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Appalachian, Southern, Universal, Global: The Case of Fred Chappell*

In 1980, the *Student*, a magazine of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, published the reactions of nine distinguished southern authors to Walker Percy's statement, "The day of Southern regional writing is all gone." Eight of the nine writers did not agree with Percy, asserting in various ways that if authors want their works to become global, they should feed them from the larders of their own communities. Marion Montgomery, in the longest reply, claimed: "Good fiction or poetry is always 'regional' in a sense crucial to its art [...]" Then he continued:

For though we travel in this world, we travel from local to local, sometimes gaining brief vision of the transcendent and the timeless – *through* the local. [...] The relationship of the "timeless," the universal, to the regional is an intimate one, as any artist recognizes in his most lucid reflective moment.

(Montgomery, in: "Is Regional Writing Dead?": 30)

The writers who devoted much less space to their answers more or less echoed Montgomery's arguments. James Dickey, the poet and author

* This article was written within the project IGA_FF_2020_033, financed from the budget provided in 2020 by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports of the Czech Republic to Palacký University in Olomouc to support specific research activities at the university.

of *Deliverance*, said that “no universal truth ever came out of a void” and local circumstances, “one way or the other, must give rise to the general formulation” (Dickey, in: “Is Regional Writing Dead?”: 32). Andrew Lytle, the editor of the *Sewanee Review* and a contributor to *I’ll Take My Stand*, wrote: “No writing is done in a vacuum. [...] Any artifact, that is made by craft with the power of an art, must have a universal subject. But it can only be wrought by a craft which uses the regional manners and mores, not those of another region” (Lytle, in: “Is Regional Writing Dead?”: 32). George Garrett, a multitalented man of letters and a tireless defender outside the South of post-Faulknerian southern literature, crowned the whole discussion with the *bon mot* that the “only imaginable place where regionalism is gone for good is ... Heaven” (Garrett, in: “Is Regional Writing Dead?”: 34–35).

However, Garrett also pointed out that “there isn’t a country or nation state in the world that is not dividing into separate and distinct parts of itself” (Garrett, in: “Is Regional Writing Dead?”: 33). He drew readers’ minds to the fact that there are no homogeneous national and state cultures, and even the South, forged by its historical destiny, cannot be reduced to a single cultural Confederacy. Even though Garrett believed that southern literature did have some specific, if not unique features, such as, for example, “love of language [...] for its own sake; a love of story telling; a strong sense of blood kinship and family and, thus, of heritage, of history; a love of the land, of nature,” that is, features we can find in most literatures all around the world, by saying that, in general, “regions are becoming more distinct and, in many ways, more separate” (Garrett, in: “Is Regional Writing Dead?”: 33), he made a case not for the South as a whole but for those parts of the South that did not value its history and never considered it their own. The most prominent of such regions is Appalachia, which, even though it is geographically southern, a part of East Kentucky and the area from Morganton, North Carolina, through East Tennessee, has its own traditions, different from those of the other parts of the South, and closer to the traditions of other poor country regions both inside and outside the United States.

For Fred Chappell the different approach to history remained one of the crucial differences between southerners and Appalachians to the present day: while southerners try to trace their family lineage and are proud of their family

histories, Appalachians keep their ancestors alive through telling stories about them; in Appalachia there is an “absence of any kind of a historical perspective on family that they seem to have in the Deep South” (Hovis: 72). Another crucial difference between East Appalachia and the rest of the South is the ethnic makeup of its population: in Appalachia there have been very few African Americans, and therefore the focus in that region was always on social rather than racial issues.

Chappell grew up on a farm near the town of Canton, North Carolina, in Haywood County, “down at the lint end of the poverty pocket” (Sopko, Carr: 228), famous for its paper mill that polluted local waters and plagued the environment with its terrible smell. The people living there were, as he said in a 1972 interview, “mostly of Scotch-Irish descent, poor, bitter, Puritan; of course, very fine, very honest. Very hard, tough people because they have to be” (Sopko, Carr: 228). Chappell also stressed that there was “[a]lmost no black population in that part of the country whatsoever” (Sopko, Carr: 228), and in another, much later interview, he asserted: “I don’t think I’d met 12 black people before I came down here to Durham” (Easa: 58).

