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The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis

MICHAEL C. STEINER

Despite the fact that more has been written about Frederick Jackson Turner than any American historian, relatively little attention has been given to his sectional thesis. Aside from three early essays and a thorough discussion in Ray Billington's biography, historians have tended either to slight the sectional concept or to reject it as a piece of misguided thinking.¹ They have dismissed it as a subterfuge hiding the unpleasant fact of class conflict,² as a simplistic exercise in environmental determinism,³ or as a case of "arrested development" and an escape from challenging social concerns "into the vast materials of Western Ameri-

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¹ The appreciative analyses of the sectional thesis include Merle E. Curti, "The Section and the Frontier in American History: The Methodological Concepts of Frederick Jackson Turner," Stuart A. Rice, ed., *Methods in Social Sciences: A Case Book* (Chicago, 1931), 353-67; Avery Craven, "Frederick Jackson Turner, Historian," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 25 (June 1942), 408-24; Fulmer Mood, "The Origin, Evolution, and Application of the Sectional Concept, 1750-1900," Merrill Jensen, ed., *Regionalism in America* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1951), 5-98; and Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York, 1973), 209-32. Lee Benson and George Pierson might typify those who criticize Frederick Jackson Turner's historiography by focusing exclusively upon the frontier thesis without noting that the sectional hypothesis corrected many of the weaknesses of his earlier work. See Lee Benson, *Turner and Beard: American Historical Writing Reconsidered* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1960) and George Wilson Pierson, "The Frontier and American Institutions: A Criticism of the Turner Theory," *New England Quarterly*, XV (June 1942), 224-55, which is the most widely read of his many critiques of Turner. Two more recent and otherwise impressive analyses of Turner's thought by David Noble and Gene Wise are also strangely silent about sectional thesis. See David W. Noble, *Historians against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing since 1830* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1965), 37-55, and Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, Illinois, 1973), 179-222. Donald G. Holtgrieve, "Frederick Jackson Turner as a Regionalist," *Professional Geographer*, XXVI (May 1974), 159-65, is an example of the attention the sectional thesis has begun to receive from nonhistorians.

² Louis M. Hacker, "Sections—or Classes?" *Nation*, 137 (July 26, 1933), 108-10, and Benjamin F. Wright, Jr., review of *The Significance of Sections in American History* in *New England Quarterly*, VI (September 1933), 630-34.

³ Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLI (March 1955), 579-600.

cana.”⁴ Even a sympathetic interpreter regards the study of sectionalism as an unfortunate diversion from the more fruitful frontier hypothesis and argues that “when Turner went on to insist that sectional divisions would continue to deepen, he was flying in the face of common sense.”⁵

Such neglect and summary treatment is surprising, for sectionalism was Turner’s dominant intellectual concern from the mid-1890s until his death in 1932. Three of Turner’s four books are sectional analyses of American history, and one of them—a sectional interpretation of the Jacksonian Era—preoccupied Turner for the last twenty-five years of his life.⁶ By demonstrating the overriding significance of regional factors in American history, he felt that this book would be the capstone of his career. The mass of notes, articles, speeches, newspaper clippings, maps, and correspondence he collected and hoped to incorporate in “THE BOOK” on sectionalism now fills sixty file boxes at the Huntington Library and stands as mute testimony to his devotion to the sectional thesis.⁷

There can be no question that sectionalism loomed large in Turner’s mind. In 1925 he admitted being “possessed with the idea that my Sections paper will travel along with my Frontier as interpretations”; a few weeks before his death he urged Avery Craven to see the section as a larger, more inclusive force than the frontier; and in 1933, Merle Curti argued that compared to the frontier thesis “the concept of the section was if anything even more important in Turner’s thinking.”⁸ How might we explain, therefore, the stock dismissal of the major portion of our most

⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968), 114, 113.

⁵ Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner*, 470.

⁶ Turner’s three sectional books are Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rise of the New West: 1819–1829* (New York, 1906), the Pulitzer Prize-winning Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York, 1933), and Frederick Jackson Turner, *The United States, 1830–1850: The Nation and Its Sections* (New York, 1935), which is the skeleton of what Turner hoped would be his sectional masterpiece. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920) has a distinctly regional flavor.

⁷ For an account of “THE BOOK” on sectionalism, see Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner*, 367–70, 382–85. I also wish to thank Ray Billington for indicating fruitful areas to explore in the Frederick Jackson Turner Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Most of the sectional materials are contained in File Drawers 14 and 15 A as well as in the sixty boxes that comprise File Drawers A - L.

⁸ Turner to Arthur Schlesinger, May 5, 1925, in Wilbur R. Jacobs, *The Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner with Selections from His Correspondence* (New Haven, 1968), 164; Craven, “Frederick Jackson Turner, Historian,” 416; and Merle Curti’s review of *The Significance of Sections*, in *American Journal of Sociology*, XXXIX (September 1933), 265.

influential historian's work? Perhaps the furor ignited by the frontier thesis has blinded us to Turner's more persistent concern with sections, or perhaps this concern was indeed an unproductive obsession.

Although wishful, even delusional, thinking is part of the sectional concept, it also contains many valuable insights. More than any other American historian, Turner draws attention to the vital fact that our culture varies over space—a fact that receives increased consideration as scholars become more aware of the segmentation and diversity that underlie our culture.⁹ And beyond providing an essential interpretation of the past, Turner's conviction that the growth of sectional or regional identity would offer a counterforce to many of the destructive cultural traits engendered by the frontier and an antidote for the homelessness of mass society has profound implications for the present.¹⁰ A careful examination of Turner's midwestern roots, of his intellectual development, and of the sectional thesis as it was fully articulated in the 1920s will bring to light a compelling feature of his thought.

Midwestern Background. In his famous 1893 address to the American Historical Association in Chicago, Turner pointed out that the free and open lands in the United States had been largely occupied and argued that the continuous push into such land had tempered our national character and largely explained American history. He is remembered for this proposition, and three generations of historians have tried to substantiate, demolish, or modify his conclusions. In the thick of their contentions, however, they have often overlooked the essential message of Turner's essay: the frontier had *ended*, and a fresh historical perspective would be needed for a fully settled nation. Turner described the frontier as a self-destroying process offering a provisional explanation of American development, and he spent most of his academic career searching for a more lasting explanation. The section seemed to be such a constant, for life had

⁹ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York, 1975) is one of the most forceful efforts to move beyond the vision of America as a harmonious "seamless" whole—an image that dominated American social science in the 1940s and 1950s. William L. O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960's* (Chicago, 1971) analyzes the heightened awareness and visibility of cultural parts in the 1960s.

¹⁰ For a lucid discussion of the environmental havoc generated by frontier traits, see Wilbur R. Jacobs, "The Great Despoliation: Environmental Themes in American Frontier History," *Pacific Historical Review*, 47 (February 1978), 1-26. "Homelessness" is explicitly discussed in Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York, 1973).

been shaped by the physiographic framework of the North American continent from the beginning, and Turner believed that this influence would become increasingly important in a "closed and static nation."¹¹ Although he viewed history as a network of forces to which there is no one "key," geographical sectionalism eventually dominated his thought and overshadowed the frontier as a causal force. "There is no more enduring, no more influential force in our history," he bluntly declared, "than the formation and interplay of the different regions of the United States."¹²

This subject concerned Turner from the beginning of his career. "My interest in the section in American history," he recalled, "was contemporaneous with my interest in the frontier."¹³ This persistent interest in sectionalism is rooted in Turner's midwestern background. His early years in Portage, Wisconsin, and mature recollections of this area as wilderness, frontier, and settled land affected the sectional thesis in at least two stages. In the late 1880s, Turner's initial speculation about the frontier and section was spurred by critical affection for his native soil; as the sectional thesis reached its fullest expression in the 1920s, memories of what seemed to be a stable community with a distinctive sense of place provided an image of order and security in the face of rapid social change and imbued his vision of America's sectional future.

During Turner's boyhood in the 1860s and 70s, his hometown gradually changed from a tumultuous frontier settlement into a more placid, stable community. His father had settled in Portage in 1858 to become the local newspaper editor and a Republican politician, and from this relatively established position within the community, young Turner witnessed the very processes that later captured his historical imagination.¹⁴ Being

¹¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Section in American History," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 8 (March 1925), 274.

