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## Maritime Regionalism: A Reading of John Casey's Novel *Spartina*

Summary

The theoretical framework within which the author reads John Casey's novel *Spartina* is the renewed interest in the notion of the regional. The choice of the novel is additionally dictated by the fact it deals with the sea. As such it allows the author to discuss the sea both as it is positioned within the American cultural imaginary and the way that it is represented in works of literature. The article delineates how these two themes are thematized in the novel and what kind of insights they can provide about certain aspects of the American polity.

**Key words:** John Casey, spatiality, regionalism, sea, cultural imaginary

## Pomorski regionalizem: pogled na roman *Spartina* pisatelja Johna Caseyja

Povzetek

Teoretični okvir, skozi katerega avtor prispevka obravnava roman *Spartina* Johna Caseyja, ponovno vzpostavlja pojem regije v književnosti. Izbira romana je dodatno pogojena z dejstvom, da je v ospredju morje kot tako, kar omogoča njegovo obravnavo tako v kontekstu ameriškega kulturnega imaginarija kot v smislu njegove upodobitve v književnosti. Razprava odstira postopke tematizacije teh dveh tém in omogoči vpogled v različne vidike ameriške organizirane nacionalnosti.

**Ključne besede:** John Casey, prostornost, regionalizem, morje, kulturni imaginarij

# Maritime Regionalism: A Reading of John Casey's Novel *Spartina*

1.

My title juxtaposes two spaces which I believe are not only relevant to the reading of the chosen novel but have a theoretical pertinence both within the general and the more local, in this case American, context. Namely, both the broader concept of regionalism and the more specific site of the sea create new resources for the study of literature and its place in culture. As part of an ongoing project, the point I want to underline is my belief that geographical knowledge can greatly contribute to our understanding of culture and its artifacts. The basic premise of my argument is that readings of regionalist texts, which all too frequently are ignored in critical surveys, enable us to reclaim works and the places they describe which would otherwise be sidelined or simply ignored.

To situate my reading within the broader theoretical framework and the more specific field of American studies I feel it is necessary to briefly comment upon the place of regionalism in these discussions. Without doubt there is a certain pejorative quality attached to the word. One can adduce reasons for this by referring to the value-laden opposition between the concepts of the particular and the universal or, if literary works are at issue, one can see it as the logical consequence of the aesthetic moment where the local tends to be elided in seeking out universal aesthetic worth. On a more concrete level, one can see the demise of regionalism as resulting from the decline of spatial diversity in the ways of life during the last century. New communication technologies have contributed to the disappearance of distinctive localities, a process which in its wake has dissolved the psycho-emotional ties humans have traditionally felt for distinct places. In an earlier reading of the contemporary American novel I have shown how these developments have manifested themselves in the United States and how their prominence gives one ample warrant to consider the United States as the exemplary postmodern polity (Grgas 2000).

In addition, it has often been contended that the American project as such is antipodal to the sustainability of the region. On the present occasion I call upon Jim Wayne Miller who is of the opinion that the American national identity “is essentially extraterritorial ... subordination of place, and hence of region, to a national perspective” (in Mallry and Simpson-Housley 1987, 4). He expands on this idea:

An inherited Renaissance concept of culture; the increasing tendency to see human collectivities in terms no smaller than the nation state; the association of culture with history, with time rather than with space; the essential extra-territoriality of the American idea – all of these and subordinate considerations have caused regions and regionalism (literary and otherwise) to come to be associated with backwardness and limitation. (5)

The rhetoric which legitimated the United States either as a religious mission or as the embodiment of Enlightenment ideas projected a homogenized, unified space. Its undeniable plurality, perhaps

precisely because of the latent danger of heterogeneous fragmentation, was throughout American history being co-opted into an ideal of unity.

But these remarks far from exhaust the issue at hand. Looking at the matter from a general perspective, one can hardly speak of a consensus if the question of the homogenization of space or the process of globalization is at stake. In a paradoxical fashion, the process of globalization has, for instance, been accompanied by an antipodal human affective and existential investment in the local. In the revised edition of his *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (1992) Wilbur Zelinsky speaks of the “disappointments of the contemporary world” and the search for “more authentic modes of anchorage”. He remarks: “In spatial terms, the safest haven appears to be located somewhere midway between the cold, faceless bureaucratic state and the incertitudes of kith, kin, and hearth – in the renewal of regional identity” (173). In the later added “afterthoughts” to his study he discerns “that, working at cross-purposes against the all too obvious process of convergence and homogenization, are innumerable local foci of resistance, all those spatially intimate and personal assertions of individuality and specialness” (184).

