms," or, more accurately, it does not match "the classic Western landscape," which Jane Tompkins identifies in *West of Everything* (1992) as "the desert . . .

rather than the rain forests of the Pacific Northwest or the valleys of California, because of the messages it sends" (74).⁴ Hence, although he is ostensibly working the western vein—horses, cattle, sheep, guns, sheriffs, outlaws, Indians, lynchings, recurrent "lightings out"—the familiar visual icons of the western landscape and the messages they send were not available to him. As in the cases of the hanging of the novel's main villain, Wade Shiveley, and the death of the hero's unnamed Indian companion, Davis emphasizes the lack of dramatic quality in the environment, as if these moments were literally out of place.

Apart from the question of the dramatic or literary possibilities of the Oregon landscape, there is also a question of regional identity. The



geography of the Northwest generally and Oregon specifically is characterized by diversity. Describing his own experience of returning to the state from different directions, Davis recalls an old Oregon saying "that people who lived there could change their whole order of life—climate, scenery, diet, complexions, emotions, even reproductive faculties—by merely moving a couple of hundred miles in any direction inside the state." For him, however, the state is not "a collection of separate localities but always . . . one single and indivisible experience" (*Collected Essays* 23).⁵ These statements in a 1953 travel article have significance for what he had earlier attempted in *Honey in the Horn*, but the question of Pacific Northwest identity goes beyond geography and has a long history as a vexing regional issue. This was certainly a major concern of the participants in the Writers' Conference on the Northwest held at Reed College in Portland in 1946. In one paper, for example, Ernest Haycox, a prolific novelist and short-story writer, asks, "Is There a Northwest?" and

Abby Williams Hill. *FIR TREES, LAKE CHELAN*. 1903. Oil. 17" x 37". Reprinted with permission from Ronald Fields.

after making “a swift, buckshot appraisal” of “certain things which appear to be true of us in greater degree than they are true of others,” he concludes that from these “it would be difficult to create a distinctive northwestern character” (40, 46–47). What is missing, he argues, is “a distinct culture”: “it [is] more accurate to say that our region, favored as it may be, is only one more part of the United States—a young region with patterns and inheritances common to the rest of the country, spiritually not yet crystallized and physically not yet built” (47, 49). Thirty years later, the editors of a collection of essays resulting from a symposium devoted to exploring “both the image and reality of the Pacific Northwest” note that “the same thrust toward cultural definition and assessment” discoverable in the record of the earlier conference “continues to engross—and perhaps to elude—us” (Bingham and Love xiii). “Thus far,” they conclude, “the Pacific Northwest has lacked an interpretation on the scale of Walter Prescott Webb’s *The Great Plains*, or Wilbur Cash’s *The Mind of the South*, or Paul Horgan’s *Great River*; nor has it produced a William Faulkner or a Mark Twain” (xv). Most recently, John M. Findlay describes the question of regional consciousness in the Pacific Northwest as a “fishy proposition. That is, regional identity over the years has tended to be somewhat dubious, artificial, and ever-shifting” (38).

The problem of writing regionalism in the Pacific Northwest, then, was compounded by the question of whether there was, in fact, a region to write about. And, central to the durability of this question *qua* question is the status of the region as “hinterlands” or the “last frontier,” a particular condition of dependency and belatedness that is economically and historically grounded and a defining aspect of Pacific Northwest regional consciousness. As Carlos Schwantes points out, although the Pacific Northwest figured importantly in the fur trade beginning in the 1780s, it did not begin to develop “close economic and social ties with the United States” until the nation was nearly fifty years old: “The northwestern corner of the United States, in short, was both geographically remote from the East Coast and chronologically distant from the mainstream of American history” (15, 16). As it developed, the region’s economic role through much of its history was as the supplier of raw materials for markets elsewhere, making the Northwest, in Harold G. Merriam’s words, “a semi-colony” (159). Hence, a recurring motif in discussions of Pacific Northwest regional consciousness is the sense of being controlled by outside forces, a pervasive feeling of secondariness. Furthermore, the patterns of economic and social development—of frontier life, pioneer immigration, and homesteading—that

seemed central to the region's definition as "western" had already occurred (and had already been written about) in the region's East and South. In the Pacific Northwest, even the *idea* of a regional identity is a late-blooming import:

Regional identity has in many respects been imposed on or adopted within Washington, Oregon, and Idaho because of these states' relationships to other places. To a significant degree, the idea of a Pacific Northwest has been the creation of outsiders to the region as well as the product of ideas about places outside the region. (Findlay 38)

In Davis's own words, Oregon was "the place where stories begin that end somewhere else. It has no history of its own, only endings of histories from other places; it has no complete lives, only beginnings" (*Collected Essays* 52).

Davis's efforts in *Honey in the Horn* to write both within and against the terms of twentieth-century regionalism, complicated by the problematics of Pacific Northwest regional identity, can be recognized in a number of ways. One of the more obvious of these is the use of folkloristic patterns which, for some critics, constitute the essence of the novel's design and purpose and its most important reflection of regional character. Jan Brunvand was among the first to describe the specific folkloristic elements in Davis's work, which include the use of vernacular speech, a full array of eccentric local characters, and a loosely episodic plot structure echoing the square-dance motif implied by the title (Brunvand 135–41).⁶ Davis's claim that folksongs constituted the region's only true literature seems the underlying motive of his interpolating the lyrics from a number of such songs into the account of his evening with the mysterious woman at the hop-pickers' camp. Indeed, as Milton asserts, "[i]n both style and substance" *Honey in the Horn* "is a piece of folklore" chronicling "the collective life of an Oregon settlement very early in the twentieth century" (303).

This claim, which matches Davis's emphasis in "Status Rerum—Allegro Ma Non Troppo" on folk performance rather than the folk as subjects, suggests the special role of both the vernacular narrator and the series of long-winded vernacular characters out of which Davis builds a significant portion of his text. The true heroes of the Pacific Northwest, argues Barre Toelken, are not figures like Paul Bunyan, but "the village liar whose self-proclaimed exploits are known primarily to his own small community and are locally thought to be clever tall stories or 'windies' made up by the Münchhausen himself" (29). Such characters

provide a version—perhaps the only possible version—of regional identity:

[R]egionalism in Northwest folklore is that quality of phrase which comes about when . . . northwesterners are identifying themselves to each other (and to “outsiders”) by performing folklore which is theirs by the circumstance of their residence in the Northwest and their association with other northwesterners—not, at least at that moment, because they happen to be also loggers or fishermen or Basques. (41)

The space Davis devotes to the descriptions and effusions of Preston Shively, Payette and Flem Simmons, Clark Burdon, the storekeeper in the coastal range, the bridge-tender in eastern Oregon, and a host of similar characters can be seen, therefore, along with the use of a vernacular narrator, as part of his effort to “perform” his region’s elusive identity. The proliferation of detail and characters, the diffuseness and lack of coherence cited earlier as weaknesses in the novel are integral to this oral tradition, much as Flem Simmons’s garrulousness is of a piece with the clutter of junk in his barn (110).⁷ The only virtue claimed for such talkers is that “[t]hey considered nothing worth telling unless they had seen and performed in it themselves” (211). In addition, treating identity as performance presents the difficulty of radical self-generation, of style over substance: the moment and function of identification replacing the content of myth-making, of articulating shared values and beliefs.

