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Writing Out of the Region

I met Ken Sullivan a year or two after the publication of his article "Gradual Changes: Meredith Sue Willis and the New Appalachian Fiction" [*Appal*], 14:1, Fall 1986]. We were at the West Virginia Italian Heritage Festival, and I remember enjoying Ken's wit and conversation. He must have wondered why I didn't mention the essay: did he think I was pretending not to have read it, or did he assume I hadn't seen it? A New Yorker might have said, "Hey, did you run across that essay I wrote where I told you to move back to Appalachia? Whadja think?" A New Yorker might have said that, but not a man from Appalachia. Thus Sullivan's essay was only brought to my attention recently, four years after it was published.

The essay argues along the lines that excellent fiction is presently being written by Appalachian novelists, that the majority of these novelists are women of the middle and professional classes, and that these writers are moving away from the traditions of Appalachia in their writing. They are also, not incidentally and to the probable detriment of the region and their own work, moving away physically. Sullivan ends his essay with a bit of polemic, flattering to me, that says, "The Hillbilly Repatriation Act is in force, and you will be welcomed with open arms. No questions asked In other words, come home, Meredith Sue Willis. We need you here." What can I do with an invitation like that except grin with sheepish delight?

And yet rootlessness is a damning charge. Rejection of your own heritage is probably a psychological illness, certainly a sin against your ancestors. It also goes largely against the grain of late 20th-century America: we are living in a time in which most Americans (probably because of cultural homogenization) are eager to recognize their heritage. Many people have been working to preserve and rediscover the past. Witness all the genealogical activity and the ethnic pride evident in events like our West Virginia Italian Heritage Festival. In the forefront of this kind of work is Ken Sullivan himself with his excellent magazine of West Virginia traditional life, *Goldenseal*.

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This rediscovering and preservation of what came before is essential to our culture. It is also vital to us as individuals to know with some precision who we are, who we came from. The operative word here, however, is precision. My father worked in the mines—but between semesters of college. He respects the men who continued to work there; he is proud of the muscles he developed that summer with pick and shovel; he is very glad he chose to be a school teacher. Now and again, to liven up a cocktail party, I claim to be a coal miner's daughter, but once I have everyone's attention, I feel the pangs of honesty and qualify my claim.

My mother's father on the other hand really did spend much of his life in the mines, and the goal he and my grandmother set for themselves was to get their children through college. The family ran out of funds during the Great Depression, but even their youngest, my mother, worked and saved and put herself through. In the end all four children in that family and my father and his only sister became school teachers.

This solid rank of teachers on both sides of my family may explain more about my world view than anything else in my upbringing. We did not think of the world in terms of class struggle as a union organizer's family might have. Nor did I grow up in an atmosphere permeated by the unavoidable, inexorable rhythms of nature, as a farmer's child might have. No, at our table were regular, constant, practical discussions of teaching methods, school politics, and student and teacher personalities. We talked about a world in which young people are led out of ignorance, tested, given opportunities for self-improvement and enlightenment. My parents and their siblings emphasized that every student gets a fair chance in a well-managed classroom. I have come to question the accuracy of all this as a paradigm of the world as it is, but I remain an inveterate learner and teacher.

My parents, with their pedagogical model of the world, came from different ends of Appalachia—my father from the mountains of Virginia, my mother's people down from Pennsylvania—relatively recent immigrants, the Welsh Merediths and German Bernhardts. Cook's Mine, where my mother was born, was two hills over from a chemical factory. The houses in the immediate vicinity of that West Virginia factory had little yards in which no tree, no grass, no flower would grow until 30 and 40 years after the factory closed. The people who lived there and in Shinnston where both my parents eventually moved were as likely to be Italian or Spanish or Lebanese as Scotch-Irish. The real mountaineers I knew, I knew at a distance. They were more exotic to me than Italian-speaking grandmothers. They lived around Bold Camp in Wise County, Va., where my father was born and where my grandmother kept a store when she became a widow.

There were misty hollows there and people who only came as far down as my grandmother's store maybe once a month, and what I knew of those people I knew with an awareness of myself as an observer.

No one in my family whittled or picked banjo, although my grandmother pieced a lot of quilts before she became a storekeeper. She baked biscuits and pieced and canned every day for much of her life, and she stopped those activities as quickly as she could afford an electric blanket, as soon as the Kern's bread truck came over the mountain to her store. She put away her pastry cutter and flour sifter and never looked back. Is that a shame that she stopped quilting and baking daily biscuits? I imagine getting up and stoking the coal stove every morning and making those biscuits every morning. Not on Sundays, and not when I was in the mood, but every day, because that was what people ate. Fresh biscuits surely tasted better than cellophane-wrapped white bread, but I can see her point. I would have done the same.

