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Region, Place, and Resistance in Northern New England Writing

By KENT C. RYDEN

The storekeeper had few regrets about leaving Pennsylvania, but he was subject to a peculiar malaise. Back in Hazleton, he had nurtured his soul with a dream of running a country store in New England. Now he had the store. The dream, which had brought him some moments of ecstasy, was now an ache. He was homesick for a place in his mind that he had left. Back in Hazleton he had created the old-timers, a composite mental picture of people he’d read about in Yankee magazine and heard about from his cousin Richard, who had settled in Claremont, New Hampshire, and who, ironically, had returned to Hazleton, divorced and alcoholic, about the time the storekeeper had moved himself and his family to the store in Darby. That had been the first hint that the dream could not be brought forth in anything like its entirety. The full realization came down on him shortly after he took over the store. Most of the people in town were like people anywhere else. As he had sought to regard them as quaint, so they were seeking to regard him. Everybody is part of everybody else’s dream, he thought, and it’s when we get to know each other that we get let down. Still, he was settled here, and he would not return to Pennsylvania.

—Ernest Hebert, A Little More than Kin

Ernest Hebert’s fictional New Hampshire storekeeper has a great deal in common with many other people, past and present, who have visited, moved to, written about, or simply thought about New England: he has mistaken the popular image of the region for the reality experienced by its inhabitants. Not only has he uncritically accepted the Yankee magazine version of New England as a land of quiet small towns inhabited by colorful rustics, and not only has he allowed his life to be shaped through acting on the ideal that he held in his imagination, he has assigned a particular moral value to that dream landscape, finding in it a peace and fulfillment that he evidently cannot find in the coalfields of home. Through accumulated experience in a particular New England town, though, he learns that New Englanders are not uniquely exempt from history and from the travails of human existence, that his new home is as likely a place for one’s life to fall apart as any other, and so he comes to replace the enchanting mirage of region with the often jagged mundanities of place. He still comes to think of New Hampshire as home, but he learns to take it on its own terms, not to force it into the patterns that have taken hold in his head. As such, within the space of a single paragraph he enacts a cultural argument that animates a vital emerging thread in recent writings from the northern New England states of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. In the pages of their novels, stories, essays, and poems, writers like Ernest Hebert work to bring the particularities of place in the marginal communities of their subregion out from the shadows of the regional image as
a whole, deliberately exploding the storekeeper’s dream in favor of an image of New England that is both more realistic and more culturally inclusive. In writing, they not only critique the prevailing identities assigned to the region, inscribing a fuller cast of characters into New England literary history, they also question the limits of “region” itself as a cultural category of experience and identity. Don’t presume to tell New Englanders—or people in any region, for that matter—who they are, these writers say; they know very well who they are through the patterns and textures of the lives they have carved out in the landscapes of their immediate places.

As such, these writers work against a great deal of historical and cultural momentum. After all, the idea of “New England” seems fairly uncomplicated at first glance. Mention that phrase to most Americans, and they’ll likely be able to cobble together some version of a common set of ideas and images that serve to give the region a particular cultural, historical, and visual definition. In the popular mind, New England looks a certain way, marked by such things as quaint country stores, white village centers, steepled Congregational churches, venerable stone walls, and blazing fall foliage. It is populated by a certain group of people, largely the descendants of the region’s Puritan founders and of the stalwart Yankee farmers of earlier centuries. And it has witnessed and been shaped by certain fundamental threads of historical experience, notably the early arrival of English colonists and the nation-founding events of the American Revolution. This bundle of pictures and stories and characters amounts to a rather simple definition of regional identity, and yet it conjures an image that is instantly recognizable to those who encounter it, one that motivates many Americans as they plan their vacation trips, choose art for their walls, or contemplate their second careers or ideal retirement homes.

