Nobel Laureate Grazia Deledda

Speech delivered in her honor in Nuoro, Sardinia, 2001

I'd like to begin my remarks by stating at the outset that I am here in the role of an American writer, a novelist, and not, I'm afraid, a scholar. Now, when a novelist reads other novelists in his own language, he does so not only for pleasure, but for another less noble reason: to borrow, or to put it more plainly, to steal. The house of fiction has many rooms, Henry James said, and he was right. What he neglected to mention was that in each of those rooms is a man or a woman standing with his ear to the wall, listening to what people in the adjacent chamber are doing. When I read my contemporaries I do so in a state of acute self-consciousness. My desire to let myself be conquered or absorbed by a book is greater, I believe, than my desire to compete with my *connazionali*, but there's a besetting weight on me when I read English language writers. There's a self-imposed pressure on me to watch and see what they can do that I can't, and vice versa. Reading for a novelist always involves a kind of measuring mania. And this fact, I'm afraid, is inevitable in something as canonical, fratricidal, and overdetermined as the act of writing fiction. That is why, for me, to be able to read in Italian is a blessing. I am able at such moments to experience the pleasure of the text without all the superimposing inventions of my own mind and its various complexes. It's not merely the exoticism of the settings and the characters, its Italian itself of course, that language which to an American ear will always seem more projective, spatial, gestural and brightly colored than our functional American English. Italian seems to proceed from an astute awareness of where it is in space at any given moment. There's a distinct feeling of

tensile roundness in Italian, in the same way that French, for example, has a bias towards lucidity, or German towards depth and interiority. Next to these languages, American English seems more interested in the industrial fact of getting to its object as quickly and efficiently as possible.

I'm here to talk about some developments in American literature that might shed light on Grazia Deledda, but first I'd like to mention some of my completely unsystematic impressions of reading her. One of the things that struck me immediately was the heavy sensuality of her prose. It's thick. It's caressive of its surfaces. It has a lot of calories in it. It moves with a method. She has a very sharp eye for detail, and a botanist's passion for exactitude—plant and animal names litter her books—and this coexists easily with a kind of proto-magical realism, or a flair for the supernatural.

Her writing is intensely visual, but not merely visual, it's painterly. When she sees a landscape she lights on individual details, but invariably finds a way to place a larger frame around it in a nearly cinematic way. Scholars have written about the way in which, as fiction came closer and closer to the age in which cinema was invented, there were subtle tropes in the writing of that time which began to approximate some of the techniques of cinema and even preceded it: the zoom, the scan, the framing shot. Grazia Deledda has many such framing shots; visual overviews of a sort which act subtly so as to orient the reader in their psycho-visual progress through the book.

It would be interesting to know what painters she enjoyed, if she did in fact like painting. Hemingway credited his long-standing study of the Cezannes in the Louvre with his patent technique of producing a landscape image in the readerly mind by isolating certain details and concentrating on them. Grazia Deledda certainly has none of

the tactically stark minimalism of Hemingway, but she gives the impression, much as Hemingway does, that she experiences the world primarily through her eyes.

I should mention another similarity she has with her fellow Nobel prizewinning writer Hemingway: both of them tend not only to paint the landscape with great vividness, but to impart a moral valence to that landscape. The landscape, that is to say, becomes a character in the book, expressing values of good, evil, nobility etc, and while doing so implicitly, nonetheless does so persuasively. This assigning of active values to the landscape is a common attribute of much early American fiction, and for good reason. The frontier, real and imagined, was always such a living presence in American life, that it was impossible not to attribute to it human qualities, to project onto it personal fears and desires. For the settlers in the American South and North, the forest pressed on every side. For those in the West, the immensities of space crushed one under their weight. It was irresistible to the lone mind not to see in these forces evidence of either divine or human hand. It was impossible, I'm saying, to remain indifferent. In the same way, I think the sheer wildness of the Sardinian hinterland was such an active force in the lives of the Nuorese of that time, that they couldn't help but endow it with moral qualities.

There's a danger in this, of course. Saul Bellow, in a famous review of Hemingway's terrible novel The Old Man and the Sea, chided Hemingway for confusing his own authorial self-projection with the delicate inner workings of his characters. They all seemed too obviously fractions of Hemingway, and there was a way in which the moral nature of the author was becoming too deafening a soundtrack for any other voices to be heard. This, precisely, is the danger of moralizing the landscape.

