

Regional and National Identities in Robert Frost's and T.S. Eliot's Criticism

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Volume 3 Issue 2 (June 2001) Article 10**Angela M. Senst,****"Regional and National Identities in Robert Frost's and T.S. Eliot's Criticism"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss2/10>>

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Abstract: In her essay, "Regional and National Identities in Robert Frost's and T.S. Eliot's Criticism," Angela M. Senst analyzes Robert Frost's and T.S. Eliot's criticism in order to explore their different concepts of culture and to determine their respective regional and national identities: While both poets stress the necessity of unified cultural entities, Frost is deeply committed to the American principle *e pluribus unum*, whereas Eliot disapproves of internally heterogeneous societies that strive to level out differences which he considers a prerequisite for the mutual revitalization of cultures. Instead, Eliot promotes the idea of intercultural exchange, whereas Frost credits the experience of immigration with producing and continuously revitalizing the American culture. Considering New England the cradle of the cultural and political American nation, Frost is convinced that his regional loyalty is the foundation for his national loyalty. T.S. Eliot, however, considers a cultural nation to be an organic, and not an artificial, structure. Consequently, he can become a naturalized British citizen without giving up his cultural loyalties to the regions of his childhood and youth, while denying America, as the product of colonization, its claim to being not only a political, but also a cultural nation.

Angela M. SENST

Regional and National Identities in Robert Frost's and T.S. Eliot's Criticism

The ongoing debates about cultural pluralism, multiculturalism, and hybridity have caused a growing awareness of cultural differences within societies and a concomitant challenge to the concept of national unity. For a country like the United States -- whose concept of itself, still, is founded upon the experience of immigration -- differing opinions about the nature of its national identity and the permeability of its culture(s) disturb traditional and ideologically inflected views of its history. Whereas proponents of homogeneous societies argue for the exclusion of differing cultures or their assimilation into the dominant culture, representatives of cultural pluralism, from Horace Kallen onwards, who "considered the melting pot concept not only impossible but also undesirable and pleaded instead for tolerant ethnic co-existence" (Freese 264), acknowledge and praise the existence of diversity. The current debates on America's pluralist polyvocality have made visible many of the formerly marginalized groups who are included increasingly into a revisionist literary canon that acknowledges the diversity of American literatures and cultures. But new notions of cultural pluralism not only make us aware of new voices, they also help us to revise our view of canonized authors like Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot, whose cultural affiliations seemed to have been settled by literary critics long ago: Whereas the former is commonly known as the "poet of New England," the expatriate T.S. Eliot was for a very long time not even classified as an American poet, let alone a regional one. The bibliography *American Scholarship*, for example, did not include him prior to 1973. Instead, the cosmopolitan wanderer between the Old and the New World has often been considered a transnational poet, whose poetry makes use of and mirrors the diversity of the world. The corpus of criticism of Frost and Eliot shows that both poets were very much interested in notions of identity, belonging, and cultural loyalties, and my examination of these texts arrives at unexpected results: It is not the cosmopolitan Eliot who argues for an open cultural concept and the permeability of cultural boundaries, but the regionalist Frost, whose belief in the American nation is mirrored in his tolerant attitude towards cultural diversity.

In his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) Eliot defines "historical sense" as an awareness of the fact that every poet writes within a specific tradition. This notion of "the present moment of the past" (22) requires a poet to be aware that his work is influenced by the past, which, in turn, is altered by his present work. However, according to Roland Hagenbüchle, remembering chronicles from diverse periods and numerous parts of the world threatens the unitary or mythic construct of nationness because it emphasizes the inherent diversity of any culture (19-20). This might be a reason why Eliot redefines the term "tradition" in a by now ill-famed lecture series published in 1934 under the title *After Strange Gods (ASG)*, in which he identifies features that constitute and unite what he calls a "native culture": "What I mean by tradition involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of 'the same people living in the same place'" (ASG 18).