And yet, that very simplicity is precisely the point of regional identities, in New England or elsewhere, and as such it raises important questions of cultural power and politics. While they may have some basis in geographical, cultural, and historical fact, at the same time regions are homogenizing mental constructs, implying as they do that a certain patch of ground maintains enough internal consistency to justify being identified by a single place-name. One need not spend much time in New England at all to realize that the conventional defining image applies to only a small part of the region’s experience, demographics, and physical surface. Rather than being fundamentally bucolic and agrarian, New England was the most heavily industrialized part of the United States through the nineteenth century; while many of the region’s mills and factories have shut down in more recent years, New England has also become a center for the electronics and computer industries, and its old industrial cities and corridors—Lowell, Lawrence, Lewiston, Worcester, Fall River, Pawtucket, the Connecticut River Valley—remain major population centers, characterized increasingly by immigration from Eastern Europe, Africa, and South America. But this is by no means a recent phenomenon: from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, New England’s factories and fisheries were increasingly staffed by immigrants from Ireland,
Italy, Portugal, and other European countries, as well as from Quebec. In addition to its industrial character, then, from early on New England has also been a very multicultural, polyglot place. Given the great variety of experience and population and landscape that the region has seen in the past and present, it takes a great deal of mental legerdemain to be able to summarize and unify it all under the single name of “New England.” Such a regional label necessarily implies a great deal of homogeneity and internal uniformity in order for it to have any meaning at all, and to apply it to the six northeasternmost United States thus ignores more than it includes.

While they imply unity and equality of membership among the people who live in them, then, regions are exclusive by nature, meaningful for what they leave out as much as, or perhaps more than, for what they take in. As such, they are tools of cultural power. Regional identities don’t arise unbidden from the landscape, after all; they do not amount to a crystallization of the irreducible essence of a place, as natural and inevitable and uniformly experienced a part of the landscape as the weather. People invent them, they invent them for certain reasons, and some people have more ability to participate in that process of invention than others. The construction and maintenance of a particular regional identity is an ongoing exercise in cultural control, a claiming of conceptual ownership over a segment of the earth’s surface, an erasure of entire categories of human experience and presence from the landscape and the historic record. To promote and impose a certain definition of “New England”—or to acquiesce in its perceived reality, for that matter—is to imply that some people belong here and some don’t, some threads of historical narrative are significant and some are negligible, and that some pieces of the landscape are to be ignored, disdained, and imaginatively excised from view as one moves through space.

And, broadly speaking, these exclusions were fully intended in the case of the conventional New England image as described above; an awareness of what New England was became predicated upon an increasing awareness of what New England was not. As the region became more urbanized, industrialized, and characterized by (increasingly Roman Catholic) immigration in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, members of older New England families understood the cultural, political, and economic dominance that they exercised over their world to be under threat. In response, they did what they could to reinscribe an agrarian, Yankee, Protestant, premodern presence onto the regional landscape and the popular mind, staking their claim to social and cultural precedence and predominance, exercising their power to define New England on their terms and theirs alone. Writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe produced stories and novels that extolled the virtues of village life. The Colonial Revival period witnessed attempts to make the world over in the image of an imagined and purified colonial past, a world of crisp white houses, ennobling handcrafts, and virtuous Yankee ancestors. A nascent historic preservation movement saved and signposted the old homes of colonial farmers and historical notables, implying that the landscape was conceptually
their's and that latecomers were mere interlopers. In short, a particular conception of region was used as a cultural weapon, a way of expunging certain population groups and historical narratives from the physical and imaginative landscape, a means of homogenizing and simplifying an increasingly complex and distressing world so that it more perfectly resembled the world that certain groups wished they lived in, or believed themselves to live in. As is true of all regional identities, the emerging definition of New England cut through the messiness of real life on the ground in favor of an imagined ideal in the mind.