A similar problem attends Davis’s use of the vernacular narrator. From the outset, readers have recognized the parallels between *Honey in the Horn* and Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, beginning with the narrative voice but including as well the use of effectively parentless teenage rogues as central characters; the patterns of initiation; the large cast of local characters; and the episodic structure. At times, the echoings seem strikingly specific as when Clay is caught carrying a gun by Zack Wall, the loudmouth son of a hardscrabble farmer who then, like Twain’s Judith Loftus, unwittingly helps him carry out his plan; or when he is stopped by a suspicious, self-important hopyard owner and small-town philanthropist, Mr. Spaugh, who, again like Judith Loftus, thinks Clay looks “like a bound-boy runnin’ away to keep from workin’”; or when the narrator describes the furniture of one of the longer-term eastern Oregon settlers with the same ironic exposure of middle-class vulgarity that Huck achieves in his account of the Grangerfords’ parlor (169). Curiously, one effect of these echoings is to make the otherwise

“unique” voice of the novel, however different the slang and however more raunchy the humor, seem derivative or stylized, self-consciously literary. Once the parallels with Twain are felt, it is hard not to consider the differences between Clay and Huck (e.g., the love interest, the movement toward community, Clay’s surliness) as conscious revisions of the prototype.

Perhaps the most significant of these differences, in Clay and in the narrative voice, is the absence of awe or wonder, that quality in Huck—the product of his innocence—that invests the river and his experiences on it with lyric feeling and mythic power. Throughout the novel, Clay exhibits a notable lack of affect; his feelings are oddly suspended or skewed by curiosity and inverted expectations. At the outset, in a scene that typifies his later encounters with death, Clay watches a coyote kill an old ewe but does not intervene, “knowing perfectly what was going to happen, but willing to freeze his very liver to see how” (21). The lamb’s dying is “so simple and . . . so quiet . . . that it scarcely seem[s] a finish to anything,” knocking “the pictorial stateliness of the preliminaries plumb in the head” (21, 22). Later, when Wade Shively is hung, “an oddly insignificant thing” brings the posse to the point of carrying out their plans, and Shively has “difficulty in getting it into his head that these were all final events in his life,” because “[f]or such an occasion there should have been more to them” (291). The event itself is “not as horrible as any of them had expected,” and Clay, though later “sick and ashamed” over his own responsibility for the hanging, is also “glad he had seen it” because of the indifference with which Shively faced his death, paradoxically described as “wild and unexpected” (293, 292). Even in the novel’s one love scene, it is not the passion that Clay remembers, not the lovemaking itself, but “every detail” of the natural bower in which it occurred:

The long willow leaves that moved not because of air-currents, but because they were alive, the wire grass going to seed in powder-brown tufts, the slate-blue doves, the red-winged blackbirds that nested in little caves in the dirt bank, and the white-and-black magpies tending their basketwork nests in the middle of the thorn-bushes. (280)

Despite the hint of sentimentality in this description (vital plants and nesting birds), Davis’s point is that they are not themselves expressive, not symbolic of some natural love-principle, not even significant except in the phenomenon of his remembering them because of “what had happened” (280).

The key element in these scenes is the strategy of reversal or inversion, which is characteristic of the work as a whole and linked both to his debunking reflex and the challenge of Pacific Northwest belatedness. In essence, Davis constructs his version of the West as a kind of anti-myth, a specific counter to popular, literary, or “false” versions of the West. Commenting elsewhere on the development of western literature, Davis argues that the pattern of reaching back “into a more colorful and manageable past” as an escape from “glaring and incongruous realities” needs to be altered: “Much of what seemed sordid and incongruous about those realities was a result of the colorfulness that had gone before; it is becoming clear now that they were all of one piece, and perhaps neither as colorful on one side nor as sordid on the other as they had seemed” (*Collected Essays* 21). His call is to revisit both the chaotic “new past” and the exotic “older one,” to explore the links between them in a conscious process of discovering what “the early writers ignored” about the new and what they “overlooked or threw away” in the old (*Collected Essays* 21–22).⁸ In a magazine sketch on Oregon, Davis relates an anecdote about his grandfather, who, “according to family tradition,” accidentally loaded his nightshirt into a shotgun and shot himself out of a hotel upper-window, disrupting a wedding celebration and causing several miscarriages, including one “denied heatedly” by the bride (30). This “uncolored incident” is presented to contrast with the “rip-roaring type of conventionalized fantasy” about the hotel involving “[s]hootings, big-money gambling,” and “dance-hall girls” (30, 31, 28, 29). Here again Davis constructs his narrative, a humorous “windy,” as an act of revision: “Tradition is what a country produces out of itself; illusion is what people bring into it from somewhere else” (*Collected Essays* 31).