¹² Turner's typescript, "The Significance of the Section in the U.S.," May 1922, File Drawer 14 A #24, Turner Papers.

¹³ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Introduction to a Lecture on Sectionalism," Wilbur R. Jacobs, ed., *Frederick Jackson Turner's Legacy: Unpublished Writings in American History* (San Marino, California, 1965), 47.

¹⁴ See Billington's careful descriptions of Turner's early years in Portage in Ray Allen Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity* (San Marino, California, 1971), 9-15, and Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner*, 5-17. John Muir and Thorstein Veblen also grew up during these years in this part of Wisconsin. Their accounts of the privations of farm life contrast with Turner's memories of a more secure village-oriented life. See John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1965), and Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and His America* (New York, 1934). Jacobs, "The Great Despoliation," briefly discusses the Wisconsin background of these three men.

part of an emerging community surrounded by a fresh landscape of pine forests, fields, swamps, lakes, and rivers left a lasting impression. Toward the end of his life, he wrote glowing, detailed accounts of his midwestern boyhood; his earlier more ambivalent reflections about this time and place are found in a series of letters written between 1886 and 1889 to his fiancée, Mae Sherwood. They met in June 1886 at the end of Turner's first year of teaching at Madison, and the subsequent stream of letters to her Chicago home abound with a developing sense of place and a concern for the meaning of his midwestern roots. He spent much of the summer of 1886 fishing near Portage. His letters to Mae are full of paeans to the natural landscape—"Blessed be the woods! Wish I might never see a city again"—yet they are also sensitive to the cultural landscape, carefully describing farms and hardy German farmfolk, picturesque hamlets along the Fox River, and the "hosts of mounds where rest the antique bones of the mounds builders—for this was once *their* fishing and hunting ground."¹⁵

A critical tone soon tempered this sense of place. While visiting his home in June 1887, he wrote, "Ah, but what a barren little town it is, so sandy and dusty and hot. I have grown away from my old time friends here, too . . . I would sooner keep a fond recollection of the place of my birth but it's impossible."¹⁶ And a trip to New England that summer—his first venture beyond the Midwest—intensified these feelings. Turner was moved by New England's rugged landscape and drawn to Boston's historical and cultural depth, confessing to Mae that "I could gladly pitch my tent on Boston Common for the rest of my days."¹⁷ This experience compelled Turner to see the Midwest and himself in a clearer light. "I understand myself better since I went to New England . . . In the first place, I was getting very provincial. . . . The scenery, too, taught me something about myself. I have lived all my life in a comparatively monotonous country." Without this trip he feared he could have become as backward and banal as the bleak towns and scrubby landscape of his native region.¹⁸ This revelation, however, did not cause Turner to reject his midwestern background. A week after complaining about the barrenness of his early environment, he declared that his scholarly mission would be to write the history of this raw, growing area:

¹⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner to Mae Sherwood, August 21, 1886, and July 19, 1886, Box A #18 and #16, Turner Papers.

¹⁶ Turner to Sherwood, June 12, 1887, Box B #3, Turner Papers.

¹⁷ Turner to Sherwood, June 28, 1887, Box B #9, Turner Papers.

¹⁸ Turner to Sherwood, August 24, 1887, Box B #30, Turner Papers.

I shall spend my study chiefly upon the Northwest and more generally upon the Mississippi Valley. The history of this great country remains to be written. . . . I am placed in a *new* society which is just beginning to realize that it has made a place for itself by mastering the wilderness and peopling the prairie, and is now ready to take its great course in universal history. It is something of a compensation to be among the advance guard of new social ideas and among a people whose destiny is all unknown. The west looks to the future, the east toward the past.¹⁹

The emerging West challenged him as a fresh field ready for cultivation, and he began the task painfully aware of the region's limitations.

This conviction was reinforced between 1888 and 1889 as Turner did graduate work at Baltimore and returned to the Midwest. Once again, contact with the East made him deeply aware of the flaws of his native region at the same time that he became more committed to the task of writing about it. On returning home he complained to Mae that "I have grown away from my native place. . . . I am stagnating in Portage. What an awful life." Yet within a few months he was exuberantly sharing with Woodrow Wilson his hopes to proclaim the historical importance of the West.²⁰ Thirty years later, Turner recalled this formative period in his life and concluded:

My own mind was warmed and stirred by the change from my more or less provincial life in the West to a new environment, where I could get a more detached view of the significance of the West itself and where I was challenged, in a way, to try to account for myself and my people, under conditions of a new audience.²¹

The ultimate affection for the Midwest and the strong sense of place that motivated much of Turner's thought is, therefore, more than a matter of regional chauvinism: his sectional thesis is more profound and ultimately more valuable for being rooted in critical affection rather than blind praise for his native soil.

The immediate product of this period of Turner's life—the frontier thesis—can be interpreted as the first stage in the development of the larger, more inclusive sectional hypothesis. Late in life, he looked back

¹⁹ Turner to Sherwood, September 5, 1887, Box B #37, Turner Papers.

²⁰ Turner to Sherwood, June 21 and June 24, 1889, Box D #47 and #48, Turner Papers, and Turner to Woodrow Wilson, August 31, 1889, Box 1 # 25, Turner Papers.

²¹ Turner to William E. Dodd, October 7, 1919, in Billington, *Genesis of the Frontier Thesis*, 195-96.

upon the frontier paper as a sectional manifesto, as "a protest against eastern neglect."²² A year before delivering the frontier essay, he had objected to the traditional treatment of American history in which "the older writers on the subject, coming, like all wise men, from the East, have largely restricted their view to the Atlantic coast." And Turner not only urged these wise old men to look beyond the Appalachians, but he also asserted that "the true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Mississippi Valley."²³

His 1893 essay was, therefore, an assertion of western and mid-western identity: the historiographic counterpart of the farmer's revolt, the Populist campaign, the rise of literary regionalism, and the development of skyscrapers and prairie houses at the heart of the continent in the last years of the nineteenth century.²⁴ In the 1780s, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur reported the western frontier to be a dismal region where "men appear to be no better than carnivorous animals"; during the Jacksonian period James Fenimore Cooper described the frontier as a plundered wilderness, swarming with grasping middle-class men; and in Turner's time, easterners like Charles Eliot Norton condemned the undeveloped imaginations and intemperate passions of the western masses.²⁵ Turner neatly transformed this into a glorification of western life by arguing that only the intense pressure of the frontier, no matter how crude and chaotic, could break the cake of European custom and forge a distinctly American character. The author of *The Prairie* winces every time the dullwitted squatter, Ishmael Bush, fells a tree; the originator of the frontier thesis, on the other hand, champions the clearing of the forest and ends *Rise of the New West, 1819-1829* with this heroic stroke: ". . . and on the frontier of the northwest, the young Lincoln sank his axe deep in the opposing forest."²⁶

²² Turner to Constance Skinner, March 15, 1922, in Billington, *Genesis of the Frontier Thesis*, 208.

²³ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Problems in American History," Ray Allen Billington, ed., *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1961), 28, 29.

²⁴ See Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 47-83. Ray Ginger, *Altgeld's America: The Lincoln Ideal Versus Changing Realities* (New York, 1958) contains a fuller picture of the creative fervor in Chicago at the turn of the century.

²⁵ Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* (New York, 1963), 66. James Fenimore Cooper's view pervades his novels, and Charles Eliot Norton's opinion is cited in Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Problem of the West," in Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 208-9.

²⁶ Turner, *Rise of the New West*, 332.

Turner admired the aggressive pioneer, yet he was also drawn to the wilderness, to the very thing that the pioneer destroyed. A series of autobiographical letters written between 1919 and 1931 are full of nostalgic portraits of his native soil as wilderness, frontier, and settled section. He had vivid memories of the bits of wilderness that remained in the Wisconsin River valley during his boyhood:

What I was *conscious* of was that father had come of pioneer folk, that he loved the forest, into which he used to take me fishing. I have polled down the Wisconsin in a dug-out with Indian guides from "Grandfather Bull Falls," through virgin forest of balsam firs, seeing deer in the river,—antlered beauties who watched us come down with curious eyes and then broke for the tall timber,—hearing the squaws in their village on the high bank talk their low treble to the bass of our Indian polesmen,—feeling that I belonged to it all.

