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LOWRY CHARLES WIMBERLY AND THE RETREAT OF REGIONALISM

KATHLEEN A. BOARDMAN

"The New Regionalism," an essay by Lowry Charles Wimberly, appeared in the summer 1932 issue of *Prairie Schooner*, already well known as a midwestern literary magazine. Wimberly, an English professor at the University of Nebraska, had been the magazine's editor since its 1927 founding (and would continue in the post until 1956). As editor and teacher, he unfailingly encouraged potential writers to "leave trace of themselves" and their region by using local materials.¹

Nationally, literary regionalism was a hot topic in the 1930s. Important scholarly works on the subject appeared throughout the decade, and journals like *Southwest Review* and *Sewanee Review* published symposia on literary region-

alism. At the same time, historians and social scientists debated the merits of regionalism in their own fields, while in the visual arts a regional emphasis appeared in the work of painters like Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton. In 1934, the *Saturday Review of Literature* began a series of articles discussing the movement's pros and cons; the first was entitled, "The Boom in Regionalism."² In mid decade, the Federal Writers' Project began another regionally oriented endeavor: producing WPA guidebooks to the states, along with shorter works on folklore, ethnic communities, and local attractions. Wimberly himself had written extensively on regional subjects in his short stories and scholarly folklore studies. Thus, "The New Regionalism" should have been a promotional article for literary regionalism. It was not.

In "The New Regionalism" Wimberly asserts that the days of literary regionalism are numbered. Although the regional writing of the past may have depth and power, Wimberly declares he is more concerned with future writing. For him the most important test of regionalism is its potential for creative writers. Regionalists, he says, hold two assumptions: that America has "clearly defined cultural areas," and that

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[GPQ 11 (Summer 1991): 143-156]

artistic allegiance to one's "geographical or cultural habitat" allows writing to grow in "beauty, power, and authenticity." While few people would question the second assumption, he says, everyone should scrutinize the first, for if society is becoming homogeneous, then "there is little or no future for regional literature." In an impeccably logical argument, Wimberly considers facets of national culture—education, recreation, shopping patterns, technology—to show that Americans "are forswearing . . . allegiance to the local or provincial" and being pulled toward national conformity. Finally, he recommends that creative writers abandon regionalism:

Since regional differences, in modes of life and types of character, are fast disappearing, I, for one, should hesitate to encourage writers to look for authentic literary inspiration in life as it may be lived in this or that geographical region. . . . Writers should turn their attention to national problems and struggles. It is there that they will find the most significant literary material.³

In the middle of this well-ordered, practical essay, however, lies a bitter cry from the heart:

The expression "regional" has, as a matter of fact, opprobrious connotations, implying, as it often does, boorishness, provincial-mindedness, and vulgarity. It implies singularity and non-conformity, too, attitudes that cannot prevail against our militancy in behalf of sameness and conformity. Ours is a genius or knack for standardization, and though, paradoxically enough, we boast, on the one hand, of our individualism, we do our utmost, on the other, to cry down and efface those differences in mind and character that would make for this very individualism.⁴

Here, for a moment, Wimberly is not the Olympian editor or gentle teacher, giving advice to young writers. He is a disappointed individual viewing a recalcitrant culture. He is an embat-

tled writer who has pinned his hopes on regionalism as an ideal, a method, and a philosophy—only to find it of little help in a society bent on ridiculing the individual and enforcing standards of mediocrity. Wimberly's experience as a writer in such a society showed that the "New Regionalism" of the 1920s and 1930s was an unreliable ally in the struggle against standardization and conformity. This essay will explore the ways in which Wimberly's own writing of that period demonstrates the shortcomings of early twentieth-century literary regionalism.

The year 1932 was stressful but productive for Wimberly. In February he and a colleague were suspended from university teaching for the remainder of the year because they had been arrested at a party in the company of a man possessing liquor. The other professor took a job at a different university, but Wimberly stayed in Nebraska. Without a salary, but also without teaching duties, he wrote prolifically for the commercial magazines. He had begun publishing commercially a few years earlier, but now it was crucial for him to make his local materials work for him on the eastern market: he had a family to support. Well into 1934 his stories from this period were finding their way into magazines like *Harpers* and *American Mercury*.

Many of these stories and articles have regional subjects; Wimberly did not follow his own advice to prefer the national to the regional although he abandoned the sod house settings and grim plots that had been omnipresent in the *Prairie Schooner* of the late 1920s. His work with regional topics, characters, and settings illustrates several problems: 1) regionalism was not successfully encouraging or drawing on the vitality of folk materials; 2) a regional writer, particularly one based in the town or city, might gather many details about life in the surrounding countryside but still fail to write with empathy about the people; 3) regional materials could easily be exploited and standardized by eastern publishing; 4) regions, and particularly the Midwest, exerted their own pressures for conformity.

According to Phyllis Bentley, regional writ-

ing "depicts the life of the region in such a way that the reader is conscious of the characteristics which are unique to [it]." But American literary regionalists of different time periods and locales have differed in their assumptions, values, and goals. The literary regionalism popular from the 1920s to the 1940s emphasized the common people of the soil. One of its major purposes was reform, for regionalists of the South and West in particular felt their areas had been at the mercy of eastern establishments, both economically and artistically. This reformist, primarily rural, folk-oriented movement was dubbed the New Regionalism, to distinguish it from the local-color regionalism of the nineteenth century. B.A. Botkin, editor of *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany*, declared that the New Regionalism meant looking to the soil, the folk "roots" of the people, and the past in order to combat standardization, metropolitan decadence, and mechanical realism. Botkin declared that a "new heroic spirit—less obvious because it stays at home" would grow out of the struggle to take root and deal with local conflicts, such as "the battle of industrialism and the soil."⁵ By the time of World War II, this type of literary regionalism was on the wane, as Wimberly had predicted; it was dead by the 1950s, victim of interstate highways, television, jet airplanes, and a national preference for conformity. The early 1930s, however, saw the high point of "reformist" regionalism; at that time few committed regionalists were as pessimistic as Wimberly about its future.

