TWO PIGS FROM MAINE: Reflections On Authenticity In Regional Literature

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reminds us that the question of "authenticity" is one of the irrepressible issues in American literary criticism. While Gates writes of authenticity in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender, authenticity of regional literature is an issue as well and is part of the growing interest in the idea of regionalism in American literature.

This interest is part of the appreciation of diverse cultural values within regions, perhaps in response to the homogenization of our national culture. Interest in the literature of Maine grew as part of this trend. Witness the publication of two major anthologies of Maine writing in the last several years. Within discussions of Maine writing generated by this increased interest, the question of authenticity remains an undercurrent. Just what is a "Maine writer?"

In many respects, this is a vexing question, one that causes a certain discomfort. Indeed, even posing the question can elicit a defensive response from some quarters. Margery Wilson, for example, says, "In short, I solved the problem of who's a Maine writer very handily. I ignored it." Yet, to fully understand regional literature as distinct from other writing, we must be able to define what constitutes any particular body of regional literature—a difficult task.

Approaches to answering the authenticity question break down along two axes—nativity and subject matter. On the one hand, there are writers born in Maine ("natives") or those born elsewhere (people "from away" in the vernacular of Maine). On the other hand, there are writers who write about Maine or those who write about everything else. Given this framework, four kinds of writers might be considered Maine writers.

First are the writers born in Maine, but whose subjects are based on something other than Maine. Stephen King fits in this category, and most thoughtful people would agree that he is not a Maine writer. The accident of his birth notwithstanding, his work generally does not depend on Maine for theme, plot, or inspiration. He is no more a Maine writer because he was born in Maine than, say, Isaac Asimov was a Russian writer simply because he was born in Russia.

Next are those born elsewhere who also write mostly about something other than Maine, but who happen to reside in Maine some part of
the time. Most of the contributors to the anthology *The Eloquent Edge* fall into this category. While the book represents itself as a collection of "fifteen Maine women writers," none of the authors are natives. Rather, all the contributors have lived some part of their lives in Maine. This residency aside, not much of the material in this particular book has to do with Maine. Despite the merits of these writers, it is odd to consider them Maine writers simply because they happen to reside in the state. The case made by the book's editors is a weak one: "Although we all now live in Maine, we have also lived in other locations for extended periods—locations which often provide settings for our poetry and prose. But in many cases we found that our work does owe something to the state we share."4 By analogy, simply because Hemingway lived temporarily in Cuba, few people would say this made him a Cuban writer.

Next to consider are those writers born elsewhere who come to Maine and draw inspiration for their work from the place or its people. This category includes people like Ben Ames Williams, Henry Beston, or E.B. White.

The final category is that of native writers for whom Maine is the central focus of their work. Examples here include Ruth Moore, Mary Ellen Chase, R.P.T. Coffin, and Cathie Pelletier.

It is these last two groups that require sustained consideration when discussing what constitutes a Maine writer. The question is, are both groups Maine writers? Is it enough to live in Maine and draw your inspiration from the place to be considered a Maine writer? Or do you need to be a "native?" The editors of the major anthologies of Maine literature have been inclusive in their definition. In Henry Beston's *White Pine and Blue Water: A State of Maine Reader*, a little more than half the contributors are natives.5 In the more recent *Maine Speaks: An Anthology of Maine Literature*, the balance shifts to contributors from away, but the split is still close to even.6

Despite this inclusiveness, among Maine natives there is a protetiveness of the "Maine" appellation. This protectiveness could be simple parochialism or it could reflect real differences in the culture of place, differences about which we might generalize and from which we might develop a definition of the Maine writer.

The question here is much like that addressed by Edward Ives in his paper "Maine Folklore and the Folklore of Maine: Some Reflections on the Maine Character and Down-East Humor." In considering the question of authenticity of Maine humor, Ives observes:

> It is my contention that the Maine stereotype, like any stereotype, is exoteric in origin; it did not grow as a self-image. . . . Rather it developed out of an "others" view; it is how an outside
group saw native Mainers, and it should be quite obvious by now that the outside group I have in mind as historically responsible for this stereotype is "summer people."  