If among the topics that define southern literature the most prominent are slavery, segregation, and race conflicts, then Appalachian literature does have very little to do with it. Still, in a 1975 essay Fred Chappell showed how racial stereotypes creep into this area through a supposedly true story narrated from an African American protagonist’s point of view about the possibility of cashing in on racial stereotypes. Chappell is retelling the story of the father of an African American friend of his. The man, who became a rich real estate dealer, earned his first capital by buying and selling run-down farms near a North Carolina town in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, located among large farms belonging to white people. This was the man’s clever strategy:

Then he’d go over to a friend of his that had a horse and wagon and rent them from him and drive over to this shed behind his house. [...] He’d load up the wagon with old busted furniture, old busted down chairs and beat up tubs and everything. And then he had this big trunk full of old ragged clothes. Now he was awful careful that us children always had good clothes and always dressed up right for school, but every once in a while on a Saturday he’d gang up a big bunch of children in the neighborhood and dress us up in these tore-up old clothes and get us into the wagon with all that junk and drive down to his new

property. We wouldn't be there no more than five minutes sometimes, [...] before some white man would drive his car up and offer to buy the place from him. They couldn't stand the thought of any no-count niggers living there, you see, and my daddy would make right there on the spot up to maybe three times what he paid for the property.

(Chappell, 1975: 79)

The point is not only that this strategy could hardly work if there were more African Americans in this area who could afford to buy property. The main issue is that Chappell is, through the story, introducing the topic of race into Appalachian literature, bringing it closer to southern literature. It is also a universal story of a trickster who, through courage, cleverness, and wit, prospers in an unfriendly or even hostile environment.

Stories like that are close to the humor of the Old Southwest but also to frontier humor and, as John Lang wrote in a different context, while western North Carolina can hardly be considered a part of the Old Southwest, in the nineteenth century it “would certainly have been considered part of that frontier” (Lang: 205). Even though the former kind of humor belongs rather to southern literature and the latter to Appalachian literature, most of their common features are shared by both. According to Walter Blair, they include masculine “pastimes, such as hunting, fishing, gambling, drinking, and fighting,” rely on humor “derived from physical discomfort,” frequently resulting from practical jokes (Blair: 75), and use wild exaggeration in their tall tales, which offer “exuberant combinations of fact with outrageous fiction” (Blair: 71). As Lang points out, tall tales and frontier boasts often have an episodic structure and exploit “framed narratives to heighten comic or ironic incongruity” (Lang: 205). However, the clever mix of “the oral storytelling tradition of his native Appalachia and the literary tradition of Old Southwest humor” (Lang: 204) is, again, more universal than it seems to be, as both traditions draw from the same source, oral folk storytelling.

In the 1980s, several Appalachian writers, under different circumstances, pondered the relationship between the regional and the global. For example, Robert Morgan, in 1980 more a poet than a prose writer, admitted: “I feel at once a solitary individual, a citizen of the planet, American, a Southern mountaineer, in about that order” (Morgan, in: “Is Regional Writing Dead?": 36).

In the 1987 issue of the Lees McRea College (in Banner Elk, NC) literary magazine *Hemlocks and Balsams*, focused on Appalachia, Jim Wayne Miller, an Appalachian poet, contrasted culture with civilization, claiming that “it is in the nature of culture to be local, whereas civilization, spread by empire, is capable of being extended over vast geographical areas” (Miller: 6). While Appalachian writers “can be legitimately regional by helping to make local life at the periphery aware of itself,” part of this awareness, in Miller’s opinion, “would have to do with global issues” (Miller: 6).

In the same journal, Fred Chappell confirmed his Appalachian identity, starting his discussion on the skepticism of mountain people facing various government proposals and promises with “We Appalachians.” For Chappell, it is “the sleazy and savage global history” that “is overtaking his local one,” which increases the habit of locals of looking “a gift horse in the mouth” (Chappell, 1986–1987: 7–8). As early as 1983, he told Ian McDowell: “I generally tend to think of myself as an *Appalachian* writer rather than simply a southern one, for when you say ‘South’ people tend to think ‘Deep South’ and I’m not part of that tradition at all” (McDowell: 33; see also Hovis: 72). On the other hand, he said that the “Appalachian literary tradition simply isn’t strong enough to support a writer on his own” (McDowell: 33) and, one year later, in 1984, when he was writing about the short stories of James Still that are set in the fictitious Appalachian hamlet of Troublesome Creek, he confessed that he was not sure that he understands the author’s intentions, not being able to decide whether a scene in which mountain people bid farewell to a local family is compassionate, or simply cynical. At the same time, he was deeply suspicious about men who either have “no true sense of humor,” or whose humor is “merely an excuse for cruelty” (Chappell, 1984: 13). Here, Chappell sounds like an outsider: “It is difficult to understand and accept the inner values of a culture when they collide with the notions of the larger American culture about what is right and wrong” (Chappell, 1984: 12).