But he saw only remnants of the wilderness: the first stages of the frontier had passed through Wisconsin a generation before his birth, and he had startling memories of the changes wrought by that process. "I have seen," he continued, "a lynched man hanging to a tree as I came home from school . . . have seen the red shirted Irish raftsmen *take* the town when they tied up and came ashore . . ." Turner remembered the turbulent frontier, but he reminisced in greater detail about the emergence of a distinctive sectional life. He recalled vibrant Norwegian, Welsh, Scottish, and Swiss communities adjacent to Portage; an Irish ward with its " 'keen-er' who looked like a Druid and whose shrill voice could be heard over impossible spaces when an Irish soul departed"; a Pomeranian neighborhood "where women wore wooden shoes, kerchiefs on their heads, red woolen petticoats . . . and drove their community's cows to a common pasture"; a beer hall "where a very able and intelligent German sold his brew; in it gather an ex-opera singer, who had grown too fat to sing"; and a mixture of "Yankees from Maine & Vermont, New York Yankees, Dutchmen from the Mohawk, brow curlers from the Highlands, Southerners—all kinds."²⁷

There are several important elements working in this reminiscence. First, Turner's attention is pulled in opposite directions: he is attached to a particular place—both in its primal state and as a settled community—at the same time that he is attracted to a moving process. He is proud

²⁷ Turner to Carl Becker, December 16, 1925, in Billington, *Genesis of the Frontier Thesis*, 243, 240. Turner's autobiographical letters to William Dodd, Constance Skinner, Carl Becker, Merle Curti, and Luther Bernard between 1919 and 1931 are collected in this book.

of the virgin forests and the forming society, yet he is also drawn to memories of the restless frontier. The tension between the moving frontier and the sense of place found in the diminished wilderness and the emerging section became a driving force in Turner's work. The frontier process interested him for a while; the land itself—both before and after it had been touched by the tumultuous frontier—became his abiding concern.

The description of Portage, in the second place, suggests that during an era increasingly affected by cities and machines, Turner held to an agrarian view of American life, to the vision that the Mississippi Valley "was the heart of an agricultural nation and the farmer the real, genuine American, the balance wheel of society."²⁸ He adhered to such a belief at the same time that he was deeply disturbed by the nation's urban-industrial transformation. Contemplating the advance of civilization at the head of the Ohio Valley, he wrote: "Where Braddock and his men, 'carving a cross on the wilderness rim,' were struck by the painted savages in the primeval woods, huge furnaces belch forth perpetual fires and Huns and Bulgars, Poles and Sicilians struggle for a chance to earn their daily bread, and live a brutal and degraded life."²⁹ Turner believed that the vigorous growth of sectional life would counteract such frightening changes; and his image of what sectional life would be was derived from memories of rural and small-town life late in the nineteenth century, a time when—especially through the mist of memory—American society seemed close to the *Gemeinschaft* ideal of intimate, stable, traditional communities for the last time.

Robert Wiebe has described the America of Turner's childhood as an archipelago of self-contained and self-satisfied "island communities" that reluctantly became a centralized urban-industrial whole after the First World War.³⁰ In 1920 Sherwood Anderson looked back, as Turner had, upon a simpler, more secure America whose island communities seemed poised between the turbulence of the frontier and the uncertainties of the machine age. "In all the towns of midwestern America," he wrote, "it was a time of waiting: . . . there being no great national problems that touched closely their lives, the minds of men were turned in upon themselves."

²⁸ Frank R. Kramer, *Voices in the Valley: Mythmaking and Folk Belief in the Shaping of the Middle West* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1964), 74.

²⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The West and American Ideals," Billington, *Frontier and Section*, 105-6.

³⁰ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967).

Here was a slower, more reflective life and a time to become attached to a specific place and its people:

In all the great Mississippi Valley each town came to have a character of its own, and the people who lived in the towns were to each other like members of a great family. . . . A kind of invisible roof beneath which every one lived spread itself over each town. . . . under the great roof everyone knew his neighbor. . . . Strangers did not come and go swiftly and mysteriously and there was no constant and confusing roar of machinery and of new projects afoot. For the moment mankind seemed about to take time to try to understand itself.

Turner also remembered such an insular, stable society; but unlike Anderson, he believed that vital aspects of this sort of social order were not irrevocably lost, that roaring machines and new projects could be molded to this steadfast pattern.³¹

Several of Turner's midwestern contemporaries also exalted their region and used memories of a simpler, more secure postfrontier past to direct present anxieties. In particular, the sectional thesis had literary and architectural counterparts in the early work of Hamlin Garland (1860–1940) and Frank Lloyd Wright (1869–1959). Born in the same decade in the same part of Wisconsin as Turner, Garland's and Wright's works elucidate the midwestern background of the sectional thesis and Turner's search for a model of order and stability in the face of rapid social change.

Garland was born a year before Turner on a farm in the Mississippi coulee country near West Salem, Wisconsin. During the 1880s, both men journeyed east to return within a few years to contribute to the surge of regional awareness in the Midwest. Just as Turner explained American development as the result of the contact between civilization and the western wilderness, Garland declared that the Midwest would soon become the hearth of American culture, that "henceforth, when men of the Old World speak of America, they will not think of Boston and New

³¹ Sherwood Anderson, *Poor White* (New York, 1966), 44–45. C. Wright Mills was one of the first to point out that memories of such simpler agrarian communities permeated many early twentieth century social theories. See C. Wright Mills, "The Professional Ideology of Social Pathologists," *American Journal of Sociology*, XLIX (September 1943), 165–80, as well as Jean Quandt, *From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of the Progressive Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1970), and R. Wilson Jackson, *In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States, 1860–1920* (New York, 1970), in which the rural roots and predispositions of intellectuals such as Josiah Royce, Charles Horton Cooley, G. Stanley Hall, Robert Park, John Dewey, and Jane Addams are analyzed. Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (Cambridge, 1962) is the standard example of this sort of treatment.

York and Philadelphia, they will mean Chicago and the Mississippi valley." And just as Turner was aroused by all that needed to be studied in western history, Garland was stirred by the wealth of untapped literary material at his feet, by the "great heterogeneous, shifting, brave population, a land teeming with unrecorded and infinite drama."³² Their theories started with renewed affection for the Midwest but quickly reached beyond sectional uplift toward a critical examination of American culture. During their childhoods, both felt a tug-of-war between the forces of mobility and settlement, between the turbulent frontier and the stable community. Garland's autobiography recounts the tensions between his venturesome father and more cautious mother.³³ At the father's bidding, the family was continually packing up and heading west until the children had scattered and their father had become an old man "snowbound on a trackless plain." The mother and children yearned to settle down, to establish a secure home. Garland regretted the deprivations of a migratory childhood, and his early fiction criticizes the rootless, solitary life encouraged by the frontier.

Wright also looked back upon a nomadic childhood and longed for a sense of stability and community. His father was an itinerant preacher and musician who dragged his family from one disappointment to another. His mother came from a family of prosperous Welsh farmers settled in the Wisconsin River valley, and she resented the rootlessness of her married life. The most satisfying periods of Wright's childhood were spent with his mother's relatives at Spring Green, Wisconsin, forty miles downriver from Portage. The summers with the Lloyd-Jones clan from 1879 until 1886 gave him a sense of family intimacy and attachment to place that he would draw upon when he entered the swirl of Chicago in the late 1880s and developed the "prairie house." This structure, with its horizontal earth lines, wide eaves, sense of depth, and nuclear fireplace, can be seen as a piece of Wright's "beloved ancestral Valley" planted in the chaotic city and as a harbor for the values of security, shelter, privacy, and family mutuality that seemed threatened by the rise of an urban-industrialized civilization.³⁴

³² Hamlin Garland, *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art Dealing Chiefly with Literature, Painting and the Drama*, ed. Jane Johnson (Cambridge, 1960), 113, 15.

³³ Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border* (New York, 1917), 43-46 and throughout.

³⁴ See Robert C. Twombly, "Saving the Family: Middle Class Attraction to Wright's Prairie House, 1901-1909," *American Quarterly*, XXVII (March 1975), 57-72. Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York, 1943), describes his parents' conflict and abounds with paeans to the rural Midwest.