Taken by itself, the definition "the same people living in the same place" does not seem objectionable, especially since, as Craig Raine points out, Eliot borrowed the notion from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (271-72), where the protagonist Leonard Bloom uses it in response to anti-Semitic remarks brought forth by Irish nationalists (Raine 323). But whereas Bloom's definition refers to a heterogeneous society united by "the same place," Eliot's argument focuses on "the same people," i.e., a homogeneous society which excludes religious ("significant religious rite") and ethnic ("blood kinship") groups. That this is not only a slip of the tongue becomes obvious when Eliot proceeds to specify his definition: "The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable" (ASG 20). The lectures reveal that anti-Semitic sentiments are deeply embedded in Eliot's concept of an autochthonous and homogeneous society, which, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, existed neither in America nor in Europe, where migrants and nationalist movements had made

people aware of the intrinsic heterogeneity of their respective nations. In view of this situation, Eliot's notion of a homogeneous society is equivalent to an open call to exclude marginalized groups. Eliot slightly modifies this definition of cultural homogeneity after WW II, claiming it to mean "the way of life of a particular people ... who live together and speak the same language" ("Unity" 120). The new definition focuses on intercultural interaction and singles out language as an important characteristic feature of a common culture, "because speaking the same language means thinking, and feeling, and having emotions, rather differently from people who use a different language" ("Unity" 120-21). At the same time, however, Eliot insists that a people's "way of life" becomes visible in a people's arts, customs, and religious beliefs -- thus, again, implicitly excluding those whose customs and religious beliefs differ from the dominant culture. Moreover, he is still convinced that the "dominant force in creating a common culture ... is religion," and emphasizes that "the tradition of Christianity ... has made Europe what it is" (122).

In *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture (NTDC)* Eliot develops the concept of the cultural nation as an "organic" structure, which allows him to differentiate it from the political nation: Whereas the cultural nation is seen as a tree that "must grow; you cannot build a tree, you can only plant it, and care for it, and wait for it to mature in its due time" (15), the political nation is seen as a machine, i.e., as a human made artificial structure ("Unity" 19). This distinction helps to explain why Eliot can become a naturalized British citizen in 1927 while maintaining the sense of being an American: His naturalization is a political decision and distinct from his inherited local loyalties to the regional cultures of his childhood -- loyalties that are not the result of a conscious choice but of time -- taking about one or two generations to mature (*NTDC* 52). Whereas Eliot merely concedes that cultural and political nation depend upon and affect each other ("Unity" 118), Frost sees both as an inseparable unit when saying: "I've about decided I am an American -- U.S.A." ("Assurance" 222), with "America" signifying the cultural, and "U.S.A." the political nation. Consequently, he cannot feel equally loyal to both England and America: "My politics are wholly American. ... I suppose I care for my country in all the elemental ways in which I care for myself. My love of country is my self-love. My love of England is my love of friends" ("To John W. Haines" [1916] 205). The fact that Frost equates his love of America with "self-love," whereas he regards his love of England only as "love of friends," demonstrates the "bifocal concept" (Hagenbüchle 6) underlying his cultural and national identity formation: In order to determine his own identity, it is necessary for him to define "the other." It also shows how closely Frost's self-awareness is linked to his sense of belonging to a particular region or nation, a sense of local rootedness that Eliot apparently lacks: "Some day I want to write an essay about the point of view of an American who wasn't an American, because he was born in the South and went to school in New England as a small boy with a nigger drawl, but who wasn't a southerner in the South because his people were northerners in a border state and looked down on all southerners and Virginians, and who so was never anything anywhere and who therefore felt himself to be more a Frenchman than an American and more an Englishman than a Frenchman and yet felt that the U.S.A. up to a hundred years ago was a family extension" (Eliot, qtd. in Read 15).

As exemplified above, Eliot's restrictive concept of culture, excluding everyone who does not belong to the dominant culture, is related to his feeling of having been "never anything anywhere": His New England family are outsiders in the Midwest; in New England his Southern drawl singles him out; and when his search for an identity leads him to Europe, first to France and then to England, his naturalization does not turn him into an Englishman. Rather, the fact that Eliot's argument circles back to the U.S.A. confirms that in his view a "voluntary affiliation" (to borrow David Hollinger's term) with a foreign culture is impossible; it links him to his immediate ancestors who did not remain in New England but joined the many explorers of the Western territories, thus proving themselves to be pioneers (i.e., Americans) and not New Englanders (whom Eliot perceives as Englishmen living in America) (see Sigg, *The American* 243). By leaving America, Eliot thus exhibits the same kind of courage and curiosity as his pioneer ancestors and in this way, paradoxically, proves himself to be an American.