Ives uses the term "summer people" in much the same way I have used the term "those from away." In Ives' view, there is a fundamental difference between the humor of natives and the humor about Maine seen from the perspective of summer people, such as that of the "Bert and I" stories.

These questions, whether about humor or literature, may be viewed as simply pigeon-holing, but the fact remains that it has mattered historically in Maine whether one was a native or from away. Furthermore, people certainly are affected by the place where they grow up; it contributes to how they see and react to the world. So it should not be surprising that those who grow up in Maine might see the world somewhat differently than those who grow up somewhere else, recognizing that "Maine" itself is a generalization of a number of more specific places. If the idea of a regional literature has any legitimacy, then it follows that the place which is the root of such a literature makes the work different in meaningful ways. In this sense, Maine as a theme in literature will be different depending on the life experiences of the writer. The issue is particularly sensitive in Maine, where those from away have not always been welcomed by natives, which is, in fact, part of their different experience.

Using Ives' terms, the folklore of northern New England is filled with examples of the problems confronted by those from away trying to fit in among recalcitrant natives. True residency (becoming a native) can seldom be achieved in rural Maine—or other New England communities, for that matter—for several generations. Those from away often feel a sense of isolation for years or decades, even though they wish to fit into the rural community. As Ives points out: "Even today as more and more summer people become permanent residents, the line remains reasonably clear, with regular Mainers on one side, the summer people on the other."  

The theme of relations between natives and those from away is explored in much of the Maine literature of the post-World War II era. In the novel Windswept, Mary Ellen Chase explores the impact on people and place of some of the earliest summer visitors who discovered the natural beauties of the Maine coast east of Acadia. The initial reaction of the natives was bewilderment. Why would anyone choose to settle on coastal land that grew poor potatoes and was buffeted by fairly severe weather? Many of these early in-migrants, as rural sociologists now call those from away, established comfortable relations with the local communities. If they did not become natives, they were seen neither as exploiters nor potential objects of exploitation.
The situation began to change early in the post-war period, when coastal Maine became more accessible by highway to an increasingly affluent population from away. Ruth Moore's second novel, *Spoonhandle*, provides one of the best accounts of the impact of growing interest in Maine, and its coastal property in particular, on a swelling prosperous middle class. The theme of mutual exploitation is central to this work, as those from away look to get one-up on the natives, and vice versa. Moore explores the impact of the interest in Maine on the community fabric and on the traditional roles played by natives. If we accept *Spoonhandle* as an excellent example of Maine literature, the question of what is a Maine writer can be addressed by way of a secondary question: Could this novel have been written by someone who was not a native? Gates calls this the blindfold test of authenticity.

In contemporary Maine literature, writers like Carolyn Chute or Cathie Pelletier have gone a step further and begun to explore the so-called underside of Maine life. While the image of Maine projected southward was traditionally that of the dramatic rock-bound coast and its colorful and taciturn folks or that of the hearty lumberjacks conquering the ancient forests, the newest Maine writers depict a side of Maine seldom seen by those from away, unless they stumble onto it by accident. This is the grinding rural poverty that marks both coastal and inland communities. There is a delicate balance to be struck in this literature between finding the worth, even nobility, of these people, and depicting their plight. The conflicts between these natives and those from away can be particularly bizarre since the individuals come from worlds so far apart.

There is a tendency to call this work the literature of the "real" Maine, the implication being that earlier Maine literature somehow ignored the reality of Maine life. While some of these authors' predecessors and travel magazines overly romanticized the state and its people, there exist plenty of examples of literature about "real" Maine life before these more recent writings came along. Certainly Ruth Moore's images in *The Weir, Spoonhandle*, and other works were realistic in every sense of the word. Even R.P.T. Coffin, whose literary reputation is solidly that of a romantic, wrote more often about the darker side of Maine life than most people realize. A good example is his first novel, *Red Sky in the Morning*.