Editors of several other literary magazines shared Wimberly's attachment to regionalism. Two magazines closely connected with *Prairie Schooner* were *Midland*, founded and edited by John T. Frederick, and *The Frontier*, edited at the University of Montana by H.G. Merriam. Frederick, who launched *Midland* in 1915, was a pioneering voice for literary regionalism in the Midwest; he encouraged many young midwestern writers and inspired several other little magazines, including *Prairie Schooner*. His editorial policy was based on his belief in a distinct midwestern regional consciousness and on his distaste for the literary control emanating from



FIG. 1. Lowry Charles Wimberly, 1955. Photograph courtesy of Journal-Star Printing Company, Lincoln, Nebraska.

New York. He urged serious writers to stay in their own regions, to write of "the native, natural and genuine, not the remote, external, and artificial." In 1930, when Frederick moved *Midland* from Iowa to Chicago, he changed its subtitle from "A Magazine of the Middle West" to "A National Literary Magazine." Wimberly interpreted this as a step away from regionalism, but Frederick said he merely wanted to recognize that *Midland* had always published material from all over the country.⁶

The Frontier began in 1920 as a campus literary magazine; when it became a quarterly national magazine in 1927, it placed even more emphasis on region, changing its subtitle to "A Magazine of the Northwest." Regular sections on early western history, northwest folklore, and oldtimers' outdoor experiences supplemented the poetry and fiction. One of the magazine's rare editorial statements announced its

"pioneer endeavor to gather indigenous Northwest material."⁷ Shortly after Wimberly's regionalism article appeared, *The Frontier* published several articles reaffirming the value of roots, outdoor life, and regionalism as alternatives to modern malaise.

During the early 1930s conversation about the evils of mechanization was common in intellectual circles. One slashing opponent of standardization was Edward J. O'Brien, widely known as the editor of *Best American Short Stories*, a yearly collection of current short fiction. O'Brien had already honored *Prairie Schooner* stories several times in his selections, and had praised the magazine in letters to Wimberly. On 21 May 1929 O'Brien wrote to Wimberly:

The quality of its stories, articles and poems is such that the *Prairie Schooner* ranks with the *Midland* and *Frontier*, and not more than one or two other American periodicals, as the most significant expression of American life which we possess. As such, it focuses the whole cultural life of a section of America. . . . I know that New York editors watch it carefully and English men of letters to whose attention I have called it find that it gives them a clearer picture of American life in its creative aspects than most American periodicals. . . . The American writers of the future are coming out of the West, and it seems a pity that they should lose touch with the West too soon. A magazine like yours helps them to keep in close touch with their environment and encourages them to talk to their own people.⁸

In his "Ox Cart" column in the Fall 1929 *Prairie Schooner*, Wimberly highly recommended O'Brien's most recent work, *The Dance of the Machines*. In extreme terms, this book portrays the struggle against standardization and warns that if humans do not "retain control of the machine and of ourselves," then "the machine and mechanistic structures shall make us their slaves." O'Brien's litany of enslaving forces includes movies, records, radio, corporations,

automobiles, advertising, propaganda, and "magazines and newspapers of large circulation." O'Brien denounces national magazine editors, who pressure writers into following mediocre formulas, thereby imposing conformity on the public as well. He suggests that literary regionalism and little magazines are important opponents of such forces; they help in the mission "to save the innocence of the young, and to encourage them whenever they show a creative inclination."⁹

Wimberly's review, as impassioned as O'Brien's critique, emphasizes modern society's impact upon writing and editing. He declares that "machine" civilization "tends to stifle the spirit of art . . . to war with the creative gift . . . standardization is the death of art!" Like O'Brien, he uses the language of battle ("war," "death," "assails") and relies on regional magazines to aid in the victory:

To mention in this connection the *Prairie Schooner*, and other regional magazines, we are glad to say that such periodicals are not dominated by machine patterns, that, indeed, their very life is a protest against that "robotism" which Mr. O'Brien so wisely and valiantly assails.¹⁰

For Wimberly the struggle against mindless uniformity was no passing fad. According to friends he often bemoaned the regularizing effects of science and the modern pressure to abandon belief in religion, ghosts, and superstitions. One of Wimberly's early short stories, "Tall and Straight" (1929), is a parable of standardization, set in a Nebraska sod house. The main character, Pierre, "humpbacked and pigeon-breasted," is an embittered, lonely exile from a world that expects all human beings to be tall and straight. He cries, "The world is full of straight, tall people, armies and armies of them."¹¹ The physical standard is not only omnipresent, it is mechanical, aggressive, and warlike; the norm forces the "deformed" man into abnormality. Protesting the regimentation that, in his opinion, affects everyone, Wimberly uses

the figure of the physically abnormal person; this character type reappears in many of his later stories.

His interest in the irregular, unusual, and out-of-the-way had led Wimberly to folklore studies in the 1920s. His Ph.D. dissertation studied death and burial customs recorded in traditional English and Scottish ballads. This work aroused Wimberly's interest in folk materials closer to home; it also reaffirmed his stance against the growing uniformity of the modern world. This dedicated interest in the past of a certain limited place and culture also coincides with Allen Tate's well-known principle of regionalism: regionalists should emphasize unity of place, moving back and forth in the time of a particular locale; thus they would combat the standard American unity in time and rootlessness in place. In other words regionalists were limited in place but not in time because they would study the past and future as well. "Provincials" (average misguided Americans) were limited in time though not in place: they cared only about the present.¹²