The Midwest in the 1890s, therefore, became the platform for at least three related expressions of regionalism. Wright's prairie house and Garland's and Turner's theories were all born of the struggle between the forces of mobility and settlement, between the restless frontier—either agrarian or industrial—and the rooted community. Garland and Wright opted for stable community and a sense of place. And Turner, who more than any other American has inspired the glorification of the restless pioneer, also criticized the migratory itch in our culture. He came to see the frontier as a fleeting process, the section as an enduring fact of American history. The boisterous movement across the land, he argued, would eventually subside into a mature attachment to particular places upon the land—a sense of environmental awareness and community that would control the growth of cities and machines. While regionalism was one episode in Garland's career and a largely unconscious force behind Wright's work, it became Turner's dominant concern after the mid-1890s. The sectional concept is rooted in his midwestern background; it reached its fullest expression, however, as Turner reacted to intellectual currents in the western world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Intellectual Sources of a Theory. A general theory of sectionalism was implicit in Turner's interest in the ever-retreating frontier. An autobiographical letter described how:

In studying our social and economic development, and the frontier advance, I saw at once, that the frontier passed into successive and varied regions, and that new sections evolved in the relations between these geographic regions, and the kinds of people and society which entered them and adjusted to the environment.³⁵

There are at least two important ideas here. First, for Turner the physiographic "region" exists before colonization, while the true "section" emerges afterwards. Second, the section forms as the settlers fit their lives to new conditions. Of the relationship between culture and environment in the Midwest, Turner wrote that "it took a century for this society to fit itself into the conditions of the whole province. Little by little, nature pressed into her mold the plastic pioneer life."³⁶ The image of people adjusting to fresh and varied environments is at the heart of Turner's conception of historical process.

³⁵ Turner to Skinner, in Billington, *Genesis of the Frontier Thesis*, 209.

³⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Middle West," in Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 154.

Graduate work at Johns Hopkins under Herbert Baxter Adams should have prepared Turner to slight environmental factors. As high priest of the Teutonic germ theorists, Adams urged his students to turn from shallow American sources to the richer European roots. Turner resisted this logic. His experience in a community developing out of the wilderness forced a respect for the natural environment, and contact with another Johns Hopkins instructor, Woodrow Wilson, helped him to visualize the cultural impact of environmental forces. Not only did the two men agree that historians had neglected regions beyond New England, but Turner recalled that Wilson's "emphasis upon Bagehot's idea of growth by 'breaking the cake of custom' left a deep impression upon me when I came to consider what part the West had played."³⁷ With this theory and striking metaphor in mind, Turner would assert in his most famous essay that a fresh American culture evolved as people adjusted to a new environment. And the very logic of this environmental explanation compelled him in later essays to perceive American space as composed of many environments evoking many responses.

Adams's influence notwithstanding, it was a favorable time for such interests. In the late nineteenth century, European and American scholars were particularly concerned with the relationship between culture and environment.³⁸ In Germany, Freidrich Ratzel (1844–1904) was writing encyclopedic studies of the connections between land and life and of the spatial patterns of cultural diffusion. Ratzel lived in the United States from 1873 until 1875, and Turner eagerly read and cited his account of America. While critical of our restless life-style and ruthless use of the land, Ratzel praised "the spiritual element of swing and push which a widely extended look into vastness gives to political projects and actions" and felt that "the breadth of land has furnished to the American spirit something of its own largeness." In a passage which presages Turner's developing interest in sectional consciousness, the German geographer and anthropologist predicted that Americans would slow down and cultivate

³⁷ Turner to Dodd, October 7, 1919, in Billington, *Genesis of the Frontier Thesis*, 196.

³⁸ For the following discussion of late nineteenth century geographical theory, the author is indebted to William Coleman, "Science and Symbol in the Turner Frontier Hypothesis," *American Historical Review*, LXXII (October 1966), 22-49; Preston E. James, *All Possible Worlds: A History of Geographical Ideas* (New York, 1972); Richard Hartshorne, *The Nature of Geography: A Critical Survey of Current Thought in the Light of the Past* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1939); and conversations with Frederick Lukermann of the Geography Department of the University of Minnesota.

a mature, land-conscious civilization as their continent became fully occupied.³⁹

Other people were interested in the physiographic basis of life. During Turner's lifetime, Otto Schlutter and Siegfried Passarge moved from Ratzel's sweeping abstractions to closer observations of the texture and spirit of specific regions. Their discussions of the interrelationships between natural and cultural landscapes and their conception of each region or *landschaft* as a living entity greatly influenced American regional theory in the early twentieth century.⁴⁰ In France, Paul Vidal de la Blanche (1845–1918) directed a similar movement. Whereas Ratzel had seemed to stress the molding power of nature, Vidal emphasized the impact of man. According to the French geographer, the natural region, or *pays*, is the arena within which people live, and each region furnishes both possibilities and limits to its inhabitants. In parts of the Great Plains, for example, it is possible to drill for oil or raise wheat or corn but not to fish for tuna or grow oranges or artichokes. According to Vidal's theory of *possibilisme*, every region is a reservoir of latent activities which, once chosen and worked at, give full character to that region. A region, for him, is:

. . . a reserve of energy whose origin lies in nature but whose development depends upon man. It is man who, by moulding the land to his own purposes, brings out its individuality. He establishes a connection between its separate features. He substitutes for the incoherent effect of local circumstances a systematic concourse of forces. It is thus that a region defines and differentiates itself and becomes, as it were, a medal struck off in the effigy of a people.⁴¹

The best way to see this cultural imprint, Vidal argued, was through

³⁹ Turner, notes for an essay on "Influences of Geography upon the Settlement of the U.S.," n.d., File Drawer 14 A #2, Turner Papers. Turner also cited these passages from Friedrich Ratzel in Frederick Jackson Turner, "The West as a Field for Historical Study," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1896* (Washington, D.C., 1897), 284. Ratzel's prediction of the growth of an American sectional consciousness is cited in Carl Sauer, "The Formative Years of Ratzel in the United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 61 (June 1971), 253-54.

⁴⁰ See Hartshorne, *Nature of Geography*, 250-84, and R. B. Hall, "The Geographic Region: A Resumé," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 42 (September 1935), 122-30. Carl Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," John Leighly, ed., *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer* (Berkeley, 1963), 315-50, is perhaps the most important expression of this tradition.

⁴¹ Paul Vidal de la Blanche's oft-quoted words are from P. Vidal de la Blanche, *Tableau de la Géographie de la France* (Paris, 1903), 8.

field studies of familiar regions, studies which would evoke the total spirit or *genre de vie* of that piece of land. For Vidal and others, the region was perceived as an organism born in the interplay of natural and cultural forces: an entity with a personality of its own. Still other social scientists of the era saw the earth's surface as a configuration of primal, organic areas rather than as political states and undertook to delineate this natural framework of civilization. By 1914 W. L. G. Joerg reported that no fewer than twenty-one scholars had proposed boundaries for the natural subdivisions of the North American continent alone.⁴²

Turner participated in these efforts. He joined both the Association of American Geographers and the American Geographical Society and deliberately tried to inject geological and geographical knowledge into historical inquiry. He responded to the French as well as to the German schools of thought. He knew the work of Vidal's students Jean Brunhes and Camille Vallaux, and he cites Vidal's comment that the American spirit is best represented by the nation's vast spaces, a statement remarkably close to Ratzel's observations.⁴³ A geographer in his own right, Turner was aware of the debate between the determinists and the possibilists. In his fascination with the molding power of the American environment, he often made sweeping claims, such as: "Most of the political and economic history . . . of Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Alabama and Mississippi can be written in terms of geology"; yet he usually qualified such utterances, as he did in this case, by acknowledging that "the human factor has also to be reckoned with." Turner was never a pure-and-simple environmentalist. "The greater sections," he wrote in 1925, "are the result of the joint influence of the geologist's physiographic provinces and the colonizing stock that entered them."⁴⁴

Turner also benefited from two additional traditions that were emerging in American thought. He profited, first of all, from a general interest

⁴² W. L. G. Joerg, "The Subdivisions of North America into Natural Regions: A Preliminary Inquiry," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 4 (March 1914), 55-83. This report helped inspire an elaborate study: Nevin Fenneman, "The Physiographic Divisions of the United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 6 (March 1916), 16-98. Turner uses parts of Fenneman's maps in his last book, Turner, *United States, 1830-1850*, 2.