To return to the American context, it should be pointed out that the unifying vision or the rhetoric of monolithic political identity never actually extirpated oppositional, particularist solidarities. Sectional interests are and have always been a constant of American politics; United States history bears the traces of their struggles, while its space of cultural production is geographically differentiated both according to those who are its makers and to the landscapes that it has mapped and explored. Needless to say, the relationship between the nation and the region bears the imprint of different historical junctures. During different historical periods either one or the other side have been emphasized or underplayed. In his classification of narratives that emerged in the United States during the formative period between 1820–1860, Jonathan Arac describes “local narratives” as at that time offering “alternative emphases” to the “national narratives” adding: “The actual differences among the regions of the United States meant that the story of America was not the only story” (2005, 30).

Both a certain crop of novels in the United States, amongst which I count John Casey’s *Spartina*, and theoretically informed investigations of the local have prompted some to speak of a “new regionalism”. Introducing his collection of essays bearing this title, Charles Reagan Wilson calls upon Foucault and contends that the French philosopher offers insights “as to the significance of regionalism in a postmodern world” (Wilson 1998, xv). He adds: “Even more relevant, though, is his stress on site. Foucault draws attention to marginal social groups who experience the effects of power in particular places and contexts” (xvi). In accord with this line of thinking, instead of being a remnant of a simplistic understanding of the intimate relationship between humans and their environment, the region is envisioned as a powerful tool of analysis and synthesis. As a metonym of the collective, the region is a barometer of the distribution of power within the state polity, at times contributing to and at times subverting its hegemony. Scattered over the varied landscapes of America, one can see regionalism as the critical interrogation of the center with its official histories and definitions, as the inscription of voices and places which have been elided from the dominant narrative of the American polity.

One of those elisions is the relegation of the sea from the American spatial imaginary. In the preface to the collections of papers entitled *America and the Sea* (1995) Haskell Springer makes the following observation:

While, for example, the vanished western has been repeatedly so studied and invoked as to make it a hoary cliché, that other, and permanent, American frontier, the sea, hardly registers today in our cultural consciousness as setting, theme, metaphor, symbol, or powerful shaper of literary history. (1995, ix)

Notwithstanding the displacement of the sea by the continental saga, a development which has been accounted for by both politico-economic and ideological reasons, the contributors to Springer's collection trace its abiding presence in American literature. It was one of these, Dennis Berthold, who in his survey of American prose since 1960 drew my attention to John Casey's novel (1995, 317).

Casey's novel won the National Book Award in 1989. If, as Tony Tanner had diagnosed the earlier period, much of American literature during the previous decades had "foregrounded language" (Tanner 1971, 20), *Spartina* belongs to a growing number of texts published during the most recent period which, in different ways, evince a rejection of postmodernist extravaganza, finding it both tedious and self-indulgent. Instead of the earlier metafictional obfuscations and their linguistic play, a growing number of writers espouse a revived realism as a textual practice that can provide a meaningful purchase on today's America.

In their attempts to render America in a more straightforward manner, many of these writers ground their novels in geographically specific sites so that there are those who have found evidence of a new regionalism in the contemporary American novel (Rebein 2001). However, neither are the novels written in this vein replicas of traditional realism nor is their regionalism a throwback to an outdated mode of writing that shuns the complexities and the trials of the present. Discussing the work of Annie Proulx, perhaps the best known representative of this literary tendency, Karen Rood makes the following observation: "Readers who approach the works of these new regionalists out of a turn-of-the-century nostalgia for getting back to their country roots quickly have their notions of pastoral serenity replaced by pictures of rural poverty and varying degrees of violence" (2001, 15). Without engaging questions of comparative aesthetic value, one can say that John Casey's novel accords with Rood's pronouncement on what awaits the reader in this new trend within contemporary American fiction. Therefore, in what follows, my first task will be to delineate those features of Casey's novel which allow the reader to approach it as a regionalist novel. The second step of my analysis will be to show how, far from projecting a "pastoral serenity", his novel registers the impact of forces and agencies from the world at large. In conclusion of my paper I will return to the problem of the sea and show how Casey deals with it.