Many folk collections and studies came out of the Midwest in the 1930s; in Nebraska alone, late in the decade, the Federal Writers' Project assembled thirty pamphlets on local folklore. Many regionalists regarded this recording process as a first step, a groundwork for later, more polished literature. Nevertheless, Wimberly's work with folk songs and ballads suggested to him a first major shortcoming of regionalism as a source for new creative material: the traditional folk ways (of white Americans), with comparatively few generations to root themselves in midwestern soil, now seemed to be disappearing, unmourned by most of the population. Antiquarians could still collect plenty of old materials, but Wimberly had been unable to locate a vital, self-renewing folk tradition. A script he wrote for a 1926 radio program, "Folksongs from the Kentucky Mountains," already shows a defensive posture: "In our crowded cities the old songs stand little or no chance of surviving. They are compelled to make way for the latest song hit. . . . The modern craze for

novelty often leads us to cast aside much that was good and beautiful in the civilization of our fathers." For Wimberly folk songs have a strong nostalgic appeal: "We might well barter some of the strife and worry of today for the peace and quiet of the olden ballads," says Wimberly's script.¹³ But he recognizes that nostalgia and antiquarianism do not help the writer who wants to create something new from the materials of the past—not simply recapture the past.

In "Hard Times Singing" (1934), Wimberly applies his background as a folklorist to collecting songs of contemporary life in Nebraska but finds the sparse results disappointing; to round out his article, he must rely on older songs remembered from his own boyhood. Apparently, he says, "the depression—in the Corn Belt, at least—will run its course without having got itself into song." There is plenty of "singable matter" in ten-cent corn, three-cent hogs, and farm foreclosures, he continues, but no "rural bard" has come forward, "no rude poet of the prairies has cut loose with a good ballad on these hard and stirring times in the Mid-West." Regretfully Wimberly says that the idea of a living heritage of song coming down from pioneer times is "little more than the romancing of ballad students, most of them college dons," like himself.¹⁴

Wimberly's informal study was limited to song and based on definitions appropriate to the study of ancient British balladry. Despite the presence of many homegrown stories and jokes about the Depression, he maintained that the prairie lacked a strong, self-renewing folk tradition: "If recoverable at all in the Mid-West, the old songs come chiefly from the memories of people one or two generations removed from the soil."¹⁵ This uprooting, this distancing in time and place, meant, according to "The New Regionalism," that folklorists and periodicals like *Folk-say* could only "embalm" the old materials, not make them vital for the creative writer.

Regionalism, as Wimberly and most of his contemporaries knew it, emphasized rural settings and ignored mobility and city life. This was its second shortcoming. Wimberly's short

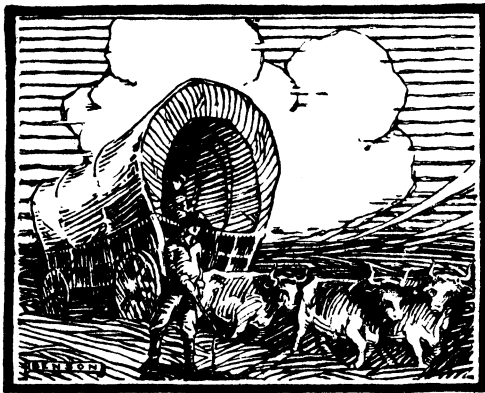


FIG. 2. Original masthead drawing for *Prairie Schooner* as it appeared during Wimberly's tenure. Reproduction courtesy of *Prairie Schooner*.

stories show that it was becoming more difficult for people like himself to write from experience of country materials. Wimberly had memories of his boyhood in the small-town South and knowledge of the midwestern countryside (particularly the rivers where he liked to fish). But he had not been raised on a farm, and as the son of a minister who moved periodically, he was without roots in the soil of any one particular place. The reminiscences of Rudolph Umland, a longtime friend, suggest that Wimberly felt certain divided regional loyalties: "Although he considered himself a Midwesterner and wanted to write about prairie yokels, the South always kept intruding." Umland says that although Wimberly was only nine when his family left Louisiana, he never got the South out of his blood. He liked to receive *Prairie Schooner* manuscripts from Southerners, who "seemed to have a genuine feeling for the dirt out of which they came."¹⁶

The mobility of Wimberly's early life made it difficult for him to satisfy Mary Austin's criterion: "The regionally interpretive book must not only be about the country; it must be of it, flower of its stalk and root." Although Wimberly was now firmly settled in the Midwest, he lived in the city of Lincoln; thus, it was difficult

for him to write "fiction which has come up through the land, shaped by the author's own adjustments to it."¹⁷

Wimberly attempted to make up for this disadvantage with a keen eye for detail and a journalist's persistent questioning. According to Umland, who was a farmer as well as a writer, Wimberly

asked questions in minute detail concerning farm activities such as harnessing a horse, putting flynets on the harness, greasing a wagon, castrating pigs, what farmers thought about while pulling the teats of cows. His mind was always on the prowl for information to use in some piece of fiction he was working on.¹⁸

Although Wimberly was an astute and tireless investigator, he had urged new writers to write from experience and not merely to embalm the past or rely on the knowledge of others. *Prairie Schooner* historian Paul Stewart emphasizes that Wimberly was "a strong advocate" of the doctrine "that literary creation can demonstrate conviction and authenticity only if it emerges from the artist's own experience."¹⁹ But Wimberly's own writing was beginning to show that the small town or city dweller—even within the region—was not necessarily suited from experience to write about farm or country life.

The result of writing without firsthand adult experience of the country can be seen in Wimberly's story "Idyl" (1932). One of several tales he wrote about farm people, "Idyl" portrays a bumpkin sadist tormenting a snake as he goads his boss and tries to impress the boss's "blowzy" wife. The story line is tight and intense, with "universal" themes of sex, jealousy, class hatred, and power. At least one reader attested to the "realism" of the details: in a 1932 letter to Wimberly, a California physician said that the boss and hired hand in "Idyl" were types he could remember from his Nebraska farm days.²⁰ Nevertheless, "Idyl" is about, rather than of, the land and people. Although it gives an accurate view of the surface, it is still distant from its subject. The narrator, a young farm hand,

observes and disapproves of all the action, but he is surprisingly inactive in the drama. The narrator's odd detachment enables him to describe setting, characters, and events in detail; but it also makes him an outsider who sees only surfaces and fails to participate in emotions. As a result the farmer, wife, and farm hand seem like puppets performing a repulsive but expectable ritual.

