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**THE PARADOXES OF AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY**

**MICHAEL  
BOYDEN**

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

# Predicting the Past



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Michael Boyden

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*Contradictions emerge  
by being communicated.*

— Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*



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low Americanists from around the globe. The foundation of the International American Studies Association in 2000 has suggested new ways of doing American Studies in the twenty-first century. The ambitious scope of this organization, the attempt to study the United States from a broader perspective than traditionally conceived, whatever the pitfalls of merely spreading received ideas on a wider scale, has proved a tremendous energy boost from the beginning.

Theodore Dreiser once confided to H. L. Mencken that, while working on *An American Tragedy*, he had been suffering from what he described as a “complex complex”: he had become obsessed with other people’s obsessions and was constantly on the look-out for traces of infantile repression. Although I do not normally share Dreiser’s rather bleak view on human nature, it has often occurred to me during the days and nights I spent on this study that I was in the process of developing a sort of “complex complex” of my own, as my research led me to inquire, not just into the latent functions of American literary history as a scholarly institution, but also into the functions of those functions. The reader can quite well imagine what kind of reactions my little attitude problem at times provoked in my immediate environment. This is a good occasion to offer my sincerest apologies to those closest to me.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the 1980s, with the culture wars in full swing, Werner Sollors issued his “Critique of Pure Pluralism.” The article appeared in *Reconstructing American Literary History*, a kind of statement of principles for the new *Cambridge History of American Literature* then underway (the long awaited final volume appeared in 2005), and begins by recounting how a critic reviewing a new edition of the *Oxford Companion to American Literature* castigated this work for being racist, sexist and elitist because, despite its professed intention to expand the established canon, the coverage of black authors was not up to the mark. Sollors saw this “identification of deplorable omissions with a scholar’s bias” as an ugly side-effect of what he later in the essay provocatively labels “Ku Klux Pluralism” (1986: 250). By highlighting the purist aspirations lurking beneath pluralism’s ethnic insider logic, Sollors tried to point the way to a more balanced engagement with the syncretic character of U.S. culture, which would focus on common literary themes cutting across ethnic and racial divides.

Much has changed since Sollors voiced his plea for a transethnic approach to American literary history. Pluralism has waned, and American Studies has in the words of Shelley Fisher Fishkin taken a “transnational turn.” But, then again, there is a lot that has not changed. In a rejoinder to a 2006 issue of *American Literary History* devoted to reconceptualizing American literary history along hemispheric lines, Paul Giles discussed a review of Shelley Streeby’s book *American Sensations*, which presents a critical account of the involvement of popular culture in the extension of U.S. influence in Mexico and Latin America. Even while noting the advance Streeby has made in relation to the existing literature on this topic, the reviewer faulted her book for inadequately conveying Latin American perspectives, thus casting it as “ultimately too US-centric” (2006: 654). Giles cited this critique not so much to enter into a discussion about the merits and demerits of Streeby’s book, but to pinpoint a utopian streak in the new hemispheric paradigm, which easily results in overcharged and unrealistic expectations. As Giles put it, waiting for a work that satisfactorily deals with all these issues in all of their dimensions “is to be waiting interminably for Godot”: given the apparently bottomless inclusivist urge of the discipline, one can always “accuse any specific example of hemispheric studies of not drawing its hermeneutic circle widely enough” (2006: 654).

Although, therefore, the stakes of the debate have shifted (pluralism has been substituted for transnationalism), it is clear that the practices that led Sollors to urge his colleagues to “go beyond pluralism” are not so different from those that later motivated Giles to caution against the gratuitous invocation of the transnational as a panacea for exclusions locked into the disciplinary framework of American literature studies. Although it is true that some of these exclusions may be the result of deliberate attempts at imposing a specific worldview or valuation ordering, the generalized emphasis on representativeness within the discipline betrays that something else is at stake having perhaps more to do with certain institutionalized constraints that perpetually prolong what may seem like an absurd wait for Godot. In spite of Sollors’s and Giles’s calls to realism, however, the inflammatory rhetoric animating American literary history has persisted. This book is a modest attempt to get at a better understanding of this peculiar dynamic. My main contention is that, from the start, American literary history has manifested itself in a highly paradoxical fashion, by creating a utopian alternative for itself. The title of this book is meant to convey this paradoxical logic by suggesting that the American literary tradition constantly predicts its own undoing and that it is precisely this institutionalized vexation vis-à-vis itself that ultimately lends this tradition relative stability.

My starting point, therefore, is somewhat different from that of most other disciplinary histories. The remarkable thing about this institution, from my perspective, is not primarily that it is fundamentally exclusionist (racist, sexist, nationalist, and so on). Even though there is real value in exposing these limitations and pursuing their implications for the study of literature, what interests me here is the fact that American literary history exists at all given such and other objections. By this I do not want to slight the achievement of revisionist disciplinary accounts. Eric J. Sundquist’s rewriting of the American Renaissance from the vantage point of black America in *To Wake the Nations*, for instance, is a masterful accomplishment which may have displaced the academic center of gravity from North to South (just as the hemispheric paradigm has to some extent deflected attention from the Civil War to the Mexican-American War) and which will without a doubt exert a profound influence on the way future large-scale institutional histories of American literature will be written. Like Elizabeth Renker, however, I do not believe that changing the content of the canon fundamentally impacts the way American literary history functions as a discipline. As Renker argues, “[t]he inherent literary quality of American literature – or lack of it – is, simply put, beside the historical point” (2007: 5).

Renker argues that the peculiar shape of the American literary canon, even though it functions as a vehicle for exclusionary practices, does not

itself determine these practices, whose workings she reveals on the basis of thorough historical micro-analyses relating to the formation of American literature at particular universities and schools. Although I would concur with most of her findings, my approach at the same time differs considerably from Renker's. For reasons that should become clear, I have opted for a more encompassing, primarily text-based framework focusing on the discursive legitimation strategies of textbooks and histories of American literature from the late nineteenth century up to the most recent past. From such a communicative standpoint, American literature's supposed lack of substance in relation to other traditions, an *idée fixe* that was particularly persistent during the early decades of the discipline but which has continued to shape it since then (but with different interlocutors), is not entirely irrelevant even if, as Renker suggests, it is "beside the historical point." What I mean to say by this is that, although the place of individual texts in the canon has had little to do with the overall curricular status of American literature, the perceived inferiority of American authors, mostly in relation to their British counterparts, and the crisis-atmosphere this engendered among the early advocates of American literature paradoxically provided the trigger that ensured the communicative survival of the discipline.

Renker claims that the genuflection of the early proponents of American literature in the academy in front of more established disciplines "exacerbated the institutional identity that attached American literature to socially inferior populations" (35). While it may be true that this sense of inferiority may initially have resulted in the scapegoating of American literature as a "feminine" field of study in relation to more "masculine" domains such as classical or Old World literatures, I claim that what in the long run functioned to ensure the continued connectivity of American literary history as a scholarly domain was precisely the internalization of these and other binary oppositions. American literary history won its position in the curriculum not by getting rid of its feminized self-image or by copying the methods of other disciplines but rather by dramatizing such conflicts as pile-drivers for the communicative space it had cleared for itself. Only when this paradoxical dynamic is taken into account, I argue, does it become possible to arrive at a more profound understanding of the entrenching of the semantics of crisis in the discipline today. As a matter of fact, Renker's argument itself taps into a persistent trope that projects American literature as a backward discipline falling short of its promise. As I want to show in the chapters that follow, such loaded proclamations are not inconsequential byproducts; they have served to call the discipline into being by opening up the possibility of a brighter future.

## — A Forensic Approach to American Literary History?

In the 1986 article from which I quoted above, Werner Sollors warned against the invocation of the term pluralism as a “redemptively transcendent category” which would automatically clear its users of the charge of exclusionary canonization (273). A couple of years before, in an introduction to an early issue of *MELUS* on “Ethnic Literature and Cultural Consciousness,” Sollors formulated this position even more poignantly when he deplored that “ethnicity is often discussed in a religious framework of hope and redemption” (1981: 16). Sollors’s annoyance at the reduction of the canon debate to a struggle between religious worldviews (or between “papists” and “heretics” – in *Beyond Ethnicity* he gives a brilliant account of the religious roots of the ethnicity debate), calls to mind the late Mary Douglas’s plea in the Routledge edition of her *Natural Symbols* for a “forensic” approach to religion that would finally abandon the psychologized language of exhortation and conversion and take in earnest Emile Durkheim’s teachings on the social basis of beliefs and categories (1996: xvii). What goes for the sociology of religion may equally hold true for the study of literature. But what would a “forensic” perspective on American literary history look like?

One of the ideas working in the background while I was writing this book was what Douglas in *Natural Symbols* calls sectarian societies and which she later re-describes as enclaves or, following Mancur Olson, latent groups. These are groups that cannot rely on sanctions or selective incentives to enforce consensus. Douglas remained fascinated by these enclaves because in them the problem of collective action manifests itself most clearly. Even though they do not display a complex organization, it nevertheless appears very difficult for its members to leave them. What is it, then, that keeps such groups together? In *How Institutions Think* Douglas argued that most enclaves operate on the basis of a latent belief that their founding principles are under threat from the outside and should be defended. In other words, such groups manage to survive not so much through coercion or self-regarding motives, but rather by internalizing a principle of suspicion, which reinforces their weak structure by blocking all attempts at direct action while at the same time strengthening their external boundaries by loading possible defectors with the charge of treason. Even though the threat is seen as coming from without, it really serves to fortify the cohesion of the institution from within.

Although in Douglas’s framework enclaves typically appear on the margins of highly organized host societies, what I find particularly compelling is that she gives us a sense of the normality of these groups. The

conspiracy theories of sects, for instance, are portrayed as more than a form of irrational superstition on the part of deluded minds but are produced by rational individuals actively following their self-interest. If this is granted, the enclavistic model appears much more typical than is normally supposed. Even prisons and markets cannot rely on punishments and profit seeking alone, but need cognitive backup for their legitimation (if only because coercion and self-interest are themselves collective action problems). Douglas's Cultural Theory has been widely discussed in several fields, from marketing to biblical studies, but literary scholars have so far bypassed it. In this book, I have tried to operationalize her work on enclaves in the context of American literary history.<sup>1</sup> Concretely, this has helped me to move away from a purely causal explanation of the historical emergence of the discipline or the ways in which specific social groups have strategically invested in it to further specific ends. Such considerations will inevitably enter into the arguments below, but my primary focus throughout has been on the hidden motivational dynamic of American literary history as an institution, whose internal workings do not of necessity coincide with the individual intentions and aspirations of its members.

Another source of inspiration for this book has been Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. In my opinion, Luhmann's sociology has hardly received the attention it deserves in the Anglo-American world. Perhaps symptomatic of this neglect is that a projected translation of *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, which I see as the tailpiece of his theory of society, never materialized.<sup>2</sup> One reason for the lukewarm reception of Luhmann's oeuvre particularly in the U.S., practical constraints aside, may be that contrary to the writings of other leading European thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas or Pierre Bourdieu it tends to resist easy capitalization in terms of the oppositional momentum of humanities discourse in recent decades. As the apparently tautological title *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (the society of society) already suggests, Luhmann attempted to theorize the semantics of oppositionalism not as an outside force but as part of the "normal" fabric of society. His aim in doing so was not to disprove the responsibility of the academy but rather to point out what it is that makes us reach out for society in the first place. In my opinion, Luhmann's consistently anti-teleological perspective (only one end is envisioned, and this end should definitely be avoided) can provide us with a useful starting point for analyzing the motivational dynamic of American literary history.

Luhmann conceptualized modern society as a "self-substitutive order" (1995: 409). Simply put, this means that change has to come from within. In this way, negations and contradictions assume a crucial role in the functioning of social function systems. Modern society deals with the



problem of contingency by reproducing it on the level of its subsystems. In my opinion, the American literary tradition can therefore equally be described as a self-substitutive order. American literary history deals with change by normalizing it, by making it expectable. As I want to argue, it is this internalized opposition to itself that safeguards what Luhmann would call the “dynamic stability” of the discipline (1995: 49). The underlying idea is that American literary history constitutes what Winfried Fluck has called “a professional culture of institutionalized difference” (2002: 213). The question that will reappear as a kind of leitmotiv throughout this study, then, is how the American literary tradition has managed to ensure its continued existence in spite of a sort of ingrown inclination to continually revalue its own valuations, to discredit professional expertise (e.g. by appealing to “general” culture) even while accrediting literary specialists, and to frustrate its own expectations regarding its nature and evolution.

Although I realize this goes against the grain of a tendency currently dominant in American Studies, I have explicitly refrained from any reconstructive ambition in this book.<sup>3</sup> By doing so I would have run the risk of reproducing rather than explaining the hidden asymmetries operating at the base of American literature studies. By this I do not want to suggest that doing both (i.e. describing the lines of cleavage permeating the discipline even while suggesting alternative conceptualizations) would be impossible. But in order to avoid *a priori* impositions of selections and demarcations, it seemed to me a matter of principle not to intervene in the debates whose structural properties I was trying to chart. My larger aim, in other words, has not been to rewrite American literary tradition, but to explain why and how this institutional formation is continually in the process of rewriting itself.

As much as possible, I have tried to steer free from academic jargon so as not to deter readers without firsthand knowledge of social theory. One thing I need to stress from the outset, though, is that the approach sketched here differs fundamentally from the sociological functionalism of the 1950s and 1960s that has fallen into disrepute in recent decades. It does so in at least two respects. First, the problem with the early functionalism in the vein of Talcott Parsons (and early anthropologists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown) was that it explained group behavior in terms of a hidden motivation invisible to the group’s members, but that it had no hard and fast rules at its disposal to determine whether this condition of latency was really fulfilled. The reason why many observers now have a problem with classical functionalism is, I believe, because it assumed that this kind of clairvoyance was actually attainable. This book avoids that pitfall by focusing specifically on communication as the primary unit of analysis.

Latency, in this context, does not entail a lack of awareness on the part of the individual but rather a lack of themes to drive forward communication about American literature.

Second, the functional approach used here also departs from that of traditional functionalism in the sense that it explicitly highlights the productive potential of paradoxes, conflicts of interest, revisions, and contradictions in the process of institution formation. The problem with the older functionalism was that its circular logic easily resulted in tautological arguments, as research results were often already implied in the initial phrasing of the question. Thus, as soon as its function was fulfilled, an institution or behavioral pattern was supposed to lose its reason for existence. An institution's survival in spite of the fact that it had already reached its "end" then had to be regarded as anomalous or deviant. From my perspective, however, paradoxes do not just create obstacles but also generate incentives for overcoming such deadlocks. Precisely because paradoxes trigger uncertainty about the actual functions of an institution, they in the same movement keep it on its toes, as it were, and thus help it to safeguard its continued existence. From such a perspective, also, a lack of themes to drive forward communication can provide an incentive for further communication.

In the revised functionalist framework proposed here, a function is conceptualized not so much as a hidden need or want that has to be met, but rather as an *insoluble problem*.<sup>4</sup> Another way of putting this is that a problem only becomes a problem when it has more than one solution. Approaching American literary history as an insoluble problem has some counterfactual appeal, given the apparently unending stream of publications offering solutions for the crisis besetting the discipline. It means that the point of departure for my investigations will be different from that of regular disciplinary accounts constructing a teleological narrative that ultimately serves to shed light on its roots and finality. In my approach, negatability is constructed as a basic requirement of literary history, which derives part of its meaning and value precisely from the continual revisioning of its origins narratives. In such a reflexive framework, disciplinary syntheses or American literary history are drawn into the object of study as part of the semantics by which the discipline continually redescribes itself.

Perhaps the best legitimation for continued investment in functionalist methodology is that functional-style explanations continue to be constructed, even by ardent opponents of the paradigm, and often in a bad way.<sup>5</sup> In the midst of the culture wars, Gregory S. Jay ambiguously called for an "end" to American literature, implying not just a literal ending but also a revisioning of the traditional mission ascribed to the discipline. Jay's overall claim was that the study of American literature had emerged from a

“prejudicial framework” which served to prioritize white ethnic particularism in a diverse nation (1997: 170). Now that the canon was increasingly opening up toward various minorities, that framework no longer served its original purpose and had to be replaced by alternative formations. It is an interesting irony, one no doubt anticipated by Jay himself, that his call for an end to American literature (along with similar proposals by Paul Lauter, Janice Radway, Carolyn Porter, and others) has merely served to postpone that end by infusing the discipline with new critical potential.

Jay’s interesting suggestion to substitute “Writing in the United States” for “American literature” to make room for formerly excluded texts has sparked very diverse and interesting reactions, but few observers have been willing to question his rather hasty assumptions about the link between the rise of American literature and the history of American nationalism. I doubt, however, whether nationalist motives summarize or explain the ulterior “function” of American literary history as an academic discipline. The most obvious reason why they fail to do so, I argue, is precisely because of the persistence of such critiques as Jay’s, which go much further back than the 1980s culture wars. Simplifying the canon as an instrument for keeping everything out that at some point appears “un-American” obscures this paradoxical foundation of American literary history. By this I do not want to suggest that the canon did not produce the inequalities Jay refers to. What I am saying, rather, is that it could only serve that end because that was not its only end. To arrive at a more profound understanding of the exclusions built into the early canon, but also later on, I claim that we need to approach such issues from a worked-out functionalist framework which does full justice to the polycontextural density of American society.

#### — Revisiting the “End” of American Literature

One way in which the theories of Douglas and Luhmann can enlighten the debates currently animating American Studies is by complicating the link between the internal functioning of American literary history as a discipline and the changing social conditions in which such a system articulates its operational autonomy. Most of the time, discussions on the fate of the discipline center on the question as to whether professionalism has driven the humanities away from their original mission, which Richard Ohmann in *English in America* identified as a potential to “extend our moral experience” (1996a: 13, 17). In *Professing Literature* Gerald Graff has sharply criticized such pleas for a return to a preprofessional past as part of a “humanist myth” which serves to sacralize the origins of humanities research

(1987: 3). Such “returns to culture,” as Edward Said has called them elsewhere (1994: xiii-iv), fail to acknowledge that literary studies as it developed in the U.S. was fraught with legitimation problems from the very beginning. The real function of these returns to culture, as Graff stresses, is not to return to a prelapsarian consensus but to legitimize new factions in the academy.

In spite of his reservations about such reformist plans, Graff fails to resist the desire to propose a “more coordinated structure” to cure the fragmentation of interests in the humanities (262). As I indicated above, it is a central aim of this study to explain how the literary institution maintains itself by institutionalizing its own negation, and one way in which it seems to do so is through revisionist programs such as Graff’s. Rather than trying to bring the proliferation of courses and approaches flooding the field under a new synthesis (and envision a common “end” uniting them all), therefore, I feel that it would be more productive to analyze what it is exactly that enables communication in a constellation that cannot rely on hierarchical structures alone for its legitimation. What is it that keeps American literary history from reaching its end despite the fact that this end has been repeatedly predicted? What holds the discipline together even though there is no agreement about its ends? What interests me, therefore, is the process which Jurij Lotman once referred to as the “snowballing of culture,” or the idea that cultures gain in strength even while seeming totally out of control or when their initial ends no longer seems to apply (1978: 229). Such cultures, according to Lotman, assert themselves through a self-propelling process that interiorizes resistance and buries ultimate values.