⁴³ Turner mentions Jean Brunhes and Camille Vallaux in Frederick Jackson Turner, "Sections and Nation," Turner, *Significance of Sections*, 317; and he cites Vidal in Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Development of American Society," Jacobs, ed., *Frederick Jackson Turner's Legacy*, 171.

⁴⁴ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Lecture on Sectionalism," Jacobs, ed., *Frederick Jackson Turner's Legacy*, 66, 67; and Turner, "Significance of the Section," 279.

in the environmental basis of our culture and growing awareness of the natural landscape; and second, he was influenced by scientific efforts to find the natural divisions of the North American continent.

After the Civil War, a significant number of Americans began to look at the land they had passed through and abused for so long. According to Lewis Mumford, only late in the nineteenth century did the pioneer's ruthless land hunger begin to give way throughout the nation to the settler's love of the soil.⁴⁵ This emerging reverence for the land had been anticipated in Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and received its most powerful expression in George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* (1864). In this book, Marsh anticipated much of Vidal's work by describing how people had changed the face of the earth throughout history. "Man is everywhere a disturbing agent," Marsh declared. "Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discord." And he was particularly critical of the "incessant flitting" of Americans, whom he urged to settle down and renew rather than deplete their land.⁴⁶ What seems almost platitudinous today was a radical notion in the 1860s. His description of people molding the land countered the long-standing assumption that the natural environment directed human behavior and the emerging Darwinian belief that the earth's many life forms had evolved in their adjustments to various habitats. At a time when it was generally assumed that the earth made man, Marsh pointed out that man in fact made the earth.

The perception of man as responsible for the care of the earth and the preservation of nature was reflected in the late nineteenth century popularity of John Burroughs, John Muir, and Thoreau; in the creation of national parks, beginning with Yellowstone in 1872; in Frederick Law Olmstead's and Horace Cleveland's landscaping and residential planning; and in the pervasive urge to replace the rational, rigid grid with flexibly designed parks, gardens, and suburbs.⁴⁷ The sectional thesis developed during a period of incipient interest in the relationship between land and life, and Turner was influenced by several of these concerns. His letters reveal an early familiarity with Thoreau and Burroughs, and he credited Ralph

⁴⁵ Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865-1895* (New York, 1955), 59-106.

⁴⁶ George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature*, ed. David Lowenthal (Cambridge, 1965), 36, 280.

⁴⁷ See John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *American Space: The Centennial Years, 1865-1876* (New York, 1972), for a discussion of the impulse to define space in terms of natural rather than man-made boundaries.

Waldo Emerson for drawing his attention to the effects of vast geographical space upon American activity and character.⁴⁸ There is no evidence that Turner read Marsh's book; but as early as 1893 he noted the environmental studies of Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, a Harvard geologist who applied Marsh's vision of man's wanton depletion and destruction of the natural resources to the American scene in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁹ Turner's belief, furthermore, that the contact between civilization and nature transformed Europeans into Americans contributed to the late nineteenth century reverence for wild nature. According to Roderick Nash, Turner recast the role of the wilderness "from that of an enemy which civilization had to conquer to a beneficent influence on men and institutions. His greatest service to wilderness consisted of linking it in the minds of his countrymen with sacred American virtues."⁵⁰

This respect for the natural environment—intensified, no doubt, by the sudden awareness at the end of the century that there were limits to the nation's space and resources—was paralleled by scientific efforts to describe and classify the continent's natural regions and resources.⁵¹ Especially influential in the formulation of Turner's sectional ideas were the geological surveys of John Wesley Powell (1834–1902).⁵² After

⁴⁸ Turner's letters to Mae Sherwood contain nature descriptions modeled after Henry David Thoreau and John Burroughs as well as discussions of the effects of these writers upon his perception of the landscape. See Turner to Sherwood, August 14 and August 28, 1887, Box B #22 and #32, Turner Papers. Turner acknowledged Ralph Waldo Emerson's influence, especially the impact of his essay, "The Young American," in some notes on the "Influence of Geography upon the Settlement of the U.S.," n.d., File Drawer 14 A #2, Turner Papers.

⁴⁹ N. S. Shaler, *Nature and Man in America* (New York, 1891) is part of the 1893 syllabus for Turner's course, "The Colonization of North America from the Earliest Times to 1763." See File Drawer 15 A #5 and File Drawer 14 D #1, Turner Papers. In Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, *Man and the Earth* (New York, 1905), Nathaniel Shaler writes that "as he mounts toward civilization, man becomes a spoiler. As soon as he attains the grade of hunter he begins to disturb the balance of life. . . . The life of the world has learned of its new master in wide-spread slaying and subjugation," 2, 190.

⁵⁰ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 1967), 146.

⁵¹ See Joerg, "The Subdivisions of North America."

⁵² Turner was also influenced by the statistical and cartographical work of Henry Gannett (1846–1914). Gannett defined the frontier as a zone containing from two to six people, and his maps depicting the progress of that zone from 1790 until 1890 were used by the Census Bureau and became recurring elements in Turner's thought. Gannett also instituted a system of cataloguing data by regions for the Census Bureau, a system that Turner used to support his sectional concept. See Mood, "The Sectional Concept, 1750–1900," 72–83, and Henry Gannett, "The Settled Area and the Density of Our Population," *International Review*, XII (January 1882), 70–77. In addition to using John Wesley Powell's and Gannett's ideas, Turner also corresponded with such promi-

exploring the Colorado Plateau for seven years, Powell published a report in 1878 which argued that American woodland culture was ill suited for the dry, treeless spaces west of the 100th meridian. For this arid region, he stressed the desirability of communal settlement at water sources, and he proposed replacing the customary geometric grid of 160-acre homesteads with a variable system of holdings ranging from 80-acre parcels for irrigated farming to portions no smaller than 2,560 acres for grazing. The boundaries of these holdings, furthermore, should be "controlled by topographic features."⁵³ Powell's proposal helped Turner realize that different environments could elicit different settlement patterns and that the agrarian frontier could evoke collectivism as well as individualism.⁵⁴

Turner's search for a theory that would cover other sections as well as the arid West was furthered by Powell's essay on "Physiographic Regions of the United States" (1896). Powell felt that the nation was composed of sixteen natural regions which he derived from major slopes and river basins.⁵⁵ Turner had been waiting for such an analysis. In 1892, he had declared that "... there is need for thorough study of the physiographic basis of our history. When the geologist, the meteorologist, the biologist, and the historian shall go hand in hand in this study, they will see how largely American history has been determined by natural conditions."⁵⁶ In 1896 Turner eagerly read and accepted Powell's analysis, for it provided a geological framework upon which he could observe the advancing waves of human settlement. And in 1898 Turner strengthened his understanding of the relationship between the American landscape and culture by attending Charles Van Hise's seminar on the physiography of the United States.⁵⁷

During the following year, Turner rewrote the frontier essay in terms of what he learned from Van Hise and Powell. This revision, which was designed for American history teachers, pictured the frontier as a "flood of settlement" flowing into "successive physiographic areas." At

ment American geographers as Harlan Barrows, Isaiah Bowman, Nevin Fenneman, A. K. Lobeck, Rollin Salisbury, and Ellen Churchill Semple.

⁵³ John Wesley Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States*, ed. Wallace Stegner (Cambridge, 1962), 40.

⁵⁴ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Contributions of the West to American Democracy," in Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 257, 258.

⁵⁵ John W. Powell, *The Physiography of the United States* (Chicago, 1896), 66–100. Turner's heavily marked copy of this essay is in File Drawer L, Turner Papers.

⁵⁶ Turner, "Problems in American History," 30.