Although well trained to use factual detail, Wimberly did not see midwestern farm life from the inside. He had a boy's memories of the farm, but apparently he wanted to deal with adult feelings of desire and rivalry. Two years before "Idyl," Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings had criticized the "passion for detail and the odd patronizing condescension" of much writing about rural settings. She argued that "the producer of literature is not a reporter but a creator," whose concern should not be with "the superficial and external aspects, however engaging, of an actual people . . . [but] with the inner revelation of mankind." There was a place for regional writing: "The best writing is implicit with a profound harmony between the writer and his material, so that many of the greatest books of all time are regional books in which the author has used . . . a background that he loved and deeply understood."²¹ But it was beginning to appear that in the future few writers would have the necessary background to create a narrowly defined, rurally-based regional literature. Like Wimberly, more writers would be urban and mobile, with experience of several regions rather than lifelong rootedness in a native soil. Despite his wish to write of the common man of the earth, an earnest and "rooted" writing was not well suited to Wimberly, with his habits of detached observation and increasingly ironic sensibility. Perhaps the parameters of literary regionalism, as outlined by Austin and others, were too narrow to include him.

Roy W. Meyer's study of the twentieth century farm novel indicates that Wimberly's experience was not unusual. Most regional works during the "boom" of the farm novel, 1920 to 1945, were written and read by people no longer living on the farm. Working farmers and con-

firmed second-generation urbanites were neither interested in reading, nor capable of writing, rural fiction. But the many people who had left the farm early in the century and who had just acquired the leisure time for reading liked stories with accurate details of regional country life. This generation, with one foot in the rural world and one in the urban, was an anomalous and irreplaceable audience for rural writing.²² Many regional writers, too, were straddling both worlds, some less comfortably than others.

Another of Wimberly's "yokel" stories, "Love Affair" (1932), shows a third problem with certain uses of regional materials: portrayals that stereotype people of a region encourage outsiders to hold them in contempt. As John T. Frederick had noted a few years earlier, a regional outlook was not necessarily a defense against stereotyping: "The young writer who takes it as his aim to write sincerely and competently of American life as he knows it is met by the editorial demand that he distort characters, exaggerate situations, and develop a glib and blatant style."²³ Regional materials could thus be exploited by the standardizing forces of establishment magazines. Easterners and city dwellers might read Wimberly's stories simply to laugh at the provincial people and to create an oversimplified view of all the region's inhabitants.

Like "Idyl," "Love Affair" has an ironic title. On a river bank somewhere in the South or lower Midwest, a one-eyed white woman in a tight dress is trying to seduce a seedy, uninterested fisherman. From the opposite bank of the river, three blacks (one of them a hunchback) are watching, and they occasionally trade insults with the woman. The characters are caricatures; their differences from the social norm are presented condescendingly. Although Wimberly often portrayed disabled individuals, he generally treated them sympathetically, reserving his sardonic treatment for prosperous, pretentious academics and townspeople. Nevertheless, this story almost compelled Wimberly to exploit "rustics."

Spectacle and ridicule are treated explicitly in "Love Affair." The fisherman and the one-

eyed woman provide slapstick comedy for the blacks on the opposite bank; the blacks, in turn, with their laughing, singing, drinking, and yelling, furnish a minstrel show for the couple on the other side. The characters in the story stereotype one another. The hunchback yells "One-Eye" at the woman; she calls him a "broken-back buzzard."²⁴ It is easy to see these characters as grotesque representatives of a whole region full of hicks; it also becomes easy to take racial prejudice lightly, as "local color." The story suffers from stereotyping; it also shows awareness of the process.

In stories like "Idyl" and "Love Affair," Wimberly had treated the characters with realistic detail. Yet they were flat, often appearing ridiculous without being humorous. What had happened? Less than a year after the two stories were published, Wimberly marked a page of an article by Thomas H. Uzzell in his copy of *Writer's Digest*. Uzzell declares that too much realism can make characters not humanly individual but mechanical; he criticizes the notions that the writer should stay outside his story, avoid "influencing" his characters, and keep from communicating any feeling. Such ideas are part of an "objectivity cult" that aims "to reduce our literary art to mechanism."²⁵ To this way of thinking, the detailed realism associated with the New Regionalism of the 1920s and 1930s was only serving standardization and the machine.

And in the late 1920s and early 1930s, commercial publishing was demanding regional stories. They were so common—and so predictable—that parodies occasionally appeared.²⁶ The regional story of the early twentieth century was itself becoming a stereotype. The likelihood increased that so-called regional writers would exploit a land and people—perhaps unintentionally—by making them serve a preconceived metropolitan notion of what provincials were like. Rawlings warned, "Regional writing done because the author thinks it will be salable is a betrayal of the people of that region. Their speech and customs are turned inside out for the gaze of the curious.

They are held up naked, not as human beings, but as literary specimens."²⁷

Furthermore, if it was largely supported by eastern curiosity, the fad for regional writing could (and did) disappear as quickly as it had appeared. According to James R. Shortridge, when the nation wishes to emphasize wholesomeness, traditional virtues, and pastoral values, it becomes more interested in the Midwest, which provides a metaphor for those values. To Americans the "purity of the image" is more important than what is really happening in the lives of Midwesterners. Shortridge notes a loss of midwestern cultural vitality and self-esteem between the 1930s and 1950s, when a majority of Americans believed in progress and opportunity and thought these things could be found only on the coasts.²⁸

When literary people such as Wimberly spoke of "standardization," they were usually thinking about national forces suppressing local difference and individual creativity. But the region imposed its own brand of standardization. This was especially true of the Midwest, for one of the hallmarks of that region was conformity. Even if the Midwest were to take a stand against national homogeneity, the local constraints on the individual would be just as strong, just as destructive of creativity. This fourth problem was most distressing to Wimberly.