At the outset of *Honey in the Horn*, the narrator announces the pattern of these reversals in the description of Preston Shively’s romantic novel *Wi-ne-mah: A Tale of Eagle Valley*, which is about

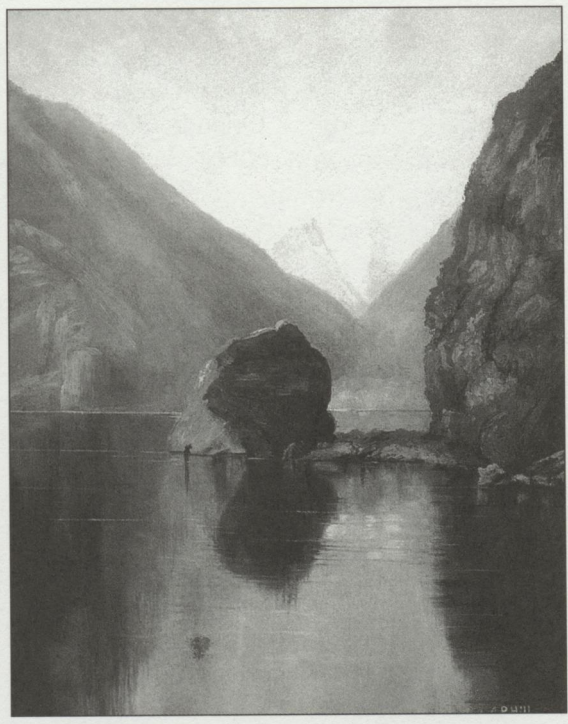
an Indian Chief’s daughter [who] ran off with a high-strung young warrior from a hostile tribe, and how, when the vengeful pursuers were closing in, she hove herself over a bluff to keep from being parted from the man of her choice. It was founded on solid statistics, too. An Indian woman in the early days had gone over a promontory on Little River, though some of the older Indians claimed she got drunk and fell over, and a few mountain men told it that her parents backed her over, not to prevent her marriage, but in an effort to hold her down while they washed her feet. (8)

While Davis does not always construct a specific literary illusion to knock down, the tone of the local legends at the end of this passage is fairly characteristic of his treatment of nearly every character in the work. The peace officer, Orlando Geary, is as intent on not missing a meal as he is on carrying out his duties. The two shepherders, Serphin Moss and Payette Simmons, are noted for their contrasting sexual outlets—mail-order brides versus prostitutes—and only devote themselves to hard work as part of their seemingly endless wrangling. Clay's guide through the middle portion of the novel, Clark Burdon, has had half his face blown away and carries out the plan to capture and hang Ward Shively, not out of any commitment to justice, public safety, or even Clay's welfare, but because he ignored Burdon's suggestions as to where he could camp. Shively himself is not much of an infamous outlaw, not only because he turns out to be innocent of the deaths that lead to his hanging, but also because he is inept at defying authority—a figure more pathetic, even sympathetic, than scurrilous. For each of the characters there seems to be a comic, off-beat, deflating "legend" of the type that "documents" Preston Shively's Indian romance.

Davis's treatment of Indians in the novel seems specifically intended to debunk any notion of them as noble savages or, more important in relation to other regionalist efforts of his day, as "folk" preserving ancient but still viable values. The unnamed Indian boy, for example, who was marked for death at birth by the stigma of having an extra finger on each hand but is rescued by his mother, becomes paradoxically fanatical about Indian beliefs "even to the by-law which had decreed his own extermination" (10). His faith in the creation god, Big Beaver, is depicted as part of his obsession with all things Indian and, therefore, as not deeply felt, and he is just as capable as Clay of wasting deer meat. To some extent, the negative portrayals are so recurrent that they might seem racist stereotyping, and yet it is the Indian boy who offers Clay the practical solution to rescuing the sheep in the opening scene, who outdoes Clay in handling the horse-drawn mowing-machine, who outcons the horse-trader in a race, and whose death is registered as one of the more poignant moments in the novel. If we compare him to other dark-skinned companions of White protagonists in American literature—Chingachgook, Queequeg, Jim, Tonto—he is neither consistently loyal, nor consistently stoic and noble, but rather a comparably flawed counterpart to the White protagonist. His appeal lies outside categories of Indian identity, even those he seeks for himself.