I don't want to be misunderstood here: her quilts mean a great deal to me. And I wish I had known some great uncle or cousin who played the banjo. I certainly wish my people had been more articulate—in story, song, or whatever—about the economics and politics of their lives. Writing books is not the only activity that defines a culture.

And yet if you want histories and novels and analysis and life review, you have to accept that the writers are not going to be the same people who dig in the earth or under the earth 14 hours a day. You can take from those people an oral history—an excellent and important genre, but oral history is in the end a form invented by the collectors, not the tellers. To write your own book or memoir, you need the famous room-of-your-own, you need the typewriter or computer, the stacks of paper, and the sheer hours and energy it takes to write something of substantial length. You might draft a lyric as you dig in the garden. You could come up with a new twist to a ghost story or folk song in the very act of telling or singing. You cannot, however, write a book without support—money collected by past generations of your family from the excess labor of their employees; a bank account from your own labor; a gift from a wealthy friend; a grant from the taxes of your fellow citizens. And further, the moment you begin to write your own books, you are, consciously or not, in the tradition of the whole of literate humanity.

My ancestors didn't write books, but a few of them seemed to have loved books. My great-grandmother owned a copy of *Jane Eyre* that she lent to her daughter-in-law, my storekeeping grandmother. This pleases me. I claim as part of my heritage the folkways of the Appalachians, but I also claim the works of Charlotte Bronte and the King James Bible. I claim the difficult prophets who spoke the distant languages that stand behind the English Bible. And I claim the European pagans who became the British and the Irish and the Scotch-Irish and the Welsh and eventually moved on out of Europe and came to seize their fortune on this continent, for good or for bad.

Another part of my direct heritage is precisely that tradition of moving on. Morgan Willis, my grandfather, taught school with an eighth-grade

education for a while but saw the future in Consolidation Coal: he signed on as a store manager, a position that had him transferred from Coburn, Va., to Burdine, Ky., to Owings, W.Va., which was up the road from Shinnston. When I go to New York, to New Jersey, back to West Virginia, down to my aunt's in Tennessee, I am doing what my people have been doing at least for 200 years and perhaps longer, because who knows where all the Picts and the Scots and the Welsh and the others travelled in their wild old ways? From the Olduvai Gorge in East Africa? Even Appalachian traditional life has only been in these mountains for a few short hundred years.

I am thus troubled by Ken Sullivan's inclination in his essay "to rejoice in the [literary] bounty as it passes before us, relishing the [Lee] Smiths, [Jayne Anne] Phillipases, and Willises so long as they produce credible regional portraits, and to lose interest in the [Lisa] Althers as they range into other realms." Does this mean he would ban the books of Lev Tolstoy and George Eliot and Lady Murasaki Shikibu from his shelves? Does he suggest that a reader limit herself to what is most like herself? How narrow should this get? Should I only read books by women writers from central West Virginia who moved to the Northeast and married doctors and had sons? That includes—if I have my facts right—Jayne Anne Phillips and me, and with all due respect her books and mine don't satisfy my craving for literature.

This of course manhandles Ken Sullivan's argument, twists it out of shape, stretches it far beyond its logical conclusion. I am quite confident that his private, if not his professional, library ranges beyond West Virginia and Appalachia. Certainly he doesn't limit himself to books by men, although in his discussion of my work he puts an interesting emphasis on the male characters. Of course everyone views the world from some local point in space and time. If Ken Sullivan wants to approach my work through its male characters and its Appalachian settings, that is useful and enriching. The project of *Appalachian Journal* and *Goldenseal* and *Now and Then* is just such categorizing, focusing, analyzing, collecting, sifting, saving, and savoring.

Appalachia includes, as Ken Sullivan points out in the essay, people from outside Appalachia who have moved to Appalachia. And I know that *Goldenseal* welcomes the ethnic diversity of native West Virginia—the black West Virginians and Italian-American West Virginians as well as the traditionally traditional West Virginians with northern European roots. *Now and Then* had a recent issue centering on Appalachians in urban settings. A work like Anna Smuckler's lovely children's book *No Star Nights* is set in Weirton, W.Va., and would I'm sure "pass for downright exotic in east Tennessee" just as much as Sullivan says Lisa Alther's work would.

Ken Sullivan says he loses interest in Alther's books or presumably in mine or in anyone else's when they leave Appalachia. He wants writers who will make art in and of Appalachia's "beauty and solitude ... [and] hard realities." His yearning to have good novelists make art out of the places he knows and the material he is working to preserve is thoroughly understandable but finally beside the point. Authentic art comes from where

the artist actually is, which is often a place she or he has been led to by necessity or stumbled upon through a series of almost blind choices. You do not stand before your future as if you were a child in the K-Mart selecting from an array of plastic lunchboxes.