The theme of conflict and misunderstanding between natives and those from away persists in the regional literature of Maine because it is an enduring undercurrent of Maine life, particularly in the small rural communities of the state. The symptoms may show themselves in other ways in the late twentieth century, such as in community fights over zoning ordinances or over expenditures for education, but the underlying conflict often boils down to the different worldviews of Maine natives and those from away. Perhaps Ives' analysis of humor provides a
structure for thinking about this question. Extending his framework to literature, the two groups would be identified as Maine writers and writers about Maine.

It is not my intention to survey all "Maine" literature to see if there is a meaningful difference as Ives found in humor. Rather, I would like to look at just two authors, E.B. White and R.P.T. Coffin, to see if there is some difference in their worldviews. To further simplify the question, I intend to look at just one theme explored by these two authors: pigs.

When one thinks of pigs, Maine is not the first place that comes to mind. Iowa, perhaps, is a place more associated with pigs. Some crustacean or maybe the moose more likely come to mind in reference to Maine. Even though pigs may play a small part in Maine farm life—being raised through the summer to provide country households with winter hams and bacon—the production of hogs on a commercial scale has never been much a part of the state’s economy. The pig is no icon for Maine or its way of life.

It is ironic, then, that a couple of stories about pigs could help us understand the authenticity of regional literature in Maine. Yet the contrast between Coffin’s "Pig Was Peak" and White’s "Death of a Pig" provides images that help us address the question of what is a Maine writer—for Coffin was the native and White was from away.13

Robert P. Tristram Coffin was born in Brunswick, Maine, and raised in its environs. His was a nineteenth-century farm and fishing family whose livelihood depended on wrestling food, fuel, and shelter from the often hostile environment of the Maine coast. Coffin was probably the first of his family to attend college, a lack of tradition for which he seemingly tried to compensate. His academic career was highly successful at Bowdoin, Princeton, and finally Oxford, where a Rhodes Scholarship allowed him to become an expert on seventeenth-century English prose. After a teaching stint at Wells College in Aurora, New York, Coffin settled back at Bowdoin College, where he pursued equally successful careers as professor of English, poet, essayist, and traveling lecturer. After he received the Pulitzer Prize for his volume of poems Strange Holiness, he worked to become an increasingly popular poet, eschewing the movements of twentieth-century American poetry and holding fast to rhythm, rhyme, story, and place: Maine.14

While E.B. White was Coffin’s contemporary, the two were worlds apart. White’s upbringing was middle class, and he summered in Maine as a child—typical of how those from away often come to settle in Maine permanently. White’s schooling was in English as well, at Cornell. But instead of an academic career, he pursued one of writing, primarily for the New Yorker magazine. In 1938, White moved to a Maine saltwater farm in Brooklin, the place from which came some of his best essays, including "Death of a Pig," which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in 1947.
"Death of a Pig" begins with what is arguably the single greatest line of twentieth-century American prose: "I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died at last, and I lived, and things might easily have gone the other way around and none left to do the accounting." White's essay continues with one startlingly crafted English phrase after another as he uses the incident of the pig as a metaphor for the precariousness of human existence.

He acknowledges the traditional agrarian activity involved in raising a pig:

The scheme of buying a spring pig in blossomtime, feeding it through summer and fall, and butchering it when the solid cold weather arrives, is a familiar scheme to me and follows an antique pattern. It is a tragedy enacted on most farms with perfect fidelity to the original script. The murder, being premeditated, is in the first degree but is quick and skillful, and the smoked bacon and ham provide a ceremonial ending whose fitness is seldom questioned.

But this essay is not about rural life, or even about pig raising to the point of butchering. The untimely demise of a pig, rather, becomes a vehicle for reflection. It is a means of trying to understand our own fragile nature. White knows his pig is ill when it stops eating, and a phone call to neighbors determines that the pig is "plugged up." The remedy is two ounces of castor oil and an enema if the medicine fails. But White understands that even accepting illness is sometimes a difficult step to take. Denial is how people often first deal with life's difficulties.

Unconsciously I held off, for an hour, the deed by which I would officially recognize the collapse of the performance of raising a pig; I wanted no interruption in the regularity of feeding, the steadiness of growth, the even succession of days. I wanted no interruption, wanted no oil, no deviation. I just wanted to keep on raising a pig, full meal after full meal, spring into summer into fall. I didn't even know whether there were two ounces of castor oil on the place.