Taking for granted that "self-awareness is ineluctably based on the acknowledgement of cultural difference" (Hagenbüchle 21), I am suggesting that balancing the unity and diversity of dif-

ferent cultures is the key to an understanding of each poet's conceptualization of region and nation: In order for solitude to bear fruit, Frost and Eliot are convinced of the necessity to both retreat from the world and to return into a world in which the cultural differences and similarities and the ensuing conflicts and sympathies will be "favourable to creativeness and progress" (Eliot, *NTDC* 59). By regarding poetry as "more often of the country," Frost focuses on the independent individual as a prerequisite for a creative exchange between individuals, regions, nations, or cultures: "Poetry is more often of the country than of the city.... It might be taken as a symbol of man, taking its rise from individuality and seclusion -- written first for the person that writes and then going out into its social appeal and use. ... I should expect life to be back and forward -- now more individual on the farm, now more social in the city -- striving to get the balance" ("Poetry" 75-76). Going to Europe, where both poets experience cultural difference firsthand, opens their eyes to the peculiarities of their respective cultural identities. Whereas Frost grows aware of his American identity and claims that he "never saw New England as clearly as when [he] was in Old England" ("To William Braithwaite" 686), Eliot adopts a new identity and becomes "a European -- something which no born European, no person of European nationality, can become" ("James" 124). Eliot's claim to familiarity with European cultures is typical of an American who perceives America to be the product of various European cultures -- even though Eliot is convinced that no colonial culture can ever truly resemble a "grown" culture since immigrants can never be representative of the "complete" culture they heralded from (*NTDC* 64). While a British or a French citizen, according to Eliot, cannot and should not give up his/her national cultural identity in order to become a European, Eliot's distanced position as an American allows him to regard Europe as a unified cultural space composed of small regional cultures. As long as the membership in these cultures is the result of a "natural" process, Eliot is convinced that a person can hold several cultural loyalties at one and the same time, thus justifying his simultaneous loyalties to England and to Europe, to New England, to the Midwest, and to America: "The unity of culture, in contrast to the unity of political organisation, does not require us all to have only one loyalty: it means that there will be a variety of loyalties" ("Unity" 123).

Despite Eliot's difficulties to affiliate himself with any one culture in particular, he, like Frost, insists that it is necessary to know one's own identity as a person, region, or nation before relating to other persons, regions, or nations. Emphasizing the interdependency of cultures, Eliot observes "that a people should be neither too united nor too divided, if its culture is to flourish" (*NTDC* 50), and he points out that the smallest local culture, i.e., the individual possesses "the instinct of every living thing to persist in its own being" (*NTDC* 55). Here Eliot seems to echo Frost, who regards this "instinct" to preserve one's own integrity as an indispensable prerequisite for successful communication: "An instinct told me long ago that I had to be national before I was international. I must be personal before I can hope to be interestingly interpersonal. There must first be definite nations for the world sentiment to flourish between" ("Japan" 817). There is, however, a fundamental difference between Frost's and Eliot's concepts of culture, which is best explained by an opposition Lewis Mumford introduces as early as 1938 in his definition of the difference between "regionalism" and "sectionalism": "Whereas sectionalism is based on the assumption that each area is or may become a unity within itself, the concept of regionalism is based on the belief that unity exists only in the nation of which the regions are subareas. Whereas the section exists in and for itself, the region exists for both itself and the nation" (qtd. in Hönnighausen 358). While Eliot requires the "true" regionalist to focus on the "absolute value," which means "that each area should have its characteristic culture, which should also harmonise with, and enrich, the cultures of the neighbouring areas" (*NTDC* 54), Frost regards regions as subareas of the geographically more expansive nation. He therefore views his reputation as the 'poet of New England' as limiting, and wonders whether he will ever be allowed to write about anything other than New England for the rest of his life ("To John W. Haines" [1915] 183). In subsequent years, Frost often repeats "that there was no rule of place laid down" ("Preface" 783), and insists that he talks "about the whole world in terms of New England" (qtd. in Cramer 64). Rejecting symbolism as "too likely to clog up and kill a poem" (*Letters to Untermeyer* 376), Frost prefers synecdoche, convinced that it is possible to use one's immediate environment in order to treat universal themes: "You can't be

