

January 15, 1990 (Vol. 5, no. 10)

Dear Colleague:

Structuralism teaches that there are certain fundamental operations of thought that all humans share. Bantu or Swede, people tend to organize reality in opposed pairs--for instance, white/black, up/down. Based on this tendency and on the near universal recognition of the importance of the sun, humans over much of earth have created (or accepted) a spatial framework defined by the cardinal points: they see themselves as living at the center between the opposed pairs of north and south, east and west. Moreover, they attribute values to these points of reference such that, for instance, north is winter and black, south is summer and red, east is spring and green, west is autumn and white; in addition, these points may be identified with an animal, a presiding spirit, a human function. Despite vast differences in language and culture, Zunis and Koreans on opposite ends of the earth ought to be able to recognize a common structure of reality, laden with human emotion and import.

At this point in my lecture, students' eyes begin to glaze, for it doesn't seem to have much to do with them, the good old USA, or the pedestrian fact that streets in Madison have compass points of reference for reasons of practicality. But wait. America is divided into North, East, South, and West: and there is the sacred center--the Midwest. According to Leslie Fiedler, American fiction may be labeled Northern, Eastern, Southern, and Western. In the Northern, the season is winter, the landscape is mythicized New England (stern and rock-bound), the scene is domestic, austere, and puritanical. In the Eastern, the season is spring, the color is tender green, the scene is romance and usually tells of an American who has fallen in love with a European. In the Southern, the season is the long, hot and sultry summer, the landscape is plantation, miasmal swamp, and Spanish moss, and the scene is passionate. The Western (post-1900) is set in an open, nearly empty landscape; in it, cowboy rescues homesteaders, leaves girl, and rides off into the sunset. In contrast to the Eastern's romance and promise of progeny, the Western hints at the brief encounter in a swirl of dust, loneliness, and death.

Students perk up. But what makes them perk up? Is it the recognition of difference, or is it, on the contrary, the recognition of human commonality? I hope both.

Best wishes,