## 2.

Excepting the flashback account of Dick Pierce's trip with Parker to the West Indies, the entire narrative of *Spartina* is set in the salt marshes, on and off the coast of Rhode Island. Descriptions

of these sites, focalized through Dick's native vision, reflect an intimate knowledge of their geological, botanical and ichthyological characteristics. At a remove from these renderings of the natural world, the text relies upon toponyms to inscribe the locale: Pierce Creek, Sawtooth Creek, Salt Pond, Block Island and so on. When Dick daydreams about his boat entering the local harbor with the inscription "Galilee, R.I." (26) written under its name on the stern, giving him the right to moor as a resident, he discloses the South County town that is the nearest political seat of power. Finally, Rhode Island as a state is the outlining border which constitutes the horizon of space that the main character projects and within which he and the other characters appear in this novel. As far as the Rhode Island setting is concerned I draw attention to the self-deprecatory comment made by Parker:

Cute little state. First time I heard of it, I was running a charter boat in the Gulf, had a couple of Texans on board. One says to the other, 'I hear you picked up that land next to yours. You must have quite a spread now.' The other one says, 'Middling. Just over two and a half Rhode Islands'. (51)

Although no more than a trifling exchange this is the only instance in the book where the reader has an outsider's perspective on the state-region in which Casey sets his novel. A similar differential logic is evident when Dick, thinking of fish prices, summons up places like New York (7) or Connecticut (11) as providing better opportunities than he can expect in his place of residence. However, the act of constituting identity through difference can best be seen in the explanation why he felt "fuddy-duddy" in the West Indies:

But it wasn't just that, or the foreignness of the people or the sleekness of some of them, that put Dick at half-speed. It was the *place* that knocked him for a loop. The air, the sea, the islands. Dick had fished off Cape Cod, Maine, and Nova Scotia. All that was more or less the same, or at least understandably different. The West Indies was another planet. The air smelled different, touched his skin like silk. The water was the same salt water, but the colors were different, greens and blues he'd never seen. (14)

Without elaborating upon this or going into the question to what extent is New England indicated here as the reference point of a broader regional identity – or something that is "understandably different" – I think the italicized form of the word "place" as it appears in the text is sufficient proof of its significance in Casey's novel. To put this otherwise: the geographical space of Rhode Island is not a mere geometrical extension but is a place invested with affective attachments and experiential significance.

Although this passage downplays the impact of the "foreignness of the people", the same relationship between identity and difference is reenacted on the level of characters. Dick Pierce

is a descendent of one of the oldest families – at one point explicitly naming it the “good stock” (128) – who had of yore been able to live off the marshes and the sea, relying on their wit, skill and toil. Keeping to the old ways he is known for his “grim Yankee manner” (15) and, comparing himself to the encroaching newly rich, he thinks of himself as a “dumb swamp Yankee” (48). These qualities are recognized by the other characters so that Parker at one point censures Dick for “dividing up the world into the idle rich and the true-blue salts. The unworthy and the worthy” (75). While Parker is representative of those on the cast of characters who, although they are willing to avail themselves of Dick’s skills, hardly show him any sympathy, there are others, Elsie in particular, whose words and deeds reflect a profound respect for the values Dick epitomizes. To use a graphic metaphor one could say that the characters are either absorbed into the centripetal spin of Dick’s value system and his obsession of building his own boat or they look upon these in an askance manner from the outside. Dick’s response early in the novel to the bank loan officer who suggests that he consider welfare as a way to alleviate his financial difficulties is indicative of his ethical profile. He is appalled at the suggestion and his rejoinder that he could be making good money if only he could build his boat instead of going on welfare (8) has a resounding political charge in the ongoing discussion of US social policy.