In his introduction to George Garrett and Paul Ruffin’s legendary anthology *That’s What I Like About the South and Other New Southern Stories for the Nineties* (1993), six years after his “We Appalachians” statement, Chappell again writes as a southerner rather than an Appalachian artist but what he says is valid for all the writers in the world: “For almost every situation a Southern

writer portrays in present time, there is a spoken or unspoken contrast with a past situation” (Chappell, 1993: 5). According to him, this is because the “world in present time is a sort of palimpsest, an overlay of images upon past time” (Chappell, 1993: 5). In my opinion, it was so not only in the present time of 1993 but in any present time. Chappell’s use of “past time” instead of “history” or “histories” confirms his strong conviction that the practice of looking at events through the past experience of individuals and communities is universal and global. Hence, in dealing with the past Appalachian writers stand basically in the same position as non-Appalachian southern writers, even though their approach to history is different – the “continuous awareness of history” made southern writers “avid for symbolism” (Chappell, 1993: 5), a feature that can hardly be found in Appalachian authors.

Two years later, in 1995, Chappell claimed in an interview: “I’m not a Southern writer, except in the largest sense. I’m an Appalachian (*sic*) writer like Lee Smith and Jane Steele (*sic*) and other people” (Easa: 58). When the interviewer, who had probably never heard of James Still, making a woman of him, asked Chappell for a reaffirmation of his statement, he received the following answer: “I reject it [the label ‘Southern writer’] when it is meant by very narrow critics to be only about Faulknerian themes, which is generally what they mean, which is kind of dumb; but Appalachia is part of the South and is part of the South in other ways, in its less good qualities, and yes, I’m a Southern writer” (Easa: 59). It becomes obvious that Chappell rejects the label but not the fact, even though “Faulknerian themes” is a category broad enough to cover most, if not all, southern topics – “Faulknerian style” would be much more fitting in this context.

Chappell’s most important statement on the status of Appalachian literature came in 1996, in the volume *The Future of Southern Letters*. His contribution to this seminal book is an interview with a non-existent Appalachian writer named Wil (with one “l”) Hickson, a prominent member of an equally fictitious movement called the Hellbillies Group. The interview takes place in what was then the near future, in 2001. The main topic is not only the relationship between Appalachian literature, Appal Lit, and southern literature, Grit Lit, but also the global extensions of both. Through Wil Hickson, Fred Chappell identifies three stages in viewing Appalachian literature: in the first

stage it was seen as a part of southern literature; then as a totally independent entity, as a unique literature “connected to no other literature in the world, [...] an absolutely independent tradition,” as if written “by Martians;” and in the third stage as literature

connected to all other literatures in the same way that any legitimate regional literature, whether ethnic, nationalist, or subnationalist, is connected to every other literature. It wasn't hard to point out the similarity of themes in Appal Lit to themes in novels and poems and dramas in Estonian and Latvian and Albanian and Peruvian and Korean literature. [...] To tell the truth, we simply went to the Stith Thompson Folk Motif Index and brought that classification to bear on written literature.

(Chappell, 1996: 58)

While the statement may look like an exaggeration, upon closer scrutiny it is not, even though it does simplify the matter. It is because each literature and narrative tradition, besides using universal motifs and themes, focuses on topics that best capture the life of local communities: countries with no sea will not abound in stories on the lives of sea fishermen, and regions with no desert will hardly celebrate an oasis. Chappell's invented interviewee voices an opinion that one of the dominant themes of Appalachian literature is “the impact of industrialism on an agriculturally based society” (Chappell, 1996: 59), a theme characteristic of writers from this region but also, at least in a specific historical period, that is, from about the mid-nineteenth century up to the present day, a major theme of world literature. A more-than-subtle irony behind this statement is that the supposedly specific Appalachian theme also led, in 1930, to the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, the manifesto of the southern Agrarians.

Now it seems that whenever we find a relevant and specific characteristic of a local or regional literature, including Appalachian literature and southern literature, we come to the conclusion that what makes it relevant and specific is, more or less, universal and can be found elsewhere in the world. But Chappell does name one exception: literature that deals with political or ideological issues of the day. In his opinion, the universality of such works is limited unless the authors use the form of allegory, fable, or parable; if they merely try to faithfully record everyday life, “their expiration dates are showing clearly stamped”

(Chappell, 1999: 231). As Chappell sums up: “Nothing in literature dates so quickly as a specific Cause, no matter how just or urgent it may seem at the time of writing” (Chappell, 1999: 229). For Appalachian literature it means that the works that provide realistic descriptions of, for example, the decay of the coal-mining industry in East Kentucky and offer sociological probes into the poverty of local citizens can constitute the “real” Appalachian fiction but one that no one reads as fiction but rather as documentation.