universal without being provincial, can you? It's like to embrace the wind" ("Axe-Handles" 19). The simile in a nutshell demonstrates Frost's concept of regionalism: Knowing that it is impossible to embrace the wind his audience is able to understand the difficulty of being universal. This familiar experience taken from the immediate environment thus enables the audience to grasp Frost's abstract thought. Consequently, Frost does not think it necessary to strike out into the world, since the material he finds in his immediate environment is better or even best suited to express his thoughts. 'New' and 'old' regionalists alike have thought this to be the essence of regionalism.

A similar combination of the local and the universal reappears in an address on "American Literature and the American Language" (*ALAL*) delivered by Eliot at Washington University in 1953. In this lecture, Eliot tries to define American literature by selecting three authors whom he considers "landmarks ... for the identification of American literature," namely Poe, Whitman, and Twain (15). Despite an initial disclaimer, condemning any attempts at defining their common American characteristics as "folly" (15), Eliot proceeds to explain why he singled them out: "Here we arrive at two characteristics which I think must be found together, in any author whom I should single out as one of the landmarks of a national literature: the strong local flavour combined with unconscious universality" (17). In other words, Eliot considers them truly American authors because their work reflects a strong sense of locality while at the same time dealing with universal themes. In this way, Eliot offers a definition of national literature which carefully avoids any specific statement about national characteristics. At the same time, however, he explicitly rejects Frost as a possible landmark, thus ignoring that Frost's poetry wants to combine both a "strong local flavour" and "universality." Calling Frost one of "the last of the pure New Englanders," Eliot views him exclusively as the poet of a region that has "its own particular *civilized* landscape and the ethos of a local society of English origin ... representative of New England, rather than of America" (14), thus denying what Frost so emphatically insists upon: the possibility to see New England as a *pars pro toto* for America. Being convinced that Frost's work appeals mostly to people of New England origin -- for whom it possesses a "peculiar nostalgic charm" (14) -- Eliot cautions against "overvaluing the local product just because it is local" (20). Mark Twain's depiction of the Mississippi river in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* serves Eliot as an illustration of what he means by "the strong local flavour combined with unconscious universality" (*ALAL* 16-17; Introduction *Huckleberry* 332-35). The novel's structure, according to Eliot, is determined by the river, which simultaneously serves as an appropriate archetypal symbol of life. Huck and Jim's journey along the river shapes the development of the story: When the river picks up speed, the story does so, too. At the same time it is possible to recognize both journey and river as symbols of the journey of life, while Twain's intimate knowledge of the Mississippi river is reflected in imagery that enables the reader not only to see the river, but to "experience" it as a tangible living entity (*Huckleberry* 333). This argument, however, is probably not wholly unbiased since Eliot himself spent large parts of his childhood next to the Mississippi river. Eliot takes great care to avoid any mistaking of "the strong local flavour" for "provincialism." For him, the term "provincial," which Frost uses synonymously with "local," signifies a distorted perception of the world: "By 'provincial' I mean ... a distortion of values, the exclusion of some, the exaggeration of others, which springs, not from lack of wide geographical perambulation, but from applying standards acquired within a limited area, to the whole of human experience; which confounds the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent" ("Classic" 69).