Critic Kenneth S. Davis, a Kansas resident, observed in 1949 that the midwestern belief in the individual paradoxically causes stronger community demands for conformity: "It is precisely because the Midwest holds the individual person in such esteem and lays such stress on individual rights and obligations that pressures develop which tend to crush individualism of mind and spirit into a dead level of conformity." "Boosterism," materialism, respectability, and "hostility to novelty or eccentricity"—the qualities laid bare in Sinclair Lewis's novels—are indeed part of the midwestern tradition, according to Davis. This "conformist individualism" arises partly from a historical sense of the East as a common enemy.²⁹ But such regimentation on the home front is no particular ad-

vantage to the creative artist who prefers not to be crushed by either local or national efforts at uniformity.

Wimberly blamed these local pressures on the pernicious influence of the town rather than on the common country people. He describes Lincoln, Nebraska, in "How a Dull Western City Takes on Class" (1934). The city he portrays has a passion for "sanctity," with "its Sunday blue laws, its expurgated movies and libraries, its clean alleys, and its general freedom from crime." Lincoln people resent Easterners who "'low-rate' the town with their notions about Indians, sod shanties, and outdoor plumbing." Even "blizzards and tornadoes have a way of passing the town up, as do famines, epidemics, and Communists." Thus Wimberly describes a regional city distinctive only in its blandness (he says it is different from Omaha, "something of a hell-hole," only fifty miles away), and oppressive within its own boundaries. It has tried to rid itself of all folk ways and local color. (Somewhat ironically, this essay—out of all Wimberly's regional writings—was retitled "The Best Known of All the Lincolns in the World" and republished twenty-three years later in a collection of Nebraska writing.)³⁰

The ideal environment for literary regionalists, in the opinion of many theorists of the 1930s, was a local community of independent-minded (not merely individualistic) persons who saw their "first responsibilities in local terms" and deeply understood the land and historical background. In the words of critic Helen Hill, these people would not seek the "support of the crowd" in large cities, and their ideas would not be "made up of a series of memberships in organized groups which [they could] . . . fall back upon for the official doctrine on this or that subject." Yet for most literary regionalists such a community remained a utopia: practical experience seemed to pit the lone individual against mass society. Hill feared that withdrawal from typical forms of American community would isolate each person at a "Walden Pond" and said regionalists should continue searching

for other alternatives: "The possibility of being a more or less complete person among other more or less complete persons is not . . . fully provided for by their theory as far as they have yet developed it."³¹

Wimberly saw the practical obstacles to a sense of creative, nonoppressive community. His experience with *Prairie Schooner* suggested that the Midwest lacked a critical mass of independent thinkers who would see their responsibility in local terms. Wimberly had done more than anyone else to establish a community of writers in Lincoln, as the testimonials of Umland, Mari Sandoz, and others show. His impact on young writers was well known. Jerre Mangione, in his history of the Federal Writers' Project, says that Wimberly's influence had much to do with the striking success of the FWP in Nebraska. Without a single prominent writer on its staff, the Nebraska project nevertheless published more books, on a per capita basis, than projects in any other state. Wimberly's recruiting help was crucial to the project, and "Wimberly's Boys" (a group of former students, including Loren Eiseley and Weldon Kees) formed the core of the staff in the main office. Two former students, J. Harris Gable and Rudolph Umland, capably headed the project during most of its years.³²

But without a local press or commercial magazine, serious writers would eventually have to go east anyway. Wimberly viewed their departure ungrudgingly but sadly: "All the good ones leave Lincoln." Umland adds that "Wimberly usually assumed a gloomy visage when speaking of the literary prospects of any writer living in the Midwest. He was thoroughly disillusioned, he said."³³

In the absence of a solid, permanent community of independent-minded writers, the lone regionalist in search of material and support would have to look to whoever was present locally. The prospect was discouraging. In the eyes of many artists, the countryside was full of bigotry and the towns were suffocated by hypocrisy. Of course any writer would have to deal with such negative aspects of life; but the lack

of a strong set of positive values and the absence of structures that allowed artists to be literary regionalists and still "be themselves" caused problems for creative individuals. In his history of *Midland*, Milton Reigelman suggests similar hesitations about that journal's editorial stance: "By counseling the writer to remain in his region and also to be wary of literary experimentation, *Midland's* policy might well have been stifling for some developing artists. One wonders, for instance, what might have become of Henry James had he been born in Illinois and taken this advice? Or of Eliot had he never left St. Louis?"³⁴

Many Wimberly stories from the late 1920s and early 1930s show just such struggles with local constraints. This conflict is a source of power in his work, but there is also a growing sense of entrapment in a stifling local community. "Tom Hardy" (1930) and "Censored" (1933) portray intolerable pressures placed upon individuals by religious groups. "The Happy Man" (1928) satirizes the community's insistence on constant cheerfulness. In "White Man's Town" a village lynches a man "suspected" of being black and instigates the murder of his white wife.³⁵

Regional conformity, national stereotyping, the writer's lack of rootedness, and the "folk's" indifference—these were four problems that Wimberly, the practicing writer, had experienced with the literary regionalism of his time and place. A few months after Wimberly's "New Regionalism" appeared, B.A. Botkin responded that its view of regionalism was too limited: "critics like Lowry C. Wimberly . . . look upon industrial standardization as death to regionalism (by which they mean the old provincial life, in the parochial sense)." Botkin, adjusting the position he had taken in *Folk-Say*, distinguished four types of literary regionalism, allowing for considerable overlap: "the Localist being strong in the frontier-conscious Northwest, the Naturist in the aboriginal Southwest, the Traditionalist in the agrarian South, and the Culturist in the metropolitan and cosmopolitan East." Noting the limitations of the first

three kinds of regionalism—they were excessively interested in the past, primitive, naive, sentimental, traditional, personal, and local—he extolled the fourth, "a regionalism, not simply of the past but of the present and of the future, not simply of separate but of interrelated regions." Such a regionalism would promote "intercourse and reciprocity" between equals, and contribute to a living culture.³⁶