My life at this point includes frequent visits home but not a move back, in spite of the Hillbilly Repatriation Act. But I do have a quasi-scholarly interest of my own or at least a question to raise. What I am curious about is whether or not there is some special reality and perspective that Appalachia exports when its natives write about the world outside the region. A major part of even *The Dollmaker* is about an Appalachian effort to grasp the horrors and possibilities of the world *outside* Appalachia. Does Appalachia in any way inform Mary Lee Settle's work when it is set in Europe? In what way does the world we grew up in organize our experience? How does it shape my writing? I know as a small example that my home hills have predisposed me to uneasiness in open places. The canyons of Manhattan seem cozy to me compared to the ocean. Large crowds always make me want to scramble onto higher ground so I can get a perspective on what I am a part of.

At the same time I don't believe solitude is particularly natural to the mountains I knew. Industrial north-central West Virginia, Wise County, Va., and Scott County, Tenn., are thickly settled and richly interlocked with social relations. People know each other and make judgments on one another's behavior enthusiastically, almost as a duty. And yet they leave each other paradoxically alone. Religious sects are intolerant of each other but protestant enough to recognize that we are each private in our spiritual arrangements. This is a nice contradiction, a gleaming paradox, that strikes me as particularly *of* the mountains: secret interior spaces in the context of a dense social fabric.

The Appalachian towns I know also have social roles available for a few eccentrics: you could be the funeral lady or the town drunk. People still know you, even give you the time of day. There is a dignity in being Shinnston's town drunk that you could never find in a larger city. They train us where I grew up to give each individual a long hard look. We're suspicious but at the same time interested. You can know people at once as individuals *and* in their roles and contexts.

And what about the special romance of monogamous—even married!—love? Is that mountain-bred? Or withdrawal to the mountains for hunting herbs or game as a way of gaining perspective on human relations and the community? This Appalachian kind of withdrawal seems different in kind to me from the solitude that others seek for religious experience, for example. I wonder about the ways congregational singing influences a world view. A vision of people singing together is one of my underlying private myths. I know that in the process of writing, some of my greatest satisfaction comes from orchestrating a group scene. But more than that, the kind of novel I aspire to write is not about the angst of a single soul but a group portrait that is at once dynamic, conflicted, and—now and then—harmonious.

The fault of my 1985 novel *Only Great Changes* is in my opinion not that it takes Blair Ellen Morgan out of the mountains—the point at which

Ken Sullivan largely loses interest in it. The fault is rather that the first-person narrator dominates everything with her interior struggles, when what I really wanted was for her and her struggles to be a detail in a group portrait. Is it possible that here the attitudes of Appalachia—the proverbs warning not to bite off more than you can chew, not to get too big for your britches—worked against my accomplishment? Was I afraid of taking on many voices, types of people different from myself?

We members of regional and minority groups may claim too little for ourselves. It seems at least possible that what is peculiarly Appalachian in attitudes and perspectives can contribute something grand or subtle to literature and the history of ideas. We may ground our literature too much in the personal and strictly regional, without insisting on its wider applications. Witness how carefully I opened this essay with anecdotes and my own family background. I could have begun with a magisterial, “The problem with regionalism is that it tends to limit its own aspirations...” Perhaps we are falsely modest, we Appalachians, like all of us who learned early on that our region or gender or race or sexual preference is supposed to keep us in one place.

On the other hand, this modesty also represents one of the hardest bought and most vital truths of our century: we never melted in the pot. We are multiform and various. Standards of beauty and even morality vary from place to place and time to time. No religion is truly universal. And human beings of all genders, skin tones, age groups, and cultural backgrounds have the right and the ability to speak for themselves. Some of the voices are songs or crafts handed down through the generations. Some of the voices are found in the work of oral historians. Some of the voices are in the writings of the children of workers who moved into the middle classes. Ken Sullivan and I share a passionate belief in the deep value of these voices.

Let me end as I began, with myself in my place. I write as the child of school teachers of the middle class of an industrial small town in the Appalachian region. I write out of my further experience of urban American life, political upheaval, confrontations of cultures. I have trained myself as a writer by reading the classics of the English language and what has been translated into English. I write as one who lives the daily life of a woman with a husband, a child, a vegetable garden, a teaching schedule, civic responsibilities.

In my best moments, the major chords of the old hymns vibrate through my body, and I see as if I were standing on a hill in north-central West Virginia on a fall afternoon. I see houses and schools, a few head of cattle and a mine tippie. Coal trucks run along the roads; a freight train passes but doesn't stop. Children shout; an unmuffled motorcycle gears down for a hill.

It is my gift to see sometimes with the clarity and breadth of one who has stood on such a hill.