Grazia Deledda is a very fluid writer, and that fluidity extends also to the temporal frames of her books. She is less interested, I find, in keeping the sharp temporal segregations and point of view demarcations we're used to, and instead ripples forward and back in time, weaves in and out of characters heads and finally achieves a narrating style that I would describe as less omniscient and more immanent. Immanent in the way that Simone de Beauvoir intended when she spoke, using terminologies borrowed from Immanuel Kant, of how woman is immanent and man is transcendant. Immanent in the sense of a cloud of atmosphere whose latency makes itself felt at every given moment.

I'd now like to proceed to those developments in American literature which began before her birth, intersected her life, and seemed in some ways to mirror her achievement, though most of these writers were not awarded the recognition of the Nobel prize: that is, the rise of regionalism as a genre in American prose fiction.

If Italy is a country divided by war, mountains, peninsular life, islands and dialects, then America is a country divided by its sheer variety of allegiances and origins. And space. America has always been too big to put under one roof. And the constant play of the local against the national, the state against the republic, and all of it crystallized in the individual struggling against the nets of destiny, characterizes the country' s literature from the first. In the 1830's, as the enormity of the country began to take shape, people found themselves faced with the need to make narrative sense of this vast, loose construction called America. As everyone does in life, they needed representation to make sense of the larger national story of which they were individual sentences and paragraphs. The early 1800's then was the era of the "tall tale," the exaggerated story full of frontier swagger, which was carried often from one settlement to

another and recounted orally. The most famous spinner of these tales was Davy Crockett. Davy Crocket was a master hunter, an Indian fighter, and a living emblem of the frontier. He dressed in the typical buckskin jacket and moccasins, and he wore what was called a coonskin cap. He was for America a kind of late-colonial Elvis Presley, a figure hovering somewhere between myth and reality in whom millions of people saw a version of themselves figured, and whose death was invested with all sorts of divine implications.

In reality, much like Elvis himself, and in the classic American tradition, Davy Crockett had many talents, yes, but his main talent was probably for self-promotion. He understood exactly how to market the theatre of his own life. Realizing the need for a person representing the vanishing wilderness in a country already waking to its dream of industry, he played the part to perfection. That said, Davy Crockett was a seminal figure in the tradition of frontier humor which would eventually give rise to the genius of Mark Twain, and he was still, at the time of my childhood, the man who boys wanted to grow up to be.

But Crockett, as influential as he was, was really only the forerunner or distinguished grandfather of a regionalist movement that swept through America at the time: it was the rise of the country becoming self-conscious about itself, and seeing in its own hamlets and villages the stuff of legitimate literary scrutiny. It was the rise of a rudimentary middle-class, or at least a class of readers, linked by magazines and journals, and it was the rise and formation of that vague thing called "taste". Taste is a middle class virtue par excellence, and it was no accident that in the 1840's and 1850's, the real boom in fiction depicting the life of American towns and villages was underway. By 1872, William Dean Howells, America's literary czar, guardian of taste and theorist of

Realism, was crowing proudly that "gradually, but pretty surely, the whole varied field of American life is coming into view in American fiction"

In the main, speaking broadly, we can break this literature of the villages and outlying areas down into two camps: local color fiction and regionalism. The differences and similarities overlap and run into one another, but we can nonetheless draw a few distinctions.

Regional writing strives after some model of authenticity. Often naïve in character, it remains close to folk experience. As it emerges from that experience, it exhibits the charm and shrewdness of life in preindustrial America, especially its varieties of humor. Often it uses dialects for effects of credibility and tone, and to rid itself of the stiffness and self-consciousness of "literary" prose. Regional writers are not intent on producing an effect of quaintness. They are often quite modest in their ambition, trying simply to catch the music of a certain limited voice of our national chorus.

Local color writing, by contrast, presents the material to the audience very aware of its appeal as something exotic. The writer in such cases tries consciously to make the depiction picturesque. He tends to employ set forms of narrative, pre-determined tropes involving recognizable human essences. In the words of critic Carlos Baker: "the curious pursuit of the unique, idiosyncratic or grotesque in local character….a noticeable though not universal tendency to gloss over the uglier aspects of the human predicament….an equally deplorable tendency to overdo the "common man" motif. Another critic explains it this way: "in local-color literature one finds the dual influence of romanticism and realism….distant lands, strange customs, or exotic scenes, but retaining through minute detail a sense of fidelity and accuracy of description."