Region, then, ignores the rich textures of everyday life in favor of ideology, abstraction, and the tides of cultural politics. As such, it has little to do with the way in which people experience their worlds and derive a sense of identity from those worlds. Landscape construed as region, that is, bears no necessary resemblance to landscape construed as place. Seen not as a component part of a region, its significance deriving from its supposed participation in large simplified patterns, but as a discrete and small-scale place, a location gains its meaning and identity from its unique local particularities: the stories of individuals and families, the unremarkable rhythms and patterns of neighborhood work and economy, the locally memorable but regionally insignificant highlights of a strictly bounded history. Regions flatten and obscure local particularities and eccentricities; places are defined by those selfsame things. The defining stories of place can be found, rich and dense, in the urban landscapes that got written out of the New England image—the industrial workplace, the immigrant neighborhood—as well as in those parts of the countryside that don't fit the Colonial Revival image: the shabby homes of the rural poor, the trailer park, the hunting camp. And, of course, they can be found in the rest of New England as well: the kinds of stories and memories and patterns that define small-scale places in their residents’ minds are as present in Litchfield and Concord as in Lowell and Chicopee. Still, because its meanings well up from within rather than get imposed from without, place offers a potential point of resistance to region. The people who live in and create particular places can tell other stories, counter-stories perhaps, that often complicate and contradict the dominant regional narratives. Place, and the stories that emerge from and define place, can be a source of subversive energy that can blunt the homogenizing force of region, inscribing marginal places and people back onto the imaginative surface of the New England states.

As suggested above, this subversive, political use of place runs as a consistent thread through the work of many contemporary northern New England writers, a point that will be elucidated in the remainder of this essay. In his *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century*, Joseph A. Conforti has noted that the conceptual heart of the traditional New England has wandered northward, into Maine and New Hampshire and Vermont, over the course of the twentieth century: as the more southerly states continued to change economically and demographically, that is, the imaginative locus of the “real” New England...
migrated into the part of the region where the landscape and the ethnic makeup of the population most closely matched the ideal (263-64). But this act of latter-day imaginative imperialism was just as homogenizing, just as aggressive, and just as disempowering to those northern New Englanders who didn’t fit the idealized image as was the nineteenth-century Colonial Revival to the region’s new urban immigrants. Mill workers, the rural poor, and people of French-Canadian descent, regardless of the vitality of their communities’ social and cultural lives, were imaginatively elbowed out of conceptual citizenship in their own states. In response to the ongoing extension and perpetuation of dominant conceptions of New England regional identity, many northern New England writers have taken on the role of partisans of place, writing their communities firmly and vigorously into the regional literary imagination, in effect saying, These people are here too, and they have as much dignity and presence and right to be here as any other New Englander, if not more. In the face of the regional juggernaut, they elevate and celebrate the particulars of place, particularly those places on the geographical and social and cultural margins, attempting to make the New England of the mind and of the printed page more closely reflect the richness of the New England on the ground. Theirs is a deeply and pointedly political literature; in their pages they address what they see as the overt and covert injustice and imbalance in the idea of New England (and, implicitly, of regional identities in general) and attempt to redress the situation by trying to write a more fair and democratic literature in the service of a more fair and democratic regional life.

Ernest Hebert, along with Carolyn Chute, is probably the most self-aware of northern New England’s literary partisans of place. He has written five novels set in the fictional southwestern New Hampshire town of Darby, using the interactions of his characters to dramatize and comment on larger concerns about region, place, and identity. In an essay called “People of the Kinship,” which he appended to a 1993 combined edition of two of his Darby novels, A Little More than Kin (1982) and The Passion of Estelle Jordan, (1987), Hebert remarks explicitly on why he focuses his books on the kinds of people that he does, and how he finds it difficult to portray class in New England without simultaneously contemplating questions of regional identity; to him, the continued vitality of prevailing images of New England is a form of class oppression as well as a means of subsuming his own subregion under the larger New England regional umbrella, and so he casts his work as bringing both places and people back from the geographical and cultural margins. “When I started the Darby series,” he notes, “I wasn’t interested in maintaining the stereotypes of frugal Yankees and cracker barrel philosophers who said, ‘Pahk the cah’ and ‘Ayup.’ I strived to portray the townspeople as I believed them truly to be. I also deliberately put the emphasis on the neglected classes, what today would be called rural underclass and rural working class” (11). Hebert doesn’t simply portray these characters for their own sake, though, but consistently places them in conflict with other social groups in Darby, particularly the local gentry and the people whom he calls
"the Commuters," "my designation for the middle class, the people who seek to live a suburban life in the country," who find the idea of New England attractive but who don't recognize the actual place in which they live, "have little sense of or respect for the traditions of the town," and "believe themselves superior to just about everybody." "A war is on between Locals and Commuters for the soul of the Northern New England town," Hebert concludes, "and it's too early to predict the outcome" (13-14). In this light, Hebert's Darby novels read as reports of skirmishes in this war, as accounts of the lives of the besieged, and as a trenchant ongoing critique of the cultural politics of regional identity. What is the effect, he asks, of an image of New England which demands that certain New Englanders not exist?