Following Luhmann’s considerations on the art system, I see the emergence of literary history as a consequence of modern society’s fixation on its own history.<sup>6</sup> By focusing on its past, a culture or community makes its negation expectable. This, in turn, makes it possible to anticipate, and thus possibly avert the realization of these expectations. In other words, even though literary histories are perceived as instruments for memorializing a canon of immaculate masterpieces, they owe their existence to a growing sense of the inherent replaceability of valuation orderings in modern society. Their lasting power derives paradoxically from the fact that they anticipate their obsolescence by continually outdating themselves (and this at an apparently ever faster rate). The first literary histories were written toward the end of the eighteenth century, when the national model started to spread over Europe.<sup>7</sup> If this reveals a close connection between the rise of literary history and the process of nation formation, it does not necessarily mean that literary history should be approached one-sidedly as an instrument for validating an emerging national community and the

hierarchies involved in it. Luhmann sees nations not as remnants of a stratified order, but as early responses or anticipatory reactions to the process of functional differentiation which he associates with modernity (1997: 1045, see also Richter 1996).

From such a perspective, the nationalization of literary traditions has to be envisioned as a temporary and ultimately inadequate “solution” to the ever more pressing problem of ranking authors and texts in a complex world society. In such a context, the “intrinsic” value of a literary work derives from its significance or representativity for a national community. As an alternative to the system of patronage, the nation served to divorce the appreciation of art from religious and educational functions (obviously, such considerations can always re-enter the debate within the newly cleared communicative space of a national tradition, as when literary historians set out to prove the sanctity and exemplary nature of the founding texts, but nobody would now dispute that art is something distinct from either religion or education). The current debate too easily assumes a structural break between the national and that which is supposed to replace it (in Jay’s case pluralism), whereby the former is usually reduced to everything that is out of line in governing identity conceptions (thus also confounding different forms of nationalism). This kind of reasoning not only results in misdirected criticism (of the type referred to above by Sollors and Giles), it more importantly obscures the continuing functionality of asymmetrical oppositions (Americanism v. pluralism, nationalism v. transnationalism, etc.), for the demarcation of the literary as a functional domain in modern society. The literary system *selects for* the nation to express its operational dynamic, not the other way around.

Rather than trying to isolate or recover the “original mission” of American literary history, the following analyses will focus on the paradoxes, tautologies, negations, and binary oppositions that keep the discipline from running down. They do so not by reconnecting to a disciplinary consensus, but by short-circuiting such attempts through a kind of falsificatory gesture. In this way, they make sure that the end will not be reached because it can always be denied. As an academic discipline, American literary history functions very much like an enclave: It did not emerge out of a set of shared principles and theories that later became submerged because of the self-perpetuating rationality of professionalism (this is not to say that these principles and theories were not around, but that they were not decisive in generalizing expectations within the discipline); rather than working as an impediment to the fulfilment of its goals or as a harbinger of an ultimate end, the conflict between a professional and an unprofessional point of view, or that between the standard-bearers of the canon and those

who claim a “return” to a more open or representative culture (not coincidentally, both positions are often held by the same people), has allowed the discipline to mobilize the necessary structural trust to keep on investing in the future.

#### — Outline of the Chapters

Although I have tried to respect chronology as much as possible, readers should not expect a comprehensive institutional history of American literature studies. For this, I refer to the pioneering work done by established specialists such as Richard Ohmann, Paul Lauter, Herbert Lindenberger, Robert Scholes, Gerald Graff, David Shumway, Kermit Vanderbilt, Nina Baym, Russell Reising, Claudia Stokes, and Christopher Newfield. In what follows, I will regularly draw on the writings of these scholars and occasionally take issue with their findings, but it has not been my aim to replace their impressive record with a more exhaustive or encompassing account of the discipline. In general, I have devoted more attention to institutional histories than to single-author works, some of which have had an enormous impact on the evolution of the discipline. Several readers will feel that I should have said more about the individual contributions by F. O. Matthiessen, T. S. Eliot, Leslie Fiedler, and others, but since I was mostly concerned with the emergence of American literary history as a collective effort, I have decided against such an author-oriented method, also because I wanted to avoid the teleological logic permeating most disciplinary histories. Therefore, I have selected from the general theme of American literary history, which I described above as an insoluble problem, a number of smaller (but, as it appears, equally insoluble) problems, which can be regarded as the nodal points around which this book is organized.

Chapter one discusses the widespread view that the discipline of American literary history is constrained by a lingering “Anglocentrism,” which purportedly serves to naturalize its English roots. The chapter tries to put this view into proper perspective by arguing that the assumption of Anglocentrism has dominated the discipline from the start and by showing how it has itself proved functional for the self-definition of American literature as a field of study. On the one hand, the idea that American culture has been impeded by its Anglo bias, an idea that is indeed as old as the Republic itself, has spurred on the semantics of independence by calling for the transformation of American literature from a “sectional” product into a “national” literature, even while indicating that the true moment of independence is yet to come. On the other hand, the charge of Anglocentrism has also been instrumental for articulating a semantics of professionalism

by favoring an approach to American literature that promises to do justice to the diversity of American culture in its entirety.

American literary history thus paradoxically validates itself by constantly postponing its beginnings. Chapter two develops a similar argument in relation to the issue of “living” literature. As the argument goes, early histories of U.S. literature excluded contemporary writings in order to counter the growing ethno-linguistic diversity of the nation after the Civil War and thus to reassert the (lost) cultural precedence of New England. In response, I argue that the norm against living authors is irreducible to a mere optimizing device for the dominant classes, because such a view fails to account for the paradox that neophobia is often a means for welcoming the new by making it expectable. Rather than as a remnant of a hierarchical system, then, the ban on living authors, evident for instance in the exclusion of realist and naturalist authors from early histories of American literature, has to be regarded as a complicated response to an increasingly diverse and mediatized social order that can no longer rely on the past alone for its justification. As the analyses show, antiquarianism has always gone hand in hand with pleas to reconnect to “literature itself.” By describing itself as neophobic, American literary history orients itself toward the future.

Chapter three draws attention to the paradoxical character of the search for an “American” language. If language is such an essential part of one’s identity, then why is it necessary to search for it? Is it possible to commit oneself to one’s language in a language that is not one’s own? I do not intend to trivialize the link between language and identity but to question the monocausal nature of that link. Languages are not inherently resistant or exploitative, poor or rich; they cannot decline or improve, or become more or less scarce. Only when they enter the semantics of culture do they turn into vehicles of identity formation. Consequently, the exclusion of non-English texts from the American tradition cannot, as often happens, be accounted for solely in terms of the exclusionist practices of an Anglo-American majority. The chapter shows how the problem of language has been factored into specific scripts about language in the U.S., such as the persistent idea that the country is becoming ever more monolingual. As I will indicate, such scripts are themselves functional for the continued existence of American literary history by urging it to open up towards formerly marginalized voices and to adapt to changing social needs.

Americans, it is said, have a passion for genealogies. At the same time, the U.S. describes itself as a highly democratic nation that values achievement above descent. The cult of genealogies can be explained in terms of an implicit strategy on the part of the governing classes to main-

tain their privileges in a nominally classless nation. Yet, genealogies also confront an increasingly complex society with the insufficiency of origins as markers of social position. The aim, then, of the fourth and last chapter is to nuance, if not directly oppose, the view that genealogies are (mere) instruments of social control. An unwanted side-effect of attempts at domination is that they create possibilities for comparison, and thus for the equalization of differences. The function of genealogies, I argue, is to turn exceptions into examples. Literary founders serve to generalize agreement as to the core values of a culture by splitting it into an actual and an ideal version of itself. The chapter indicates how power politics alone cannot sufficiently account for the systematic “misrepresentation” of certain founding figures (I focus on Jonathan Edwards, Emily Dickinson, Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop in particular). Recognition always flows from, and indirectly produces, a lack thereof.





## THE "PRE-HISTORY" OF AMERICAN LITERATURE: EARLY PROSPECTS (1850-1910)

Although a few names stand, most early accounts of American literature now seem to generate little more than antiquarian interest. American literature studies only really began, according to most accounts, in the twenties and thirties with Vernon Louis Parrington, Van Wyck Brooks, Perry Miller, Stuart Sherman, and others. Thus, in *Creating American Civilization* David Shumway consigns literary histories produced before the First World War to a "predisciplinary" stage in the rise of American literary studies. These preprofessional accounts, he argues, display two major "weaknesses": on the one hand, they lack "an aesthetic appropriate to American literature," and, on the other, they have no "unifying conception or theory" (1994: 126-127). As the source of these weaknesses, Shumway points out the fact that American literary studies has come into being as a subfield of English and was formed on the basis of that model, which would explain why the early canon of American letters now seems so unrepresentative and even racist or sexist. "The assumption that American literature was a branch of English prevented a homegrown aesthetic from emerging" (127).

Only when this idea was challenged and literary criticism replaced the "narrowly historical" approach of the philologists did American literary history finally become a discipline in its own right. But Shumway insists that, even today, that discipline continues to labor under some of the ideological premises out of which it was born. Despite dramatic changes in the academy, American literary studies still more or less implicitly reflects the ideological assumptions that informed it at the outset. Claudia Stokes advances a similar claim. According to Stokes, American literary history owed its early success to the late nineteenth century New England social elite's sense of unease at the erosion of its social standing due to the professionalization of higher education. To confront this challenge, these men of letters turned to literary history, a discipline that allowed them to reassert their privileged status in American culture by narrating the (bygone) glory of antebellum New England, even while spreading the impression that they were living up to the demands of the modern research university. While stressing that American literary history has long since shed the social snobbery of its early proponents, Stokes maintains that the discipline continues to feed off of the "questionable beliefs, practices, and aims" of their pioneering works through its self-imposed defiance of professional expertise

and its continuing emphasis on cultural relevance (2006: 187).

It is the aim of this chapter, if not to entirely reject this widespread origins narrative of the discipline, then at least to complicate it considerably. I will argue that the supposedly “predisciplinary” point of view of the early historians, apparently still visible in the repeated attempts to regain a public function for American literary studies or to give in to popular anti-intellectualism, constitutes more than just a prelude to or a defensive reaction against the rise of the discipline. We misunderstand these early accounts if we conceptualize them one-sidedly as instruments for cementing the privileged social standing of a New England intellectual elite at the turn of the nineteenth century, although in many ways they are of course just that. The point, however, is that these protonarratives of American literature, however problematic with hindsight, are much less monovocal and much more varied than disciplinary historians Shumway and Stokes would have us believe. What is eclipsed from view when we see the still dominant narrative of the predominance of New England before the Civil War exclusively as an ideological means for strengthening the cultural predominance of a small social elite in a time of intense change, are the paradoxical legitimation strategies by which American literary studies first asserted itself and continues to do so. Even while reasserting the vanishing authority of New England culture, the first historians of American literature validated that story by anticipating its eventual revisioning. They legitimized their emergent discipline not merely by presenting New England literary culture as the apex of American literature but by stressing that the true moment of cultural independence was yet to come.

When focusing all attention on the social conservatism or Anglocentrism of the early literary historians, we easily lose sight of the complex incentive structures underlying their accounts. We tend to forget that, for them, the priority of mid-nineteenth century New England literary culture was much less a given than it is today in a time of American global dominance. They presented their narrative in the conditional mood by indicating that the truly American moment had not yet arrived, even while expressing the hope that this moment would entail a partial return to the age of Emerson and company. In fact, the tendency to discard these first accounts as “predisciplinary” itself presents a manifestation of the futurization strategy at the basis of the discipline. The English literature scholar Brian Doyle once noted a “tendency to reduce all events prior to the establishment of English at Oxbridge to the level of a pre-history” (1982: 18). As he put it, such explanations of the rise of English literature often use such a pre-historic stage as an “ideological husk” to be discarded for the discipline to establish itself, even while indicating that this purification

rite is not complete. I claim something similar has happened in American literary studies. The distinction between a "professional" and a "preprofessional" viewpoint entails a kind of doubling that allows the discipline to simplify its own history and to reconstruct itself in relation to changing social conditions. It does so by projecting the professional viewpoint into the future and thus opening up an ideal horizon against which the discipline can measure itself at each given moment in its institutional development.

This chapter presents a new perspective on the early history of American literary history, roughly between 1870 and 1910. What sets my account apart from others is that I will not just look at the origins narratives these histories constructed to justify the study of American literature, but also at how these narratives have in turn been retold by disciplinary histories trying to make sense of the current legitimation crisis in the humanities. In this way, I hope to obtain a sharper focus on the peculiar motivational logic of American literary studies than has hitherto been achieved in studies of this kind. Among other things, this means rejecting monocausal explanations of the genesis of American literary history and acknowledging the constitutive role of contradictions, conflicts, and differences of opinion in this process.

#### — The Future of an Illusion

It has often been stressed that, contrary to its European counterparts, early American literature could boast of no *Nibelungenlied*, no *Beowulf*, no *Song of Roland*. In other words, it lacked a European-style early stage of development. Where, then, does the American tradition begin? Where do we locate its roots? The answers to such questions can be seen as functionally equivalent solutions to the constitutive problem of an American literary tradition. From this perspective, the attribution of origins is both cause and symptom of the existence of American literature. It is a motivating cause, because it validates American literature as a field of study, something to take pleasure in, a means for instruction or for creating solidarity, etc. But it is a symptom, also, because such validating strategies are commissioned by a meaning system already in place. We should therefore refrain from according priority to one or the other origins theory. Origins are points of view. They can always be replaced by alternative viewpoints.

This seems odd at first. Where we come from, we feel, has nothing to do with when, how, by whom the question of origins is posed. We do not order our roots, but search for them. We resort to them precisely because they preclude dissent. That is also, perhaps, why we tend to get offended when we feel our roots are being violated. In this sense, origins

theories can only perform their foundational function when this function is not visible. They are only effective when the indirect causal link from consequence to cause (the American literary tradition talking back to its beginnings) is hidden from view. From such a perspective, the story of the genesis of a culture or people is not negotiable. The first person plural perspective is unconditional, one either accepts the whole package (including the less pleasant implications), or one simply believes in something else. But whatever the belief system, for it to survive, the roots have to remain underground.

How, then, did the early defenders of American literature studies deal with the fact that it did not seem to have a history, or, according to the most obvious criteria (no folk roots, no classic texts and authors, no common language, no pedigrees), did not even exist? At first, the most common procedure of validation seems to have been to project its origins into the future. Sydney Smith's 1820 rhetorical question in the *Edinburgh Review* – “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” – has been ritually repeated ever since to suit all kinds of purposes. This sentence has acquired so much currency, perhaps, because it suggested a possible first solution for the legitimation problems of the new literature. It provided a flint that sparked the shared expectation to expect better in the future. The first advocates of an independent American literature, encouraged by the patriotism of the Jacksonian era, picked up Smith's question and (directly or indirectly) turned it to their advantage.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, therefore, American literature was antithetical to the very idea of tradition.<sup>9</sup> Above all, it had to be different from everything that existed: democratic *and* high-minded. Emerson called for a break from the “God of tradition” in order to achieve true originality and become independent from the traditions of Europe. The belief in the future was thus fused with (or based on) a disqualification of the past. This mechanism reveals the workings of an emergent institutional arrangement, which endowed itself with self-validating truth by splitting off the individual soul or self (located in the future) from the corrupted institutions of the past. The investment in the future is evident in Rufus Griswold's *Prose Writers of America*, which is advertised as *A Survey of the History, Condition, and Prospects of American Literature*. In the preface, Griswold noted that most Americans still regarded their country as a “Nazareth of the Mind” with nothing to show in the domain of letters (1847: 5).<sup>10</sup> Europeans, by contrast, had long gone beyond Sydney Smith's disparaging dictum, and had begun to avidly read the American authors that published in their literary journals. Griswold matter-of-factly attributed this inferiority complex on the part of Americans to the absence of copyright protection for foreign

authors. Pirated versions of European (especially English) books flooded the American market, which left native authors with little or no chance of getting published (an international copyright law was not passed until 1892). A corollary of this was that relatively unimportant authors received comparatively too much praise, as soon as they were noticed on the other side of the Atlantic.<sup>11</sup>

It should be stressed that Griswold presented his survey as a corrective to what he regarded as the inflated patriotism of his contemporaries. This later earned him the praise of the editors of the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, who detected in his reserve a sense "that something better is yet to come" (Trent 1917: viii). While discussing the future of American literature, however, Griswold was indirectly fighting out a number of local battles. His quarrel with Poe has become notorious, but he was especially crossing swords with the Young Americans, the New York literary cénacle around the Duyckinck brothers. Evert and George Duyckinck had more urban tastes than Griswold, who saw the popular literature of the time as a disease of the cities. It seems that Griswold had his reasons to talk about American literature in the conditional mood. His prospectus of American literature was at the same time a way of securing the increasingly contested privileged position of Whiggish New England culture in the province of American letters.

In their *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* the Duyckincks focused on American literature as "a record of mental progress and cultivation, of facts and opinions, which derives its main interest from its historical rather than its critical value" (1855: v). For the Duyckincks all books (whether literary or not) produced on American soil belonged, at least in principle, to American literature. By this very inclusive definition, they tried to counteract the overemphasis on the North in accounts like Griswold's.<sup>12</sup> Although the South had not been given the same opportunities as the North, the Duyckincks thought that Southern authors had nevertheless supplied "their fair proportion" of political writings (vii). It is almost as if with these two bulky volumes they wanted to offer statistical proof of the intellectual vitality of the South. The brothers' apparent suspension of value judgments thus served a critical function: it licensed a muffled attack on the intellectual supremacy of New England.

Like Griswold's *Prose Writers*, the *Cyclopaedia* was closer to an anthology or encyclopaedia than a full-blown history. However, some lines of cleavage were already present, such as the division between the colonial and revolutionary periods (with Franklin as a transitional figure), and what was provisionally labelled "the Present Century" (vi). Especially the first two periods were granted "fullness of display" (vii). This editorial choice

was motivated by the limited availability of materials, some of which had but recently been discovered. But the Duyckincks also thought that the “picturesque” qualities of the early writings could illustrate the development of the national tastes and character: “The voice of two centuries of American literature may well be worth listening to” (viii).

In more than one sense, the Duyckincks’ comprehensive approach was meant to give body to the new American literature. To them, the fact that the first writings in America were not homegrown products, but had emanated from the “European mind,” presented an advantage rather than an impediment (v). Significantly, the first work they discussed was George Sandys’s 1626 translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.<sup>13</sup> This book could pass for a Southern product, since Sandys had written it while he was treasurer of the Virginia Company (he returned to England when his mandate expired). Moreover, Sandys was the son of the Archbishop of York and had dedicated his Ovid to Charles the First. It preceded that other translation, the *Bay Psalm Book*, the first book to be printed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, by more than a decade. By means of Sandys’s translation of Ovid the Duyckincks could thus counterweigh the view that the roots of American literature lay with the New England Puritans.