If authors add some ingredients that make their works more palatable – imagination, humor, or figurative language – the narrative keeps its regional flair but at the same time becomes more universal, more global. In a 1992 interview Chappell goes so far as to claim that Appalachian literature is “distinct from Southern literature mostly because the economic and social conditions are different in the two areas” (Palmer: 406), giving as examples, beside the absence of African Americans in this area, the greater impact of technology and industrialization on nature and different transportation problems. Then, realizing that the differences he just listed are only in subject matter, he adds that what is true of Appalachia can be found in “all kinds of places all over the United States” (Palmer: 406). If there is a geographical split (that may imply a cultural split as well), it is “urban/rural, not North/South or East coast/West coast” (Palmer: 406). In the same interview Chappell claims that writers from the mountains have a “different type of self-consciousness” and they “take cognizance of the fact that they are mountain people and try to make something of it,” immediately adding, nevertheless, “but that doesn’t mean they’re entirely different from the rest of the human race” (Palmer: 406).

Chappell himself made several attempts at writing narratives that would both speak for Appalachia and at the same time have much broader, universal appeal, after he voiced in a 1980 interview: “I have not done my area of the country justice” (Ragan: 114). The prime example is his Kirkman tetralogy – *I Am One of You Forever* (1985), *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (1989), *Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You* (1996), and *Look Back All the Green Valley* (1999) – that was conceived as a prose parallel to *Midquest: A Poem* (1981), a four-volume poetic sequence he conceived one day after his thirty-fifth birthday, the age at which Dante Alighieri started his *Divine Comedy*. As he admitted after the publication of the fourth and final volume, he focused on

“large themes,” especially “the passing of an Appalachian way of life, the unity and strength of family, the effect of industrialism upon landscape and cultural tradition, and the interaction between imagination and empirical event” (Chappell, 2000: 236). These four themes are just as important in Appalachia as anywhere else in the world, and if in the first theme “Appalachian” is replaced with an adjective referring to another region, the statement will not lose its validity; if any of the themes is pursued by a good writer, it contributes to the universal appeal of a narrative.

Chappell’s pronouncement does not contain another important aspect playing a substantial role in the ability of narratives to become global: the fact that the genre of the narrative holds the same importance as its thematic focus. As in any oral culture, in the Appalachian culture comic genres prevail, especially those that mix the realistic with the magical, the everyday with the supernatural, and the true with the invented. The genre that meets the criteria best is “windy,” sometimes also called “rusty,” as people in Appalachia call tall tales (see Lang: 208).

I offer two examples of a windy from Chappell’s Appalachian fiction. In the short story “Simples” (2003), published in *Appalachian Heritage*, the main character, Richard Grieves, plans to write a historical novel called *The Cold Mountain*, but at present he is working as a door-to-door, or rather hill-to-hill salesman, selling everything from silver polish to live animals from a catalog. When he finally meets a “granny woman” living on the crown of a steep Appalachian hill, he thinks that he will manage to sell something at last, but instead he spends all his savings on Healthy Herb, a miraculous remedy, Moonlight Miracle #6, a powerful love potion, and Harper’s Superlative, an ointment for his knee injury. Not only is Richard unable to earn anything; he even faces a lawsuit, as the old woman claims that the silver polish he sells is her stolen recipe, and at the end he leaves with the well-meant advice to call his novel, instead of *The Cold Mountain*, *Shoot ’em in the Sticks!* This windy (the granny is in charge of Granny Woman Enterprises and in her hut she offers credit cards of her subsidiary company the Granny Woman Credit Corporation) is written in the local dialect, which is, together with the mixing of the traditional with the contemporary, and the vernacular with the intellectual (the granny promises

Richard that after her “simple” he will write like Shakespeare or Kafka), the main source of humor.

While the deadpan, often cruel humor moves the narrative closer toward the humor of the Old Southwest, the allusions to Charles Frazier’s bestselling 1997 novel (Richard hopes to finish it by 1975) that “takes place in the remote backwoods during the Civil War” (Chappell, 2003: 24) reach out to the southern tradition. Nevertheless, most of the motifs in the story are universal, appearing in Stith Thompson’s index as migrating across the world. The relevant categories are, for example, K100 “Deceptive bargain,” K110 “Sale of pseudo-magic objects” (Thompson, vol. 4: 243–244), K170 “Deception through pseudo-simple bargain” (Thompson, vol. 4: 249), and even K1040 “Dupe otherwise persuaded to voluntary injury” (Thompson, vol. 4: 364).