Although distinct, the region is nevertheless a part of a larger whole and is therefore susceptible to developments that originate elsewhere. Since regionalist literature invests so much in the notion of place, a useful way of understanding that relationship and its consequences would be to analyze the impact outside forces have had on the land itself, particularly on the way humans have used it. Reshuffling the numerous references to this problematic scattered throughout *Spartina* one could propose a history whose beginning and present stage are juxtaposed in the following passage:

Tautog. Squeateague. Indian names. Names left over like bones. From half a mile away Dick heard the trucks leaving the building site on Sawtooth Point. Narragansett. Matunuck. Words from before anyone had owned anything. (87–8)

In passing, through the character of Miss Perry, Dick is made aware of the original inhabitants and the fact that they “hadn’t owned land individually” but as tribes “they’d had dominion over tribal lands” (88). But not much is made of this within the novel since the focus is upon what happened to the land that Dick’s family had previously owned and upon how it is being transformed in the present of the novel. Throughout the narrative Dick is constantly being reminded, feeling “anger, envy, and regret” (89), of the fact that his father had lost the largest part of the family land. Apparently his belief “in the natural order of the Pierces’ owning land” (128) was unfounded and after that order had showed itself to be far from natural his son was left with a “sliver of marsh” (9), with certain hunting and fishing rights. It is from this position of the dispossessed native, at a point where the old mode of “family’s farming and fishing” (89) has been displaced by the rules of late capitalist economy, that Dick Pierce is witnessing changes that are transforming the land and the older way of life.

Real estate transactions had driven away all but a few of the older residents so that “every other house was now a summer rental” (24). A “flood tide of money and fun” (49) had brought in a new group of people who see the land as an opportunity for profitable investment in the cottage project. To put this in economic terms, what is unfolding before Dick’s eyes is the gradual disappearance of the use-value of land and the growing significance of its exchange-value. The role of the filmmaker Schuyler can be understood within this context since he is there to booster the appeal of the place to future property buyers. Although Dick is constantly immersed in financial worries both as they pertain to supporting his family but, more significantly, to the project of building his own boat, he refuses to compromise on the issue of mortgaging his home place. His “sliver of marsh” is his last anchorage in a world which is in flux, caught up in changes over which he has no control. In making Dick the center of the novel, Casey is giving a voice to a specimen of those who are being overwhelmed by the processes of corporate America. The narrative of Dick Pierce’s survival strategies and of his tortuous humanity provides a counterpoint from which to take stock of what is involved in the all-devouring power of capital and its ability to appropriate and expand. If that alternative is not already foreclosed the question that needs to be asked is from where does it draw its potential.

### 3.

To answer this question we have to go the coast and out to sea as the other site of my reading. To be more precise, it is the ocean and its lure, the way that it calls out the best in man and the way that it is has always been the element that cannot be subjugated to the whims of human hubris – these facets of the sea and the way man relates to it, on different levels of the narrative, empower the mode of being which is embodied in the main protagonist of the novel. Faced with its elemental force the humans have to rely on their mother wit, their skills and their energy. On each of the voyages to the sea depicted in the novel one can decipher a story of trial and initiation. It is on the sea that the constrictions and the encroachment of capital do not hold dominion.

There are different psycho-emotional responses that are evoked by the sea. In one place we read that some of the lobstermen are “scared to go all the way out to the edge of the shelf” (7). At one point, ruminating on the need of making a compromise in order to build his boat, Dick muses that he will work just in order to “get himself out to sea” (34). The journey out is envisioned as an escape from the pitfalls and the debilitating protocols that reign on land. Elsewhere Dick explicitly states his love of the sea – “I like the time out there” (52). On a more abstract level there is the following comment: “Being at sea opened you up. And if you wanted to do things right, you had to use all that opening up for what you were doing, for where you were, for what was going to happen” (63). The exigent circumstances in which man encounters the elements on the open sea demand of him an utter intentness to the tasks at hand, an attentiveness through which the skilled mariner becomes one with his surroundings. In a rare metaphysical bent of mind Dick thinks of the sea in the following manner:

Everything in the sea dissolves – the particular matter into the deeps, then back into upwellings, into the chain whose first invisible links are animal-plants, plant-animals; and all the while the great fluid of the sea is drawn into the sky by the sun, takes passing shapes as cloud, and returns to the earth. (137)