In his dedication to the English crown, Sandys had commented on the cruel conditions under which the translation had been composed, in stark contrast with the elevated subject matter. For the Duyckincks, this ironic discrepancy between Ovid’s poetic “dreams” and the “realities” of colonial life paradoxically provided the device that could validate an American tradition (1). It sealed the promise that the American wilderness would at some point be *metamorphosed* into a blooming civilization comparable in greatness to ancient Rome. The Duyckincks linked Ovid’s Golden Age to the “Golden Age of Virginia,” and thereby turned the realities of the Virginia settlements into a dreamlike beginning. Colonial life was not only rough and dangerous. It was also new and full of promise. Sandys’s Ovid thus supplied the classical analogies that would make up the chassis of the new literature: the Golden Age signalled the coming of the Silver Age, and after that, the Brazen and the Iron Age.<sup>14</sup>

#### — Nationalizing the Past

For Griswold, the Young Americans, and many of their contemporaries, the exclusive tie to England presented the most important obstruction to the development of a mature American literature. This would change dramatically towards the end of the century. The first professors of American literature were professors of English as well, and both positions were usually

combined without manifest contradictions. Within their meaning horizon, nationalism and Anglophilia were not necessarily in conflict. In his *American Literature in the Colonial and National Periods* (1902), Lorenzo Sears noted a colonial "renaissance" in American culture, evident not only in the domain of letters, but in architecture, dress, furniture, and given names. Sears attributed this renaissance to the "historical spirit" of his generation (1909: 4). Interestingly, he also noted that this might be a sign of "coming imperialism." The inclusion of the colonial period running from the first English settlements up to 1783 (which takes up more than a third of Sears's overview), was an indication of the fact that the U.S. was now "old enough to have a literature of its own" (vii).

How, then, did the idea emerge that the revaluation of British culture was a serious obstacle to the nationalization of American literature? In certain respects, angloscepticism and anglophilia can be regarded as two sides of the same coin: both suppose an intimate relation between England and America, although that connection was valued in diametrically opposed ways. It should not surprise, therefore, that both attitudes sometimes occurred together. John Seely Hart's *Manual of American Literature* (1873), for example, defined American literature as "that part of English literature which has been produced upon American soil" (1969: 25). This definition could suggest that for Hart there was no demonstrable conflict between English and American literature, because the two were presumed identical, or at least part of the same family. But, in fact, Hart *did* advocate the cause of American literature as a distinct tradition. His earlier textbooks had successfully aroused interest in the study of English literature (after the war, he was appointed professor of rhetoric and English language at Princeton, his alma mater). With his *Manual* he tried to achieve something similar for American literature (Vanderbilt 1986: 85).

It is perhaps too easily forgotten that during this period the disciplines of English and American literature were in the same boat. Because they were both of relatively recent date, they were forced to make a common defence against the classical curriculum. A total rejection of the old curriculum was impossible, since it was too firmly established. The modern language scholars validated their field of study, not by negating the other camp, but by bringing it closer. This was done, among other things, through the construction of cognitive analogies. The advocates of modern languages and literatures tried to prove their peerage by making the new appear old. For this, they needed their golden age, their Homer and their Ovid.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, the *esprit historique* of philology came in handy in at least two ways (even for its opponents). On the one hand, it was a means of deferring the problem of adequate standards for determining the order



of merit of modern languages and literatures vis-à-vis the classics. On the other hand, by historicizing the criteria of acceptability, philologists extended their origins back in time, thus recursively nationalizing their earliest (pre-national) beginnings.

American literature, at this stage, observed itself as doubly handicapped. Well into the twentieth century, many textbooks deemed the colonial past too remote and dull for college students.<sup>16</sup> Moses Coit Tyler's *History of American Literature, 1607-1765* (1878), followed by his *Literary History of the American Revolution, 1763-1783* (1897), both in two volumes, formed perhaps the first concerted attempt to break away from this disinclination towards the nation's "prehistory."<sup>17</sup> Tyler was unhappy with the bootlicking mentality of many anglophiles, but like Hart he did not *a priori* reject all ties with England. In the 1878 preface, he likened American literature to a form of speech which developed from the "scattered voices" of the thirteen English colonies, each with its "peculiar literary accent," to result in "one great and resolute utterance" and a common "national accent" (1949: xi). The naturalizing analogy (literature as language) serves to underscore the intellectual independence of the Americans in relation to the mother country.

But if Americans now had their own literary "accent," they still spoke the same language as the English. To comprehend how the American mind had come into existence, therefore, it was important to include the "neglected literature" of the colonial period (xiv). As the title of the first two-volume history betrays, Tyler saw 1607 as the starting point of American literature, i.e. the year of the first permanent settlement "of English blood and English speech" in Virginia (6). More broadly, the seventeenth century constituted "[o]ur first literary period," since this would have been the time when American civilization "had its planting." This introduces a second metaphor, namely that of American literature as an "offshoot" or "branch" of that of England.<sup>18</sup> Seeing American literature both as a language and as an organism seemed to pose no contradiction in this context. The organic metaphor was in a sense already implicit in the image of an American culture gradually developing its own "voice."

These cognitive analogies allowed Tyler to counter two then familiar objections against the inclusion of writings produced before 1800. The first was that the early settlers were not born Americans and that their writings could thus not be considered a part of American literature. For Tyler, the linguistic link between English and American culture (which was also a bloodline) justified the inclusion of the colonial writers, because they had sown the seeds of the more mature literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Notwithstanding their English birth, these first writers in America were Americans; we may not exclude them from our story of American literature. They founded that literature; they are its Fathers; they stamped their spiritual lineaments upon it; and we shall never deeply enter into the meaning of American literature in its later forms without tracing it back, affectionately, to its beginnings with them. (7)

The emphatic tone of the quote, as appears from the repetition of the copula ("were," "are") and the specific use of certain modals ("may not," "shall") and adverbs ("never," "affectionately"), indicates that the cognitive component (the organic analogy, here in terms of a parent/offspring relationship) is reinforced by a moral component that gives Tyler's point of view the appeal of an almost sacred mission. To Tyler, the writings of the first settlers or "English Americans" belonged to America as much as they did to England. The countries thus constituted the "joint proprietors" of the beginnings of American literature. Rather than impeding the growth of American culture, this shared investment strengthened its roots by harmonizing expectations on both sides of the Atlantic.

The second implied objection was the "but is it any good?" argument that is now often levelled against minority writers.<sup>19</sup> Tyler acknowledged that the seventeenth century had produced little or no literature "for its own sake." However, the value of these early writings resided precisely in the fact that they articulated a steadily developing national identity. Rather than a contradiction in terms, colonial literature was "an instrument of humane and immediate utility" which the early settlers practised "with all the earnestness that was born in their blood" (8). Rather than a gratuitous pastime, the early literature of "English Americans" was the expression of the character of the American people. The colonial tracts and sermons, the letters home and the early apologetics of America, if unrefined in subject matter as well as in syntax and spelling, displayed a directness of appeal absent in the later periods.

By focusing primarily on the English immigrants, Tyler denied Native Americans – those "uncouth dusky creatures" – any claim to the paternity of American culture. For Tyler, the Indian was merely "a fierce dull biped standing in our way" (9). Remarkable, too, is the relative neglect of the writers of the Southern colonies. Even though Virginia provided the founding documents for the American tradition, Tyler had considerable difficulties in finding materials from outside New England. He attributed this

to the fact that the Southern settlements had been established mainly for a “material benefit,” whereas the North was more intent on an “ideal benefit” (85). Although he worked at a Mid-Western university, Tyler grew up in Connecticut and was educated at Yale. The marked preference for writings from New England might have been a way of indirectly reasserting the predominance of the intellectual centers of the Northeast. Equally under-represented are non-English immigrants, African Americans, and women authors. When Tyler composed his history, a number of certainties were all of a sudden in the air due to the expansion of the Union, the growth of mechanized industry, the influx of millions of immigrants from various parts of the world, and the internal division of the country over the question of slavery. No doubt, part of Tyler’s rationale in writing his *History of American Literature* was to strengthen the intellectual and political predominance of the New England elite by tracing the beginnings of American literature back to the Pilgrim Fathers.

What I want to draw attention to here, however, are not merely the racist, sexist, and regionalist leanings of Tyler’s story but the *improbability* of his founding narrative. What explains the colonial turn in American literary history, given the lack of trust in the literary qualities of the colonial texts? Why should American literary historians want to strengthen the cultural bonds with Great Britain even while struggling for an autonomous tradition? Most disciplinary histories fail to consider such questions because they construct a purely monocausal account of the rise of the discipline. Clearly, exposing the ideological presuppositions at the basis of Tyler’s *History of American Literature* constitutes a necessary and important undertaking. But such critiques do not in themselves explain the complexities of the Anglo-Saxon roots mythology. By saying that this mythology is improbable, I do not mean to suggest that it cannot be persistent, dominant, or oppressive. Rather, what I want to show is how the possibility of negation and revisioning is built into the process of institution formation.

The complexity of Tyler’s position cannot sufficiently be explained in terms of a continuation of English colonialism. This becomes apparent if we consider how the identity between American and English literature was constructed differently on both sides of the Atlantic. Tyler’s history was partly inspired by an outline of American literature (1875) in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* by John Nichol, the first professor of English language and literature at the University of Glasgow. In 1882 Nichol published a longer version of this outline as *American Literature: An Historical Sketch 1620-1880*, which began quite predictably with a chapter on the geographical, historical and climatological “conditions” affecting American literature (including the Indian). Nichol stressed that the difficulties involved in

carving out a civilization in the wilderness had impeded the growth of a national tradition. "The people of the United States have had to act their *Iliad*, they have not had time to sing it" (1882: 27). Another hindrance to the development of American literature was the absence of a native language. If the Americans had had "some modification of Mexican or Cherokee," Nichol comments, they might have been able to avoid "the violences and eccentricities in the midst of which they are beginning to 'sign their intellectual Declaration of Independence'" (27).

Up to this point, Nichol's perspective is more or less in accordance with Tyler's. Throughout his history, he self-evidently refers to the people of the U.S. as "our" race. At the same time, Nichol firmly objected to what he saw as a backward insistence among Americans to regard Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton as their great poets. In particular the first settlers of Virginia, he thought, could lay no claim to literature in any real sense (Nichol used the landing of the Mayflower rather than the establishment of Jamestown as the cue for his history).

But this colony [Virginia], founded at the time of the meridian blaze of English imagination, when Shakespeare was, in his greatest plays, holding up the mirror to our grandest life, has in its written record little trace of the richness and grasp of our passionate Elizabethan thought.

The referent of "our" is not specified (which indicates that for Nichol it did not need specification), but it seems clear that Nichol's aim was to puncture the mythology of Elizabethan roots as championed by Tyler and others. In doing so, Nichol at the same time made it plain that the "meridian blaze" of Elizabethan thought still flickered in Britain (or, rather, in an upward-aspiring Scotland).

With hindsight, the canon that Nichol constructed does not appear to be so different from that of his American contemporaries, but there are some shifts of emphasis. Although he ranks Whitman next to Bryant, Longfellow, Poe, and Joaquin Miller among the "Representative Poets," Nichol's final judgment of him is scathing. "If Shakespeare, Keats, and Goethe are poets, Whitman is not" (210). The mechanism used to upgrade American authors is here applied to downgrade them. Some American critics adopted Nichol's Victorian standards and Whitman's status as a poet remained doubtful for some time. But in the U.S., this doubt was frequently mixed with promise. Even at this stage, therefore, American literature in Great Britain was something different from American literature in the United States. Both countries set a different price on their "joint property."

Tyler's Elizabethan roots mythology cannot narrowly be interpreted as an actual return to English culture. Such returns ultimately served the self-definition of American culture.

#### — The Rhetoric of Race

Apart from Tyler, the two best-known champions of "Anglo-Saxonism" up until 1900 were Charles F. Richardson and Barrett Wendell, both professors of English, at Dartmouth and Harvard respectively. What sets them apart from Tyler is their almost exclusive focus on the literature of the nineteenth century, and in particular that of pre-Civil War New England. Richardson and Wendell were probably the first to more or less consistently identify a New England "Renaissance" (the term was coined by Wendell) as the first high point in American letters, although the flag did not then carry the same cargo as now. In doing so, they clearly reacted to what they perceived as the earlier overemphasis of the colonial and revolutionary periods as well as against the growing cultural importance of New York.

For this reason, revisionists have approached Richardson and Wendell as conservatives, whose exclusion of non-white authors has slowed down the development of a truly American tradition. As Wayne Charles Miller once said in a programmatic essay calling for a new literary history of the United States, "it is time to let all our peoples in" (1984: 25). Such critiques, however, hide as much as they reveal. For one thing, they obscure the fact that "Anglocentrism," "provincialism," or "racism" are by no means fixed categories. Their meanings can vary enormously depending on who applies them. As I will show, Richardson and Wendell were themselves involved in opposing what they perceived as the exaggerated literary nationalism of the preceding generation. My aim is not to explain away their undeniable shortcomings but to point out the malleability of apparently natural categories of affiliation. Reading these accounts exclusively in terms of current conceptions of race is to miss out on the fundamental paradox that the racism of these scholars constituted an effect of the relativization of race as a marker of national belonging.

Richardson's *American Literature 1607-1885* was published in two volumes in 1886 and 1889, the first dealing with *The Development of American Thought* and the second with *American Poetry and Fiction*.<sup>20</sup> Richardson thus physically separated "thought" from "belles-lettres." That he still devoted an entire volume to the former even though it had little to do with literature in the strict sense, was motivated by his conviction that American literature constituted a "commanding offshoot" of English literature "without essential change of form and character, and yet existing

under peculiar conditions" (1891: vi). The principal aim of the first volume was to examine the "conditions" that had made American literature and culture possible. Richardson thus adopted a (supposedly) Tainean point of view in explaining American literature as the product of the English "character" in a new environment. The writings of temporary residents such as John Smith and George Sandys or William Morrell could help to pinpoint the distinctiveness of American literature, but they had no intrinsic literary value. "When there is a Central African literature in English," Richardson rhetorically asked, "will Henry M. Stanley be reckoned one of its early lights?" (xvii).<sup>21</sup>

For Richardson, American literature really started with Irving, Longfellow, Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, and the (literary) historians Bancroft, Motley and Ticknor. Except for Irving –Richardson still placed him "at the fore-front of American literature" but no longer "at the head of our prose writers" (xi) –, these were all New England writers. Richardson's first volume can be considered a justification of this regionalism. The first chapter on "The Race-Elements in American Literature" links the genesis of the American tradition to the "Saxon mind" (9). The most vital features of the Saxons were Christianity, self-reliance, the village-idea, and a capacity to assimilate foreign elements. According to Richardson, the removal to the new world had not fundamentally altered these basic features, so that Americans and their English forebears could still be regarded as "in essentials but a single folk," "unchanged in all important matters" (9, 11). This procedure allowed Richardson to trace the roots of American culture as far back as Tacitus.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, however, he stressed that certain race-elements were more developed in America than in England, thanks to the peculiar "conditions" in which the country had emerged. This obtained *a fortiori* for the New England colonies, whose "strong religious purpose" fully brought out "the half-Hebraic temper of the Christianized Saxons" (12).<sup>23</sup> Another asset of the New Englanders was their commercialism, which had prevented the development of a European-style state church. Richardson's was thus not an unequivocal affirmation of puritan origins. On the contrary, he underlined the fanaticism and intolerance of the puritan founders. Since they were radically opposed to *belles-lettres* as such, a true literary culture could only emerge when Unitarianism had removed the dogmatism from their value system. Richardson heavily discriminated against the South, whose patrol culture he contrasted with the New England town meeting. He likewise discriminated against Native Americans and non-English immigrants, both of whom he discarded as subordinate "influences" on American literature. But he nevertheless regarded the assimilation of non-

English elements (except for the Chinese, the Italians, and the Hungarians, who refused to be assimilated) as an added strength for the English race, which had become more cosmopolitan and enterprising in the process.

Richardson thus played with the expectancy of the future perfection of the English race, which allowed him to assert both the “Saxon” roots of American literature, and to include writings from outside New England or even the original thirteen colonies as part of that literature. “Unto him that hath shall be given”: Richardson drew on the Parable of the Talents to justify the Westward expansion across the continent as a legitimate course of action (33). This allowed him to naturalize the predominance of the Northern emigrants or colonizers over those from the South, as “the configuration of the continent gave them more land to occupy.” Richardson was in no doubt that the writings produced outside the thirteen original colonies, however far removed from the Atlantic coast, were still part of English literature, as they were produced “under somewhat unfamiliar conditions, but never under a new race-domination” (35). Interestingly, this position testifies not just to Richardson’s origins-based conception of American literature but also of the potential expansiveness of that definition.

As it appears, Richardson’s insistence that the Americans and the English remained one indivisible people did not automatically entail that they had descended from the same origins. Above all, they belonged to the same “race” because they could read each other’s books. This is why Germany, the third great “Teutonic” nation, was excluded from membership in that community. Richardson probably felt strengthened in this view by the authority of Matthew Arnold, who the year before had declared that in his opinion the Americans remained nothing more or less than “English on the other side of the Atlantic,” despite the massive inflow of German immigrants since 1848 (Arnold remained silent about the Irish or other immigrants groups) and contemporary assertions that America had become as close to Germany as to England (Arnold 1888: 71-2). Such claims could not be motivated on the basis of blood ties alone. What, for Richardson, explained the bond between the English and the Americans (given their Teutonic origins) was their shared language.

This linguistic nationalism is even more explicit in Barrett Wendell, whose *Literary History of America* appeared in 1900 for Scribner’s *Library of Literary History*. The series editor probably suggested the title for the book, since Wendell himself preferred the label “(English) literature in America,” which does not lay claim to the whole of the Western hemisphere.<sup>24</sup> Wendell’s Anglo bias is directly apparent from the fact that the first three books of the history (which follow a straightforward division into centuries) each begin with two chapters on English history and

literature, as a kind of yardstick for the development of American letters. The rest of the volume is reserved entirely to the nineteenth century, the only period in American history that would have produced literature of significance. While book IV is devoted to the literature of the Middle States (separate chapters on Brown, Irving, Cooper, Bryant, and Poe), book V, by far the longest section of the history, deals exclusively with "The Renaissance of New England" (including both the Concord and the Cambridge writers). The literatures of the South and the West (as well as Whitman) are squeezed into the final book, rather laconically labelled "The Rest of the Story."

In spite of what this simplistic outline may suggest, Wendell had developed a rather detailed theory of literary evolution built on the link between literature and language. For Wendell, nationhood (at least in principle) had nothing to do with descent but everything with language: "In a strange, subtle way each language grows to associate with itself the ideals and the aspirations and the fate of those peoples with whose life it is inextricably intermingled" (1909: 3). This entailed that, as with languages, literatures could be studied according to "laws" of growth, development, and decline. The evolutionary career of a "normal" literature consisted of three distinct phases, the first of which was "instinctively poetic" and therefore "the most excellent," because it still followed a spontaneous impulse that was not yet shackled by tradition (5, 1). After that came the "prosaic" phase, and later still, "prose fiction." In both later stages, literature was more conscious and formally developed.

Wendell thought that the United States lacked the first, "poetic" stage of development, the vital force that infused other traditions. He claimed, however, that at the time of the first English settlements in America, English culture was not yet infected by the "debility of extreme culture" that would captivate it later on (4). The dominant literary forms were still poetry and drama, as the works of Spenser and Shakespeare (or "Shakspere" as Wendell spells it) testified. In this way, Wendell provided American literature (or rather English literature in America) with a "native" phase, residing in the traditions that the English immigrants had brought with them during the seventeenth century. Whereas in England the Elizabethan character had faded due to social and economic pressures, it had remained alive in the relative isolation of the colonies.

Thus, even as Americans had gradually lost touch with their home culture and perhaps had become a new "race" due to the admixture of other peoples, the Elizabethan character traits ("spontaneity," "enthusiasm," "versatility") had not disappeared, because they were ingrained in the language through which Americans continued to express their ideals.



