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Location and Landscape in Literary Americanisms:  
A Brief Look at H. L. Davis and F. Scott Fitzgerald

David Sumner

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While casting for a major publisher for *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean received a now famous rejection letter. In it, an eastern editor complained bewilderedly, “These stories have trees in them” (Connors 32). Despite the rejection, the University of Chicago Press took a chance, and publishing fiction for the first time, had a hit.

This story is humorous, but also reflects a long standing tension between western American writers and the eastern publishing establishment. For much of the history of American letters, what has been written in or about the northeast has been seen as the core of American literature, while everything else has often been dismissed as regional. “It is from the provinces and may reflect local color,” their practice has seemed to say, “but is not at the center of what we call American literature.” As the country expanded westward, other regions seem to enter the mainstream. Post Civil War, southern writers brought their tradition, carving out a niche in the landscape of American letters. Some minority literatures begin to gain recognition, but well into the twentieth century, western American literature is still dismissed as regional or is boxed in by the genre expectations of pulp Westerns.

The causes of an eastern dismissal of western literature are many. But for this paper, I want to focus less on cause and more on what is unique about western literature,

and how it reflects the larger western experience. I want to look at the particular Americanisms evident in the letters of the American West.

As examples of different literary Americanisms, I will look at short stories: H. L. Davis's "Open Winter" and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited." My analysis may seem a bit anecdotal, but I would argue these stories are—in Kenneth Burke's words—representative anecdotes (*Grammar* 59). Davis and Fitzgerald's stories represent bigger trends in western and modernist literature. These stories help shed light on what distinguishes western American literature from the writing of other regions, or even from just plain American literature. So what makes western lit, western lit?

I came across these two short stories while teaching an undergraduate seminar. I had arranged the syllabus chronologically, which placed these stories on the same day in the schedule. As I prepared to teach them, there were some striking similarities between the authors, and some real contrasts that highlight the argument I want to present today. First the similarities: Harold Lenoir Davis and Francis Scott Fitzgerald were born two years apart—Davis in 1894, Fitzgerald in 1896. They both came of age as writers in the 1920s. The two short stories I am examining were first published during the Great Depression—"Open Winter" in 1939 and "Babylon Revisited" in 1932. Both stories reflect the economic difficulties of the era. But the similarities between authors and texts seem to end here.

Davis grew up in Oregon as the son of a school principal. His family moved around a bit, but finally settled down in The Dalles on the Columbia River. He graduated from high school, had various jobs—deputy sheriff, surveyor. He was drafted and spent a stint in the army in California. He spent his writing career in the American West,

received numerous literary prizes and fellowships including a Guggenheim in 1932 and a Pulitzer for *Honey in the Horn* in 1936. He continues to write and to publish until his death in 1960 in San Antonio, Texas.

Fitzgerald, born in 1896, spent his boyhood in the St. Paul, Minnesota. And although he did not come from wealth, through the help of extended family, he was able to attend prep school and go on to Princeton University. Like Davis, Fitzgerald received some early literary attention; unlike Davis, the attention translated into some early financial success; here is where some interesting contrasts develop.

Fitzgerald starts in the Midwest, but moves east both physically and in subject matter, eventually ending up in Europe rubbing elbows with other expatriate Americans—Hemingway, Stein, Pound. Except for some time in Mexico, Davis, in body and subject matter stays firmly in the American West. Fitzgerald documents the era—or at least what those living in the east saw as the era—in *This Side of Paradise*, *The Great Gatsby*, and in hundreds of short stories; he is hailed as the voice of the Jazz Age. Davis grounds his fiction and poetry in the occupations and folk traditions of the region and spends most of his life writing in relative obscurity. Fitzgerald wins few prizes, lives fast and dies young, but his work is canonized. Davis wins a Guggenheim, and a Pulitzer, outlives Fitzgerald by twenty years, continues to publish but is never widely recognized.

Such comparisons provide contrasts that also appear in the stories. Here, two very different Americanisms come into relief—Americanisms as different literarily as the east and west are topographically.

## II

“Babylon Revisited,” first published in H. L. Mencken’s *American Mercury* in 1932, is the story of Charlie Wales. Set in a post-boom, 1930s Paris where most of the rich American expatriates have gone bust and gone home, the story is about Charlie’s return to Paris in an attempt to regain custody of his daughter. During the boom days, Charlie and his wife had participated fully in the drinking, dancing, and general hedonism of the time. But in the fall out, his wife is dead, and his only child, Honoria, is in the legal custody of his sister-in-law, Marion Peters, who unjustly blames Charlie for his sister’s death. In the narrative, Charlie has shaped up, gotten a handle on his drinking, and is now in a successful business in Prague. He has come to Paris to persuade his sister-in-law to return custody to him so he can bring Honoria back to Prague.