In an extended metaphor appearing later in the text I find a word which I think summarizes many of the characteristics that are latent in these pronouncements: “a bay as it becomes deeper and vaguer, undefining itself into the broader sea” (158). The expanse of waters lapping at the shore is the site where land demarcations and all of the cultural weight that they carry become irrelevant. The arrangements that prevail on the land mass are blotted out on the sea where the solid security of the firm earth – which is in this novel socially differentiated – falls into disarray. I offer here a thought from an article by David Wills:

the distinction between ocean and dry land has led to attempts at the partition and defense of parcels of that land, to interminable territorial dispute. Again, the sea has parted, distinguishing and defining the land, defining it as distinction in opposition to the indiscriminate sea; but again the sea has returned for the lines drawn in the sand of the land are lines drawn in the ocean, undecidable, difficult to defend, changeable, always threatened with disappearance or reimposition, subject to waves of conquest or flight. (Wills 2001, 531)

Although the implications of this observation go far beyond our immediate topic, nevertheless it gives us some of the parameters which allow us to read the thematic of the sea in Casey's novel.

The sublimity of the ocean, the fact that in a sense it can be seen as the radical other of culture is, in my opinion, one of the reasons that it has had a problematical position within the imaginative repertoire of different peoples. The American example offers a fascinating story of the displacement of the sea from its cultural imaginary, particularly if we keep in mind both the early history of the United States on the Atlantic seaboard but also the geographical position of the United States between two oceans. However, a novel such as *Spartina* shows that this displacement has not been total and that geographical realities inevitably make their way into the cultural archive. Let me propose a thesis: in order to reclaim the ocean for the American imagination, in order to understand how the ocean has related to different aspects of American experience we would have to go to texts which project the space of the littoral or which stage the human drama on the waters that spread out in front of it.

Bringing these remarks to a close I join the ranks of those who, in arguing for the continuing relevance of the regionalist approach, call upon Michel Foucault to theoretically sustain their claims. In a passage often quoted in this context Foucault argued that historical research is prone to ignore or to eliminate from its accounts “particular, local, regional knowledge ... incapable of

unanimity” and to privilege “systematizing thought” or the established version (Foucault 1980, 82). He voices a plea for the “subjugated knowledges”, that have been eclipsed by the dominant paradigms, to be recovered and reclaimed as vital elements in charting human reality. Although there might be some who would warn that I am reading too much into a straightforward tale I nevertheless maintain, as I have tried to show in my reading, that John Casey’s novel can be seen as a work of reclamation and that it gives voice to geographical sites and social groups who are often displaced from the different American narratives. This can be seen in two antipodal passages in the closing section of the novel. The first one is the disparaging commentary that accompanies Schuyler’s movie which is being watched by Dick and his cronies in the local bar Neptune. After some statistics have been read out, there is a factual description of the state of Rhode Island, some of whose items the reader recognizes had been previously thematized in Casey’s novel:

If Rhode Island were a country, it would be part of the Third World. The largest employer is the military. Tourism is the major moneymaker, although most Rhode Islanders benefit from it only in service positions. The bulk of choice real estate is in the form of second homes or resorts run by absentee corporations.

There is a seafaring tradition, and there is – still – a fishing fleet. By comparison to the high-tech factory ships of Russia, East or West Germany, Japan, or the tuna clippers of our own West Coast, the boats and methods are quaint. (344)

What is occluded in such a stereotyping account of the region is exactly the content, both spatial, temporal and human, that the novel *Spartina* in different ways has brought to light. Near the end of the book, in a kind of epiphanic revelation, Dick comes to terms with “something he’s always known – that they all flowed into each other. All of them set about the salt marsh in the little towns and the houses on the hills – they all got mixed in, they stayed themselves” (371). Dick intuitively at this point the human value of the particularist solidarity that had been explored and put to the test in the previous escapades. To put a number of complex, interweaving themes in the crudest terms, we can say that *Spartina* makes visible a region and its inhabitants which have been overwritten by the United States national narrative.

In doing so it has empowered through the vision and voice of its narrator a social group – that has “stayed themselves” to use Casey’s formulation – that has, in my opinion, all too frequently been ignored even in the contemporary “full-blown diversity madness” (Jacobson 2006, 313). In the context of present day identity politics, in which every statement is discussed as the projection of someone’s distinct self or view of the world, I would contend that a stratum of United States society, a very important one for that matter, has been blotted out from the overall picture. Simply put these are the impoverished Anglo-Saxons. Their presence complicates the celebratory discourse of ethnic difference and compels us to reengage the issue of fault lines between classes within seemingly homogenic ethnic groups, an issue that I believe can help us gain a better understanding of certain politico-cultural realities in present-day America.

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