In his last Darby novel, *Live Free or Die* (1990), Hebert provides a telling description of Center Darby Village, a key spot in the literal and imaginative landscape on which his cultural war is being fought. The village resembles a calendar picture: "the fine eighteenth- and nineteenth-century houses surrounding the common had never looked finer. The reason, in the language of the times, was gentrification. Educated, prosperous people from downcountry had moved into the neighborhood," and, armed with money and ideas and the fact that they "liked to fix things up," had made what they no doubt considered improvements to their properties. They had done so, though, in pursuit of a particular ideal, a visual and conceptual template that they were eager to adjust the landscape to match. "Unlike the natives, the new people believed in the idea of New England, even if the idea wasn't exactly true to the place, whereas the natives believed in the place and lacked any true idea of that place" (67). The new people were living most meaningfully in the regional image that they carried in their heads rather than in the everyday world that actually surrounded them, and worked hard to make reality fit the image. The natives, by contrast, lived their lives within the Darby landscape without trying to fit it into any larger system of imaginary constructs; to them, their place was simply home, the medium through which they unselfconsciously moved every day. The new people lived in "New England," not in a particular town in a particular New England state, and identified themselves with the bundle of images and meanings tied to that overarching geographical label. To the locals, on the other hand, it seems doubtful that "New England" is a meaningful concept at all.

Hebert's first Darby novel, *The Dogs of March* (1979), is a book-length enactment of this contrast in ways of seeing the New England countryside, one which also directly confronts the differences in social and cultural power implicit in that contrast. Hebert's symbolic actors are Howard Elman, a laid-off textile-mill foreman living in a ramshackle farmhouse surrounded by old cars and abandoned appliances, and Zoe Cutter, a wealthy New York widow who buys the property next to Howard's intending to refurbish it. She doesn't simply want to renovate her house to make it more liveable, though; she deliberately wants to make over her scruffy surroundings so that they more closely resemble the New England ideal. As an unhappy young girl in Kansas
City thirty years earlier, Zoe had discovered a picture of a New England vil-
lage in a copy of *National Geographic* magazine: “forested hills, fields that
rode the lower slopes, a tidy stone wall bordering a country lane, white
birches in the foreground like two angels, white church steeple just showing
behind maples in the background.” The image is described as though it is a
religious vision, and its saving perfection, its order and serenity, provides Zoe
with an imaginative refuge from the imperfect world in which she actually
lives. Her pursuit of the archetypal regional landscape and all it stands for
motivates her into adulthood as well: “Zoe had carried the picture of the vil-
lage in her mind all these years, ... and it was the picture in the mind, beauti-
ful and perfect, that fired her anger now as she surveyed the real fields and
woods through her binoculars” (59). The reality of place undermines the
regional tableau that Zoe would prefer to see and that she inhabits in imagina-
tion, chiefly because Howard Elman’s property stands squarely in her visual
field. The *National Geographic* picture has no room for tar paper, junked
automobiles, and bullet-pocked stoves and refrigerators. Something will have
to be done.