At its core, “Babylon Revisited” is about character and consequences. Charlie visits some of his old haunts and runs into some of his old friends—friends who are still trying to live the individualistic and materialistic American motto from the twenties: “do what you will.” Through these friends, the reader has a glimpse into Charlie’s past. When these friends call uninvited at the Peters’s, Marion again becomes angry with Charlie and uses his irresponsible friends as an excuse to deny Charlie custody.

The story ends on a melancholy note. Charlie is at the Ritz, the Paris bar where he and so many other Americans spent time and money. He is having his one daily drink and talking to the bar’s owner—who is now a very rich man.

“I heard that you lost a lot in the crash.”

“I did,” and he added grimly, “but I lost everything I wanted in the boom.”

“Selling Short.”

“Something like that.”

Davis’s “Open Winter” was published seven years later than “Babylon” (1939), at the tail of the Great Depression rather than the beginning. The United States was still in grips of economic hard times. Yet, hard times in “Open Winter” are less about national or world economic forces and more about a tough and demanding landscape. The hard times are specifically caused by a lack of snow.

Davis sets his story in eastern Oregon, and to understand the importance of setting, you need to understand Western geography. The west coast of Oregon is a rainforest, but eastern Oregon is arid. All winter long, storms come off the Pacific and shed their moisture until they bump up against the volcanic peaks of the Cascades. Here, the last of the rain is wrung out and very little falls on the eastern part of the state.

Such aridity is a common feature of the American West. If you look at a map of north America and draw a line right down the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian, splitting the US right through the center of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, you will mark the border of dependable rain fall—dependable rain fall to the east and dependable drought to the west. An open winter, then, is a winter without snow covering the ground. Without snow, the soil loses what little moisture it has to the wind, and there is no feed for domestic animals or water for hay, winter wheat, and other dry farm crops.

Davis’s “Open Winter” is set during such a drought. It’s a coming of age tale where the older and more experienced Pop Apling and 19-year-old Beech Cartwright drive another man’s rag-tag horses across the drought stricken, high country of eastern Oregon. Apling has contracted Ream Gervais to winter his horses and then to deliver them in the spring. It is now March, and Apling, Cartwright and a herd of under-

nourished horses arrive at the Gervais place only to find it abandoned: no feed for the horses, no instructions, and no pay for the wintering or the delivery.

The conflict lies in what to do. Cartwright is the cold-eyed pragmatist and wants to leave the horses to their fate at Gervais's deserted and dilapidated ranch and be done with it. Apling, however, plays the idealist and wants to continue on for 180 more miles to the railroad and the Columbia River where the horses have hope of feed and survival. For Cartwright it's about time and money. "Ream Gervais triggered me out of a week's pay," Beech says, "It ain't much, but he swindled you on that pasture contract too" (400).

But for Apling it's not about the contract, it's about what he sees as right and wrong. It's about keeping a commitment to the horses; but even more, it's about keeping a commitment to the community. In such a tough year, it's about not leaving these horses there to make trouble. "Ream Gervais don't count in this," he responds. "What counts in this is you" (400).

As you might guess, Apling convinces Cartwright to accompany him, and after some difficulty, they successfully deliver the horses to the town on the banks of the Columbia where there is feed and where horses are in demand.

So as we look at these two stories, what do they tell us about literary Americanisms? Or perhaps more to the point, what does contrasting a piece of western fiction with a more canonical piece of American fiction tell us about western American literature and about western America?<sup>i</sup>

There are many representative differences between the two stories in both style and subject matter, but the most distinguishing differences—and many of the distinguishing differences of Western literature in general—are connected to landscape.

In short, I would argue that the western landscape, with its aridity, low population density, and vast wild land shapes not just the subject matter of western American literature, but its very ethos.

“Open Winter” begins:

The dying east wind, which always brought hard luck to Eastern Oregon at whatever season it blew, had combed down the plateau grasslands through so much of the winter that it was hard to see any sign of grass ever having grown on them. Even though March had come, it still blew, drying the ground deep, shrinking the water courses, beating back the clouds that might have delivered rain, and grinding coarse dust against the fifty-odd head of work horses that Pop Apling, with young Beech Cartwright helping, had brought down from his homestead to turn back into their home pasture while there was still something left of them. (397)

Davis makes it clear from this opening passage that the more-than-human world is going to be a key player in the narrative, but not merely as setting. The story is as much about the human relationship to the landscape as it is about the Pop Apling’s relationship to Beech Cartwright and their individual relationships to the larger human community.