“English or not,” Wendell states, “we Americans are English-speaking still; and English-speaking we must always remain” (8). Wendell hardly makes explicit what he means by the Elizabethan ideals or values at the base of American culture, but he suggests that “every one bred in the traditions of our ancestral language instinctively knows” what they are about. Morally, these ideals are contained in the King James Bible or the imperative “to do right.” Legally, they are expressed by English Common Law, or the duty to “maintain our rights.” Ultimately, it is the supposed self-identity of the English language that allows Wendell to speak of a New England “Renaissance.”

The influential Anglo-Saxon roots narratives of Richardson and Wendell are thus more complex than is usually supposed. Both present the English “race” as at once unchanging and highly tolerant to change, which allows them to differentiate American from English culture even while stressing the bond between the two.<sup>25</sup> By focusing all attention on what they exclude, we risk losing sight of this paradoxical legitimation logic. Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued that we need to refrain from imposing our “racial lexicon” on earlier periods in American history (1998: 6-7). Richardson and Wendell lived under a different racial regime than ours, the defects of which are all too clear now. Interpreting their literary histories in terms of contemporary divisions such as white versus black is thus not only misleading, it also suggests that these latter-day racial categories can function as objective parameters for determining cultural membership or professional respectability, when in fact they are highly contingent and politically charged. However mistaken or erroneous from a present-day perspective, the early accounts of American literature should be regarded as early responses to the emergence of an autonomous national tradition.

#### — Teaching and Preaching

Modern literatures first entered the American schools and colleges through classes in rhetoric and oratory. This institutional setting conditioned the choice of authors and texts that were considered worthy of attention, as well as the kinds of expectations associated with the study of American literature as such. Thus, *McGuffey's Sixth Eclectic Reader* motivated its selections (both English and American) by means of “their elocutionary value” and “their instructive merit and healthful moral tone” (1879: iv). More practical considerations crept in as well, such as the expensiveness of the American authors vis-à-vis their British colleagues due to the absence of international copyright protection. The rise of literary criticism vis-à-vis the study of rhetoric entailed a respecification of the ends of American

literature. But this institutional relocation should not readily be regarded as the point where American literature became a field of study in its own right rather than a mere instrument for drilling rhetorical rules. We should keep in mind that the classes in rhetoric were the only ones in the traditional college that let modern literatures in.

Significantly, the argument that the study of American literature has been hampered in its development by the educational conservatism of the old college tends to go hand in hand with the converse assumption that we have erred from the original aim of literary studies through excessive specialization and overproduction. In *The Rise and Fall of English* Robert Scholes proposes to "go back to the roots of our liberal arts tradition" by reinstating rhetoric at the core of the college curriculum (1998: 120). At the same time, however, Scholes realizes that the "invidious binary opposition" between writing teachers and literary scholars is in fact the foundation of English as a discipline and thus cannot be undone without in a sense abolishing the discipline (35). Scholes's own reconstructive ambition, however legitimate and meaningful, cannot but reproduce this asymmetry at the core of the discipline.

Most early manuals of American literature functioned as supplements to histories of English literature. We have already discussed Hart's *Manual of American Literature*. Two other examples are Edmund Clarence Stedman's popular *Poets of America* (1885), a companion volume to his *Victorian Poets* published ten years earlier, and Henry A. Beers's *Outline Sketch of American Literature* (1887; revised in 1891 as *Initial Studies in American Letters*), designed as a complement to his *From Chaucer to Tennyson* (1886). Most of these textbooks did not necessarily display excessive deference to British culture. Stedman, for instance, claimed that "the literature – even the poetic literature – of no country, during the last half-century, is of greater interest to the philosophical student, with respect to its bearing on the future, than that of the United States" (1892: ix). English literature was as much a steppingstone as an obstruction for the development of a national literature in the U.S.

Stedman further argued that the Victorian period had produced "a first heat" in American poetry (he devotes separate chapters to Bryant, Whittier, Emerson, Longfellow, Poe, Holmes, Lowell, as well as Whitman and Bayard Taylor) that was unparalleled in the British literature of the same period (x). But, however significant, this was merely the preface to a "second period of poetic achievement" when America would definitively outshine Great Britain (xiii). Stedman thus already had a vague notion of the second literary cycle that is worked out in Spiller's *Literary History of the United States*. Rather than the ultimate champions of American literature,

the Victorian poets were considered trailblazers: “when the true poet shall come to America, it will be because such an one as Emerson has gone before him and prepared the way for his song, his vision, and his recognition” (179). Although Stedman focused mainly on the New England authors, their ultimate status was by no means assured. They were still too English to be truly American.

This tentativeness also characterizes Beers’s manual, which still detects “a helpless provincialism” in American literature: “[d]ecrepitude rather than youthfulness is the mark of a colonial literature” (1895: 8). True independence, which for Beers still had to be achieved, thus entailed rejuvenation rather than a coming-of-age. Characteristically, Beers fused this remarkable openness towards the future with an almost exclusive emphasis on the first half of the nineteenth century (although the last chapter briefly discussed the “Literature since 1861”). He thus refused to pass a definitive judgment on the Whitman, who had died but recently. Poe, on the other hand, had failed in his promise to become a greater poet than both Longfellow and Whittier, because of his defective “character” (173). If Beers’s perspective betrays a conservative agenda, one must also admit that he recognized Poe’s talent in spite of his moral objections.

During the nineties, or even before, textbooks started to explicitly denounce the pedagogical approach of the McGuffey readers. Julian Hawthorne and Leonard Lemmon’s *American Literature* (1891), for instance, advised teachers to encourage pupils to read more for themselves. The pupils were to be directed to those books they liked most. Rather than a dull illustration of technical rules, literature was a “criticism of life” in Matthew Arnold’s sense. A critical ability should be awakened in pupils by urging them to “tell in their own words” what they had chosen to read (1907: viii). This manual, therefore, cannot readily be qualified as an instrument for social control. It just as much served a critical function in that it made pupils think for themselves.

This, of course, does not mean that no pedagogical aims were envisioned. By making students more critical and by fighting their aversion to reading, Hawthorne and Lemmon also wanted to make them good Americans. They promoted their handbook by stressing that it was more than a mere supplement to an English manual and could stand on its own. American literature had to be evaluated on its own terms rather than on the basis of English or European standards. This, at the same time, entailed the recognition that American literature was still in a very poor state: “Unless we can see promise in it, there is not much, as yet, that we can see” (ix). The “protoplasmic rubbish” of the colonial and revolutionary periods could be called literature “by courtesy only” (1, x). As to contemporary authors,

there was the usual problem of adequate evaluative standards.<sup>26</sup> Except for a handful of great names (Webster, Franklin, Emerson, and Hawthorne), the United States had yielded no creative geniuses that could bear comparison with Europe.

In most respects, Hawthorne and Lemmon told the familiar story, with Brown, Irving, Cooper, and Melville as the supposedly unrefined pioneers, and Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Holmes as the leading figures. But it is important to note the structural incentives locked into this scenario. To isolate the great talents from the "impostors," American authors had to be submitted to the highest possible standards. Modesty as well as optimism were called for to avoid falling prey to the "crippling of provincialism": "Let [boys and girls] study this manual, not for the glorification of home products, but to realize, by learning what has been done, how much remains to do" (xiv). This quote clearly indicates that the study of American literature had to fill some kind of formative function, which interestingly resided not in the affirmation but in the negation of a narrowly nationalist viewpoint. Hawthorne and Lemmon's manual is thus not merely a product of cultural nationalism, but also a complex response to it.

Brander Matthews's *Introduction to the Study of American Literature* (1896) is a prototypical instance of a literary history textbook, with questions and answers, portraits of the great authors, all of whom are neatly consigned to a separate chapter (predictably, Longfellow, Whittier and Holmes are included, Melville and Whitman are not). While the "Colonial Period" is corseted in a summary chapter at the start (the only eighteenth century figure to receive more than passing attention is Franklin), a short glance at "The End of the Nineteenth Century" rounds off the history. In the preface, Matthews notes that, to make things easier for the student, he filtered out of the history "all dates and all proper names, and all titles of books not absolutely essential" (1896: 5).

The introductory chapter unfolds the familiar narrative of American literature as part of the English tradition. Language rather than nationality is decisive, making Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia all contributors to the same tradition.<sup>27</sup> "This must be remembered always – that the record of the life of the peoples using the English language is English literature" (10). Matthews had good reasons to insist on the unity of English literature. Every literature, he stressed, is as strong as the people who share a common language. According to his estimation, by the end of the twentieth century, there would be a thousand million English-language speakers around the world. This gave English literature a marked advantage vis-à-vis the other world literatures. "Greek literature is dead, and Hebrew literature is dead; but English literature is alive now. It is the con-

tinuous account of the life of those who speak the English language, in the past, the present, and in the future.”

Through the opposition between living and dead languages, Matthews asserted the place of modern languages and literatures in the academy next to and apart from the classical curriculum.<sup>28</sup> In the same movement, he gave American literature a privileged status among other modern literatures. While the association with the “splendid possession” of Great Britain made it part of world literature, American literature also showed its own distinctive identity by virtue of its “Americanism,” or as James Russell Lowell had put it, “not thinking yourself either better or worse than your neighbors by reason of any artificial distinction” (12-13). Because of this defining quality, American literature had the best cards for the future of all the divisions of English literature. Rather than by a pressing need to subdue a growing body of non-English immigrants, therefore, Matthews’s “Anglo-Saxonism” was primarily informed by a struggle to convince conservative administrators of the relevance of American literature. For this, he linked arms with self-taught champions of industry such as Andrew Carnegie, who had severely criticized the lifeless institutions of higher learning.

Matthews adroitly tapped this widespread distaste of college education by copying the opposition between “experience” and “learning” and extending it to the academic debate among classicists and modern language scholars. Kermit Vanderbilt has argued that, despite the enormous success of his *Introduction*, Matthews “may have impeded the cause of American literature ... by showing a conventional deference to English letters” (1986: 133). I would like to stress the limitations of such a teleological viewpoint. With hindsight, the idea that American authors should be measured “upon the same scales” as their British colleagues, as one textbook put it, can easily be read as a symptom of cultural immaturity (Higginson and Boynton 1903: 4). It should be kept in mind, however, that this interpretation recycles a constitutive dilemma that has structured the discipline from the start. The starting point for American literary history was not some kind of master plan of New England intellectuals, but rather a set of conflicts, between colleges and universities, teaching and research, regionalism and nationalism. All attempts to get at a synthesis inevitably feed this conflict, since they have to depart from established institutional structures.

#### — Why Textbooks (Never) Lie

The canon wars of the 1980s and after have considerably energized the study of American literature by pointing out the ideological functions of American literature studies and by un- or recovering the work of minority

writers. However, precisely because most attention has gone to what the discipline excludes, not enough has been said about how these exclusions are produced. The incentive to open up the canon, which has yielded so many interesting new materials and viewpoints, has to some extent obscured the foundational paradox of the discipline, which resides in the fact that its undeniable exclusiveness is a symptom of an underlying drive to (ever greater) inclusivity. This paradox, as I see it, is difficult to capture from within a framework that derives its legitimacy from a corrective impulse. Let me clarify my point by looking at a well-known article by Nina Baym entitled "Early Histories of American Literature: A Chapter in the Institution of New England." In this text Baym convincingly argues that, upon becoming a university discipline, American literary studies built on an already established narrative derived from schoolbooks produced for the use of common schools roughly between 1880 and 1910. This narrative has served to uphold the predominance of New England society as well as the social distinctions operative in that society.<sup>29</sup>

Baym discusses several of the pioneers of American literary studies that I discussed above, among them Tyler, Pattee, Richardson, Wendell, and Matthews. According to Baym these early textbook authors told a "tendentious" story, because they projected a canon of American literature that is not representative of the entire nation (459).<sup>30</sup> The diffusion of this story was thus a deliberate strategy on the part of the New England elite to secure its privileged social position in American society. Leading publishers and educators made up the story of the primacy of New England to subdue a general "fear of materialization" among the established order after the Civil War (476). Industrialization and immigration had produced two new social classes: the new rich and the "far more dangerous" class of poor immigrants in the urban slums (461). Since the new rich could not be counted on to conform to the Whig ideals, the rootless new poor formed the primary target of the reform scheme. By preaching the "spiritual way," the elementary textbooks instilled the values of the established order in the new labor class. At the end, Baym warns us that the "originary narrative" of American literary studies established by the early textbooks continues to haunt the discipline, "even among many who earnestly wish to escape it" (479). Even today, whatever their political or aesthetic views, American literary historians are willy-nilly furthering the Whig project of a nineteenth century cultural elite.

Baym's highly evocative account of the ideological roots of American literature studies has done a lot to create a more profound awareness among literary scholars of the ideological implications of their pursuits. What it has not done, however, is formulate a thorough explanation of the

genesis of American literary studies and the incentive structures buttressing it. In my opinion, Baym considerably weakens her own argument by mixing up social and psychological factors. When attributing the rise of American literary studies to a generalized “fear of materialization” among New England worthies, she reduces the discipline to a spurious ideology that indirectly serves to keep the established order intact. The problem with such a view is that it explains the existence of an institution in terms of its supposed psychological effects, about which little can be known. And even if these effects can be ascertained, it is very hard to predict to what extent the causal link that upholds the institution remains obscure to its members.<sup>31</sup> After all, once the ideological effects become visible, they tend to lose their force.

Did the early textbooks of American literature really prevent immigrant children from climbing the social ladder? How do we know how these children responded to the origins story? Provided that the textbooks actually fulfilled the ideological function attributed to them, it still remains to be seen how a club of New England intellectuals could fool the rest of the country into believing that the “New England way” was the only possible way. When stating that the authors of the early manuals “*knew all too well* that the nation was an artifice and that no single national character undergirded it” and that, therefore, they “*insisted passionately* that peace and progress called for a commonalty that, if it did not exist, had *at once to be invented*” (460, italics added), Baym is drawing on Eric Hobsbawm’s well-known notion of invented traditions.

What sets these invented traditions apart from older traditions or customs, in Hobsbawm’s view, is that they are “factitious” (1983: 2). They have been deliberately instituted to answer problems peculiar to modern societies.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to what one would expect, these traditions have not existed from time immemorial, and the reason why they make us believe that they have is because they have been drilled into our minds by the sheer force of repetition. This kind of mass intoxication is only possible in societies that rely on mass media. At the same time, those societies are least able to hold on to established traditions because of the weakening of social bonds. In the following I want to argue that the view that American literature constitutes an invented tradition of this kind is not a very productive one, because it fails to capture the complex institutional logic of American literary history.

The study of American literature was established during the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century, in a time when the mass media flourished to an unprecedented degree. The school manuals had to bang into the heads of immigrant children the idea that the United States was and would

always remain an "Anglo-Saxon" country. According to Baym, New England educators "seemed certain that sheer repetition by itself would suffice to flood the child's mind with irresistible spiritual light" (463). This may explain why, for current observers, many of these early textbooks seem to be so much alike. But Baym takes her argument a step further when she claims that more scholarly works like the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, which explicitly reacted against the booming textbook market, still (implicitly) strengthened the narrative of Anglo superiority, because "there was really no other story to tell" (478). Even current literary history projects, despite their theoretical bravura, would partly remain stuck in the plot line of the early school manuals.

At this point, we may well ask which story *we* are stuck in: that of the textbooks, insisting against all odds on the "Anglo-Saxon" roots of American literary culture, or Baym's, claiming that all the textbooks are telling the same story, even when this story is revised or rejected. Is it really the case that there is no other story to tell? What is the story of the story of the story? My aim here is not to invalidate Baym's origins narrative but to add to its complexity. The point to note is that literary tradition cannot be traced to individual intentions or ideals alone. The early beginnings of American literary studies testify as much to the frustration of founding ideologies as of their implementation. As Gerald Graff has put it: "what goes in is not necessarily what comes out" (1987: 5). Every narrative invites contradiction; there are no twice-told tales. For every plot, there are a myriad counterplots. Our perspective on the future, as long as it has not been turned into fact or refuted by the facts, remains open to refutation by others.

Baym cannot entirely capture this self-induced complexity, because she constructs a fully intentional argument and tends to focus on the uniformity of the early textbooks rather than on the ways in which they invite contradiction. But it is not only the supposed function of the puritan origins story that is in the air if we pursue this line of reasoning. The idea that the origins story is "factitious" becomes problematic as well. According to Baym, American literary history continues to be haunted by the exclusionist narrative that called it into existence. By conceptualizing American literature as an "invented" tradition, Baym implicitly invokes the ideal of a "real" tradition, which allows her to re-establish the discipline from the inside out. Even while exposing the narrative of puritan origins as fiction, Baym thus seems to illustrate her own claim that we can never escape that narrative even if we want to.

I think we miss the point when we reduce the ideology "Anglo-Saxon" roots to a mere device for domination. The story that the early textbooks narrated is more complex than Baym assumes. In my opinion, an



explanation like Baym's cannot satisfactorily account for the "belatedness" of American literature in the plot of the school histories. If the function of these histories was to justify the predominance of New England culture, then why were they so reluctant to acknowledge its existence? Even the Cambridge and Concord writers, despite their undisputed prominence, were still mostly qualified as "sectional" instead of truly "national" writers. For Baym, this self-denial is merely a device for making the story more compelling, to make the un hoped for New England "Renaissance" even more glorious. The fact remains, however, that these American literary historians were less inclined than many of today's scholars to regard the New England writers as the representatives of an "American" (rather than merely a regional) flowering.<sup>33</sup>

Where does this propensity on the part of American literature to continually postpone itself come from? Why does the turn to colonial literature at the same time entail a devaluation of colonial writings? In my opinion, such paradoxes can best be explained by defining American literary history as a self-substitutive order. Such an order is stabilized by a projective structure that validates itself by constantly propelling itself into the future. This dynamic is apparent in the plot of the early textbooks, which underscore the barrenness of New England culture even while promoting it. But it is equally present in Baym's narrative of that narrative when she claims that current American literature scholarship is still furthering "Whig goals" in spite of itself (480). If, from our perspective, the "Anglo-Saxon" roots story serves a "goal" at all, it has less to do with keeping immigrant children down than with the differentiation of a professional viewpoint on American literature. In a society that insists on equality and diversity, an expert perspective can only develop when it institutionalizes its own negation. This may be why American literary studies constantly falsifies the origins stories that it constructs to validate itself.

To repeat, I do not want to explain away or trivialize the ethnocentric or sexist bias of the first school manuals. Rather, the point is that this undeniable exclusionism has to be read as a paradoxical consequence of the fundamental inclusiveness of the semantics of belonging underpinning American literary history as an emerging scholarly field. Precisely because the early textbooks address the nation as a whole, i.e. because they assume a nationalizing purpose, it becomes possible for us to hold them to account for failing to live up to this goal. I don't think that the story that a small New England elite has led everybody else up the garden path by spreading a "tendentious narrative" about the puritan origins of American culture suffices to explain the social functions of American literary history. An origins story, after all, only makes sense when there are several ways of

telling the story. Only by considering this self-substitutive impulse at the core of American literary studies does it become possible to understand the tremendous impact of the "Anglo-Saxon" roots story, as well as Baym's contemporary rendition of that story.