This essentially transgressive method of representation crosses gender boundaries as well. While Davis's emphasis on action, violence, risk

taking, physical skill, and emotional reserve (plus the narrator's frequent references to what a man must do) certainly suggests a traditionally masculinist version of the American West, his depiction of gender roles does not quite fit that formula. The values of civilization, for example, are made to seem as dubious here as in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but the civilizing agents are as often hard-bitten men as genteel women. The bonds between Clay's romantic interest, Luce, and her stepmother



Abby Williams Hill. *PEAKS OF HORSESHOE BASIN*. 1903. Oil. 19" x 16". Reprinted with permission from Ronald Fields.

and between the prostitutes and the freezing Indian women along the Columbia seem both more genuine and more admirable than those with the men in each case. The domesticity of the store owner and his wife, whom Clay meets on the way to the coast, is made to seem a prison, and yet the closest thing to an idyll in the novel occurs when Clay and Luce set up a home in the coastal range. Davis's characterization of Luce seems particularly designed to violate expected gender roles. She is capable of domesticity and sexuality and at different times subordinates herself to her father and to Clay, and yet she is presented as more capable than either. She can outshoot and outride Clay, and when they reestablish their relationship at the end, he has learned that she has committed two murders. Although her name suggests light, in Luce the dark and light ladies of romance—in a sense the masculine and the feminine as well—seem to merge, dissolving the categories themselves.

Davis's greater concerns, however, are with the patterns of economic and social development that dominate the homesteading era in eastern

Oregon in the first decade of the twentieth century. He has been searching for links to a colorful older past, which then become the universals by which his regionalist project transcends the limits of regionalism. Once again, his treatment of these patterns reflects the debunking reflex ubiquitous in the novel. His account of old Mr. and Mrs. Helm's four-thousand-acre wheat ranch is typical: what the Helms have acquired through "drudgery and crime and cruelty and torture of women and slavery of children" ends as nothing when both are dead and the ranch passes on to Mr. Helm's second wife and her "piously-given" husband, who "planned to build . . . a church to preach in" (328). Similarly, he mocks a group of families who flee civilization looking for equality of opportunity and, after gaining only the equality of poverty, pray "that old E. H. Harriman might be moved to build his railroad their way . . . and put civilization back around them again":

The land, by some mysterious impulse to be communicated by the railroad, was going to raise ton lots of everything—cattle, hogs, sheep, chickens, turkeys, geese, silver foxes, strawberries, gooseberries, apples, peaches, plums, garden-truck, flax, cut flowers. The climate would cure asthma, tuberculosis, rickets, melancholia, goiter. It was going to be a remarkable region. (299, 300)

The tone of sarcasm in this last statement suggests the precise terms of Davis's peculiarly Northwest, regional dilemma. Nothing in either the historical record, the evidence of his firsthand observation, or the realist genre in which he wrote will permit him to take seriously the spirit of boosterism in the farmers' outlook, and yet that spirit is central to the patterns of homestead development he describes and to the sense of regional newness or uniqueness inviting expression. The group of homesteaders joined by Clay and Luce is the most important example of this, typing the more general pattern. A motley collection of individuals to start with, their search for new beginnings is presented as a repeated process of aspiration, miscalculation, defeat, and movement in the direction of some new promise. "Changing locations," Davis observes, "had been a regular thing with the settlers" (204). But, to their self-appointed leader, Clark Burdon, they are "no longer merely a head-of-the-creek community on the move through restlessness, but an entire people, a whole division of society, gathering to tackle a new country rather than live as peons in an old one" (225–26). However noble this sounds, Davis points out that when the capitalists inevitably squeeze them out, they will move again, looking for new land where "they could become the ones who did the squeezing instead of the ones who got