Paul Bryant argues for the importance of landscape in Davis’s work. He notes that there is a reverence “when he turns to description of the landscape, the tone and style change. The land is presented with unfeigned seriousness and wonder” (65-66).

Moreover, the economic and moral conundrum that Apling and Cartwright face is shaped, even caused, by the aridity of the land. The counted-on snow has not come and



the resulting grass has not grown, because this year “Nature had decided to take a little extra territory” (399).

Part of Cartwright’s coming of age—as in any coming of age—is his ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances and to act appropriately. But in Davis’s tale, these actions often occur in a context broader than human society. One important example comes as they are trailing the horses toward the river. They can’t find water, and without water, the horses can’t go much farther. Beech notices a small sink surrounded by cottonwood and, logically, looks there, but without success. “[E]ven digging a hole in the center of the basin failed to fetch a drop” (403).

But, as the day goes on, he thinks about the sink. There should be water there.

[A] whole set of observed things began to draw together in his mind and form themselves into an explanation of something he had puzzled over: the fresh animal tracks he had seen around the rock sink when there wasn’t any water; the rabbits going down into the gully; the cottonwoods in which the sap rose enough during the day to produce buds and got driven back at night when the frost set in. During the day, the cottonwoods had drawn the water out of the ground for themselves; at night they stopped drawing it, and it drained out into the rock sink for the rabbits. (406)

Because Beech is able to put the pieces together—pieces the more experienced Pop Apling is not—they are able to water the horses and continue their journey.

As they deliver the horses to the river town, Beech is amazed with the abundance of the place. An abundance afforded by the river, by water. As he pulls into town, he

sees with amazement “big leafless poplars that looked as if they hadn’t gone short of moisture a day of their lives; the grass under them was bright green and there were women working around flower beds and pulling up weeds, enough of them so that a horse could have lived on them for two days” (412). He sees “a Chinaman clipping grass with sheep shears to keep it from growing too tall” he even sees “lawn sprinklers running clean water on the ground in streams.”

The final act of the story is for Beech to drive the horses through town. In the narrative, Pop Apling has set this up as the final moment of reward for the hardship of the trip; it is also the key coming-of-age moment for Beech. As he brings the horses into town “[t]here were women who hauled back their children and cautioned them not to get in the man’s way, and there were boys and girls, some near Beech’s own age, who watched him and stood looking after him, knowing that he had been through more than they had ever seen and not suspecting that it had taught him something that they didn’t know about the things they saw every day” (412-13). Beech sees the contrast. The town’s people don’t know what its like not to have “delicacies to eat and new clothes to wear.” They don’t know what it means to “be warm and out of the wind for a change, what it could mean merely to have water enough to pour on the ground and grass enough to cut down and throw away” (413). But the other thing Beech notices, is that despite the abundance, “[t]here wasn’t one of them who wouldn’t have traded places with him. There wasn’t one that he would have traded places with, for all the haberdashery and fancy groceries in town” (413).

In many ways, Beech’s experience is similar to other coming of age stories. He has a key experience that changes his view of the world, causing him to think and act like

an adult. In this way Beech is similar to William Faulkner's Sarty Snopes from "Barn Burning" or the unnamed narrators in Sherwood Anderson's "I Want to Know Why" and John Updikes "A&P." But again, the key difference in Davis's work—in the work of many western writers—is landscape.

The landscape of "Open Winter" is not rural. It is not the southern landscape of Robert Penn Warren's "Blackberry Winter" or even that of Sarah Orne Jewett's northeast. It is a wild landscape, arid, open, sparsely populated. And it is the landscape itself that sets western literature apart from what is happening in the rest of the country. Fitzgerald is writing in response to modernity, and is in many ways representative of his contemporaries. His work looks eastward to New York and Europe. He's responding to a loss of faith in traditional social, political and religious structures.

In the 1920s, however, western writers, and therefore western literature, have not yet entered that modern world. Because of location and landscape, they have been isolated from many of the shocks of modernity; furthermore, pre World War II especially, to be successful in such a sparsely populated, wild, arid landscape, to be successful long term, westerners had to depend on more traditional structures, depend on community.<sup>ii</sup>

In the two stories we are considering here, I would argue that landscape even influences the fact that Davis ends on a note of optimism and Fitzgerald one of melancholy. As Charlie Wales sits at the Ritz bar having his daily drink and mulling over the fact that he will be returning to Prague without Honoria, worried that her childhood will be gone before he is able to bring her home, there is little hope, little

optimism. As the final line of the story, Charlie is “absolutely sure Helen wouldn’t have wanted him to be so alone” (612).