⁵⁷ Turner's careful notes of Charles Van Hise's lectures are located in File Drawer 15 A #4, Turner Papers.

several points in this essay, Turner is on the verge of writing history in terms of geology. "When the science of physiography is more completely related to the study of our history," he argued, "it will be seen how dependent that history was upon the forces that carved out the limestone valleys and deposited alluvial soils along river courses." To actually see how civilization had seeped into the geological structure of the continent, Turner urged teachers to place census maps of the advancing frontier line alongside Major Powell's map of the physiographic regions. The lesson then became clearer: the frontier had advanced unevenly, according to the dictates of geography; the nation had matured in sections "each with its own inheritance, its own contributions, and individuality."⁵⁸

The sectional thesis reached its final shape as Turner joined his environmental studies with Josiah Royce's concept of a "higher provincialism." Both regional theories were based upon personal memories of frontier life. While Turner had mixed emotions about what the frontier had done to his native soil, Royce saw it as an unmitigated evil. In his history of California (1886) and in a series of essays written toward the end of his life, Royce diagnosed the frontier as a disease that disintegrated community and depleted the land. For Royce, the "real winning of the West" took place in homes, villages, and fields—in the urge to use the land wisely and to build stable communities—not in the mining camps of rootless, isolated individuals. Reviving Marsh's criticism of our nomadic misuse of the land, Royce contended:

Local traditions, the reverent memory of the pioneers, the formation of local customs, the development of community loyalty,—these have displaced the merely wandering mood, and the merely detached spirit of private individual enterprise. . . . And whatever our social evils . . . we have learned one lesson—namely, that in the formation of a loyal local consciousness, in a wise provincialism, lies the way toward social salvation.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ "A Comparison of Differing Versions of 'The Significance of the Frontier,'" Everett E. Edwards, ed., *The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1938), 280, 287, 281, 275–92. H. Roy Merrens, "Historical Geography and Early American History," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXII (October 1965), 529–48, questions Turner's use of maps and his notion that population spread according to the lay of the land.

⁵⁹ Josiah Royce, "Provincialism, Based upon a Study of Early Conditions in California," *Putnam's Magazine*, VII (November 1909), 237. In addition to this essay and Josiah Royce, *California, From the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco: A Study in American Character* (Boston, 1886), see Josiah Royce, "Provincialism," in Josiah Royce, *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems* (Freeport, New York, 1967), 55–108. Turner's marked copy of the essay is in File Drawer L, Turner Papers.

He perceived steady progress from the evils of the frontier to the saving graces of the province; Turner found redemption, of different sorts, in both stages of development. As Turner tried to grasp the meaning of the death of the frontier and shifted his attentions from frontier mobility to sectional stability, he turned to Royce's theory. His most important discussion of sectionalism relies upon Royce's belief that a wise provincialism would nurture careful use of the earth and also support a sense of community amid mass society.⁶⁰

Sectional Thesis. From 1893 until the publication of "The Significance of the Section in American History" in 1925, Turner argued with increasing clarity and conviction that a sense of place and respect for the natural environment were needed in a frontierless society. He carefully prepared to analyze the relationship between environment and culture by reading Ratzel, Vidal, Shaler, Powell, and others, by studying geology under Van Hise, and by rewriting the frontier essay in terms of this fresh knowledge. By 1907 he felt confident enough to begin championing the use of environmental theory at professional conferences. In December of that year both the American Historical Association and the American Sociological Society met at Madison, and Turner arranged a program on the "Relation of Geography and History" for the historians and addressed the sociologists, urging them to pay more attention to the spatial variations of culture. A year later, at the AHA meeting in Richmond, Virginia, he renewed the call for historians to examine environmental factors and to see sectionalism as a vital, growing force in our culture.⁶¹ The historians and the sociologists were highly skeptical. Turner absorbed their criticisms and decided that a more practical way to champion the cause would be to demonstrate the historical importance of particular sections. To prove the significance of the section in American history by examining New England, the Ohio Valley, the Midwest, the West, and the South became his basic scholarly mission. Except for another poorly received address on "The Significance of Sections" in 1914, Turner curbed his desire to proclaim a general theory of sectionalism until the early 1920s.

⁶⁰ Turner, "Significance of the Section," 275.

⁶¹ See Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner*, 227-32, for an account of Turner's efforts to sway historians and sociologists toward sectional considerations. Turner's account of the Madison conference was printed as Frederick Jackson Turner, "Report of the Conference on the Relation of Geography and History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1907* (Washington, D.C., 1908), I, 45-47. His address to the sociologists was published as Frederick J. Turner, "Is Sectionalism in America Dying Away?" *American Journal of Sociology*, XIII (March 1908), 661-75.

His struggle to communicate the sectional thesis during these years was partly due to a deeply rooted conflict in his own mind. He was drawn in two directions: out into the mainstream of restlessness and mobility and back toward the countercurrent of tradition and attachment to place.⁶² Turner found two compulsions within himself and also entwined throughout American history: the urge to strike out for new territory and the desire for rootedness and community. His ideological allegiance shifted from one set of values to the other, but by the early 1920s he would firmly agree with Royce that provincial or sectional identity had become the cornerstone of American well-being and stability.

Both the compulsion to wander and the desire to settle down, Turner argued, grew out of the frontier experience. The frontier bred rampant individualism as well as collective endeavor, and in this apparent contradiction one can see the seeds of sectionalism that grew to replace the vanishing frontier. The pioneer who felt the urge to move on at the sight of smoke from a newcomer's campfire also knew that sooner or later he would need help from his neighbor. Turner admired both pioneer traits. He praised the nomadic backwoodsmen who "found too little elbow room in town life," yet he extolled the communal life of the backwoods settlements and predicted that "in the spirit of the pioneer's 'house raising' lies the salvation of the Republic."⁶³

As long as free lands beckoned, the inevitable clash between frontier individualism and collectivism could be avoided: Natty Bumppo or Huck Finn could simply leave the jurisdiction of people like Judge Temple or Miss Watson. But once the open West disappeared, these types had to face each other. As Turner described it, the "squatter ideal" of "individual freedom to compete unrestrictedly for the resources of a continent" confronted the "ideal of a democracy—'government of the people, by the people and for the people.'" "The national problem," he wrote, "is no

⁶² Although he ignores Turner's sectional phase, Max Lerner succinctly describes the tension between the forces of mobility and settlement in American culture. Lerner argues that "the idea of Nature, as it has been expressed in American commentary, has two aspects—that of restless mobility, as emphasized by Turner and his followers, and that of attachment to place, as emphasized by the regionalists and traditionalists. To understand America one must see them as facets of each other—a double beat of migration and the sense of place. . . . When the beat of migration has fulfilled itself, it may be expected that the same intensity which informed it will be transformed into attachment to place." Max Lerner, *America as a Civilization: Life and Thought in the United States Today* (New York, 1957), 95.

⁶³ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Hunter Type," Jacobs, ed., *Frederick Jackson Turner's Legacy*, 153, and Frederick Jackson Turner, "Middle Western Pioneer Democracy," in Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 358.

longer how to cut and burn away the vast screen of the dense and daunting forest; it is how to save and wisely use the remaining timber.”⁶⁴ In a settled nation, in other words, restless individualism would give way to cooperative action and attachment to place.

Turner found the strongest evidence of this change in the Populist agitation of the 1890s and in the persistence of sectionalism after the passing of the frontier. Pioneer folk who, in their wandering years, had considered government an evil entanglement were now settled farmers and townspeople seeking legislative protection from the forces of eastern plutocracy and proletarianism.⁶⁵ At the same time, sectional differences—which Turner believed grew more vigorously in a closed than in an expanding space—also stood in the way of the consolidating forces of Wall Street. With restless frontier movement halted and the land occupied, Turner believed unique American subcultures would grow out of the landscape, cultures potentially as rich and various yet less divisive than those of the Old World. “The American section,” he argued in 1922, “may be likened to the shadowy image of the European nation, to the European state denatured of its toxic qualities.”⁶⁶

Sectionalism, therefore, answered many psychological and social needs: it provided a resting place and a sense of community after so many centuries of westward migration; it nurtured an awareness of the environment that broke the pioneer pattern of mining the land and moving on; it implied a healthy cultural diversity that diverted the urban-industrial glacier; it encouraged the sense of American uniqueness; and it offered an alternative to “toxic” European nationalism. Sectionalism also represented a geographical fact that existed before and after the frontier movement across the continent. The “vast and shaggy continent,” which Turner described as seizing and transforming civilized Europeans into primitive Americans, was composed of many environments, each evoking distinct patterns of life. “The vast spaces over which this forming people have spread,” he observed, “are themselves a complex of physiographic section.” “The first clearly marked social integration took place in *sections* rather than in the nation as a whole.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Frederick Jackson Turner, “Social Forces in American History,” in Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 320, and Frederick Jackson Turner, “The West and American Ideals,” in Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 293.