squeezed" (226). When Davis describes this "not altogether . . . virtuously-purposed movement" as "a great one" and, because it is "happening now," one that Clay is "glad he [is] in," he seems to affirm both the historical significance and the essential spirit of optimism in the movement (226). As Clay observes near the end, "If enough of 'em [the homesteaders] was to take to the road all at once, they could stand this country on its head." Davis continues: "Once[,] enough of them had taken to the road all at once, and they had conquered half the continent" (379).

Behind this great movement, then, is essentially a recapitulation of the "pioneer spirit" that moved Europeans from New England and the eastern seaboard to the Midwest, then from the Midwest along the Oregon Trail to the Pacific Northwest, and as a recapitulation, its appeal to the imagination is inescapably "belated," a story many times told. There is a potential uniqueness in the reformulation of that spirit in the various homesteading enterprises involving turning the soil, digging wells, land speculation, town building, harvesting, herding, and so forth, but as Luce comes to recognize and the novel seems everywhere to confirm, settled prosperity, which is the object of their enterprise, "brought out everything in them that was childish and pompous and ridiculous and wasteful" (379). Even work itself, whose value Davis explores throughout, from the opening account of Clay's rescuing sheep to the closing depiction of the migrating communities' efforts to bring their wagons down a two-mile, steep trail, becomes measured by nothing that lasts.⁹ As he observes of Ten Per Cent Finley's old-fashioned "view of the difference between work and property," "He wouldn't give away a second-hand board because that was saleable, solid, permanent, and not subject to obsolescence or shrinkage. . . . But he would willingly give away three dollars' worth of his work, because that was something that went away from him whether he did anything with it or not" (270). Thus, on "the very last land on the continent, a place so rank and wild that even the United States hadn't been able to spare enough people to cultivate it and live in it," the pioneering spirit continues on as seemingly endless movement and activity in search of land or work that, for most, is "not to live, but to get rich" (181, 254). The only constant is change itself, which, as Davis observes, makes the region seem perpetually new: "The constant drifting away of second generations from this country, and the influx of new people from other states, may have something to do with its persistent sense of newness, of everything being done for the first time" (*Collected Essays* 27). And "Oregon is not new; . . . Its population turnover gives it an illusion of newness, that is all" (*Collected Essays* 29). Even the "freshness" that in "Status Rerum—Allegro Ma

Non Troppo" Davis insisted must become central to a serious Northwest literature remains elusive, if not illusory.

Honey in the Horn, then, is a paradoxical, curiously conflicted and self-baffled work. The aim of universalizing the local is made difficult by the practice, as much literary as personal, of nearly constant reversals, inversions, and deflations of universal categories and, even more, by the suspicion that what seems uniquely local is actually a pale copy of something prior and elsewhere: the sought-for universality is degraded to mere repetition. It is significant, I think, that while such major nineteenth- and early twentieth-century regionalists as Jewett, Chopin, Cather, Faulkner, and Austin wrote from literary or cultural perspectives outside their regions, Davis essentially did not. He was contemptuous of the literary parochialism he saw in the Northwest, but his critique of the region seems largely an internecine battle, a form of the parochialism he despises. The humor and candor of the novel are appealing, and its depiction of frontier energy lingering on as a form of restlessness and diminished, ephemeral enterprises can be seen to epitomize or critically distill America's history of economic and social development, of "westerling." This last effect, like the border-crossings of race and gender, is a somewhat ancillary product of the particular kind of literary project Davis undertook, suggesting the novel's own end-of-the-trail status: a belated regionalism from a belated region.