#### — The Taboo on Provincialism

The tabooing of the provincial taboo has proven a remarkable constant in American literary studies.<sup>34</sup> In a 1924 issue of *The American Mercury*, Fred Lewis Pattee enlisted "ten commandments" for a truly "American" literary history, one of which was that it should be "impartial and unprovincial" (1924: 6). Towards the end of the sixties, Robert Spiller looked back on the rise of American Studies as a legitimate struggle against a "lingering colonialism" ingrained in American culture (1977: 140). In the *Literary History of the United States* (1948), Spiller and his team had attempted to conquer this colonial complex by stressing the "cosmopolitan" beginnings of American literature. Even the efforts of the myth critics to interpret American culture in terms of archetypal images can be seen in this light. The aim was clearly to provide American culture with a sense of origins, but these origins were at the same time infused with a strong sense of promise.<sup>35</sup> And, finally, when he announced the new *Cambridge History of American Literature* at the 1985 Salzburg Seminar, Sacvan Bercovitch ambiguously declared "the end of American parochialism" (1986a: 652).

"Provincialism" can thus be described as a semantic pointer that conditions the acceptability of American literature as a functional domain and a scholarly field. Each generation or movement fills this concept with different meanings, depending on their relation to predecessors or competitors. But the structural configuration remains more or less stable. It should be stressed that such self-descriptions only become meaningful inside the American literary profession, where they can authorize alternative viewpoints. A simple, monocausal perspective cannot capture this self-engendered complexity. What I have tried to show in the foregoing is that a balanced account of early American literary history needs to incorporate the hidden motivational structures underlying the discipline, which urge it to go beyond its accepted definitions and to recover its "predisciplinary" roots. This antiprovincial move, equally present in the pioneering textbooks discussed above as in current "transnational" reconfigurations of literary history, can thus be described as the normal operational mode of a discipline depending on the improbability of its emergence.

In this chapter I have offered a corrective to the dominant view that American literature entered the school curricula to reinforce the firstness of

the New England pedigree during a period when the American identity was under increasing pressure due to various social factors. This perspective, however interesting and revealing, presents us with a half-truth at best. In response, I have claimed that the persistent Anglo-Saxon roots narrative, which remains visible in the periodization of current histories, cannot be reduced to a deliberate invention on the part of a New England power elite intent on preserving its social status. I argue that this perspective obscures the foundational dynamic of the discipline, which resides in the fact that American literary history is continually in the process of re-inventing itself by dismantling the origins narratives that it puts out. This is what allows it to hold open the promise of a truly inclusive realization of American culture in the future. Contrary what is usually supposed, this demand for inclusiveness is already present in those early accounts that now seem so exclusionary. A valid explanation of the functions of American literary history needs to incorporate this constitutive tension at the basis of the discipline, which constantly urges it to look forward even while going back into the past.

## LIVE AND LET LIVE: DEBATING CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE (1890-1930)

In the complement to his *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863), devoted to “les contemporains,” Hippolyte Taine remarked: “Si Dickens était mort, on pourrait faire sa biographie (...) Malheureusement Dickens vit encore et dément les biographies qu’on fait de lui” (1921: 2-3).<sup>36</sup> For current observers, the assumption that a scientifically valid approach to literary history should abstain from judging living authors seems difficult to maintain. Today, it is perhaps not so much the present as the past that arouses suspicion.<sup>37</sup> Why, as the reasoning goes, should we read the epics of dead white males instead of focusing on the living cultures of our own communities? Not so long ago, however, the idea of the unreliability of the present was still very much accepted. Moreover, in more than one respect it still guides us. It shows, for instance, in current jeremiads about the “oprahfication” of culture, or the unifying effect of prestigious literary prizes on an author’s oeuvre: very often, such events occasion critics to redefine her writings in light of her struggle for or against a special cause.

Living writers present us with a paradox in that we cannot predict whether their work will last. The vitality of a tradition depends on the degree to which it reaches back into the past. In order to enter the pantheon of letters, an author has to depart from the contingencies of life. He or she may move to the woods, but the longest anyone has held out there is two years and two months. Moreover, one cannot do this without setting a trend. In a way, then, the problem of living authors is a reformulation of the more basic problem that besets the discipline of literary history in general, namely that not everything can be included even though in principle everything could be. How can we keep the literary masterpieces alive (even though so much has already been said about them)? And, vice versa, how can we sort out from the flow of writing those works that will prove lasting (although nothing definitive can be said about them before time has done its work)? How, in other words, can we expect the unexpected?

My aim in this chapter is to account for the problem of living authors in functional terms. Where does the impulse to consign valuable writings to the past come from? On first sight, the norm against living authors is merely an instrument of forgetting, a mechanism for setting apart the classics from the nine days’ wonders. But it is more than a mere sieve. The

classics can only preserve their privileged status in relation to the contemporary scene, which can be forgotten precisely because it has to be presupposed. The memorableness of the great literary works, on the other hand, constantly has to be proved, and precisely this makes them worth remembering. As the boundary line between the past and the future moves forward, the canon has to be reconfigured in such a way that contemporary developments become predictable from the vantage point of the classics, which thus retroactively confirms their foundational status. Literary traditions in other words immunize themselves against forgetting through forgetting. It is this dynamic that concerns us here. When Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian published their *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* in 1924, they could not get around the fact that Taine had already written an authoritative five-piece work of the same title sixty years earlier, and that a massive body of other studies on the same subject had appeared in the intervening period. As the authors remark in the opening pages of their history: “Un livre nouveau ne justifie sa publication que par l’apport de quelque nouveauté” (1929: vii).<sup>38</sup> But this novelty, as they realized, would have to depend on the recognition of what had already been achieved in the field of English literature. They could criticize the earlier accounts, take the edge off them, make qualifications, etc., but they could not totally ignore them. As the greatest obstacle to their project, Legouis and Cazamian explicitly stated the traditional overemphasis of the older periods. “Le désir commun des deux collaborateurs était de réagir contre cet excès, tellement accoutumé qu’il s’est inscrit en notre optique même” (xi).<sup>39</sup>

The authors divided labor between “Le Moyen Age et la Renaissance” (Legouis) and “Epoques moderne et contemporaine” (Cazamian). Both parts were more or less equal in size, but the aims and methods were different. For Legouis, the greatest challenge was to digest the growing mass of secondary literature devoted to the early periods that had gradually blocked access to the primary works. He had to pierce through this layer of anterior judgements to re-establish direct contact with the literary masterpieces. Cazamian, on the other hand, was less burdened by the weight of the discipline. In his case, it was the lack of constraints that was more constraining. “Nous connaissons moins les vivants que les morts” (1248).<sup>40</sup> Despite such Tainean reservations, Cazamian devoted the final chapter entirely to contemporary tendencies, for which he proposed tentative lines of division, classifications and rankings. Here, the goal was not so much simplification or synthesis as selection.

There are two opposite strategies at work here. The first strategy serves to indicate that, despite the flux of time, the variety of the works, and the scholarly disputes about their merits and demerits, “English literature”

(still) forms a more or less stable entity. The other strategy is designed to break open the established divisions and periodizations in order to make room for the newcomers. Let me stress that the original problem (what is/is not English literature?) is not thereby solved (if it were solvable, we could close the books). Legouis was no more able to save the masterpieces from being snowed under by commentaries (he even contributed to the process), than Cazamian could predict the future status of contemporary authors (although his judgements did set the premises of further judgements). Nor does the division of expertise between old and new by itself remove the problem of living authors. This specialization merely makes it easier to ignore the problem or, conversely, to study it more attentively. Simplification and selection can thus be seen as conflictual but complementary procedures for the demarcation of a literary tradition. We consult who's who's and necrologies with opposite goals in mind but we assume that both types of reference works will be regularly updated.

This chapter is about the negotiation between these two ways of ordering literature. In the six decades separating Legouis and Cazamian's history from Taine's pioneering work, English had developed into an established scholarly discipline. Consequently, everything that is said on the topic of English literature now has to be said in opposition to what has already been said about it before. This means that ever more needs to be forgotten and remembered. In a society that is increasingly oriented towards the new, forgetting becomes a problem in its own right. The aim of this chapter is not to remedy this problem. The formulation of the problem of the new, its problematization as a defining attribute of modernity, in a sense already justifies disagreement about what caused it. As long as the controversy lasts, we remain committed to the cause (even if we define it in different, incompatible ways). The point, then, is not just to explain the paradox of modern literature, but also to account for the functions it has been made to serve.

#### — Explaining Antiquarianism

From the start, Americans have been accustomed to validating their nation on the basis of the fact that it was still in the making. As the country expanded westward in the course of the nineteenth century, however, and new immigrant groups poured into the nation, a distinction enforced itself between the predominantly "Anglo-Saxon" nation of the Founding Fathers and the increasingly multiethnic, continental nation that it was turning into. In many ways, the novelty of American literature proved a major obstacle to its institutionalization in the university during the last quarter of the

century. As the example of Taine shows, scholarly decorum requires that (good) literature be old. If the idea of a modern literature was a contradiction in terms, this applied *a fortiori* to American literature, which was only just beginning to discover itself. As we saw in the previous chapter, this called for specific defuturization strategies in order to counterfactually reconnect an “old stock” America to the common past from which it was factually deprived.

One way to account for the problem of contemporary literature in the U.S. is by referring to specific “needs” generated by socio-cultural shifts in the post-Civil War period on the one hand, and the rise of professionalism on the other. In regard to the former, what appeared as the distinctive characteristic of American culture, its novelty, was increasingly problematized in view of the new, predominantly non-Anglo immigration and the rise of newly enfranchised groups. Charles Richardson, for instance, complained in his *American Literature 1607-1885* that recent American literature only concerned itself with “deck-hands, longshoremen, and stagedrivers, Californian miners, Chinese, highway robbers, buffaloes, and Indians” and disregarded such loftier themes as “God, duty, culture, and Eastern lakes or rivers” (1891: xv). From such a perspective, the bias for authors no longer living reflects a deeper suspicion towards the development of American culture as a whole. The reserve towards living authors can then be explained in terms of a form of nostalgia for pre-Civil war America, when the Brahmin culture of New England still enjoyed national prestige.

But in the last quarter of the nineteenth century there was also a strong urge to professionalize, which made the present too present, too readily available to develop expert knowledge about it. William Spengemann has pointed out that early anthologies of American literature showed little interest in the colonial past and directed most of their attention to authors who were still living (1994: 8). But with the institutionalization of American literature in the academy, this perspective seems to have been inverted. Literary historians in the wake of Moses Coit Tyler increasingly invested their energy in the early colonial texts, while leaving the evaluation of contemporary writings to the journalist and the dilettante. The disinclination towards living authors thus served the differentiation of a scholarly class. This also appears from the fact that the textbook versions of scholarly literary histories often proved much more lenient towards contemporary authors. The adaptation of Barrett Wendell’s *Literary History* for school use (Wendell and Greenough 1904) is a case in point. Keeping out recent literature may have helped to credentialize the professor of American literature vis-à-vis the (mere) teacher.

The following analyses are designed to deepen this double explanation of the norm against living authors in terms of, on the one hand, the increasing stratification of a supposedly classless society, and, on the other hand, the developing logic of professionalism, which always demands something new and precisely by so doing deflects attention from the new. On first thought, such an argument seems to meet both requirements of functional reasoning. The asymmetrical opposition between dead and living authors cognitively sustains the social precedence of New England culture by underscoring both its seniority and its vitality. Vice versa, this structure of precedence indirectly selects for those literary works that bring out the values of the old nation: God, duty, and culture (thus suggesting that these are exclusive possessions of Anglo-protestant America). Second, this circular relation between the cognitive and social foundations of the literary institution is protected by latency through the professional commitment of literary historians to stick to the more or less distant past. We thus have both circularity and latency. From this perspective, the argument makes perfect sense.

However, as I hope will become clear, the view that the exclusion of living authors merely functions as an instrument for policing social relations is far too monolithic to be entirely convincing. Consider, for instance, the antipodal perspectives that Richardson and Wendell adopt on the issue of living authors. Both were strongly influenced by Taine's ideas on literary evolution, and both came from privileged New England backgrounds. They thus had a real interest in keeping out the most recent authors, especially those that explicitly clashed with the New England way, such as the local colorists Bret Harte and George Washington Cable. In his *American Literature*, however, Richardson adamantly states that "[t]he point of view of American literature must include living authors," even if this leads to gross misjudgements or overstatements (1891: viii). Wendell, on the other hand, detects a "touch of inhumanity" in literary histories that deal with living writers as if they were already dead and buried; he concludes: "so far as our study concerns individuals, we must confine it to those who are no longer living" (1900: 9).

Such a clash of opinions cannot be explained by focusing all attention on social control. Why do Richardson and Wendell disagree on the norm against living authors, even if both of them would benefit from its implementation? How can such contradictions be factored into the analysis? Both Richardson and Wendell seemed to act on the basis of a moral imperative (not) to follow the norm (note the use of the modal "must" in both cases). Obviously, it remains to be seen how they deal with the problem in practice. Their outspoken disagreement may hide a deeper convergence



of perspectives. Precisely for this reason, the function of the norm has to remain latent. But, then again, why should this be the case? It is difficult to understand how one can benefit from something if the beneficial effects are not somehow recognized. Does the norm against living authors really serve the functions we have attributed to it? Could it not be that, in one way or another, these functions are themselves functional for upholding the norm?

I would like to argue that the norm against living authors can best be conceptualized as an immunological reaction of American literary scholarship. Immunity is not simply a matter of excluding what does not fit in. Rather, an immune reaction alerts the system by confronting it with its own foreignness, by enforcing a reaction against itself. The purpose of the reaction is not a return to a state *quo ante*, but adaptation to changing circumstances. This image has been used by Luhmann to account for contradictions and conflict in society (1995: 369-70). If we apply it to the debate about living authors, we could say that banning contemporary literature is less an attempt to keep out the new than a muffled acknowledgement that it cannot be kept out anyway. This explains why the norm against contemporary literature was institutionalized rather late, when it was sufficiently clear that the forward push of the new could no longer be stopped. This paradox may explain the persistence of the debate and the continued “usefulness” of the norm. Since it already has the expectation of its violation built into it, it serves to normalize deviances which it does precisely by categorizing them as abnormalities. My point is that a narrow causal explanation of the controversy fails to account for the contradictions involved. The controversy is not so much about the old versus the new as about the restructuring of the American literature canon as a future-oriented system that asserts itself by destabilizing itself.

#### — The Temptations of the Flesh

One way of demonstrating the one-sidedness of explanations of the taboo against living authors exclusively in terms of power relations among classes or social groups is by showing that it does not solely justify a shrinking of the canon, but in some cases also its extension, both into the future and into the past. This is evident, for instance, in Trent’s *History of American Literature, 1607-1865*, which came out in 1903 for Appleton’s *Short Histories of the Literatures of the World* series (edited by Edmund Gosse). In the preface to this work, Trent emphasized its difference from the other volumes in the series in that “a somewhat enlarged scale of treatment” had been adopted (Trent 1903: v).<sup>41</sup> This divergence from the established format had been necessitated by the fact that, according to established opin-

ion, American literature presented “a creation of the nineteenth century,” and because it had proved nigh on impossible to “deal satisfactorily with living writers.”

Apparently, the magnified scope had to keep Trent’s short history of American literature from dwindling into an essay. On the one hand, it allowed him to include a large number of “fairly important” writers next to the “comparatively eminent” ones. Given its democratic character, Trent claimed, the U.S. had quite a few of such “fairly important” writers, so that the inclusion of an unusually large proportion of them could bring out the peculiar character of the literature. On the other hand, the extended scale also made it possible to cover more adequately the writings of the colonial and revolutionary periods. Two years before, as we saw above, Trent had already edited (with his brother-in-law Benjamin Wells) a three-volume anthology on this subject. Now, he devoted almost a third of his history to the “worthy pioneer authors” of American literature (vi).

The remaining two-thirds of the book were rather conventionally divided into “The Formative Period (1789-1829)” and “The Sectional Period (1830-1865).” Although the last chapter occupies about half the volume, Trent stressed that it could not be regarded as a history “in the strictest sense of the term” (vi). While in the first three chapters Trent remained rather close to Moses Coit Tyler’s method and scale of treatment, the second part was conceived in a far more tentative and “impressionist” fashion: “Holmes and Lowell are no fitter subjects for the historian and critic as opposed to the appreciator than Tennyson and Browning are.” Trent asked the reader’s “special indulgence” in relation to his account of those writers “who but the other day were receiving in the flesh our love and praise” (vii). Thus, despite the fact that the final chapter covered the central era of American literature – indeed, stood for American literature as such –, Trent refrained from any definitive judgments on the literary production of that period.<sup>42</sup> What, in this context, explains this duplicity?

To begin, we may venture that the new/old split cognitively sustains the role division between the literary “historian” and “critic” on the one hand, and the “appreciator” (journalist or man of letters) on the other hand. The distinction between early and later periods thus institutionalizes a preference for scholarship as opposed to (mere) impressionism. The norm against living authors can then be regarded as a kind of ordering schema that distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate communications on American literature. The opposition between (long) dead and (near) living authors in a way disembarasses the discipline from amateurism by endowing it with a serious cause or purpose (consecrating the dead). The point to note, however, is that despite his reservations about living authors Trent

does not actually restrict himself to accurate scholarship. This is the case, obviously, because he is trying to establish American literature as a new scholarly field. His undertaking thus rests on the assumption that what is at present the business of the amateur will at some point be transferred to the domain of the scholar.

It is interesting to note, in this regard, that the professor/amateur opposition does not coincide with the professional code that can be identified as the basic motivational structure of American literary scholarship. The distinction between a professional and an unprofessional point of view does not determine the acceptability of a choice, but merely indicates that a choice has to be made. It does not in itself prescribe what (in a specific time and place) counts as professional behavior. To the role of the “professor,” however, are attached certain more or less explicit rules that determine the do’s and don’ts of the discipline, what is (not) relevant, or what should (not) be remembered. The norm against living authors provides such a rule. It programs the professional code from the inside out by indicating the professional correctness of certain lines of action, decisions, or expectations. Such programs, unlike codes, are highly sensitive to change (in a sense, their very implementation already changes them). What today appears as the pinnacle of professionalism may be exposed as mere nonsense tomorrow.

If we take this dynamic into consideration, then the reserve towards living authors is more than just a protectionist move on the part of the scholarly community in order to retain its exclusive rights to what counts as (high, earnest) culture. This explanation fails insofar as it does not account for the fact that scholarship and appreciation are both integral parts of the semantics of professionalism. In other words, the problem of the new does not so much come from the outside as from the inside. This is why it is possible to cultivate amateurism as a form of professionalism *par excellence*; and vice versa, why scholars can castigate themselves for neglecting the living culture that is at their elbows. This continual inflation and deflation of the semantics of professionalism is what energizes American literary scholarship as a discipline and what urges it to constantly go beyond itself. The norm against living authors, therefore, does not just serve to distinguish the accredited professors from the nitwits, or the insiders from the outsiders; more importantly, through such a norm the semantics of professionalism enforces a reaction against itself. Trent’s scholarly restraint in relation to modern authors can also be related to the political and social unrest of the “sectional” period (Trent clearly avoids the label “national”). This social unrest may have prompted literary scholars to fall back on the colonial period as a kind of hand-hold against insecurity. According to de-

corum, Trent thought that from a purely aesthetic perspective the colonial era had produced a “hopeless” literature, with which only English literature around the time of the Norman Conquest could rival (1). The analogy is revealing, given the fact that the twelfth century in English literary history was at this time regarded as a period of “sleep,” which produced no significant writings, but which prepared the way for the “awakening” of Middle English literature (Saintsbury 1960 [1898]: 39-47). Under Latin and French influence, as the argument goes, Anglo-Saxon was transformed into English without however betraying its essential characteristics.<sup>43</sup>

This fits in well with what Ernest Gellner has called the “dormis-sion” doctrine of nationalism (1997: 8-9). This doctrine is an instrument for squaring the nationalist principle (the nation is necessary) with the continual violation of that principle in actual fact (the nation is contingent). It thus functions as an immune reaction of the nation, constantly guarding it against (self-induced) disillusionment. As the doctrine asserts, the national principle never dies; it merely goes into hibernation once in a while to regain its powers. The analogy between English and American literature thus suggests that the colonial period was a time of transition during which English literature was recreated or actualized as American literature. From the point of view of national culture, therefore, the colonial period was not so “hopeless,” because it contained the promise of national fulfillment, a promise that had been (momentarily) shattered by the Civil War. Although, strictly speaking, the colonial writings were not part of American literature, they already contained the roots of national culture, a culture always in the making and always already achieved.