⁶⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, “Pioneer Ideals and the State University,” in Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 277, 279.

⁶⁶ Turner, “Sections and Nation,” 316.

⁶⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, “Problems in American History,” in Turner, *Significance of Sections*, 8, and Turner, “Development of American Society,” 175.

While sectionalism existed along the Atlantic coast from the beginning, nationalism only developed as settlers moved inland. People from various coastal sections and European nations gathered and blended in the inland frontier. Out of this continuous movement and mingling of people and institutions emerged the outlines of a national character. Sectional distinctions were momentarily fused into a composite type "in the crucible of the frontier" where, through mobility and intermarriage, "the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics."⁶⁸ Yet after this nationalizing ferment had moved on, the population settled back into sections. Turner's frontier might be thought of as a turbulent wave passing over an uneven stretch of land. The features that stand out before the wave arrives are momentarily submerged as it swirls over them only to emerge again in its wake. The separate parts remain although they have been somewhat smoothed by the wave. In a similar manner, a slice of the North American continent under the influence of the frontier evolves from a jumble of physiographic regions to an area of frontier activity to a settled pattern of sections functioning within the national whole. The homogenizing phase is transitory; a sectional pattern endures. Yet the frontier works an important transformation: it brings a swarm of disparate regions into a federation of sections, into a nation which is, ideally, a creative association of distinct parts: "a nobler structure, in which each section will find its place as a fit room in a worthy house."⁶⁹

Thus, for Turner, sectionalism was an enduring fact of American life that existed before and after the frontier and explained many of the problems and accomplishments of our past. As a historian, he knew the weaknesses of sectionalism: the possible drift toward selfishness and small-mindedness, the tendency for one section to ignore or condemn other areas and see itself as the national standard, and the chance of misunderstandings, rivalries, and conflicts. He believed, nevertheless, that the benefits of sectionalism outweighed these handicaps and that "the Civil War was only the most drastic and most tragic of sectional manifestations"—a terrible deviation from a generally worthy and constructive tradition.⁷⁰ Echoing Royce, Turner would argue that sectional friction and fissipar-

⁶⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 23, 30.

⁶⁹ Turner, "Sections and Nation," 339.

⁷⁰ Turner, "Significance of the Section," 26, and the opening paragraph of Frederick Jackson Turner, "Geographic Sectionalism in American History," in Turner, *Significance of Sections*, 193.

ousness, if it comes, might be preferable to inflexible nationalism and the consolidation of life into an ever-widening, undifferentiated mass.

Fortunately, such choices would be rarely necessary, for Turner believed that Americans had developed a social and political system that balanced the forces of fragmentation and consolidation. Embedded in James Madison's theory of federalism was the conviction that the Republic was strengthened by localism: that a diversity of parties, interests, and local governments scattered over an extensive area would clog surges of nationwide emotion and make it difficult for destructive tides of mass impulses to develop. The opposite drift toward atomistic separatism, according to Turner, was held in check by the growth of cross-sectional interests and political parties, by the fact that there were Democrats in New England as well as in the South, Republicans in the West as well as in the Midwest. After 1914, Turner would compare the "*Pax Americana*" to war-torn Europe and propose that the "American League of Sections" serve as a model for worldwide peace.⁷¹

Turner became an ardent champion of sectionalism because it seemed to offer the most satisfying answers to the difficult questions raised by the end of the frontier and the rise of an urban-industrial society. In 1893 he had announced that "the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."⁷² This famous funeral sermon ends with the dismal image of a frontier nation without open space and a pioneer people without free lands to subdue. Fortunately, sectionalism offered a solution to this distressing situation. Turner's geographical frame of mind and his emotional attachment to the wild forests and open tracts of the continent led him to believe that American mobility halted as soon as these empty spaces were occupied. Movement—the "dominant fact" of frontier life—would give way to a sense of place—and roaming individualism would be replaced by a sense of community. "As the frontier advance drew to a close," he concluded, "as these provinces were no longer regions to be crossed, or merely to be exploited, but home-sections of permanent settlers, the final stage was reached."⁷³ It was time to establish roots, to articulate and shape raw space into comprehensible place, and Turner felt that Americans would eagerly choose to belong to particular places and communities after so many centuries of restless movement.

⁷¹ The "*Pax Americana*" reference is in Turner, "Sections and Nation," 339, and Turner, "Geographic Sectionalism in American History," 203.

⁷² Turner, "Significance of the Frontier in American History," 38.

⁷³ Turner, "Geographic Sectionalism in American History," 197–98.

But the problem refused to be solved so easily. Turner warily eyed the growth of cities, and he knew that during the 1920s, for the first time in our history, more people lived in urban places than in the country. At the turn of the century, sectionalism had seemed the most desirable sequel for the frontier; by the 1920s, it appeared to be the only way to avoid an unvarying urban-industrial order. In February 1924, Turner began his final course at Harvard by mentioning the unusual number of recent publications that discussed the problem of diminishing foodstuffs and natural resources in the United States and throughout the world. He then pointed out that this concern coincided with the census report that more Americans lived in cities than in the country, with more than one-fifth of the population living in metropolitan areas.⁷⁴ The 1920 census held as ominous a message for Turner as the 1890 bulletin announcing the end of the frontier. Without citing Oswald Spengler's theory that the rise of the metropolis marks the decline of the western world, as many of the other regionalists of the period were doing, Turner reached the conclusion that a nation overwhelmed by cities will lose touch with its sustaining resource base in the countryside.

The sectional thesis reached its fullest expression as Turner adjusted his thinking to the spread of urban society. In 1922 he outlined an essay on "The Significance of the City in American History," and in 1925 he argued, in a letter to Arthur Schlesinger, that "there seems likely to be an urban reinterpretation of our history. But we cannot altogether get away from the facts of American history, however far we go in the direction of adopting the Old World."⁷⁵ Turner knew that cities, accompanied by industrial capitalism and proletarianism, had deeply affected our national life; yet these forces seemed essentially unAmerican—they rubbed against the facts of our history, they belonged to the Old World. One of his basic assumptions was that America's greatness lies in its liberation and isolation from Europe, in its new and distinct way of

⁷⁴ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Opening Remarks at the Beginning of a Course on the History of the United States, 1880–1920," Jacobs, ed., *Frederick Jackson Turner's Legacy*, 84.

⁷⁵ Turner, notes for an essay on "City, Frontier, and Section" or "The Significance of the City in American History," October 1922, Box 14 A #1, Turner Papers. In these notes, Turner would seem to be alluding to Oswald Spengler when he writes: "Also read literature on the city—whose?—which shows how the city eats up its own children and is recruiting young men from the country." Turner's letter to Arthur Schlesinger of May 5, 1925, is in Jacobs, *Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner*, 163–65. Schlesinger recognized Turner's influence in Arthur M. Schlesinger, "The City in American History," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXVII (June 1940), 43.

life. In the 1920 preface to *The Frontier in American History* he stated that

... the larger part of what has been distinctive and valuable in America's contribution to the history of the human spirit has been due to this nation's peculiar experience in extending its type of frontier into new regions; and in creating peaceful societies with new ideals in the successive vast and differing geographic provinces which together make up the United States.

Open lands and then a vast and varied sectional life have set us apart from the Old World, yet Turner wondered how much of the "courageous, creative American spirit" could be sustained in "that new age which is replacing the era of free lands and of measurable isolation by consolidated and complex industrial development and by increasing resemblances and connections between the New World and the Old."⁷⁶

Cities and industrial technology had a place in Turner's thesis: they were necessary parts of civilization, and it might even be appropriate for them to dominate a few sections. But a more elemental, rural pattern based on the primary tasks of farming, fishing, raising livestock, lumbering, and mining would endure in the other sections. He felt that such food and resource-gathering regions would become increasingly important in a closed world suddenly aware of limits and of the need to conserve its raw materials. A shrill sense of urgency entered Turner's argument at this point. In a 1924 lecture, which stressed that with the passing of the frontier we must live in a limited world faced with "over population relative to food and raw materials," he exclaimed, "Truly a shrinking earth! An earth compelled by irresistible forces to exercise restraint, to associate, agree, and adjust, or to commit suicide."⁷⁷

This fear, coupled with the sectional solution, is most clearly stated in "The Significance of the Section in American History," a work he considered the "companion piece" to the frontier essay. The stage is set in two swift sentences: "The free lands are no longer free; the boundless resources are no longer boundless. Already the urban population exceeds the rural population of the United States." He then moves to the heart of his argument:

⁷⁶ Turner, *Frontier in American History*, [v-vi].