Women were the proponents of both of these kinds of writing, and predictably, there was also a kind of gender and thematic policing underway by the white male establishment of the time. William Dean Howells was one of the guardians of american literary taste of the late 1800's and he refused to print work by women that he judged too bitter or condemnatory of the social system. A woman regionalist writer of that time by the name of Rose Terry Cooke once received a rejection letter which read: "the canons of taste forbid the editor to accept a story so sad in its motive; it is a duty to brighten life for the public, not darken it with melancholy motive."

In woman's local color fiction, the heroines are often unmarried women or young girls, and the narrator is typically an educated observer from the world beyond the village who serves as a mediator between the rural folk of the story and the urban audience to whom the tale is directed.

This can be seen perfectly represented in *Canne al Vento*, when the arrival of cousin Efix upsets the settled ecology of the village. The motives behind local color writing are summed up concisely by Grazia Deledda herself when she says, in a letter to the critic Luigi Falchi, "…il mio ideale e' di sollevare in alto il nome del mio paese, cosi mal conosciuto e denigrato al di la dei nostri malincolici mari."

Every literary movement requires a star to be worthy of the name "movement," and in the 1860's, the local color school gots its first national celebrity. His name was Bret Harte, and like Davy Crockett, his career was a perfectly emblematic American tale. He was a man who shrewdly exploited the medium of the newspaper to sidestep the traditional slow path to the literary citadels of taste. An effete dandy, his dialect stories and tales of mining camps and roughnecks in California were first printed by the local regional papers across the country, and only then, when he was a household name, was he

taken into the genteel literary magazines. Read today, his work seems incredibly sentimental. He was writing at a time when the idea of the "West" seemed still to represent to Eastern readers a loose, unpoliced part of the country, where crime and prostitution was rampant. His function in that context was to redeem this area with stories of whores and miners with hearts of gold. That sorry emotional deformation that we all know as Hollywood today can be seen prefigured in the writing of Bret Harte, who falsified experience unconscionably in the interests of making it sweet and palatable. Everyone, in his universe, is finally innocent, and for that, meaningless. That said, he was also a very smart and original writer, who was probably the single greatest literary influence on Mark Twain. Their eventual hatred for one another is a sure sign of that fact.

The Civil War was not exactly a Chinese Wall which changed everything into before and after in American life, but it was pretty close. In pre-industrialized pre Civil War America, there was still that Arcadian, Jeffersonian dream of gentlemen farmers and spiritual democrats which was Walt Whitman's vision of America. The bloodshed of the Civil War, the arrival of railroads, the rise of heavy industry, and the point driven home to everyone in the country that there was a national identity that was not merely Western, or Southern, or Eastern, changed everything dramatically, and it began the serious career of nostalgia in America.

Nostalgia has of course always been a determining force in human affairs. The act of writing itself is a kind of memorializing of thought, and with the beginning of writing, and therefore the production of history, there began the feeling of nostalgia for a lost age. Even the ancient Romans mourned the freedom and refinement of the Etruscans. James Joyce famously described Ireland as the "sow that eats its own farrow."

That is, the mother pig that eats its own afterbirth or placenta. But nostalgia in America today has become an industrial grade operation, in which decades are cheerfully cannibalized one after the other, in a kind of Moebius strip of reappropriation, with the end result that someone like myself, at age 40, could find the toys of his own childhood becoming prized collectibles at the exact moment in his life when he was supposed to have the cash—and the desire—to begin collecting such things.

People in the intellectual trades are fond of relativism nearly as a parlor game, but rest assured, *that* particular coincidence never happened before in American history.

The point is that America was particularly needy of myths and loyalties to replace those destroyed in the bloody maw of war, and it was no accident that the schools of regionalism and local color fiction flourished the most in that place which had felt the pains of war the hardest: the South. When Faulkner won the Nobel Prize, he flew to Tokyo and was mobbed by reporters there, asking him questions. Faulkner was a famously taciturn man, and when a reporter asked him why the American South had produced such a massive outpouring of literature, he looked at the man, and said simply, "because we lost."

The South played a major role in the local color movement that followed the Civil War because the south was already a place ridden with mythomanias brought over from the old world and allowed to flourish. The American South was an insular place, cut off from the industrial body of America by its agrarian tradition, alien to the Puritan pieties and investigations of the North, deeply dynastic, and filled with hundreds of the self-enclosed universes of slave plantations.

Southern local color had about it a special quality - the mystique of the Lost Cause. In many stories written about life in the antebellum South there was an

idealization of the way things were before the war; the South was often pictured in these stories not as it actually had been but as it "might have been."