The conditional treatment of the “sectional” period then appears as a strategy for incorporating the writings from the colonial era into the American tradition. These, in turn, had to take the sting out of the later sectional conflict, perhaps even depoliticize it, and give it direction from the vantage point of a common past. Paradoxically, therefore, the suspension of value judgements in relation to post-1830 literary production in a way laced it up more firmly into the national myth. This paradoxical treatment of living authors once again shows that it is too facile to suppose that American literary history at this time was in the hands of a clique of New England professors trying to secure their privileged social position by excluding living authors and by focusing all attention on the colonial period and the puritan founders. However suggestive, such a perspective slights the dynamic nature of culture, which asserts itself precisely by presenting itself as chronically endangered and in need of confirmation.

We ought to refrain from hasty inferences about agenda setting. In fact, Trent was a Virginian by birth, and thus in a sense a converted Tory.

He started his career at the University of the South, where he founded the *Sewanee Review* and published a highly controversial monograph on William Gilmore Simms, which earned him the scorn of a number of his Southern colleagues. One claimed that “Trent’s New England ideas and prejudices made him unfit to write about a South Carolinian” (quoted in Simms 1986: 315). The controversy may have facilitated Trent’s eventual move to Columbia (both Theodore Roosevelt and Brander Matthews applauded the book). But, even at Columbia, Trent’s “ideas and prejudices” made some bad blood. During the First World War, as Vanderbilt documents, his outspoken anti-imperialism flagged his friendship with Matthews (1986: 21). If anything, this shows that a monocausal explanation of the problem of living authors in terms of a defensive reaction on the part of a New England cultural aristocracy fails.

My point, then, is that the “benefits” that the norm against living authors brings to a collectivity (for instance, the New England patriarchy, as represented by literary historians working at elite institutions) does not automatically exhaust its social function. This is not to say that such effects do not play a role at all. It means, rather, that I have wanted to focus the reader’s attention on the inconsistencies that the norm has attracted. Why should those who would normally benefit from the implementation of such a norm want to reject it? Or, why should those who do not seem to derive much prestige from excluding living authors nevertheless communicate about them with (apparently needless) reservation? Why should literary historians want their predecessors to be distinctly hostile towards contemporary writings, even though it is clear that the latter could hardly resist the new? In my opinion, such questions can best be answered by recognizing that the legitimacy of American literary history as an institution depends to a large degree on its capacity to repel itself.

#### — Culture and Scholarship

Rather than discarding living authors altogether, Trent played both the scholar and the dilettante, and this fact no doubt contributed to his professional prestige. George Woodberry, Trent’s colleague at Columbia, even cultivated dilettantism as a pre-eminently scholarly value. This is not to say that Woodberry was particularly receptive towards contemporary literature. On the contrary, in his *America in Literature* he showed a clear bias in favor of the culture of Great Britain and Europe, “where both thought and life are old” (1903: 94). As to the American literary scene, he thought that “no new champions” had arrived since the age of Emerson (1903: 252). But Woodberry combined this aesthetic conservatism with the experiential

rhetoric of the impressionist. Thus, in *The Appreciation of Literature* he asserted that literary appreciation was “by no means a simple matter”:

(...) it is not the ability to read, nor even a canon of criticism and rules of admiration and censure that are required; but a live soul, full of curiosity and interest in life, sensitive to impressions, acute and subtle in reception, prompt to complete a suggestion, and always ready with the light of its own life to serve as a lamp unto its feet (1921: 5).

For Woodberry, impressionistic criticism was in a sense more difficult (and therefore more valuable) than scholarship or the mechanical application of “rules.” Contrary to the latter, it supposed receptivity towards “life” (note the repeated use of the word). Woodberry thus (at least rhetorically) inverted the values of adequate scholarship in order to revitalize it. Again, what may first appear as a flaw is rectified as a trademark of professionalism.

The dynamic interplay between new and old not only serves to differentiate the professional literary scholar from the layperson; it also and more importantly differentiates scholars from other scholars. It thus structures the profession from within, and this not only horizontally, by opposing academic factions, but also vertically, by articulating differences in sex, age, social background and rank. Perhaps not surprisingly, the established professors tend to monopolize the great authors (even while declaring their sympathy for the lesser gods), whereas the neophytes have to work their way up from the Apocrypha. This is particularly relevant in relation to *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917-'21), the first large-scale composite American literary history (commissioned by George H. Putnam in collaboration with Cambridge University Press). Trent supervised the project, aided by two of his younger colleagues at Columbia, John Erskine and Carl Van Doren, and Stuart Sherman from Illinois. The historical genesis of this work has been sufficiently documented by Vanderbilt and others. What is of interest here is its policy towards living authors and how this policy impinged on the collaborative enterprise.

The work was more or less explicitly modelled on an English example, *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (Ward & Waller 1907-'16), whose fourteen imposing volumes (excluding the 1927 index) literally stand out against a meager four for its American counterpart.<sup>44</sup> Trent and his team decided to abandon the exclusive focus on “*belles-lettres*” and to pay considerable attention to “writings” that were or had in some way been relevant for the development of American life, including songs, newspapers, travel literature, sermons and speeches, etc. (1917: iii). As a

consequence, the colonial and early national periods received extensive coverage. As for living authors, the editors agreed to include those “who before 1900 had written notable books and who have exerted important influence in our literary history” (1918: iv). How this standard was applied – which authors qualified as “notable” and “important” – will be discussed below. For now, I want to stress that the *Cambridge History of American Literature* was relatively lenient towards living authors.<sup>45</sup> Apparently, the persuasion that total neglect of contemporary literature would make the history “obviously inaccurate” offset the danger of possible conflicts of interests.<sup>46</sup>

A few words on the composition of the authorship are in order. As already noted, Sherman was the only representative of the Mid-West on the editorial board. As Erskine later remembered, a fifth editor from the Far West would have been included, “if the Pacific Coast had not been so very far” (quoted in Vanderbilt 1986: 4). In the preface to the first volume, the editors explicitly stress that they recruited from “a numerous body of scholars from every section of the United States and from Canada” (iii). In fact, however, there was a heavy disproportion in the institutional background of the contributors. More than a third came from the state of New York (Columbia alone supplied twelve contributors out of fifty-two). The South and the West are clearly underrepresented. The Northwest had but one representative (Parrington at Washington). The same goes for Canada (MacMechan at Dalhousie). Moreover, those not effectively related to North-eastern institutions had often studied there.<sup>47</sup>

The editors’ puffing up of the spread of expertise can be explained by their avowed abstinence from any bias, whether commercial, sectional, or national. For this reason, also, they favored a broadly historical approach over aesthetic criticism in the vein of Richardson and Wendell, both of whom are criticized for being biased in favor of New England.<sup>48</sup> The *Cambridge history*’s table of contents reveals its scholarly outlook. Degrees, positions, and institutional affiliations are openly advertised. About two thirds of the authors occupied a professorship or had prospect to such a position. More than half worked in the field of English (a degree in American literature was obviously unavailable). Even though there was no uniformity in the degree labels, most had obtained a doctorate (Trent himself is an exception). Several contributors had more than one doctoral title, and in some cases the doctorate was an honorary degree.<sup>49</sup>

All of this seems to reveal a clear penchant for solid scholarship as opposed to impressionistic criticism. However, not everybody shared this philosophy, not even among the editors, as their divergent career paths illustrate. Whereas Trent was a historian rather than a critic, the others were

critics first and literary historians second.<sup>50</sup> Erskine was not only a professor of English but also a creative writer and a well-regarded musician. Sherman was a regular contributor to popular media and at mid-career left the academy to become literary editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*. Van Doren, brother of the poet Mark, would become a scholar of some repute, but failed in his real ambition to become a full-time novelist. Thus, whereas Trent felt on thin ice as soon as he came near journalistic criticism, the younger editors apparently had their doubts about a straightforward academic existence.

With the changing attitude towards scholarship came a different approach to contemporary authors. In several respects, we see a return to the belletristic criticism of Woodberry and others, and a movement away from linguistics and literary history. Sherman had studied at Harvard under Irving Babbitt, the most prominent spokesman of the New Humanism, who wanted to recover the classical and Christian roots of American culture. Sherman seems to have inherited Babbitt's anti-modernism, but unlike the latter he was directly engaged in the polemics surrounding contemporary authors. In 1908, two years after obtaining the doctorate, he sent an open letter to the *Nation* in which he lamented that "the very best men" turn away discouraged from literary studies to pursue a career in journalism or creative writing (1908: 442). By "the very best men" Sherman meant "men of literary taste and aspiration," who were put off by the pseudo-scientific specialization and deadliness of the "Darwinians" who ruled the universities.<sup>51</sup>

The reference to Darwin is revealing, given the rise of naturalism with its interest in biological and social determinants on human behavior. In 1917 Sherman would publish his *On Contemporary Literature*, in which he famously slashed Theodore Dreiser's early work for its alleged immorality and determinism. From our perspective, this volume of criticism is interesting not so much for its conservatism and xenophobia, but because it explicitly addresses issues that up to then had fallen out of the province of scholarship.<sup>52</sup> In his letter to the *Nation*, Sherman criticized the medievalism and esotericism of the elite universities on the East Coast, which disheartened "the ardent and aspiring souls" from the South and the West. As a consequence, they had no adequate "standards" to evaluate contemporary literature. The plea for standards reveals Sherman's new humanist leanings. More than ever before, he thought, there was need for "popular men" (like Emerson, Carlyle, and Arnold) who, contrary to the specialists, had "a sense of life in its fullness," and could lead the way to really great literature.



That Sherman's litany was more than a personal grudge against academia appears from the diverse reactions it triggered. One respondent retorted that "the object of a graduate school is not culture; it is scholarship" (Adams: 485). Brander Matthews asserted that some of "the very best men" worked at the universities (he names his colleagues Spingarn and Erskine) (485-6). Another replied that Sherman's critique was abusive to Darwin, "the grandest generalizer of the past century" (Keller: 486). Still another claimed that Sherman had committed the "popular fallacy" that the doctorate was a "certificate" for teaching (Woodbridge: 576). In the July 2 issue, Irving Babbitt noted the predominance of "an almost German inability" to differentiate between scientific "research" on the one hand, and literary "reflection" and "assimilation" on the other, and stressed the need to re-establish a connection between scholarship and culture (8). The next week, Carl Van Doren argued along similar lines that the notion of "accurate scholarship" was founded on a "fallacy," and that "culture and scholarship must be inseparable" (31).

John Erskine was apparently equally dissatisfied with "research" as his fellow-editors Sherman and Van Doren. In his classes, he encouraged his students to read more and without the help of ancillary works. He saw it as his task to "[turn] the baseball captain into a reader of Thackeray" (1908: 202). As a cause of the decline in literary reading among young Americans he pointed to the "unsettled mental background" of an increasingly multiethnic population. But he suggested another, more immediate cause too. Books, for Erskine, were so important because they contained "the stored-up wisdom of the race":

Surely for the average boy or man, literature appeals through the experience it portrays, the companionship it offers – the crowded hour of glorious life ... The interest is human, natural, direct. (203)

Erskine did not specify what he meant by "wisdom," "experience," "life," "race," or the "average boy or man." He sufficed by stating that it was important to note that every boy was eager to "get at life," and therefore had a natural love of books, because books convey life experiences.

That innate love of books, however, would have been blocked by the "machinery" of the modern literature course, which focused excessively on technicalities of inaccessible texts and relegated actual reading to the spare hour already crowded with the practice of sports (204). As a remedy, Erskine suggested assigning reading for discussion in class, so that students could recover their interest in books, which would stimulate further,

less evident reading. The task of the instructor or professor was then to remove the obstacles that prevented young men from enjoying good books. For this reason, he had to be an avid reader himself, and if possible a creative writer too. Only in this way could he preserve for himself the “sanity of appreciation” that he tried to transmit to his students. The phrase “sanity of appreciation” recalls Woodberry. What it means here is not specified, but it seems clear that Erskine did not just have the physical prowess of the baseball team in mind.

At this point, we may well wonder whether the persistent recurrence of such words as “experience,” “life,” “appreciation,” “creativity,” etc., is merely a matter of coincidence, or whether there is perhaps an underlying pattern involved that can be explained. Where does this persistent need to reach out to culture come from? Why are literature scholars so critical of the academy, even if they are among its leading representatives? In a sense, the conflict between culture and scholarship is nothing but a reprise of the age-old division between the contemplative and the active life. The “end” of the conflict is not an actual return to a time undivided by opposing interests; rather, it serves to reproduce the latent motivational structure of the discipline, i.e. the distinction between a professional and an unprofessional point of view. Since professionalism can only articulate itself in relation to its opposite, every plea for a “return to culture” indirectly reinforces the discipline by negating it. Such jeremiads help the institution to simplify itself, to adapt to changing social conditions, even while adding to its inner complexity.

When still a student, Yvor Winters used to think of Irving Babbitt as “the Professor in Person”; only to realize later that, from his perspective, Babbitt had been “a professor largely on sufferance” (1956: 325-6). Similarly, one could argue that, to philologists specializing in the Gothic gospels, Stuart Sherman may have appeared as a dangerous iconoclast, whereas for many of his contemporaries he was a prototype of the reactionary “professor.” It is this self-implicatory logic of the semantics of professionalism that I want to explain. Even though the outlook of the opposing factions is continually changing (classicists versus philologists, generalizers versus specialists, critics versus scholars, etc.), the basic operational structure of the discipline (professional versus unprofessional) remains remarkably intact. The discipline thus asserts its autonomy by constantly disqualifying itself, by institutionalizing disagreement as its normal mode of operation. As Luhmann would have it, the system “protects itself through negation against annihilation” (1995: 372).

Sherman’s outing in the *Nation* (typically not a specialized journal, but a weekly of general interest) does not seem to have weakened his

scholarly standing. On the contrary, one could argue that it made his name as a “popular” man of letters, who spoke out with authority on modern culture (meaning here: “English” literature from the Renaissance onwards). Similarly, Erskine’s scepticism about the “Germanization” of literary studies did not isolate him from his colleagues, many of whom shared his pessimistic opinions about the professionalization of the discipline.<sup>53</sup> His General Honors course on “great books” at Columbia greatly influenced a generation of literary critics and scholars (Lionel Trilling was among his students). The conflict, therefore, was not so much between “scholarship” and “culture,” as between different cultures of “scholarship” inside the scholarship of “culture.”

It comes as no surprise that, when the history was planned, Van Doren, the youngest board member, was assigned the chapter on Howells and the “later” novel, a topic that Trent a few years before still thought unfit for the literary historian. In his chapter, Van Doren took pains to set Howells’s “selective realism” apart from Zola’s naturalism. Unlike the latter, Howells would have displayed “benignance and noble health, never illicit or savage and but rarely sordid” (1921: 84). Given that Irving Babbitt had referred to realism as “art without selection,” this may be seen as an attempt to fit Howells into a governing academic thought style (quoted in Lewisohn 1939: 420). Stressing Howells’s “noble health” was a way of sanitizing the author (who had died the previous year) to assure his legitimate place in the American tradition.<sup>54</sup> Yet, Van Doren recoiled from any definitive judgment on Howells’s oeuvre. It would take another century, he thought, before its lasting value could definitively be ascertained.

In a chapter that devotes almost a page to Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur* – Van Doren was particularly pleased with “the thrilling episode of the chariot race” (74) –, there was still some space for a few remarks on contemporary tendencies. Whereas the (now almost completely forgotten) historical romances of Silas Weir Mitchell passed under extensive review, the naturalists of the nineties, situated “nearer to Zola than to Howells,” had to make do with a summary notice at the end (92). Although he admired Crane’s passion for truthfulness, Van Doren described *Maggie* as “a horrible picture of a degenerate Irish family” (93). Norris’s “speed and vividness” did not square with “his body and meaning,” and London had pursued “the ‘cult of red-blood’ to its logical, if not ridiculous, extreme” (94). Van Doren comfortingly concluded that the naturalistic trend was now over its peak and about to make room for “a newer form of realism,” which again addressed “the more civil phases of life.” Thus, although he belonged to the new guard of the Cambridge team, Van Doren clearly did not wholeheartedly embrace the new writers.

The other *belles-lettres* chapters display a similar awkwardness in relation to the latest period. In volume two, Fred Lewis Pattee labelled the post-Civil War period “the Era of the Short Story,” a genre particularly adapted to American conditions (1918: 367). But this was no reason for euphoria, Pattee thought, since the contemporary short story writers (London, Davis, Harte, O. Henry) lacked “moral background” and remained too close to “the surface of life” (392, 394). Thus, for Pattee, who was an enthusiast of short story writing, the success of the genre was nevertheless a sign of the lingering adolescence of American culture. Likewise, in the opening chapter to volume three, Stuart Sherman saw Twain as “a fulfilled promise of American life,” as appeared from his “masculine” style, his humor, and truthfulness (1921: 1, 6). But, much to Sherman’s regret, there was also a strain of “naturalistic melancholy” in Twain’s later work, which was “likely to be influential too, and, unfortunately, not always in connection with the fine bravado of his American faith” (20).

In the chapter on “Later Poets” Norman Foerster detected in Frost, Robinson, Lindsay, Masters, Sandburg, and Amy Lowell the promise of “a new vision of life,” although he thought that their “exaggerated individualism” still stood in the way of “genuine discipline” (1921: 65). Joseph Warren Beach found “a superior spiritual fineness” in Henry James that made up “the heart of his Americanism” and put him on a line with the Transcendentalists (99). But where this “spiritual fineness” tilted towards “the cult of impressions” that animated the aesthetic nineties, James became more the European than the American (107). In his best works, though, he struck a balance between new-world “faith” and old-world “culture” (108). Montrose Moses, finally, traced the development of the drama from the Civil War up to 1919, but was not particularly enthusiastic about the little theatre movement (O’Neill is not even mentioned), whose philosophy was “not always (...) in accord with the American spirit” (297-8).

It seems rather ironic, moreover, that, while Moses briefly touches upon Dreiser’s *Plays Natural and Supernatural* (published in 1916), the *Cambridge History* mentions none of the author’s other works, although Dreiser’s debut novel, *Sister Carrie*, came out in 1900 (he had been working on it since 1889). What might explain the *Cambridge History*’s unequal treatment of literary genres in relation to contemporary tendencies? One possible answer is that novels and poems present more typical literary genres than plays, which thus makes them more threatening when it comes to contemporary tendencies.<sup>55</sup> Another way of accounting for the *Cambridge History*’s slackness in relation to contemporary drama is by pointing out the theater’s capacity to take advantage of the present. Since they are live performances, plays can perhaps more easily relate to current

affairs than other literary genres, which have to go through a tiresome publication process before they can reach their audience. However this may be, the point to note is that the editorial rule to exclude from consideration those authors who published their most important work after 1900 was not always consistently applied in practice.