Zoe spends the book attempting to alter and edit the Darby landscape so
that it corresponds to the ideal regional template, focusing her efforts on get-
ting Howard off his land or at least forcing him to be the sort of person who,
in her mind, deserves to make his home in the New England landscape. She
tries to buy him out, making higher and higher offers which Howard keeps
refusing, and proposes a town ordinance requiring landowners to keep junked
cars screened from public view. In Zoe’s eyes, this improved landscape will
not be a real place at all, but an aesthetic and emotional refuge from the com-
plications that real places necessarily entail: as she says at the town meeting
in which she introduces her proposed ordinance, “All of us, whether our fami-
lies have lived here for generations or whether we’ve been here ten minutes,
know what Darby is: a massage for the eye and soul.” To her, “what must not
change is that first impression as you pull off the highway and drive in amidst
the fields, into town, ... past the meeting house, down the valley road and
along the brook, and into the deep woods” (193). Zoe’s is basically a touristic
sensibility, her perception of Darby a fundamentally static, visual, and people-
free one, and she wants to occupy the landscape on the same terms that
tourists do, seeing it as a place untouched by time and circumstance, a healing
alternative to Kansas City, New York, or wherever the tourist might happen to
come from.

Of course, Howard’s relationship to and perception of Darby is very differ-
ent. To be sure, he, like Zoe, has an aesthetic response to the landscape, but
Howard values the very same scene that Zoe despises because he has created
it through the everyday actions and textures of his life; with every addition to
the motley collection of things that surround his house, Howard inscribes
another segment of his story onto the land. Howard’s vision is introduced on
the novel’s first page: “Birches, a score of junk cars, a swing on the limb of a
giant maple, a bathtub in the garden, a gray barn, a house sided with fading
purple asphalt shingles, a washing machine riddled with bullet holes—to Howard, these things were all equal in beauty. He saw no ugliness on his property” (1-2). Howard is rooted in Darby in a way that Zoe could never understand; in fact, as an orphan shuttled through a series of foster homes, Howard invented his own last name of Elman in honor of the elm tree, “gripping the earth, springing forth from the earth, rising into the sky” (231). Like Zoe, he also gains solace from the Darby landscape, but in his case that comfort comes from the fact that his immediate surroundings are the only part of his world that he can control, and control is rapidly slipping away from Howard’s life: first he loses his job when the mill he works for is sold to a Southern company that immediately shuts it down, and then Zoe attempts to drive him from his property. But he refuses to leave; indeed, the very possibility of doing so makes no sense to him: “He was going to stay here, because he was what he was, like a rock or a bunch of berries” (141). Howard is as much a native species in this landscape as the birch trees that Zoe so loves. Staying in his house, working on his cars, building a place in the world that is uniquely his, that expresses his values and priorities—these feelings and actions are what motivate Howard as northern New England changes around him, with economic opportunities leaving and new people with money coming in. In the end, Howard doesn’t care about the regional ideal—indeed, gives no indication that he knows it exists—but only about the particularities of his immediate place. “He quit work and headed for the house, pausing in the driveway to scan his properties, a quick mental inventory—land, vehicles, house, rock wall, apple trees, fifty acres of blue sky above, and the tail of a cloud about to dissolve, the frozen field, the dry leaves beneath. All his” (142).

Through its central symbolic conflict between Howard and Zoe, then, The Dogs of March emerges as a discussion of the differing nature and competing claims of place and region in New England. In the end, though, it is an unequal competition: in the person of Zoe, the regional ideal is aligned with wealth and power, and whatever moral victories Howard can claim by the end of the book are partial at best. Howard resists as long as he can, at one point even planning to shoot Zoe and her real estate agent, but in the end he burns his house down and sells the property to Zoe, reserving a quarter of an acre for himself—for a garden, he tells her. Howard immediately moves a mobile home onto the land that remains to him, and “would have given anything to see the look on her face when she pulled the drapes to gaze at her hard-won view and there, conspicuous as a pig, was a trailer” (252). This is rather a sad and diminished triumph, though, and certainly less that what Howard would seem to deserve. By eschewing a David-and-Goliath ending to his representative regional drama, Hebert remains true to the reality of economic hardship that has hit many northern New England communities in recent years. He also imparts a keen political edge to his fiction. By couching the book’s action so clearly in terms of New England’s prevailing regional identity and of the power of that identity, by making his protagonist a victim of the regional ideal, Hebert emphasizes the social and cultural inequalities implicit in the
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image of New England and, by extension, any other region. Regions may seem like harmless cultural constructions, but when they become templates for action they can have unfortunate consequences.