White shares his feelings with us through the whole process of nursing the pig. Again, though, it is not pig nursing that is on his mind; it is his own fate reflected in the pig that dominates his thoughts. The first dose of castor oil and the first enema each fail its task, and he must cope with this failure.

At this point, although a depression had settled over me, I didn't suppose that I was going to lose my pig. From the lustiness of a healthy pig a man derives a feeling of personal
lustiness; the stuff that goes into the trough and is received with such enthusiasm is an earnest of some later feast of his own, and when this suddenly comes to an end and the food lies stale and untouched, souring in the sun, the pig's imbalance becomes the man's, vicariously, and life seems insecure, displaced, transitory.  

The more White does to save the unfortunate pig, the more he becomes wrapped up in the fate of the animal:

I discovered, though, that once having given a pig an enema there is no turning back, no chance of resuming one of life's more stereotyped roles. The pig's lot and mine were inextricably bound now, as though the rubber tube were the silver cord. From then until the time of his death I held the pig steadily in the bowl of my mind; the task of trying to deliver him from his misery became a strong obsession. His suffering soon became the embodiment of all earthly wretchedness.

White finally calls for professional advice, having discovered suspicious spots on the pig's back. The veterinarian feels that the spots could indicate erysipelas, a serious bacterial infection, if they are "deep hemorrhagic infarcts."

Deep hemorrhagic infarcts—the phrase began fastening its hooks in my head. I had assumed that there could be nothing much wrong with a pig during the months it was being groomed for murder; my confidence in the essential health and enduriance of pigs had been strong and deep, particularly in the health of pigs that belonged to me and that were part of my proud scheme. The awakening had been violent and I minded it all the more because I knew that what could be true of my pig could be true also of the rest of my tidy world.

Of course the pig dies and is interred, but we knew that was to happen. There is no surprise in this story, only reflection. Indeed, early on White tells us: "The loss we felt was not the loss of ham but the loss of pig. He had evidently become precious to me, not that he represented a distant nourishment in a hungry time, but that he had suffered in a suffering world."

Significantly for our topic, White never mentions Maine in this story. While it obviously occurs at his Brooklin farm, his references are to "country life" rather than to Maine life, a distinction that White may not have made in his own mind. In his collected essays, "Death of a Pig" is grouped with other stories in a section simply called "The Farm." The same anonymity of place holds true in the story of White's even more famous pig, Wilbur. Those familiar with the Blue Hill peninsula and the

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Blue Hill Fair can hardly fail to recognize much that is familiar in *Charlotte's Web.*

Ultimately, White tells us about ourselves, mostly through his own thoughts, but also in the behavior of the pig or even in that of Fred, his canine companion through this whole episode.

As my own spirits declined, along with the pig's, the spirits of my vile old dachshund rose. The frequency of our trips down the footpath through the orchard to the pigyard delighted him, although he suffers greatly from arthritis, moves with difficulty, and would be bedridden if he could find anyone willing to serve him meals on a tray.

Fred even offers to help administer the pig's first enema:

Once, when I lowered the bag to check the flow, he reached in and hurriedly drank a few mouthfuls of suds to test their potency. I have noticed that Fred will feverishly consume any substance that is associated with trouble—the bitter flavor is to his liking. When the bag was above reach, he concentrated on the pig and was everywhere at once, a tower of strength and inconvenience.

The pig and its place and Fred, then, are meant to help us reflect, to stimulate introspection. Maine is the stimulus for White, but he feels no compulsion to make us understand Maine or what it means as place. Contrasting this piece to Coffin's helps us address our questions of regional literature.

Coffin's "Pig Was Peak" first appeared in *Gourmet* in 1944 and was later reprinted in one of Coffin's several collections of essays, *Maine Doings.* The contrast in theme and tone between the two stories is obvious, and not simply because Coffin's pigs survive to the cool days of late fall, known as "pig sticking time," and Whites' pig did not.