Wimberly had not, as Botkin claimed, overlooked these possibilities: he had already been searching for living materials for creative writing, as well as attempting to inspire national respect and equal treatment for regional authors. He would not have been impressed with Botkin's "Culturist" regionalism, centered in the East—the old enemy. Emanating from the East, the "insistence on an interregional life" among equals must have sounded to Wimberly like more standardization. Even worse Botkin distinguished no midwestern brand of regionalism. On the contrary his article deplored "the bankruptcy of aggressive and abstract Americanism and industrialism, best typified by the Middle West, with its attempt to boom America."³⁷ That is, the Midwest contained the problem, not the solution.

Although pessimistic about the chances of literary regionalism in a relentlessly homogeneous culture, Wimberly liked the idea of a continued focus on the local soil. He kept this in mind as he continued to edit *Prairie Schooner*. Perhaps the younger authors would solve some of the problems he had encountered in his own writing. But the manuscripts arriving in the mail showed that his 1932 predictions had been correct: good regional writing was becoming scarce, and writers from outside the Midwest were submitting good manuscripts in increasing numbers. Paul Stewart notes that Wimberly's editorial policy after the early 1930s was characterized only by "eclecticism," and that the magazine "officially abandoned its regional pretensions" in 1940.³⁸ Wimberly was somewhat defensive about his refusal to come up with a strongly outlined editorial policy to replace the regional emphasis. He ignored suggestions that

he follow in the footsteps of other little magazines and adopt a policy insisting on proletarian or experimental writing. After what he had discovered from his own writing, it would hardly do to impose a narrow standard on other writers.

As an editor Wimberly did not reject literary regionalism—he just lost faith in it. Although he had experienced its shortcomings and apparently felt its demise to be inevitable, he sensed that by moving away from regionalism, the nation's literature would “lose both in depth and beauty.” He apparently did not mind that *Prairie Schooner* was still often considered a regional magazine, and he continued to encourage Nebraskans to write what they knew. According to Umland, “He'd much rather have kept regionalism. . . . There was some material here if it would only be developed.” Although Wimberly edited *Mid Country*, a midwestern anthology, in 1945, he was no longer committed to a philosophy of rootedness in the land, folk, and local history.³⁹ The literary regionalism he had promoted early in his career had proved too narrow to serve his real and lasting commitment to individual creativity, wherever it might be found.

Wimberly was first and foremost a practitioner: a writer and mentor of potential writers. Therefore he found it important to advise people on what worked rather than to champion a theoretical position. He would advise and encourage, not mold, writers. All he insisted on, he said, was a good story, well written. Although his criteria for a “good story” were somewhat conservative, *Prairie Schooner* did become eclectic in its offerings. Partly because of the flexibility born of Wimberly's disillusionment, *Prairie Schooner* survived, multivoiced, at a time when many other little magazines failed.

One important casualty was *Midland*, which had refused university funds and control, despite continuous financial need. The magazine began to falter as the Depression moved west; finally it was absorbed by *The Frontier* in 1933. Frederick had first offered to merge with *Prairie Schooner*, but Wimberly had had to refuse because he, too, found his publication short of

dependable funds from the university and from its readers. *The Frontier*, with university support, continued its regional emphasis until it ceased publication in 1939.

Survival became a key goal for Wimberly, as shown in his rejoinder to Weldon Kees's lament over the demise of all the lively, experimental little magazines. He reminds Kees of the good publications that have survived largely by avoiding experimentation and ideology:

And that they are not experimental is in their favor. The experimentalist always has an axe to grind—the left-wing axe, the agrarian axe, or some other kind of axe. And as a consequence, he is, nine times out of ten, a poser and a dishonest writer. . . . Their writing is ephemeral simply because there is no genuine experience or conviction behind it.⁴⁰

Perhaps “survival” was a key term for the midwestern region as a whole. The prairie schooner, traveling across the land but also adapted to it, carrying a hodgepodge of items from other places, was driven by sturdy people bent on surviving in any way they could. Perhaps the new stories of the Midwest would emphasize not rootedness but transience, eclecticism, and differing cultural forms. Country yokels and small-town prigs might be regional figures, but so were the restless people moving across the landscape. Grizzled homesteaders might be joined or replaced by urban or suburban families trying to establish an identity by coming to know the place and history in which they found themselves. Aspiring writers who came to *Prairie Schooner* for a few years and then moved on were part of the makeup of the region. This vision might have sustained Wimberly as editor, although he did not promote it as a new kind of literary regionalism more suited to the future.

As a writer Wimberly had an even more ambivalent relationship with regionalism. In the kind of world he wanted to live in, the “New Regionalism” of the 1920s should have worked.