This stands in contrast to the way Davis ends “Open Winter.” Beech Cartwright has just driven a herd of horses into town after overcoming many obstacles on a hard trip. Boys and girls his age have looked on him with envy. “For the first time, seeing how the youngsters looked at him, he understood what that amounted to” (413).

There is no way to know definitively, but the optimism seems to be a result of necessity. As Beech enters the town on the Columbia River, he has never seen such an array of finery. In the arid, hardscrabble West he inhabits, such things don’t exist. It is only with those things that the luxury of melancholy can live. In short, the difficulty of existence in the arid West cannot afford despondence. James Potts writes: “Davis preferred to write about those who eked out modest livings, those who accepted frugality in the face of tremendous hardships, and those who recognized the personal significance of the ordeal” (119).

Wallace Stegner, himself the winner of a Pulitzer and head of the creative writing program at Stanford from 1945-1971, has thought and written much about what distinguishes the West, western writers, and western literature.<sup>iii</sup> In “Born a Square,” an article originally published in *The Atlantic* in 1964 and reprinted in *The Sound of Mountain Water*, he notes that much of twentieth century western literature is still influenced by a pioneering and frontier past. He also argues that that past brings with it a certain worldview. He writes: “This western naïveté of strenuousness, pragmatism, meliorism, optimism, and the stiff upper lip is our tradition such as it is” (184). And in a later interview with Richard W. Etulain, Stegner connects this attitude to what he sees as

the dismissal of western literature by the eastern establishment. “Modern literature and western literature are somehow irreconcilable, at least up to now. The kind of western writer who writes modern literature immediately abdicates as a Westerner, and the kind who sticks to the western attitudes is likely to be considered a little backward by the modernists” (123).

Davis faces the dilemma Stegner describes. He definitely wanted to be a writer taken seriously by a national audience, but he also wanted to be a writer of his region and culture, a region and culture that was either not taken seriously, or had certain genre expectations placed upon it from the outside—genre expectations that still persist. In a 2002 article in *The Nation*, Philip Connors writes: “William Eastlake once gave William Kittredge a piece of advice about writing as a Westerner. ‘Never allow a publisher to put a picture of a horse on the cover of your novel: The people who buy it will think it’s some goddamned shoot-up. And they’ll hate it when it isn’t’” (32).

Davis’s desire to be taken seriously on a national basis is most clearly evident in “Status Rerum,” a pamphlet he co-wrote and published with James Stevens, another Northwestern writer. They subtitled the tract: “A Manifesto, Upon the Present Condition of Northwestern Literature Containing Several Near-Libelous Utterances, Upon Persons In the Public Eye.” The bottom of the cover reads “privately printed for the craft” (357 Davis, *Collected*). In this short document, Davis and Stevens manage to offend almost everyone in Washington or Oregon who has put pen to paper, claiming that all practitioners of literature in the Northwest are doing so only because they are unfit for any other occupation. “What can we give our own numskulls, ‘naturals’, and mentally afflicted, to do?” they ask. “Obviously, they could not be trusted to manufacture rocking-

chairs, to pile lumber, to operate donkey-engines, or combined harvesters; to shear sheep, or castrate calves.” So they conclude that the only employment left for these people is “short-story writing” (361-62).

Davis and Stevens goal here was not necessarily to offend all who were writing in the Northwest, though they were happy to do so along the way. Their goal was to get the attention of H. L. Mencken and his *American Mercury* and therefore a national audience. At the time, Mencken was interested in carving out a place in American letters for more than high modernism. Glen Love notes that “Mencken rewrote the American literary canon during the ‘teens and twenties . . . elevating the realists working in the colloquial tradition of Mark Twain, a tradition in which both Stevens and Davis could be placed” (332).

Their pamphlet apparently worked. Stevens had a long correspondence with Mencken. And again, as noted by Love, “Mencken . . . encouraged both young men to write fiction, and his magazine was receptive to their work all through the decade” (332). They both acknowledged a debt to Mencken, and after winning the Pulitzer in 1935 for *Honey in the Horn*, Mencken call Davis’s novel the best first novel ever printed in America (Forgue 394).