In one of Chappell’s best-known short stories, “The Storytellers,” used in 1985 as a chapter in the first part of his tetralogy, there are several windies within the frame of the main narrative, which introduces Uncle Zeno, an excellent storyteller who came to visit the Kirkman family, who are at the center of the whole volume. Soon, two things become obvious: Uncle Zeno does not care about his audience and is able to stop any narrative in mid-sentence, thus driving especially the rationally oriented head of the family crazy, and, even worse, every person who becomes a subject of one of his stories vanishes without trace. One of the embedded stories, originally published in 1970 in *North Carolina Folklore* under the title “Elmer and Buford,” features a dog called Elmer who is so clever that when his owner Buford shows him a board, he trees a coon of exactly the same length. However, on one occasion he shows him an ironing board by mistake, and the dog vanishes, pointlessly trying to find a coon that big. Buford decides to find him but he loses his way and ends up in a cave with a Native American woman whom, after two and a half years, he finds “the ugliest woman that ever went on two legs,” after he happened “to wake up just as the woman was stepping over him” (Chappell, 1970: 82). While the original version of the story ends after World War II, where they gave Buford “a Purple Heart because when he was drunk one time he took a leaping jump into one of those really hot Japanese baths and a lot of skin came off his posterior and lower extremities” (Chappell, 1970: 82), the new version in *I Am One of You*

Forever has Buford return home only to find that Elmer the dog is already there, sleeping with his wife and earning his living by teaching mathematics.

In this windy there is a plethora of universal motifs that can be found in Thompson's index: for example, within Part B "Animal motives (*sic!*)," the subpart "Animals with magic wisdom," we can find the entry B121.1 "Dog with magic wisdom," with a subentry B121.1.1 "Infallible hunting-dog" (Thompson, vol. 1: 378), as well as the entry B215.2 "Dog language" (Thompson, vol. 1: 400). As the entries show, similar stories can be found in Greek, Scandinavian, especially Icelandic, Breton, Irish, and Jewish folklore and mythology. James W. Kirkland, who also used motif-indexes in his analysis of Chappell's fiction, first of all Ernest W. Baughman's *A Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America*, found many of his storylines from his tetralogy among universals as well (see Kirkland: 242-45).

How can motifs travel so freely, appearing in different parts of the world? Chappell gives an answer in "The Storytellers" – Uncle Zeno, the miraculous narrator, "only told stories, he didn't answer questions. The voice he listened to, the voice beyond the world, gave him only stories to report; any other matter was irrelevant" (Chappell, 1985: 102). At one point the narrator of the story, an eleven-year-old boy, finds Uncle Zeno sitting on a tree and telling another part of a story he did not finish the previous evening to "mica rocks and horse nettles" (Chappell, 1985: 111). But even without a human audience Uncle Zeno does not finish his story: "The story impulse had died in him, or maybe this story flew from this roosting-place across the world to another storyteller, Chinese or Tibetan, who sat waiting for inspiration" (Chappell, 1985: 110).

Obviously, narratives, storylines, themes, and motifs had always traveled freely and emerged unexpectedly at places far from each other. All of them deserved a keen audience, but did not always get it. Through them both the South and the Appalachian Mountains, regions that are overlapping but not identical, or even parallel, culturally, socially, or historically, were always leaving footprints in other, often remote places. On the other hand, what is seen in them as typical of Appalachian and/or southern literature might have flown from another part of the world and, after a short rest, will continue its journey.

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Appalachian, Southern, Universal, Global: The Case of Fred Chappell

Summary

The article discusses the universal and global features of southern and Appalachian literature. As various southern writers confirmed in a 1980 poll, good regional writing must have a broad appeal and focus on universal problems, without neglecting to deal with specific local details, including dialects. Fred Chappell, a short story writer, novelist, poet, and essayist from North Carolina, who often claims to be an Appalachian author rather than a southern one, pursues the goal of universality through the use of oral history. Exploiting the traditional Appalachian folk genre of a windy, a local version of a tall tale, in some of his short stories he turns to universal motifs, listed, for example, in Stith Thompson's motif index. Analyzing two of Chappell's short stories, "The Storytellers" (including its early version "Elmer and Buford") and "Simples," the article focuses on the ability of motifs to travel around the world.

Keywords: Appalachian literature, southern literature, Fred Chappell, oral history, tall tale, windy, universal motifs

Słowa kluczowe: literatura Appalachów, literatura amerykańskiego Południa, Fred Chappell, historia mówiona, nieprawdopodobna historia, gatunek „windy”, motywy uniwersalne