Likely to pass unnoticed is Eliot's frequent usage of the term "unconscious," employed whenever he strives to explain affiliations with a particular culture: Truly national literature has to combine "local flavour" with "unconscious universality," and in the work of a truly national author the foreign reader recognizes "perhaps unconsciously, identity as well as difference" (*ALAL* 20). Since Eliot's concept of culture does not allow for voluntary affiliations on the basis of cultural consent, he perceives a colonial culture or an immigrant nation like America, in which "two or more cultures exist in the same place" and are "likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate" (*ASG* 20), as something unnatural. Contrary to his earlier conviction that tradition "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour" ("Tradition" 14), Eliot is now convinced that "a *tradition* is rather a way of feeling and acting which characterizes a group

throughout generations; and that it must largely be, or that many of the elements in it must be, unconscious" (ASG 31-32). Consequently, a "fiercely self-conscious" culture would be unnatural and as undesirable as the other option, a cultural mixture which, in Eliot's view, levels out characteristic cultural differences and thus renders mutual cultural enrichment impossible. At the same time, however, Eliot does not construct a hierarchical system of "different" cultures; he is convinced that homogeneous cultures should stay separate and safeguard themselves against dilution, an attitude that, according to Christopher Balme, is symptomatic of "the conceptual world" of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when "clear cultural boundaries were essential for cementing identity" and "any suggestion of mingling and interchange was synonymous with dilution, deracination and breakdown" (9). Yet, as Peter Freese points out, this concept of exclusion has not been the only position "the 'ones' have taken towards the 'others' in the course of American immigration history": *Assimilation, Americanization*, and even the concept of *cultural pluralism* have been and are still being discussed in order to come to terms with an increasingly heterogeneous society (264). Balancing unity and diversity has always been one of the basic traits of American society, and, as Lothar Hönnighausen argues, "virtually all regionalist thinkers" follow the ideas of Josiah Royce, whose concept of provincialism, formulated as early as 1908, calls for a "balanced relationship between the nation-state and its regions" (354). Hence it is not surprising that the regionalist Frost favors the concept of diverse regional cultures united by American ideals, and that he declares his regional poetry to be national, i.e., American poetry:

One cannot say that the real American poetry is the poetry of the soil. One cannot say it is the poetry of the city. One cannot say it is the poetry of the native as one cannot say it is the poetry of the alien. Tell me what America is and I'll tell you what its poetry is. It seems to me we worry too much about this business. Where there is life there is poetry, and just as much as our life is different from English life, so is our poetry different. The alien who comes here for something different, something ideal, something that is not England and not France and not Germany and finds it, knows this to be America. When he becomes articulate and raises his voice in an outburst of song, he is singing an American lyric. He is an American. His poetry is American. He could not have sung that same song in the place from where he hails; he could not have sung it in any other country to which he might have emigrated. Be grateful for the individual note he contributes and adopt it for your own as he has adopted the country. America means certain things to the people who come here. It means the Declaration of Independence, it means Washington, it means Lincoln, it means Emerson -- never forget Emerson -- it means the English language, which is not the language that is spoken in England or her provinces. Just as soon as the alien gets all that -- and it may take two or three generations -- he is as much an American as is the man who can boast of nine generations of American forebears. He gets the tone of America, and as soon as there is tone there is poetry ("Courage" 49-50).

In this interview, given in 1923, Frost hails the experience of immigration as the key American experience that causes the "alien" European to become a "native" American, thus contributing to the American culture and its voice, the "real American poetry." Yet the immigrants Frost mentions are all of European descent (i.e., England, France, and Germany), which suggests that, in Frost's view, it was these three groups that determined "American" culture. Frost uses the term "native" to refer to the assimilated European, while truly "native" Americans and slaves, who did not come into the country on a voluntary basis, do not count in this Eurocentric conceptualization of the American nation. In order to become an integral part of the American nation, future immigrants have "to adopt the customs and values of the ones who are already there" (Freese 264). The process "may take two or three generations," but unlike Eliot, Frost does not liken it to the natural growth of a tree; the time it takes to assimilate depends on the individual immigrant and his/her conscious acceptance of the American "ideals."