So in many ways, Davis found himself caught between two often-conflicting desires. He wanted to be taken seriously as writer on a national scale, but he also wanted to write from what he knew—the experience of growing up in the West, of growing up in the beautiful and difficult landscape of eastern Oregon. He was a westerner who wanted to write western literature without writing westerns. He wanted to avoid being restricted by a narrow genre. He wanted to avoid the trap Jane Tompkins describes in *West of*

*Everything*: in its attempt to avoid Victorian social mores, she writes, “the Western paints itself into another kind of corner,” a corner as restrictive as the one it tries to escape (127).

Instead, Davis is working toward something grounded in folk tradition and landscape. In his essay “Oregon,” Davis writes critically of the popular western myth. “Tradition is what a country produces out of itself; illusion is what a people bring in from somewhere else. On the record, the illusions have considerably the better of it. People keep bringing them in” (31). In short, he wanted the reality that had responded to the place rather than the imported myth. Often that reality was a tangled bramble of the two. In fact because his books were western and not “westerns,” they were a sort of hybrid. Commenting on this, George Armstrong writes, “Davis would not have shrunk at calling them bastards” (169).

The modernist aesthetic of Fitzgerald and others did not work for his subject matter or place. The human community he knew, one that was so shaped by its geography, did not seem to fit the modern world with its modern problems. John Clemen’s writes: “The formulation of a national literary culture to which Davis aspired was significantly not the ‘high’ moral culture of Jewett’s Boston, for example, or the equally high European Modernism in which Faulkner’s work resonates . . . . Davis both drew on popular or folk culture for his literary materials and envisioned a wide range of ‘ordinary’ people as his primary audience” (436). This was not Fitzgerald’s aspiration, source or audience.

## III

Finally, what do these two stories tell us about literary Americanisms? We already know much about Fitzgerald's America—canonized America. But what is represented by Davis's work is a culture and literature emerging from the frontier, a culture with all its myths, violence, optimism, and what Davis calls “glaring and incongruous realities” (*Collected Essays* 21). But it is a place where the vastness of the wild landscape, the aridity, the lack of other human beings, or as Stegner's puts it “a certain spaciousness . . . a sense of elbow room in people's minds and in what they write”—a place that has not yet entered modernity (123). Davis seems representative of a similar ethos found in other western writers of his era—Willa Cather, Bernard DeVoto, Paul Horgan, even John Steinbeck. Finally, however, Davis represents something that is disappearing. Like the rest of the country, the West is becoming more suburban than anything else. There seems to be a leveling out of regional culture in the West, as well as in the rest of the US, and perhaps the world. People listen to the same music, shop at the same stores, wear the same clothes. There is also a commercialization. In 1957, Wright Morris had already noticed it. “The region—the region in the sense that once fed the imagination—is now for sale on the shelf with the sugar maple Kewpies; the hand-loom ties and hand-sewn moccasins are now available, along with food and fuel, at regular intervals on our turnpikes” (22).

Even with contemporary western writers, the western ethos seems to be changing. As fewer and fewer people live in the same place they were raised, even the idea of a “western writer seems to be fading. Perhaps the influence of landscape is currently



waning. But in the culture and literature of Davis's West, landscape is still the defining factor.

#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Interestingly, Fitzgerald seems to be a common figure against which western writers define themselves and the West. In Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, the brother-in-law Neal represents everything Norman, Paul, and all self-respecting fly-fishermen and Montanans are against. When he arrives by train, Maclean describes him. "He was last off the train and he came down the platform trying to remember what he thought an international-cup tennis player looked like. He undoubtedly was the first and last passenger ever to step off a great Northern coach car at Wolf Creek, Montana, wearing white flannels and two sweaters. All this was in the days when the fancy Dans wore red-white-and-blue tennis sweaters, and he had a red-white-and-blue V-neck sweater over a red-white-and-blue turtleneck sweater. When he recognized us as relatives and realized that he couldn't be Bill Tilden or F. Scott Fitzgerald, he put down his suitcase" (29).

<sup>ii</sup> There is much written in both western fiction and history about the importance of community and the failure of homesteaders, ranchers, miners, loggers, to survive long-term in the west because of a lack of community and a nonsustainable view toward resource extraction. See Wallace Stegner's *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, *West of the Hundredth Meridian*, and *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* for three examples.

<sup>iii</sup> Stegner's influence on western literature in particular and American letters in general is remarkable. Over the years his students included Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Ernest Gains, Larry McMurtry, M. Scott Momaday, Tillie Olsen.

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