⁷⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Since the Foundation of Clark University," in Turner, *Significance of Sections*, 233-34. In this address, Turner named a more abstract alternative to global catastrophe than sectional planning: he put his faith in education, which he hoped would develop strong leadership from above and encourage the growth of ideas from below.

But this does not mean that the Eastern industrial type of urban life will necessarily spread across the whole nation, for food must come from somewhere. . . . there must remain in the United States large rural farming interests and sections. The natural advantages of certain regions for farming, or for forestry, or for pasturage will arrest the tendency of the Eastern industrial type of society to flow across the continent, and thus to produce a consolidated, homogeneous nation free from sections.

For Turner, the surge of urbanism in the 1920s underscored the need for an expanded resource base in the countryside. And beyond conserving natural resources, such areas were developing distinct cultures of their own—cultures insuring a responsible use of the land and also acting as mediating structures between the individual and mass society. With Royce in mind, Turner asserted that “the world needs now more than ever before the vigorous development of a highly organized provincial life to serve as a check upon mob psychology on a national scale, and to furnish that variety which is essential to vital growth and originality.” The American experience, he concluded, will continue to be dominated by the growth and interaction of such distinct cultural areas, and “we must shape our national action to the fact of a vast and varied Union of unlike sections.”⁷⁸

By the end of his life, Turner believed that the intensification of American sectionalism would conserve the nation’s natural resources, preserve its rural essence, and sustain a sense of community. He interpreted the peaceful growth of sections as a sign of ripeness and maturity, as a mark of a nation arriving at its full potential:

Now, we confront a nation with less mobility, with its unpossessed natural resources, more or less taken up; and exhibiting the larger outlines of a nation’s portrait, revealing something of the America that is to be, even as a man’s physiognomy takes firmer shape, as the unformed boyish face takes on the features and the lines of character of the man.⁷⁹

It was a relief to pass from youthful excess to full-grown stability, from the frenzied activity of the frontier and metropolis to the calmer considerations of sectional life. The historian of the American West would finally agree with D. H. Lawrence that people cannot chase sunsets forever, that:

Men are free when they are in a living homeland, not when they are straying and breaking away. . . . Men are free when they belong to a living, organic,

⁷⁸ Turner, “Significance of the Section,” 266, 275, 280.

⁷⁹ Turner, “Introduction to a Lecture on Sectionalism,” 48.

believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west. The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom.⁸⁰

Turner told us that the ever-retreating frontier was gone, and he argued throughout much of his life that instead of anxiously facing west from California's shores it was time to turn around and learn to live upon the land we had taken for granted for so many generations.

Richard Hofstadter, among others, feels that Turner's interest in sectionalism "blind[ed] him, even in the post-World War years, to the significance of modern industrial mass society" and speculates about the more fruitful areas the historian might have explored "if he had been able to forget about geography and physiography, to abandon his intricate maps, and to read with any of his former enthusiasm in contemporary sociology and literature."⁸¹ This is a telling criticism—up to a point. Turner had difficulty accepting the fact that cities and machines were transforming American culture and making it "all eastern in quality" even though an image of inexorable movement in this direction lies at the heart of his thought. He believed that every society inevitably evolves from natural simplicity to artificial complexity, but in America the western movement into fresh environments delayed this process by returning us to nature and renewing the cycle. Yet Turner, as well as many Americans, knew that this push into the wilderness which continually returned us to our primal sources also depleted these sources. In Perry Miller's words, the suspicion that we are destroying the very foundation of our collective identity and "are being carried along on some massive conveyor" toward "the artificial, the urban, [and] the civilized" has always lurked in the American mind.⁸² By the 1920s, Turner believed that a radical shift of values was slowing the conveyor belt, that the sudden awareness of limited space and resources was forcing Americans to replace such destructive frontier traits as restless mobility and rugged individualism with a sense of settled stability and community rooted and sustained in the section.

Much of this sectional theorizing is misguided, wishful thinking. Since Turner's time, geographical mobility has accelerated, people continue to flee from the country to urban centers, and regions have not emerged as the distinct and vital wholes within our culture that Turner

⁸⁰ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, 1961), 6.

⁸¹ Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 102, 114.

⁸² Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, 1956), 216, 211.

anticipated. Yet the fact that Turner exaggerated the significance of sectionalism should not blind us to aspects of the theory that seem increasingly pertinent in the late twentieth century. It is in the very area that Hofstadter felt Turner wasted his energies—in the study of geography and physiography, in the examination of the relationships between the physical environment and American culture—that his greatest value lies for us today. At the most obvious level, his theory emphasizes the indisputable fact that our culture varies over space—that there are deep and lasting differences, for example, between New England and southern California—and that physical environment plays an important part in explaining these differences. As we become increasingly dissatisfied with the notion of a homogenized, seamless America and more concerned with the ethnic, racial, religious, economic, gender, and age-based segments of our culture, Turner's study of sections has renewed importance.⁸³

At a more abstract level, Turner realized that the frontier characteristics of rootless individualism and restless mobility isolated Americans from themselves as well as from their environment. Sectionalism, he argued with reasoning that seems more convincing today, could not only foster a sense of community amid the incorporation of life into larger, more impersonal units but also insure a healthier relationship with the land. Implicit in the sectional thesis is the desire to instill reverence and affection for the portion of the earth that has nurtured us, to learn to meet the promise of the land rather than mine it and move on in the traditional American manner. From his experiences in the same part of Wisconsin that influenced Turner so deeply, Aldo Leopold concluded that a whole and healthy culture must be rooted in an awareness of the land as a community to which we belong rather than a commodity belonging

⁸³ Of this quickened awareness of cultural diversity, George B. Tindall writes that "... since the mid-1960s the existence, certainly the appearance, of consensus in American life has been visibly shaken. The suspicion grows that the legend of a homogenized American culture had all along the shimmering quality of mirage, like those situation comedies where people live in boxes made of ticky-tacky and all looked the same. It is not the South that has vanished but the mainstream, like one of those desert rivers that run out into the sand, consumed by the heat," George Brown Tindall, *The Ethnic Southerners* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1976), 3-4. A number of other scholars have rekindled Turner's interest in the regional diversity of our culture. See, for example, Raymond D. Gastil, *Cultural Regions of the United States* (Seattle, 1975), Kirkpatrick Sale, *Power Shift: The Rise of the Southern Rim and Its Challenge to the Eastern Establishment* (New York, 1975), William Carter, *Middle West Country* (Boston, 1975), John Shelton Reed, *The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society* (Toronto, 1972), and Carl N. Degler, *Place over Time: The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1977).

to us.⁸⁴ Our heightened awareness in recent years of dwindling global resources and the inefficiency of large-scale organization and massive centralization should open our eyes to the value of Turner's sectional concept.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, With Other Essays on Conservation* (New York, 1966), 219–22.

⁸⁵ A number of environmentalists have recently seen sectionalism, in the form of regional planning and development, as an important means to conserve resources and balance the unwieldy centralization of power. Percival Goodman argues that wise cultivation of the earth's diminishing resources ought to be fostered by regionalism—by planning society so that people and their technology are closer to local resources and will develop an attachment to and love of place. Percival Goodman, *The Double E* (Garden City, New York, 1977), 110–79. E. F. Schumacher contends that the growth and careful development of regions "is the most important subject on the agenda of all the larger countries" and that "in the poor countries in particular there is no hope for the poor unless there is successful regional development, a development effort outside the capital city covering all the rural areas . . ." E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (San Francisco, 1973), 69. René Dubos sums up the fresh awareness of the need for sectional or regional growth, a need Turner perceived early in the century. Dubos believes that "modern societies will have to find some way to reverse the trend toward larger and larger agglomerations and to recreate units compatible with the limits of man's comprehension—in other words, small enough that they can develop a social identity and a spirit of place. By cultivating regionalism, the United States could derive from its rich geographical diversity cultural values and also forms of economic wealth far more valuable because more humanly meaningful than those measured by the artificial criteria of a money economy." René Dubos, *A God Within* (New York, 1972), 286.