However, it is not complete assimilation that Frost requires of the individual; he praises the "individual note" the immigrant contributes to the "song" that is America. American diversity is seen as an asset, effected by the multitude of immigrants who come into the country, who bring along their various individual histories and cultures, and make up an American national identity whose most characteristic and essential trait is change ("Courage" 52). This attitude echoes a concept advanced in 1908 by Randolph Bourne, who blankly states the "failure of the 'melting pot'" (266) as it disregards the potential for renewal inherent in immigration. Bourne's call for "a clear and general readjustment of our attitude and our ideal" (269) foreshadows contemporary concepts

of hybridity, in which identity becomes a "third space in-between" (Steffen ix). Contrary to the notion of hybridity, however, Frost postulates an American "ideal" that the immigrant has to believe in, if she/he wants to join the congregation of Americans: "The national belief we enter into socially with each other ... to bring on the future of the country. We cannot tell some people what it is we believe ... partly because we are too proudly vague to explain" ("Education" 727). This "national belief" resembles what Gunnar Myrdal has called the *American Creed* (qtd. in Ostendorf 211), and demonstrates Frost's difficulty in determining such an American ideal. According to Frost, it only comes into existence when the members of a given society interact. The word "belief" allows Frost to avoid a more precise definition. After all, knowledge would make belief superfluous. By giving a religious answer to a secular question, Frost thus holds doubting Thomases at bay: Those who insist on a more precise definition of the national belief prove themselves to be outsiders; the initiated know and need not ask. Despite the difficulties inherent in defining the "ideal" as suggested in the above-quoted interview, Frost tries to explain what America "means" for the people who come to her shores. In doing so, Frost defines what he thinks is the foundation of the American nation, in short, he defines the *American Creed* and his reference to the Declaration of Independence leads the audience back in time to the separation from the mother country. But this document is not only America's birth certificate, it also stands for America's determination to fight, like Washington, for her independence. Washington's name reminds the American audience of an excellent military leader and his irreproachable character. The next name on Frost's list, Abraham Lincoln, evokes the most painful experience in American history, the Civil War, which signifies America's coming of age and reminds people that unity and personal freedom are values worth fighting for. But political events alone cannot create a unified culture: It requires the arts to do so, and Frost thus refers to Emerson, whose work he valued throughout his lifetime. By doing so, Frost alludes not only to Emerson's first book, *Nature*, in which the latter explains his philosophy and contributes to the concept of America as "Nature's Nation," but also to Emerson's speech "The American Scholar," which Oliver Wendell Holmes has called "our [i.e., America's] intellectual Declaration of Independence" (88).

Both poets, Frost and Eliot, single out language and literature as two of the most important features of a unified culture, thus considering it indispensable for a nation to produce its own poetry: While Frost values the arts as "the permanent record of a nation" ("Visit" 132), to have poetry, according to Eliot, "actually makes a difference to the society as a whole" ("Function" 18). Since poetry depends upon language and its specific ways of expressing thoughts, feelings, and emotions and can therefore never be adequately translated ("Unity" 121), Eliot claims that "no art is more stubbornly national" ("Function" 19). Frost, too, considers poetry the "most national of the arts": "The most national of the arts is not painting, not music -- that can go over -- not sculpture. It's poetry. The only reason for keeping England alive and the English language alive is to keep Shakespeare from being translated into Volapük or Esperanto" ("Remarks" 308). Translations, according to Frost, will never get across a poem's original thoughts and feelings, which is why he considers them to be a poor substitution and insists on reading poetry in the language it was originally written in. In this respect, Eliot is less purist than Frost: Although agreeing that complete ignorance of the language does indeed limit one's appreciation of a work of literature, he maintains that this is no excuse for complete ignorance ("Goethe" 219). Instead, Eliot maintains that one's own cultural heritage also includes literature written in languages other than one's own ("Tradition" 16), and that no culture or literature can prosper in isolation ("Function" 23). In 1953, he even cautions against the danger of "narrow national pride" which always seeks to determine whether a writer and his work are "truly American" (*ALAL* 19), in this way disregarding the fact that any contact across cultural boundaries inevitably initiates the kind of cultural change Eliot himself rejects emphatically. Without cross-cultural contacts, Eliot's praise of English as "the richest language for poetry" ("Unity" 111), would not be possible since only cultural contact, and the ensuing change in its wake, introduced the "rhythms of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Norman French, of Middle English and Scots ... together with the rhythms of Latin, and, at various periods, of French, Italian, and Spanish" into the English language ("Music" 29).