The antique ritual in this story is the same White attempted to follow, but Coffin's approach is anything but reflective. While White assures us that the murder is premeditated, quick, and skillful, Coffin is compelled to describe the event:

A tense air of expectancy had been building up for days. The pigs had been poured out extra pailfuls of gruel and soured milk. They had been gorging themselves till they couldn’t run any more. They should have known that something was in the air. But pigs pay no attention to portents. They have no concept of the sinister. Our pigs kept right on stuffing themselves till they could barely grunt.
It is the uncles who come to the farm to do the premeditated deed, with "cold steel."

The men in long dusters came, right hand behind their backs, straddled over the fence into the pig-pen, and beckoned with their left hand. "Come, piggy, piggy! Nice piggy." They fairly oozed gentleness. . . . And piggy-piggy—the fool—came right up to the gentleman in the duster.

The next thing was lightning. It flashed out from behind the gentleman, and it hit the pig under the chin, where his neck—if he hadn't been greedy and a pig—should have been. It was quick and clean. But it was death. The pig bounced back on his hams, and he sat there dazed, trying to figure out what had happened to him. And all at once his life came out of him, red.

Squeals came out too. Squeals on squeals, slanting up faster and faster to such high trebles that the ear could record them no more, and they faded into silence.26

The pig sticking is just a prelude for Coffin and his family, a utilitarian necessity. The pig is one of the rewards of the fall season in the time before meat markets and refrigeration.

So heavy frosts and snowflakes meant fresh meat at last. We were willing to see leaves fall from the trees and flowers wither on the stalk, willing to see the year die, because we now had the huge roses of pigs spread wide open out in the woodshed. If the rose petals were gone, there were the rose petals of pork chops filling our house with fresh fragrance. It was a fair swop.27

"Pig Was Peak" is a story, after all, about eating. Its placement in Gourmet is fitting. After the pig sticking, the rest of the story is a celebration of the culinary delights of all parts of the pig. The first of these delights come immediately after the bristles are cleaned off with a knife:

The pig was pink once more, as he had been as a baby. And his eyes were squizzled shut in utter peace. Up he went on the tackle-and-fall by his heels again, and a wide-shouldered man with a blade like a Zulu spear, a man who knew every secret a pig had in him, slashed this way, slashed that, laid him wide open from snouted stem to pompous and plump stern, from ring on the nose to curlicue of his tail. Everything came tumbling out of him—blue, green, gray, brown works. The boys bugged their eyes. They had never guessed a pig had so much to him. The haslet—heart, liver, and company—was rushed to the house where the frying pan was hissing and waiting.

I suppose there is some meat in the world as tasty as a newly-butchered hog's liver. But I have never come across it. These
crescent moons of brown meat, fried in hot fat along with
bacon, and a few slivers of baby onion around them, eat like a
dream of falling in love come true.28

What follows is a parade of pig parts cooked and eaten in every
imaginable way, each better than both what came before and what was
to come after. There are spare ribs, pig’s tail, pig’s head, ears, and feet—
the trotters. Of course hams, bacon, and salt pork are put up in barrels
in the basement for sustenance throughout the long Maine winter.
Sausages, too, are strung about the pantry.

Coffin is willing to reveal the unusual as well in this story. One can
bake the head, but putting up hog’s-head cheese was preferable. Indeed,
a piece in Gourmet requires at least one recipe:

To start the cheese off, you cut off the pig’s ears, dig out his eyes.
Then you stew the head, and the cleaned ears, in a thick iron
kettle, in salted water, till the meat begins to fall from the bone.
Take all the meat off the bones and run it through your wooden
chopping-tray. Stir sage and a chopped, raw onion into the
meat-stock. Put your chopped meat back in. Let the whole
mess boil a few minutes more. Last, pour the whole business
into a shallow crock and set it high on the pantry shelf where
Uncle Asas cannot find it, and let it cool. Set it outside if Uncle
Asa isn’t around. The liquid solidifies as it cools. The gelatino-
ous substance cooked out of the bones in the stock holds all the
variegated tidbits of ear and jowl and cheek and cartilage
suspended in a firm jelly. You can slice it with a knife.29

Celebration, pure and simple, is central to Coffin’s story. There is
none of the angst or introspection of White here.