Hebert is not alone in self-consciously using his fiction to advance an argument about the pitfalls of region and the priority of place. In a 1989 essay called “The Other Maine,” novelist Carolyn Chute rails angrily against “how the office of tourism has been advertising Maine lately” and “how the realtors have been selling Maine.” The images they use, in her estimation, bear no resemblance to the people she knows in the small town she lives in: contemplating the beautiful models in the ads, she says, “I couldn’t know those people, not even if I tried. They are untouchable, unknowable, artificial, dangerous. Dangerous because lately many Mainers are trying to be like the artificial people. Some actually believe that the artificial life is worth aspiring to.” Regardless of the truth of her allegations, Chute clearly values the Howard Elman-like landscapes of the rural New England working class, where “Lots of us have assorted useful stuff around our yards—tractors, tractor parts, truck tires, wooden skids, plastic industrial pails, rolled up chicken wire, treehouses (the lopsided kind made by kids), old cars, old appliances” (229). She fears the effects of codes and laws that will eliminate places like this and allow “the tourists and buyers [to] drive up and down the roads of Maine” and only “see a storybook New England” (231). Like Hebert, Chute does not see the New England image as benign or irrelevant, and certainly not as quaint or charming. She shares Hebert’s sense of its insidious nature, a threat that she too identifies in terms of class, power, and the corrosive effect of regional ideals on the perceived imperfections of place. The ideal and abstract region of the mind may be inhabited by equally “artificial” people, but places, in Chute’s view, are inhabited by real people, “some hands scarred by work, some not,” “mostly overweight or underweight—however it is they turned out” (228), who deserve to be respected and valued for who they are.

To a large extent, Chute’s novels, particularly The Beans of Egypt, Maine (1985), can be read as a fictional gloss on this cultural argument. The book caused something of a furor on its publication, and garnered a great deal of critical praise, because of its frank depiction of the Bean clan. Many family members live together in a decrepit trailer surrounded by just such a collection of “useful” objects as Chute describes in her essay. Poorly educated, groomed, and dressed, the Beans are variously violent, hard-drinking, criminal, and promiscuous—and yet Chute’s sympathies lie with them and their lot, and she implies that they are to be seen mainly as victims of the society and economy in which they live. Like Hebert, Chute wants to write into the regional literary record a representation of the community in which she lives, a community which has not often been acknowledged in depictions of New England. And her doing so accounted for much of the splash that the book created: like Peyton Place before it, perhaps, The Beans of Egypt, Maine stood deliberately and jarringly at odds with the image of New England that many readers carried in their heads, forcing them to complicate their under-
standing of the region and to think about it in new ways. The Bean family of Egypt, Maine, stands in implicit contrast with the Beans of Freeport, Maine—that is, the L.L. Bean company and the idealized images of Maine life that are an important part of its stock in trade. The idea of New England as a region with certain limited meanings is thus an important context for reading Chute’s novel, even if her cultural arguments are not as overt a part of the book’s plot and message as are Hebert’s in *The Dogs of March*. Still, the town of Egypt is under pressure from wealthy new people from outside, even if they are not as aggressive as Zoe Cutter: one of the book’s subplots focuses on the growing sympathy that emerges between March Goodspeed, a transplant from Massachusetts, and his neighbor Roberta Bean, while in a symbolic crucifixion near the book’s end the frustrated Beal Bean is killed by police while shooting out the windows of a large house recently built by a family of newcomers. The pressures described by Chute in her essay hover around both the lives of the Bean family and the novel that describes them, and Chute’s book takes on additional cultural and political resonance within that larger system of regional rhetoric and representation.