For Eliot, British and American English merely constitute two varieties of the same language (ALAL 8-11). The differences in spelling and pronunciation he sees as analogous to the varieties of English existing within Great Britain, where the English language is constantly enriched because "poems by Englishmen, Welshmen, Scots and Irishmen, all written in English, continue to show differences in their Music" ("Unity" 111). To Eliot, "the music of poetry, then, must be a music latent in the common speech of its time. And that means also that it must be latent in the common speech of the poet's *place*" ("Music" 31). This, however, only applies to a regional, not a national idiom. Since English and American literature are written in the same language, and since both literatures do look back to the same tradition, Eliot finds it difficult or even impossible to consider them as two different literatures because an American has the same right as an Englishman to write in the tradition of Chaucer or Hardy, and is as justified to perceive himself as part of "the English mind" of which he is a constituent ("Scottish Literature" 680). Frost, however, insists that American English must not be mistaken for "the language that is spoken in England and her provinces." Setting himself the task to "write with the ear on the speaking voice" in order to capture "sentence sounds," or "the sound of sense" ("To William Braithwaite" 684), he calls upon American poets to use the hitherto neglected tones of life, by which he means colloquial everyday speech: "I am as sure that the colloquial is the root of every good poem as I am sure that the national is the root of all thought and art. I may shoot up as high as you please and flourish as widely abroad in the air, if only roots are what and where they should be. One half of individuality is locality: and I was about venturing to say the other half was colloquiality" ("To Régis Michaud" 228). In this letter, Frost deliberately likens the colloquial to the national, thus connecting region and nation. Identity consists of both, a sense of place and the vernacular speaking voice. Like Eliot, Frost wants poets to employ a regional idiom, which to him, at the same time is a national one. This is possible since Frost associates his own usage of words with Puritan thought, which he perceives to be the germ out of which the American nation has developed: "And the thing New England gave most to America was ... a stubborn clinging to meaning; to purify words until they meant again what they should mean. Puritanism had that meaning entirely: a purifying of words and a renewal of words and a renewal of meaning" ("New England" 757). Seeing himself as the successor to those whom he considers the nation's forefathers allows Frost to call the speech of New England an American speech and its literature American literature.

To sum up, Frost is deeply committed to the experience of America as an immigrant nation. As a regionalist, he pleads the cause of distinct regions united by the *American Creed*, pointing out that diversity is an inherent quality of the American nation and should be considered an asset. As an American, he himself is the personification of this principle: "Doesn't the wonder grow that I have never written anything or as you say never published anything except about New England farms when you consider the jumble I am? Mother, Scotch immigrant. Father [sic] oldest New England stock unmixed. Ten years in West. Thirty years in East. Three years in England. Not less than six months in any of these: San Francisco, New York, Boston, Cambridge, Lawrence, London. Lived in Maine, N.H., Vt., Mass. Twenty five years in cities, nine in villages, nine on farms. Saw the South on foot. Dartmouth, Harvard two years" ("To Amy Lowell" 226). The fact that Frost perceives all these diverse cultures to be part of his own cultural identity demonstrates the permeability of his concept of culture, which allows for voluntary affiliations. At the same time, however, Frost emphasizes that his sense of personal identity is deeply rooted in his sense of belonging to a particular region and nation, a sense Eliot obviously lacks. By suggesting that "without such roots there can be no sense of personal identity and self-respect, and without self-respect there can be no sense of respect for, and commitment to, others" (22), Hagenbüchle offers a possible explanation for Eliot's closed cultural concept, which postulates an imaginary cultural homogeneity in the midst of an increasingly heterogeneous world, in this way disregarding the fact that even those kinds of intercultural contacts that Eliot considers an "enrichment" inevitably initiate the changes that he deplores as "adulterous." Convinced that a cultural nation must be an organic structure whereas a political nation is an artificial one, he acknowledges the existence of distinct regional American cultures while denying the immigrant nation America its claim to a unifying national cul-

ture.

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