The Southerners had good reason to dream of better days. Not only had they lost the war, but even before then they were more often than not characterized by Northerners and European visitors as lazy, despotic, cruel, irreligious, or, at the very least, ignorant and misguided, as in Connecticut-native Harriet Beecher Stowe's widely influential *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. That particular book, published in 1854, portrayed slaves in a sensitive light, was a wild bestseller and did more to promote the cause the Civil War than any other individual text. When Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, he is reported to have said, “So you’re the little woman who caused the great war.”

Southerners responded to criticism of their social ways in several ways. One was to retreat from the vexing particularities of time and place in a poetry of detached pastoral abstractions that could be set anytime, anywhere, as in works by Philip Pendleton Cooke, Thomas Holly Chivers, and Edgar Allan Poe. The second response to outside criticism was to wallow in it, to display Southern people, and indeed human nature as feckless, greedy, lazy, "no count," and uproariously, if vulgarly, funny. Richard Malcolm Johnston's *Georgia Sketches* (1864) and *Dukesboro Tales* (1871) presented stories of the "cracker" the often mean simple white tenant farmer. The well-known writer George Washington Cable immortalized the Creoles of south Louisiana in the pages of *Scribner's Monthly* and then in such books as *Old Creole Days* (1879) and *The Grandissimes* (1884); Mary Noailles Murfree spent her summers in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee and then wrote about the mountaineers, using pen names such as Charles Egbert Craddock and E. Emmett Dembry, in the *Atlantic Monthly* and in a book of stories Other local colorists included, Kate Chopin, Ruth McEnery Stuart, Charles E. A.

Gayarre, and Grace E. King (Louisiana); Margaret Junkin Preston and Mary Johnston (Virginia); John Fox, Jr. (Appalachia); and Lafcadio Hearn (New Orleans).

One of the elements of Southern writing which seems to us the most egregious today is the “plantation novel” which became an enduring genre in Southern literature, characterized by a benign patriarchal master and his pure and charitable wife presiding over child-like blacks in the plantation "family." Representative of this writing is the fiction of Thomas Nelson Page, whose tales of Virginia plantation life in such stories as “Marse Chan”, pictured beautiful southern maidens, noble and brave slave-owners, and happy, contented slaves. Although not all southern local color writing depicted the South in such romanticized terms, the exotic and quaint characteristics of this region were dominant motifs : Chivalry toward women, courage, integrity, and honorable conduct among gentlemen, and pride in and loyalty toward one's region.. In keeping with its hierarchical ideals, stories of this tradition frequently portrayed African Americans as happier and better off under slavery than they would be (or, later, were) if they were free. Within this system exists the racist stereotype of the "happy darky."

I’d like to digress a moment to talk about black writing and specifically about black dialect. Clearly, in a country like America haunted by the twin primary acts of appropriation of taking away both the Indian and African cultures, there would be a lot at stake in what passed for authentic. And when it came to something like black dialect, the argument about authenticity would be doubly difficult, because the criticism would come from both sides. Blacks in the 1860’s often wrote in black dialect for the pleasure of white audiences. But they also subtly poked fun at white steroetypes of blacks in certain of the novels. In the same way the language of Yiddish was an offshoot of German, invented in part to sound like German at a distance while expressing an entirely

subversive content, so the black dialect writings sometimes had a sting within their subservience. Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus, is a case in point. The frame stories--an elderly African-American narrator telling tales to a young white boy--recall the plantation tradition, but the tales themselves, which are based on black folktales, are frequently subversive of the tradition

I give this overview of American regional literature as preparation for that literary movement which, in conjunction with this regional background, provides, I think, the closest foreign cognate for Grazia Deledda seen through an American optic: realism. Realism, which arrived in America in the late 1800's is a vast and complex phenomenon which we needn't go into here. A few points bear mentioning however.

--The desire to represent in works of prose narrative concrete, commonplace experiences of ordinary Americans in recognizable social locales and at a specific historical moment. Not legendary white whales or ladies with scarlet letters on their bosoms, but the kind of people who might actually be found in new york city, or on the coast of maine.

--A readiness to show the despair, the sadness, the loneliness of life in small towns and prariers and farms. There was a feeling of disenchantment with the small town, and a desire to present a realistic portraiture of that town as a way of showing why they fled.

--A new readiness to confront the sensual nature of human beings.

In the year 1890, the Census Bureau declared the frontier "closed," the Seventh Cavalry massacre at Wounded Knee ended Native American armed resistance to U.S. government, and Ellis Island Immigration Station opened. Things, my friends, would never be the same again.