Many other contemporary northern New England writers join Hebert and Chute in depicting depressed, beaten-down places which are nonetheless rich in the details of life and landscape that go into their portrayals and in the respect that their chroniclers bear toward them: novelists like Richard Russo, Cathie Pelletier, and Howard Frank Mosher; poets like Donald Hall, Wesley McNair, and David Budbill. And, like Hebert and Chute, some of these writers are very deliberate in defending the myriad places of Northern England against the depredations, both physical and imaginative, that can follow in the wake of the regional image. In his long poem *The One Day*, for instance, Donald Hall comments acidly on “ways to get rich,” which include wiping out the historic layers and textures of the New England landscape and replacing that landscape with a simulacrum of itself, suitable for sale to rich folks from elsewhere:

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Buy fifty acres of pasture from the widower:  
Survey, cut a road, subdivide; bulldoze the unpainted  
barn, selling eighteenth-century beams with bark  
still on them; bulldoze foundation granite that oxen sledged;  
bulldoze stone walls set with lost skill; bulldoze the Cape  
the widower lived in; bulldoze his father’s seven-apple tree.  
Drag the trailer from the scraggly orchard to the dump:  

... Build huge  
centrally heated Colonial ranches—brick, stone, and wood  
confounded together—on pasture slopes that were white  
with clover, to block public view of Blue Mountain. (158-59)
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Even poets who don’t critique the New England image as explicitly as Hall does, though, still write against the persistent presence of that image, their focus on sharply realized, unglamorous scenes and places standing in quiet resistance to prevailing ideas about what New England is “supposed” to look
like and mean. That larger context makes these poets' achievement that much more urgent, that much more poignant. A poem like Wesley McNair's "Seeing Mercer, Maine," for example, focuses on just that: seeing this unprepossessing Maine town as if for the first time, picking it out of its obscuring regional context, taking it on its own terms instead of criticizing it for what it is not. Mercer is a small place where "the semis / go right on by" and where, "apart from summer, the big / event in town's the bog / water staggering down the falls." And yet the town has a thick layer of individual and collective meaning that the surface glance does not reveal: "Would it matter if I told you / people live here—the old / man from the coast who built / the lobster shack in a hayfield; / the couple with the sign / that says Cosmetics / and Landfill; the woman / so shy about her enlarged leg / she hangs her clothes / outdoors at night?" "What you see here in daytime," McNair remarks, "you'll need to adjust / your eyes for" (107-08)—and your mind as well, presumably, as you'll need to take in more about life and landscape in Maine than your imagination may have been prepared to accept.

In the end, this adjustment is what all these northern New England partisans of place are trying to accomplish with their writing. They explore the geographical and cultural margins of their region and then, explicitly or implicitly, use those explorations to question and critique the prevailing definitions of New England as well as the social and economic ramifications of those definitions. In their fiction and poetry, the often gritty details of place belie the comforting abstractions of region, and in portraying their subregion realistically they try to expand our definitions of what New England is, who New Englanders are, and why these questions even matter at all. Once the obscuring haze of region is removed, they demonstrate, an even richer world of place and meaning awaits our imaginative engagement. Perhaps a short story of Howard Frank Mosher's called "Alabama Jones" summarizes their argument and intent best of all. In this story, the title character, a singer in a traveling show, ends up in Vermont; she insists, however, that she must be in New Hampshire because the autumn scenery reminds her of a picture she saw as a child called "Autumn in the White Mountains." To her, one New England scene is interchangeable with any other, it seems, and its appeal lies solely in its colorful fall foliage. The story's narrator, however, knows differently. The colors "come once a year for less than a week and then they're gone. And even while they're here they aren't quite real" (12). The narrator has the chance to leave Vermont with Alabama's show, but silently declines, deciding to remain in the landscape that he knows and belongs in, however drab it might be, however distant it might stand in its unremarkable daily textures from the New England ideal: "Looking off down the valley, I could just make the dark bulk of the October hills. The sky above them was starless and I could not see the shapes of the mountains beyond. I felt the warm wind on my face and knew it would rain that night. In the morning the hills would be brown. In a week gray. Then white. There was nothing to say" (15). Places like this shouldn't need to be argued for or have their value explained, and
people who live in them might neither have the words or feel the need. By contrast, given the weight and implications of prevailing regional imagery, today’s writers of northern New England find themselves with a great deal to say, and reading their works inspires a closer, more inclusive, more democratic reading of New England life and landscape, story by story, town by town, place by place.

Works Cited