But it was Wimberly's fate to live in a time of transition, when the movement toward national standardization seemed inexorable. As a result the folklorist in him began to be at odds with the creative writer; stories about farmers and the soil became less true to his own experience and to the reality of an increasingly mobile, urbanized region; his allegiance to the midlands subjected him to pressures of conformity. The regional writer's sense of rootedness in place, history, and community was supposed to counteract the alienation of modern mechanized life. But Wimberly the writer was as alienated as any member of the lost generation, even though he never became an "expatriate." According to Rudolph Umland, "Wimberly believed a writer had to be a lonely person. Writing, he said, was the loneliest of professions." Wimberly "had an uncanny sense for detecting ability in the work of young writers," because he was able to recognize a "quality of loneliness" in the writing.⁴¹

By training and inclination Wimberly found it easier to look at the past than at the future. His powers of prophecy were limited. Writing in the heyday of "New Regionalism," he did anticipate its downfall, which began at the time of World War II, and was complete by 1950. But Wimberly did not foresee that continued standardization, mobility, and population increase would paradoxically (by the 1970s) alleviate some of the problems he had encountered in regional writing. For example increased urban populations outside the East led eventually to a proliferation of commercial regional magazines that have taken a respectful stance toward local materials. Regional presses have grown. Seeking a sense of identity, highly mobile populations have often turned to family histories and ethnic and regional history and literature. A reaction against nationalization has led to increased interest in local writers. Although, as Fred Erisman points out, "the inexorable disappearance of regional distinctiveness" has indeed been occurring, this does not inevitably mean the end of all types of literary regionalism; instead, writers reconsider the abstract concept of "place," and accept a more complex

relationship between the geographical and cultural environment and the literature arising from it.⁴²

Wimberly saw regionalism (attached to the past) being defeated in a battle with standardization (the wave of the future); now, scholars like Richard Maxwell Brown and Fred Erisman emphasize an ongoing dialectic between past and present, between mythology and modernization, between old and new populations and values, between traditional identity and technological present—between the "classic" and the "counterclassic."⁴³ Literary regionalism as Wimberly and many of his contemporaries saw it was only half the dialectic, just part of the picture. Overworked, overcommitted to teaching, editing, and other responsibilities, Wimberly must have found it difficult to reflect on alternatives. As a result, when he wrote his 1932 essay, "mass society" did not represent to him a challenge to refine his approach to regionalism; it seemed instead an overpowering opponent. Thus it became difficult for him—as it did for others—to find a voice as a regional writer.

After the early thirties, as Wimberly once again became busy with teaching and editorial duties, his commercial writing slowed. Looking back at that period of immense productivity, he said that "The Program" (1932) was his favorite story. "He put a lot of himself . . . into that story," reports Umland. "He had done his share of speaking at academic meetings."⁴⁴ I believe that Wimberly also expressed in this story his frustration at the weakness and voicelessness he felt as a regional writer in the presence of a faceless standard.

"The Program" portrays the demise of Fred Albers, a timid provincial professor and an authority on "Joaquin Miller and the Frontier." (In the January, March, and May issues of 1932, *The Frontier* published letters of Joaquin Miller, edited by Beatrice Beebe. *Prairie Schooner* and *The Frontier* exchanged copies regularly. I believe that Wimberly saw one or more Miller installments and then made this sly reference to *The Frontier* in his story.) Albers is to read an academic paper at a conference two thousand

miles from home; he has "come into an alien land to make himself heard among strange people." He enters the lecture hall late and instinctively takes a back seat along the aisle to avoid "that feeling of being trapped." As he waits for his turn to speak, he thinks about his "folks" back in Pawson, who admire him as the brains of the family. He thinks also about his academic colleagues who bully him and tell him to "know your authorities." He fantasizes about throwing his paper out a train window:

The pages scattering over the landscape—one page, perhaps, blowing across a pasture and frightening a horse, others getting caught on the barbed-wire fences and flapping there, or some of them perhaps being sucked back under the train, the little black letters ground to nothingness against the black rail.⁴⁵

As the hour wears on, Albers becomes more and more nervous, alienated, and depressed, until the pressure is finally so great that he collapses. He dies before reading the paper, and the voice from the provinces, the authority on regionalism, is never heard.

NOTES

1. Rudolph Umland, "Lowry Wimberly and Others: Recollections of a Beerdrinker," *Prairie Schooner* 51 (1977): 18.

2. Important books on literary regionalism during the decade include Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore, *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938) and Carey McWilliams, *The New Regionalism in American Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Book Store, 1930). Among the symposia are Norman McLeod et al., "Regionalism: A Symposium," *Sewanee Review* 39 (1931): 456-83 and Mary Austin et al., "Points of View," *Southwest Review* 14 (1929): 474-94. The *Saturday Review of Literature* articles were "The Boom in Regionalism," *Saturday Review* 10 (April 1934): 606; Joseph E. Baker, "Four Arguments for Regionalism," *Saturday Review* 15 (28 November 1936): 3, 4, 14; Paul Robert Beath, "The Fallacies of Regionalism," *Saturday Review* 15 (ibid.): 3, 4, 14, 16. More recent overviews of literary regionalism can be found in the following articles: Benjamin T. Spencer, "Regionalism in American

Literature," in Merrill Jensen, ed., *Regionalism in America* (1951; rpt. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965); Richard Maxwell Brown, "The New Regionalism in America, 1970-1981," *Regionalism and the Pacific Northwest* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1983), pp. 37-96; Frederick C. Luebke, "Regionalism and the Great Plains," *Western Historical Quarterly* 15 (1984): 19-38; Fred Erisman, "The Changing Face of Western Literary Regionalism," *The Twentieth-Century West: Historical Interpretations* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), pp. 361-81.

3. According to *Prairie Schooner's* historian, "The New Regionalism" elaborated a theme Wimberly had first voiced in "Regional Literature," a paper delivered to the National Association of Teachers of English convention, 29 November 1930. (Paul Stewart, *The Prairie Schooner Story: A Little Magazine's First 25 Years* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955], p. 74); Lowry Charles Wimberly, "The New Regionalism," *Prairie Schooner* 6 (1932): 214-21; quotations pp. 216, 221.