Hence, in this light, the lack of critical or popular interest in *Honey in the Horn*, and in Davis generally, seems ironically appropriate, a sign of the region's defining marginality. Despite the number of first-rate writers born or writing in the Pacific Northwest in the last half century and despite the considerable body of first-rate literature they have produced, a major (or canonical), distinctly regionalist work of Pacific Northwest fiction—comparable to *Country of the Pointed Firs*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *My Ántonia*, or *The Sound and the Fury*—has yet to appear. The example of Davis does not argue that such an achievement is impossible, but that for more than any other region in America a consciousness of limits in both geography and history conspires to enact the limits of the regionalist genre itself, even as the writer struggles to transcend them.



NOTES

1. In *The Problem of American Realism: The Cultural History of a Literary Idea*, Michael Davitt Bell argues that “realism,” although not definable as a genre or as a coherent literary movement or theory, was, nevertheless, an idea that a number of late nineteenth-century American writers “felt some need to embrace or resist” as they perceived it (5). Similarly, in *Honey in the Horn*, Davis can be seen wrestling with the particular “problem” of writing Pacific Northwest regionalism, as he perceived that project.

2. From “Puget Sound Country,” originally published in *Holiday* (May 1954), 98–105+, and reprinted in Davis’s *Collected Essays and Short Stories*, 83–103.

3. Originally published as “The Elusive Trail to the Old West” in *The New York Times Book Review* (Feb. 7, 1954), 1, 17, and reprinted as “Preface: A Look Around” in *Collected Essays*, 17–22.

4. From the outset of her study, Tompkins insists that the essential western landscape of both literature and film has definite geographic limits: “It is the American West, and not just any part of that but the West of the desert, of mountains and prairies, the West of Arizona, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, the Dakotas, and some parts of California” (4).

5. From “Oregon,” originally published in *Holiday* (June 1953), 34–47, and reprinted in Davis’s *Collected Essays*, 23–52.

6. Davis borrowed the title from the verse of a dance song, essentially a square-dance “call,” that he used as an epigraph to the novel:

“. . . He met her in the lane and he laid her on a board
And he played her up a tune called *Sugar in the Gourd*,
Sugar in the gourd, honey in the horn,
Balance to your partners, honey in the horn. . . .”

7. Flem Simmons is one of the mountain settlers whose “solitude had lost them . . . the habit, not of talking, but of listening” (105). He takes in Clay and the Indian boy after they have killed a large buck, and while feeding them rattles on with a series of “seven-year-itch style of bush-beating narrative[s]” (106). When he sends them to the barn to skin and cut up the deer, they find the carcass

dumped among piles of rusty scrap-iron, broken-down furniture, old nail-kegs and coffee-barrels and tin tobacco-signs, bottles of poultry-conditioner and horse medicine and whisker-reviver, old gun-barrels and shoes and hoops and wire bustles and pieces of buggy-harness, worn-out horseshoes and deer antlers and eagle wings, old catsup-bottles and lard-pails and baking-powder cans, miles of rusty wire and decayed rope binding the whole smear into one monumental unit of uselessness. (110)

Simmons considers this chaotic clutter “a mighty useful collection, because there was scarcely an article needed by man that couldn’t be found somewhere

in it," but its value, Davis suggests, like his endless, aimless storytelling has most to do with his mountain loneliness: "it did keep him entertained when there was nobody around to talk to" (110, 111).

8. Both in his Twayne biography and in his article "H. L. Davis: Viable Uses for the Past," Paul Bryant explores Davis's ideas about the West and the past in much greater depth. My concern here is with the element of conscious literary revisionism that I find central to his approach to these ideas.

9. In the period between the 1880s and World War I, the primary means of earning a living in the Northwest shifted from farming and shop-keeping to selling one's labor for wages, creating what Carlos Schwantes calls "a wage-worker's frontier" (i). In addition to particularly volatile labor disputes, this frontier was also characterized by a good deal of movement, workers going from job to job as projects were completed and new ones begun or as the season changed. Davis shows little interest in organized labor movements or in social protest, but he does depict some aspects of the "wageworker's frontier" when Clay becomes an itinerant semi-skilled laborer for a period after Luce leaves him.

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