The non-*belles-lettres* chapters were especially under pressure to let contemporaries in. Thus, William Cairns pointed out the (negative) impact of the muckraking magazines “even if they reached their culmination just after 1900” (1921: 317). Frank Scott traced the development of the daily press (and the growing distrust towards it) up to the World War. Although Trent regretted the “conspicuous amount of space devoted to contemporaries” in Morris Cohen’s chapter on “Later Philosophy,” he apparently found it hard to edit them out (Vanderbilt: 221). Although Santayana’s principal work *The Life of Reason* appeared after the turn of the century, Cohen devoted almost five pages to it (more than the naturalists receive together!). Cohen motivated this decision on the basis of the “unique value” of the philosopher’s work, as well as the fact that it was not clear whether his “future career [would] belong to America” (258).<sup>56</sup> What, however, ultimately justified Santayana’s presence in the *Cambridge History*, seems to have been the topicality of some of his ideas in relation to the debates that raged in and around the academy at the time.

Curiously, therefore, *The Cambridge History*’s attitude towards the present was at once highly selective and very open. On the one hand, it rather anxiously repressed those living writers who had just come to fame, while on the other hand it dealt with almost anything (even Ford jokes) as long as the question of its value did not pose major obstruction to its inclusion. One could thus argue that the resistance to the new rose in proportion to the literary quality of the text under discussion. Paradoxically, therefore, excluding a work was at the same time a muffled admission of its literary worth. But, even in the purely belletristic chapters, the editorial policy on contemporary literature engendered inconsistencies. The underlying story of the *Cambridge History* suggested that the 1890s signalled the beginning of an entirely novel literary tradition, which perhaps for the first time could be called truly “American.” At the same time, however, it was stressed that this promising new literature still lacked the “moral background” to really measure its strength with the masterpieces of world literature.

In my opinion, such discrepancies cannot be explained solely in terms of power politics in the academy. Such an account does not answer, for instance, why Carl Van Doren, who represents the new guard in the Cambridge team, should be so cautious in relation to the work of the realists and the naturalists. In a notice on a 1933 reissue Van Doren characterized the

*Cambridge History* as “a pre-war history of pre-war American literature,” the product of “sound antiquarians” that was no longer in tune with the concerns of the discipline (1933: 680). Not only had the decision to deal only with those authors who had published important work before 1900 become “too wide a margin for safety”; the critical opinion about such authors as Dickinson and Melville had also changed considerably. Ironically, however, it was Van Doren himself who had contributed the part on Melville in a chapter on “Contemporaries of Cooper.”<sup>57</sup> What possessed Van Doren to bring down his own contribution? An account solely in terms of “benefits” or “interests” is not of much use here.

Van Doren concluded his review by saying that, at the time of the Cambridge project, literary studies was “in academic hands, because it was, temporarily, an academic matter.” Clearly, this remark should not be read as a reaction against professional literary studies as such. To be sure, in 1933, the study of literature was still largely (or even more so) in the hands of academics. What had changed in the decade between the publication of the *Cambridge History* and Van Doren’s review of the 1933 reprint, however, was the meaning of the word “academic.” When he wrote his review, Van Doren probably had in mind the diatribes of the so-called literary “radicals” against what they disparagingly referred to as the “professors.” In the famous pamphlet “On Creating a Usable Past,” Van Wyck Brooks had detected “an almost pathological vindictiveness” in the university professors when comparing “the ‘poetasters of today’ with certain august figures of the age of pioneering who have long since fallen into oblivion in the minds of men and women of the world” (1968: 220). This is clearly an oblique critique of the *Cambridge History*, which had justified the inclusion of colonial authors by comparing them to the “facile novelists and poetasters” of the modern era (1917: x).

For Brooks, the “professors” in their “uncreative habit of mind” had become completely dissevered from “the living present,” which is why they were so scared of contemporary literature. However, when launching this critique, Brooks was merely copying an analogy (“pathological” v. “living present”) that “professors” such as Woodberry, Babbitt, and others had used years before to dissociate themselves from the philologists, whom they had thought too “academic.” Brooks thus tapped the same semantic reservoir as the “professors” he criticized for being out of touch with reality. The only difference was that, for him, it was the academy as a whole (including the generalists) that appeared out of key. Ironically, however, given his vivid plea for a return to the “creative spirit,” Brooks shunned the contemporary scene as much as his opponents did. After Whitman, he thought, not much great literature had been produced in the U.S. After the

Civil War, American literature had remained stuck in a stunted stage of development. Twain was too cynical, James too European, the naturalists too bleak.<sup>58</sup>

Brooks's vehement attack on the "professors" thus at the same time revealed his allegiance to an "academic" approach to literature. Brooks's conception of American literature as a youthful, idealistic literature profoundly out of touch with reality at least in part seems to betray his Harvard training, and in particular the influence of Irving Babbitt. Like Babbitt and others, Brooks was looking for a different kind of "professor," an intellectual leader rather than a mere specialist, who would be able to counteract the pervasive commercialism and banality of American culture. Therefore, although Brooks spoke from a perspective located outside the university context (Brooks had taught at Stanford, but resented teaching there and after the War he turned to the magazines for his living), his criticism nevertheless remained internal to the semantics of professionalism. Once more, it appears that the professional viewpoint on American literature validates itself by reacting against itself. Precisely such internal resistance allows it to readjust to the governing thought styles in and outside the university.

Despite their aversion to the academy, the "radicals" were very active in forming a "guild" of their own. Symptomatic is the profusion of symposia and programmatic statements after the war. An example is Harold Stearns's *Civilization in the United States*, a joint effort of thirty professed liberals (among them Mencken, Macy, Spingarn, Brooks, Aiken, and Ring Lardner) to chart and direct "the advance of intellectual life in America" (1922: iii). The title is deliberately copied from Matthew Arnold's 1888 collection of essays, which famously stated that the Americans were (and would always remain) "English people on the other side of the Atlantic" (72). Put off by the post-war upsurge of racist Americanism, Stearns and company gave their version of the facts. As the preface declares, "whatever else American civilization is, it is not Anglo-Saxon" (vii). However, in their reaction against the "Anglo-Saxon 'Colonialism'" of the establishment (Spingarn's phrase), the oppositional intelligentsia at the same time revealed their continued allegiance to a version of Arnoldian culture (97).

Meanwhile, the "professors" had their answer ready. Sherman in particular felt called upon to organize a counterattack. In his *Americans* (with the essay on Franklin for the *Cambridge History*), he lamented the fact that all of a sudden the Anglo-American tradition appeared worthless, and he urged his readers to "keep open the channels of their national traditions and to scrutinize contemporary literature in the light of their national past" (1922: vii). Sherman referred to the oppositional critics (he was gunning for Mencken and Lewisohn in particular) as the "Loyal Independent Order

of United Hiberno-German-Anti-English-Americans,” which in its zeal to draw attention to the work of Twain, Masters, Anderson, Dreiser, Sandburg, or George Ade, had unjustly discredited established names such as James Russell Lowell, Longfellow, James, and Howells (11). In the sequel volume *The Genius of America*, with the telling subtitle *Studies in Behalf of the Younger Generation*, Sherman held a brief for the recovery of the Puritan tradition, which Mencken and Brooks had reduced to a caricature. For Sherman, a modern, “radical” Puritanism was nothing but “the release, not the suppression, of power, welcome to new life” (1923: 68, 72).

What such and other animated exchanges reveal is not a progressive de-academization of literary studies, but rather the radicalization of the profession itself. This radicalization, moreover, has little to do with a growing willingness on the part of literary scholars to embrace the “living present.” Rather, it is a corollary of the paradoxical logic of literary studies, which both valorizes the new as something that is different from the old and at the same time distrusts it as something that warrants no more than passing interest.

#### — Explaining Anti-Antiquarianism

In his *Literary Opinion in America* Morton Dauwen Zabel remarked that, under the influence of the realists and the radical intellectuals of the 1910s and '20s, American literature “was brought to closer terms with experience” (1950: 20). Such a statement implies that American literature, while getting closer to “experience,” moved away from an unspecified something else. There is thus a hidden asymmetry involved that makes “experience” the natural yardstick for evaluating a body of literature. But what is “experience”? Anything, according to Hamlin Garland, as long as it is “true to life.” “The only model is life, the only criterion, truth” (quoted – disapprovingly – by Winchester 1899: 301).<sup>59</sup> Ironically, therefore, Garland and his colleagues participated in the general hypostatization of science that had allowed the scholars to ignore them. But their view as to what constituted “facts” or “truth” was the exact opposite of what the scholars had made of it. “Literature,” as Van Wyck Brooks said in 1915, was “a thing felt to have been done” (1958: 2). The realists and naturalists, however, wrote not capital-L-Literature but (short) fiction or (free) verse about “ordinary” people.

The whole debate over contemporary authors was at the same time a struggle over “life” in America, how it should be defined, and who was in charge of it. In a sense, the doctrine of “experience” is nothing but a retake in a different constellation of the philological cult of “facts,” equally codi-



fied and norm-based, and equally removed from or equally close to (in any event, there is no indication to state that it is closer to) the real thing. While chiding Mencken's fetishism of German *Kultur*, Sherman was indirectly also opposing the former's view on American culture: this view did not so much entail "God, duty, culture, and eastern lakes" as the boastful slang of the multiracial, Midwestern milieu of a city like Chicago. The increasing interest of the "professors" in living authors, which is in a way the mirror image of their neophobia, can thus be read in terms of an attempt to recover some of the lost ground, to reinscribe modern American culture in a shared national (read: "Anglo-Saxon") past. The return to "culture," "life," "experience," etc. was then a more or less deliberate move to regain the exclusive rights to American culture.

However, such an explanation of the drift towards contemporary culture is only part of the story. For one thing, it obscures the differences of opinion among the "professors" themselves. Spingarn's "creative criticism" is not what Babbitt understood by it, and vice versa.<sup>60</sup> Yet, both relied on a similar set of (unspoken) preferences. An explanation in terms of institutional politics also makes it difficult to comprehend that some people do not consistently pursue the trajectory that seems most logical in terms of their social position. Along the road, Sherman somewhat tempered his youthful conservatism in relation to the naturalists. This eventually led him to give amnesty to Dreiser and relocate the author in the "main stream" of American literature.<sup>61</sup> This reversal also shows that there was more at stake than a mere alternation of generations in the academy, since the new and the old guard were not consistently distributed over both camps in the *querelle*. In some respects, the debunkers were the more conservative, as Brooks's reservations in relation to the contemporary revival seem to testify.

Whatever purpose we ascribe to the institutionalized bias in favor of contemporary culture (reclaiming a legacy, change of guards, etc.), the problem with such explanations is that they usually end up justifying the phenomenon that has to be explained, and thus as it were accentuate the already established asymmetry. It is therefore important to address the further question as to what kind of cognitive need triggers the causal link to begin with. Just as the norm against living authors, anti-antiquarianism takes the form of a paradox: a constant *Neubeginnenwollen* has to prove the permanence of the literary legacy. This paradox carries with it the injunction to bring American literature (again) closer to reality, but not so much reality pure and simple as the reality resulting from the system's reactions to itself. "Experience," here, is nothing but a viewpoint that, like tradition or antiquity, allows American literature to split itself into

“moral” and “immoral,” “sane” and “sick,” “true” and “untrue,” “memorable” and “unmemorable” versions of itself.

The new and the old can thus be regarded as opposite but equivalent strategies for dealing with the growing complexity of the American tradition. They are equivalent in that opting for “life” is already to commit oneself to a tradition, just as the formation of tradition entails a disengagement from already established ones. The real question, then, pertains less to who is right, the traditionalists or the radicals, but rather to how the paradoxical togetherness of the new and the old is approached. How can the past still be informative, if only the new carries information value? And, conversely, how can we confront the new without in the same movement making it old? What is the meaning of professional authority if it presupposes its own contestation? Similarly, how can we get at “life” or achieve true creativity if the very attempt already seems to defeat the object? How can one become an experienced expert, or an expert in experience, both more and less professional?

In his “On the Teaching of Modern Literature” (1961) Lionel Trilling took up Matthew Arnold’s (not so new) question as to what makes up the modern element in literature. Trilling knew that at the beginning of the sixties this was no longer an open question. He was then teaching a class on modern (twentieth century) literature and spoke directly from his own “experience” as a teacher. The defining attribute of modernity, according to Trilling, is “the disenchantment of culture with culture itself” (2000: 381). Precisely this disenchantment, he argued, leads universities to modernize their curricula and to “turn their beneficent imperialistic gaze upon what is called Life Itself” (386). For Trilling, however, the turn to “Life Itself” has merely resulted in the professionalization of culture, which in this way threatens to lose all immediacy. The best way to retrieve this lost authenticity, therefore, is to step back from the present and to turn to the older periods.

Trilling did not raise this issue out of disaffection with the quality of modern literature as such. It was because he was committed to that literature, and to its personal nature, that he felt it did not really fit in a college classroom situation, where the routine of papers and examinations threatens to take the sting out of the works. Yet, given that the new cannot be kept out of the classroom anyway, Trilling expressed the hope that students’ actual experience of the assigned books goes beyond their banal term essays, and that “in ways and to a degree to which they keep secret they have responded directly and personally to what they have read” (399). In other words, Trilling remained committed to the teaching of modern literature precisely because he saw it as a paradoxical enterprise which bespeaks the

incompatibility of the private and the public, the spiritual and the practical, the individual and society. This at the same time entails that it is never private, spiritual, or individual enough. The academy thus justifies its interest in the new by continually disenchanting itself, or, in the terminology used above, by immunizing itself against itself.

#### — Historians of the Present

After the First World War, it became increasingly difficult for the “professors” to completely block out contemporary literature. One factor that can help to explain this gradual shift from the old to the new is the growing importance of the mass media, which were increasingly competing with the academy for the accreditation of literary works. The newspapers and magazines invited a different kind of literature: short, climactic, and adapted to a large and heterogeneous reading public. This licensed an acceleration of the canonization process as well. In time, the column or notice for the weekly newspaper supplement ousted the scholarly essay in the respectable monthly.<sup>62</sup> The nationwide circulation of the mass media meant that everybody could read, or at least digest, the new literature. With its short-term memory, journalistic criticism ate into the cultural authority of the university “professors.”

However, the idea that the mass media replaced scholarship as the leading credit institution of American literature is difficult to square with the impressive growth of higher education at the time, as well as the generalized cultivation of professionalism. Janice Radway has convincingly drawn attention to the structural ties between the rise of the research university and the development of new forms of print culture in the U.S. The years between 1870 and 1915 not only witnessed the formation of disciplines and departments, professional associations, specialized journals and university presses, but also a deluge of guidebooks and encyclopaedias to transmit the new knowledge to the larger population. But the modern scholar reached out to the community in other ways as well, for example by means of expert advice for the mass-market magazines or book clubs. The point of intersection between the two circuits, that of the (internal) scholarly and the (external) popular one, may have been a shared insistence on periodicity, expertise, and collaboration.<sup>63</sup>

Radway explains the curious synergy between specialized scholarship and middlebrow culture in terms of the modern predilection for the new, which resulted in the growing dominance of the sciences over the humanities, and of research over teaching. My aim here is not to enter into the ongoing debate about the predicament of humanist learning but

rather to examine how this debate is itself instrumental in articulating the perceived gap between scholarship and culture in a society increasingly geared towards the future. How do we both advance and counter the new? Is it possible to promote Arnoldian culture through retail selling? As I want to argue, such questions are by no means new but animated American literature studies from the beginning. It is these questions that made scholars such as Stuart Sherman turn to the daily press. After Sherman's death, Norman Foerster emerged as the spokesperson of the (second wave) New Humanism.<sup>64</sup> In 1928 his *American Criticism: A Study of Literary Theory from Poe to the Present* appeared, probably the first book-length study of the history of American literary criticism. In the preface, Foerster stressed the importance of such an overview, given its neglect in established accounts such as the *Cambridge History*, and because contemporary criticism, as he put it (the New Humanist shibboleth), lacked "standards." Foerster mocked the so-called "open-mindedness" of contemporary "observers," who were "impotent to lead" because they had surrendered to the propaganda of the publishing industry (1928: viii).

Foerster was particularly disillusioned with a category of professionals whom he described in one of his essays for the *Bookman* as "historical journalists" or "historians of the present." He had in mind men such as Sherman, Carl Van Doren and Henry Seidel Canby, who acted as "experts" offering "advice" on new publications for the literary reviews or the book clubs. According to Foerster, these scholar-critics were not ordinary journalists, because they possessed the historical baggage of the scholar. But they differed from the regular scholar in that they abandoned the scrupulous study of "the best (and much else) that has been thought and said" in favor of the freer propagation of "the best (and much else) that is being done from year to year and day to day" (1930: 368). By ironically twisting Arnold's dictum (and the repeated qualification "and much else" between the round brackets), Foerster makes it plain that for him the historical critics failed in their attempt to bridge the gap between scholarship and criticism, facts and values, or the past and the present. Instead of achieving a synthesis, they succumbed to the taste of the moment, which was "not merely vital but also superficial" (370).

In Canby's *American Memoir* (1947) we get a different take on the matter. As the rather immodest title betrays, this book pretends to be more than the autobiography of the successful editor-in-chief of the *Saturday Review of Literature* and the Lord Chief Justice of the Book-of-the-Month Club.<sup>65</sup> First we are told about Canby's early years at Harvard and his dissatisfaction with the antiquarianism of the "scholars," their blind pursuit of "facts" as opposed to real wisdom, which eventually convinces him

to leave the academy (1968: 221). Canby calls this period of his life the age of “romantic materialism” (224-5). During the “Golden Age” that followed, Canby tried to recover (in the capacity of journalist and editor) “the continuity of human experience” that his professors had failed to address (226). In particular the Book-of-the-Month Club would have successfully confronted the realities of the industrial nation that the U.S. had become. The modern reader, Canby asserted, asked for “leadership even more than advice” (362).

The Greeks may have been always seeking a new thing, but that is certainly not true of our reading public. The new thing (and the good thing) has to be brought to them. (367)

Why should so many readers be prepared to put their trust in the advice of book club judges? According to Dixon Wecter, the reasons “may have been busy lives, distrust of their own judgment or merely the desire to read at a given time what everybody else was reading” (1948: 251). The question is of course where the “desire” to synchronize one’s reading with that of millions of others comes from. The best way to account for this phenomenon, I think, is in terms of the self-substitutive logic of American literature. Even from a quite different angle, Canby tapped into the same semantic network as Foerster: “values,” “human experience,” and “leadership,” are opposed to “facts,” “romantic materialism,” and “advice.” Both Foerster and Canby evoke an opposition between culture and scholarship, and both express a clear preference for the first. But, apparently, this preference for culture is not so outspoken that they want to reject the idea of literary scholarship altogether.