4. Ibid., p. 217.

5. Phyllis Bentley, *The English Regional Novel* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1941), p. 7, quoted in Erisman, "Changing Face" (note 2 above), p. 362; Brown, "New Regionalism in America" (note 2 above), pp. 41-42; B.A. Botkin, ed., *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany*, vol. 1 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1929), p. 17. *Prairie Schooner* 6 (1932): 65-67 ran a positive review of *Folk-Say* written by Mari Sandoz, who was at that time one of the young Lincoln writers whom Wimberly was encouraging. Sandoz praised the New Regionalists for combating the standardization and "saccharization" of literature: "The hinterland is trading its individuality for cheap imitations of that which is the mediocre, the tawdry of our commercial centers. . . . Those who still believe in vigor and honesty in American literature will look to *Folk-Say* and the few regional magazines to preserve us from Sweetness and Light" (pp. 66-67). In this essay I will continue to use "New Regionalism" to refer to the literary movement that lasted from the 1920s to the 1940s. Richard Maxwell Brown (note 2 above) has renamed it the Old Regionalism to distinguish it from a new form of literary regionalism that arose in the 1970s. Nevertheless, the title of Wimberly's essay remains the same.

6. Milton Reigelman, *The Midland: A Venture in Literary Regionalism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1975), pp. 41-42; John T. Frederick, "Culture of Communities," in F.C. Bingham, ed., *Community Life in a Democracy* (Chicago, 1942), p. 185, quoted in Reigelman, pp. 45, 31.

7. "Endlessly the Covered Wagon," *The Frontier* 8 (1927): 3.

8. Edward J. O'Brien to Wimberly, 21 May 1929,

quoted in "Ox Cart," *Prairie Schooner* 3 (1929): 235-36.

9. Edward J. O'Brien, *The Dance of the Machines: The American Short Story and the Industrial Age* (New York: Macaulay, 1929), pp. 7, 16, 130, 258. The copy of *The Dance of the Machines* at the University of Nebraska's Love Memorial Library has this final passage bracketed in a bold style characteristic of Wimberly's handwriting. There is no indication that the copy ever belonged to Wimberly, so he may have marked the library copy.

10. Wimberly, "Ox Cart," *Prairie Schooner* 3 (1929): 302, 303.

11. Wimberly, "Tall and Straight," *Prairie Schooner* 3 (1929): 17-27; quotations pp. 17, 18, 20.

12. Allen Tate, "Regionalism and Sectionalism," *New Republic*, 23 December 1931, pp. 158-59.

13. Wimberly, "Folksongs from the Kentucky Mountains," radio script, 15 October 1926, Collection MS 465, Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS), Lincoln.

14. Wimberly, "Hard Times Singing," *American Mercury* 32 (1934): 197-202; quotation p. 197.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

16. "Looking Back at the Wimberly Years," unpublished ms., Heritage Room, Bennett Martin Public Library, Lincoln, Nebraska, p. 4.

17. Mary Austin, "Regionalism in American Fiction," *English Journal* 21 (1931): 97-107; quotations pp. 106, 101.

18. Umland, "Lowry Wimberly and Others" (note 1 above), p. 24.

19. Stewart, *Prairie Schooner Story* (note 3 above), p. 59.

20. Wimberly, "Idyl," *American Mercury* 26 (1932): 90-93; H.R. McMeekin to Wimberly, 16 May 1932, Collection MS 465, NSHS.

21. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, "Regional Literature in the South," *College English* 1 (1940): 381-89; quotations pp. 382, 385, 386.

22. Roy W. Meyer, *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 183-88.

23. John T. Frederick, Editorial, *Midland* 16 (1928): 369.

24. Wimberly, "Love Affair," *American Mercury* 26 (1932): 323-27; quotation p. 325.

25. Thomas H. Uzzell, "This Modern Realism," *Writer's Digest*, June 1933, p. 25. Wimberly's copy is preserved in collection MS 465, NSHS.

26. One of these parodies, "The Gloomy Mid-West Story," by "Mortimer L.F. Suet" (John Riddell, pseudonym for Corey Ford), appeared in *Vanity Fair* vol. 32 (April 1929), p. 95, and was reprinted by

O'Brien in *The Dance of the Machines* (note 9 above), p. 262.

27. Rawlings, "Regional Literature" (note 21 above), p. 384.

28. James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

29. Kenneth S. Davis, "East is East and Midwest is Midwest," *New York Times Magazine*, 20 November 1949, p. 60.

30. Wimberly, "How a Dull Western City Takes on Class," *American Mercury* 32 (1934): 364-68, quotations pp. 365, 368; reprinted as "The Best Known of All the Lincolns in the World," in Virginia Faulkner, ed., *Roundup: A Nebraska Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), pp. 248-53.

31. Helen Hill, "A Local Habitation," *Sewanee Review* 39 (1931): 464.

32. Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), pp. 109-116.

33. Umland, "More Beerdrinking with Wimberly," unpublished ms., Heritage Room, Bennett Martin Public Library, pp. 31-33.

34. Reigelman, *The Midland* (note 6 above), p. 71.

35. Wimberly, "Tom Hardy," *Forum* 84 (1930): 284-88; "Censored," *American Mercury* 29 (1933): 111-14; "The Happy Man," *Prairie Schooner* 2 (1928): 180-88; "White Man's Town," *Forum* 85 (1931): 166-71.

36. B.A. Botkin, "We Talk About Regionalism: North, East, South, West," *The Frontier* 13 (1933): 286-96; quotations pp. 294, 286, 292.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

38. Stewart, *Prairie Schooner Story* (note 3 above), pp. 79, 76.

39. Wimberly, "The New Regionalism" (note 3 above), p. 221; Umland, telephone interview with author, 25 October 1989; Lowry C. Wimberly, ed., *Mid Country* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1945).

40. Weldon Kees and Lowry C. Wimberly, "Magazine Chronicle," *Prairie Schooner* 13 (1939): 68.

41. Umland, "More Beerdrinking" (note 33 above), p. 19.

42. Erisman, "Changing Face" (note 2 above), pp. 376-77.

43. Brown, "New Regionalism" (note 2 above), pp. 71-72.

44. Umland, "More Beerdrinking" (note 33 above), p. 31.

45. Wimberly, "The Program," *Harper's Magazine* 165 (1932): 296-302; quotations pp. 299, 296, 298.