I like to paint the portrait of a happy man. He is the man who
sits in his house while the gray sky is spitting its first snow.
There is a smile all over the man’s face. For there is a pig cut
wide open to the world in his woodshed. There are sausages in
garlands strung all around the pantry. A barrel of newly salted
pork is right under the man’s broad foundations, in his cellar.
Hams are darkening and sweetening in his dark and sooty
chimney. The man leans back in glory. For under his ribs are
a dozen spare-ribs. Before them, there had been a dozen
crescents of fresh liver. That man will never mind taxes or
Uncle Asas or wars. Whatever comes, he will take all like a
philosopher. For he has had his hours of bliss, sitting outside
his own spare-ribs. He has ripened with his fat pigs at the ripe
end of the year!30

This is a far cry from White’s struggle to keep his pig alive. And had his
pig survived, somehow the feeling one gets from White is that the cold
autumn months would not have brought him this much unbridled pleasure from various parts of pig.

Perhaps it is too much to draw conclusions about authenticity in regional literature from just two stories by just two authors. The risk is that there is something idiosyncratic about White or Coffin, or even both of them. Indeed, there is nothing explicitly "Maine" in either of these stories. There is, however, much to suggest that the stories are representative of differences in the regional literature of Maine as long as the lines of difference are not drawn too sharply or applied too rigidly. Ives' analysis of regional humor can be extended to regional literature to understand this difference. In this context, it is fair to speak of Coffin as a Maine writer and of White as a writer about Maine.

There is a plainness in the Maine writer, Coffin. He will tell you the story and perhaps even embellish it a little. But, for the most part, figuring out what it means is up to you. It is not that he has not thought about the meanings of life, but he is reticent about suggesting that he has figured things out better than you have. It is important to Coffin that the reader understands the utilitarian value of the pig.

The writer about Maine, on the other hand, uses the place and what it offers in a broader context. Maine is more often a vehicle for interpretation. Since this writer is, by definition, from away, he is some kind of searcher. The Maine experience, as part of some kind of search, becomes a foil instead of an experience complete in and of itself. The pig is more than utilitarian potential or even a part of the way of life in Maine; rather, it is a means to human understanding.

If this distinction holds up across other writers and across time, and I think it does fairly well, then it gives the reader different reasons to engage with the works of different writers. To think about this place called Maine and what it may mean in larger contexts, read the works of "writers about Maine." They offer readers Maine and its people as a foil that reflects the larger world. To understand what is plainly and simply Maine as experience, read "Maine writers." As Floyd Watkins says in his book In Time and Place: Some Origins of American Fiction, "Country people are usually well mannered and communicative, but it takes a native to know a native." The Maine writer will give you experience and sense of place and will let you relate that experience and place to your own values.

Gates might not accept this conclusion fully, but it is in part consistent with his view of the blindfold test for authenticity.

The lesson of the literary blindfold test is not that our social identities don't matter. They do matter. And our histories, individual and collective, do affect what we wish to write and what we are able to write. But that relation is never one of fixed
determinism. No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world.32

I think the blindfold test for sorting Maine writers from writers about Maine succeeds more often than it fails. To see this point, return to Coffin and his deeply personal poem "This is My Country," part of which is carved into Harpswell slate over his final resting place. Just as we asked whether the novel Spoonhandle could have been written by someone who was not a native, we can ask whether these lines could have been written by anyone but a Maine writer:

This is my country, bitter as the sea,
Pungent with fir and bayberry . . .

These are my people, saving of emotion,
With their eyes dipped in the Winter ocean,
The lonely, patient ones, whose speech comes slow,
Whose bodies always lean towards the blow,
The enduring and the clean, tough and clear,
Who live where Winter is the word for year . . . 33

NOTES

6. See Maine Literature Project, Maine Speaks.
8. Ibid., 116.
15. White, "Death of a Pig," 17.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 18-19.
18. Ibid., 20.
19. Ibid., 21.
20. Ibid., 22.
21. Ibid., 18.
24. Ibid., 21.
26. Ibid., 216-217.
27. Ibid., 214.
28. Ibid., 218-223.
29. Ibid., 226-227.
30. Ibid., 228-229.