American literary scholarship thus immunizes itself against the new by means of the new. This is no different in the age of the mass media. However different the context, Cecilia Konchar Farr’s apology for Oprah Winfrey’s resolve to “make America reading again” strongly recalls Canby’s argument, now half a century ago, about bringing the “new thing” to the American reader. It is remarkable that Farr draws on the very duals that have permeated literary studies from the start: “experience” versus “intellect,” “entertainment” versus “education,” “empathic” versus “reflective” reading, etc.<sup>66</sup> In her effort to explain Oprah’s success as a triumph of cultural democracy and women’s liberation, Farr appeals to the “Life Itself” argument that Trilling isolated as the source of much of the unease in modern literature studies.<sup>67</sup> Oprah is made to stand for the “new thing” (during the first years, at least, no dead authors were selected) and consequently also for the “good thing.”<sup>68</sup> Farr stresses the urgent need for a

different approach to books that would allow the reader “to get to them right now, without having to go through stacks of mediocre stories on the way to that one great read” (89). Although the values are inverted – the “great” becomes “mediocre” –, Farr’s rhetoric is identical to that of Stuart Sherman trying to re-establish the New England tradition. Even while pleading for a return to “real life” or for more attention to what the reading public really wants, Farr’s narrative reinforces the boundaries of professional literary studies as a distinct functional domain.

### — Facts and Factors

In the year *American Criticism* appeared, Foerster also edited *The Reinterpretation of American Literature*, a collaborative book published by the American Literature Group, which had just been established. This work warrants special attention, since it is often regarded as a foundational text of American literary studies. As I will argue, however, far from representing an initial consensus, *The Reinterpretation* appears as a site of conflicts over the academic ownership of “life” and “experience.” As Foerster stated in the introduction, American literature up to then had been in the hands of “facile journalists” and “ignorant dilettanti,” because its relative novelty had deterred “sound but timorous scholars” (1959: xx). This, he claimed, had a lot to do with its stepmotherly treatment in the English department. The formation of the American Literature Group inside the Modern Language Association was a first step in approaching American literature, not as a “mere reflection” of English literature, but as a tradition in its own right, which could be studied with the same scholarly rigor as the other modern traditions (xxiii). It was especially the rise to world power of the U.S. after the war, Foerster argued, that had increased the need for a better understanding of its history and culture.

Notwithstanding the linguistic bond with the mother country (which had been considerably weakened by Mencken and others), Foerster thought that American literature had developed under “special conditions” of its own, from which had arisen “special tendencies” (xxiii). Foerster isolated four such “tendencies,” which have since ingrained themselves in American literary history: the frontier spirit, the Puritan tradition, romanticism, and realism. The individual chapters in *The Reinterpretation* then explored the role that each of these “tendencies,” which Foerster also called “factors” or “forces,” had played in the development of American literature. Yet, Foerster not only urged a reinterpretation of American literature, but also its revaluation. While nineteenth century estimates had become obviously inadequate, much modern criticism suffered from a “provincial-

ism of time,” its standards being derived from the moods of the moment (xxv). Criticism without scholarship necessarily remained impressionistic and directionless. At the same time, however, scholarship without criticism was nothing but a “blind pursuit” of facts (xxvii). Foerster thus advocated a synthesis of historical scholarship and criticism, since only in this way would “the life of scholarship” become more than just “a mechanism to be manipulated” and really “a life to be lived.” As we have noted before, however, such a synthesis of “life” and “scholarship” can only be accomplished in reaction to another form of scholarship that then appears less vital. *The Reinterpretation* opened with a reissue of Fred Lewis Pattee’s famous ten commandments for a new history of American literature, which we already touched upon in the previous chapter. In his pamphlet, Pattee strongly attacked nineteenth century university standards, such as the refusal to take on living authors, the impressionism of classroom textbooks (he had written several), as well as the timidity of scholarly works such as the *Cambridge History* (to which he had contributed), which in his opinion was “not a history at all but a series of essays and bibliographies by a varied assortment of writers” (4). Pattee further argued for better criticism and suggested “truer lines of cleavage” (18).<sup>69</sup> He concluded that American literature was “something different from anything else in the world” (22).

Of the middle essays in *The Reinterpretation* Vernon Louis Parrington’s “The Development of Realism” directly impinges on the issue of living authors.<sup>70</sup> Parrington, then working on the third volume of his *Main Currents in American Thought*, rather loosely identified realism as a socio-economic “force” or “attitude,” which counterpoised the romantic optimism of the pre-Civil War period, when the ugly effects of material expansion had not yet become manifest. In this way, Parrington broke with the established view that realism constituted the endpoint of the mid-century renaissance. For Parrington realism was not so much a literary movement as a body of ideas that had emerged from typically American conditions, and in which several stages of development could be distinguished: Howells’s realism of the “commonplace,” Garland’s realism of “social protest,” Crane and Norris’s “naturalism,” and Anderson and Lewis’s post-war “impressionism” (143).

Parrington’s reinterpretation of realism as a native development, rooted in the disillusionment of science and post-Civil War industrialism, may have stimulated later literary histories to go beyond the Victorian moralism of the previous generation. The realist movement could now be situated at the beginning of a new cycle, rather than the tail end of the mid-nineteenth century literary renaissance.<sup>71</sup> However, Parrington’s environmental approach also made him exclude Henry James, because the latter appeared

“culturally European” (144). Parrington’s preference clearly went out to the realism of protest, which he saw as “the most pervasive and domestic” of the four stages. He showed most sympathy for those authors who retained a sense of social justice and romantic faith in the older, agrarian America (like Garland or the Muckraking novelists). The bleaker realism of later novelists (such as Dreiser) signalled a return to the “harsh Calvinistic dogma” of the Puritans, since like the latter it entailed an “amoral” and “deterministic” philosophy of life (153-4). In this sense, Parrington’s estimate of realism remained rather close to the settled academic perspective on recent literature.

Two summary chapters rounded off *The Reinterpretation*, one by Arthur M. Schlesinger, the only real social historian among the contributors, the other by Harry Hayden Clark, an outspoken proponent of aesthetic criticism. These contributions are revealing, because they are so incompatible. Schlesinger applauded the recent rapprochement between social historians and literary scholars. Up to then, he thought, American literary studies had been too narrowly concerned with “polite” literature. The social historical approach, by contrast, dealt with all writings, irrespective of their aesthetic value. The greatest obstacles to an unbiased treatment of American literature were the established critical canons and standards: “Until the historian of letters frees himself from the domination of the literary critic, his work is certain to fall short of its highest promise” (164). Clark’s essay tilted towards the other extreme. A brief survey of earlier literary histories had to bring out the flaws of the socio-economic approach. By contrast, and despite their obvious shortcomings, early literary historians Griswold, Tyler, Richardson, and Wendell still embraced a broad humanistic and comparative viewpoint that the economic determinists painfully lacked.<sup>72</sup>

As an alternative, Clark proposed to subject the “mechanical” generalizations of Parrington and company to the “inductive test of fact” (190). Clark thus once again recycled the opposition between facts and factors. But, here, “facts” meant the exact opposite of what they meant to the literary and social historians. The latter, Clark argued, were so preoccupied with the environmental conditions of American literature that they had lost track of “literature itself” (193, 197). He therefore put renewed emphasis on the “proper reading” of the masterpieces (198). But, significantly, the examples he gives to illustrate his method do not in the least resemble what we would now – with new critical hindsight – see as “proper reading.”<sup>73</sup> My main point, however, is that the division between Schlesinger and Clark is in a sense a replay of the earlier conflict between literary historians and appreciators, but with this difference that the meaning of the code words has shifted. More than that, the stakes of the debate have been inverted so



that now the critics (at least from their perspective) appear more scientific (inductive, factual) than the historians.

Instead of a synthesis, therefore, *The Reinterpretation* offered what may be called two radically opposed perspectives on the study of American literature, one focusing mainly on the socio-economic determinants of American literature, the other more concerned with criticism and evaluation of individual literary texts. The representatives of each claimed to be more in touch with "literature itself." Rather than anything else, it is the opposition of these two opposing camps that seems to have provoked the articulation and definition of principles and methods. The recurring demand for a rapprochement between the two factions thus appears at once as a result and a catalyst of the setoff. Even while accusing each other of being disloyal to (contemporary) culture and thus to the actual aim of American literary studies, the two parties implicitly articulated what I see as the motivational structure of the discipline, i.e. the opposition between a professional and an unprofessional point of view. In the end, it is this distinction, rather than some kind of pre-established guiding idea or original ideal, that seems to unite the contributions in Foerster's *The Reinterpretation*.

When looking at some of the literary histories produced at around this time, we perceive the same kind of structural disagreement. On the one hand, there are those reference works that focus primarily on the social and historical "environment" of American literature. To this class belong the Marxist textbooks of the forties, such as Calverton's *The Liberation of American Literature* (1932) or Granville Hicks's *The Great Tradition* (1935). On the other hand, we have literary histories more concerned with the issue of aesthetic worth. An example is Charles Angoff's *Literary History of the American People* (1931), which explicitly defines its subject in opposition to the social historians (and in imitation of Anatole France) as "an adventure among and search for masterpieces" (ix). Here, I will discuss two less pronounced adherents of both classes, namely Russell Blankenship's *American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind* (1931) and Ludwig Lewisohn's *Expression in America* (1932).<sup>74</sup>

As the titles suggest, everything seems to revolve around the word "expression," which in each case carries rather different meanings. Blankenship's was more of a textbook than a history, with suggested readings at the end of each chapter. In the preface (at the same time an apology for an avowed lack of originality), Blankenship acknowledged his indebtedness to Parrington (his instructor at Washington) on the one hand and the "new critics" (Macy, Mencken, Brooks, Lewisohn and others) on the other. While Blankenship applauded the latter for their advocacy of contemporary literature in relation to "current problems of social import,"

the former's influence is most tangible (viii). Like Parrington, Blankenship rejected a strict aesthetic perspective and proclaimed to study American literature insofar as it was "expressive of the changing American mind" (ix). And like Parrington, he refused to regard the "American mind" narrowly in terms of its connection to English culture.

Blankenship's environmental approach had significant implications for his policy toward the new writers, a considerable portion of which, as we know, was of non-English origin. Sandburg, Dreiser, Santayana, or Robert Nathan are given considerable attention, as well as the new "Negro poets." Blankenship's stress on the development of the "American mind," therefore, did not result in the rejection of all foreign influences on American culture. What he did oppose, rather, was the monopoly of Great Britain. At times, however, this resulted in a discrimination against English background. Thus, ironically, the Italian-born socialist radical Arturo Giovannitti occupies as much space as T. S. Eliot, whose intellectuality and political conservatism sat rather uncomfortably with Blankenship's idea of American "experience." While Lafcadio Hearn could be "properly accounted an American writer," Henry James was "positively un-American" (498). The only thing that justified the latter's inclusion was his large literary retinue in the U.S. "But when all is said, James hardly belongs to American literature; he is international in every respect" (502).<sup>75</sup>

Lewisohn, from his part, rejected any form of environmental determinism as "mechanistic superstition" (312). Instead, he opted for a form of aesthetic liberalism loosely inspired by Freud, Goethe, and Arnold. Echoing Brooks, he stressed the enormous cleavage in American culture between "life" and "art," or "expression" and "experience," as well as the urgent need for the "reintegration" of both (xxxii). The source of the trouble was what Lewisohn defined as the "degenerate Puritan view of life" and the effeminate, genteel culture that had sprung from it. Lewisohn disposed of everything from the Puritans over Cooper and Simms, the Cambridge writers (now definitely out of grace), and the Transcendentalists, to Hawthorne and Melville in the first four chapters of the history, leaving the remaining two thirds to what he saw as the truly American "folk culture," which had first manifested itself in the writings Lincoln, Whitman, and Twain (194).

Lewisohn associated "expression" with the virility of the Middle West, which he associated with a direct and coarse speech, but also psychic and moral health.<sup>76</sup> Whoever departed from this norm confessed to "polite" writing corseted by Calvinistic dogma. Thus, James's indirect narrative technique was a symptom of "that distance of his own from human experience" (265). The naturalists, on the other hand, "reconquered life for art, reintegrated experience with expression and were the liberators of

our cultural life” (465). Lewisohn thus copied the moral categories of the “professors,” and turned them inside out, so that now it was (his interpretation of) the genteel tradition rather than the naturalists that appeared “degenerate.” As to the most recent literature, Lewisohn again detected a growing “fear of life” (526). James Branch Cabell, for Blankenship the greatest contemporary prose writer, had all the traits of “the adolescent or the neurotic who will not face life” (531). The disintegration of form in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* could be traced back to the poet’s adolescent disappointments and the resulting escapism, as appeared from his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. The future would rank Eliot among the “minor poets” of the post-war period (587).

It should be of no surprise that, while classifying American literary works, Blankenship and Lewisohn were at the same time indirectly classifying themselves as literary historians. This can explain what we may now see as the former’s exaggerated appraisal of Giovannitti, or the latter’s description of the relatively inconspicuous Sylvester Viereck as “the most conspicuous poet” of the pre-war years. What is more interesting from our perspective, however, is the basis on which such differences of opinion find expression. Both literary historians adopt a “cosmopolitan” viewpoint as opposed to an “Anglocentric” one, and both show a predilection for the “contemporary” scene (at least, up to the First World War) as opposed to the “genteel” era. It is this shared body of more or less outspoken preferences that continually stimulates further “calls” for synthesis or conciliation, all the while holding open the possibility of a *return* to a retrospectively reconstructed original mission.

In his 1930 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Sinclair Lewis uttered the following familiar sounding words:

To a true-blue professor of American literature in an American university, literature is not something that a plain human being, living today, painfully sits down to produce. No, it is something dead; it is something magically produced by superhuman beings who must, if they are to be regarded as artists at all, have died at least one hundred years before the diabolical invention of the typewriter. (quoted in Cowley 1964: 6)

Lewis was the first American to receive the Nobel Prize. If anything, it put him, as well as American literature as a whole, on the literary world map. In his Stockholm address, Lewis enlisted the names of some of his colleagues who, according to him, had remained unappreciated by the established institutions in his home country: Dreiser, O’Neill, Cabell, Mencken,

Anderson, Sinclair, Hergesheimer, and Hemingway. Not coincidentally, by 1930 most of these authors counted (both within and outside the academy) as the most prominent representatives of an age then drawing to a close.<sup>77</sup>

At best, Lewis's portrait of the American literature professor was a highly unflattering caricature that failed to take into consideration the particularly intense debates that, as the above analyses have shown, had been raging in the academy for over a decade. What is of interest here is that, by presenting the academy as a bastion of reactionary professors hostile to authors "living today," Lewis was indirectly contributing to the shared self-image or script of American literature as something novel and still in the making. Consequently, his role as a prominent ambassador of that literature was to underscore the extent to which it had remained undervalued by the consecrating authorities. In a sense, therefore, Lewis's speech merely articulates the basic paradox that recognition can only be granted by postponing it, or that the best way to accept a literary prize is by refusing to accept it.

When the new gets institutionalized as the primary yardstick of literary worth, the problem arises as to how we can keep it from turning old.<sup>78</sup> As I have tried to show in this chapter, American literary history deals with this (basically insoluble) problem by constantly presenting itself as out of time with itself. The discipline does so by setting out certain motives ("experience," "life," "sanity," "creativity," etc.) and generalizing them as absolute standards of achievement. Such motives are at once inside and outside the literary institution. They are outside in that their priority appears above question. Nobody wants to be part of the old guard. Even when they are sceptical of contemporary writings, therefore, literature scholars tend to validate their version of the American tradition by showing how it is profoundly connected with "the continuity of human experience." But the motives are inside as well, because they are selected by American literary history as an institution. They serve to structure the discipline from within by holding out a choice between two options (new/old, live/dead). Being both inside and outside, they thus belong to the inner environment of American literary history.



## THE USES OF LANGUAGE: LITERARY POLYVOCALITY AND ETHNIC CONTINUITY (1880-1950)

“Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (Anzaldúa 1999: 81). With this much quoted statement, the late Gloria Anzaldúa stressed the intimate link between her identity and language. Like a skin that demarcates the body, language defines us in relation to the world, and thus cannot be peeled off at will. At the same time, however, the quote is rendered in English rather than Chicano Spanish, Anzaldúa’s professed mother tongue. The assertion of the unquestioned primacy of one’s mother tongue expressed in a second language here at the same time questions that primacy. This chapter is about such paradoxes in the formation of American literary history. It has often been noted that, despite its rich multilingual traditions, U.S. culture has become accustomed to celebrating its diversity in just one language (as opposed to Europe which celebrates its unity in many languages). Before the rise of pluralism, during the first half of the twentieth century and before, there was strangely enough much more awareness of the plurilinguistic dimension of American life. How can we account for this?

Lawrence Venuti has drawn attention to the massive trade imbalance between translations in the Anglo-American world after the Second World War. English, it appears, is the most translated language worldwide, but one of the least translated into. British and American publishers like to focus on selling translation rights rather than on buying them. Moreover, the proportionately few books that do get selected for translation into English are generally those that allow themselves to be economized in terms of English-language values. Following Schleiermacher, Venuti makes a distinction between “domesticating” and “foreignizing” translation methods (1995: 20). While the former strategy conforms the original to the cultural values of the target culture (“bringing the author back home”), the latter accentuates the difference between the original and the translation (“sending the reader abroad”). Although every translation in a sense bends toward the target culture and thus perpetrates a form of “ethnocentric violence,” Venuti argues that the strategy of foreignization to some extent restrains or resists this violence by confronting the reader with the radical otherness of the source text. In the Anglo-American culture of the post-war period,

however, the strategy of domestication has acquired most currency. Translations of this kind create an illusion of “transparency” and “fluency” and thus, in a sense, do not appear as translations at all. This is precisely why they do the original harm: By suggesting that the text speaks for itself, the translator’s presence become invisible.

Venuti’s thesis has met with strong criticism (a.o. Pym 1996, Tymoczko 2000). The main problem seems to lie with his rather loose argumentative style as well as the “fluency” of his concepts. Thus, his argument confounds the English-speaking world with the U.S. and Great Britain, which he describes as “aggressively monolingual” countries that would be “unreceptive to the foreign” (15). Venuti thus simply assumes that a “foreign” text is a text in a language other than English, which severely constrains his interrogation of linguistic ethnocentrism. In general, there seems to be no self-evident link between the domesticating method and a “transparent” view on translation, or vice versa, between foreignization and a more “resistant” attitude. Venuti does not provide us with clear criteria to recognize a foreignizing translation. To what degree does the foreignness of a translation have to do with the choice of the source text, the kind of discursive strategies used, or with the cultural context in which the translation is produced? Under what conditions do foreignizing translations retain or lose their “foreign” potential?<sup>79</sup>

Contrary to his critics, I do feel that Venuti’s concepts can be operationalized provided that we deal with them in a reflexive way. The point to note is that the violence inflicted upon “foreign” texts only becomes visible when the domesticating strategy has already been turned against itself, in other words, when it has been foreignized. The violation retroactively calls itself into existence, like a trauma that manifests itself long after the occurrence that caused it. When using concepts like domestication and foreignization, we should therefore be ready to apply these strategies to themselves. An example of the foreignization of domestication (which is different from Venuti’s foreignization strategy since it does not pertain to the translated text but to the target culture itself) would be the exposure of the ways in which a culture has tacitly accommodated elements from other cultures. The domestication of foreignization, by contrast, is evident in the institutionalization of the whole semantics of resistance that Venuti rather comfortably embraces.<sup>80</sup>

Rather than rejecting disjunctive concepts as such, I want to make such pairs amenable to functional analysis.<sup>81</sup> The function of labels such as foreignization and domestication seems to me twofold. On the one hand, they exclude everything that does not fit in with the domesticated assumptions about language and translation in a specific cultural constellation. On

the other hand, such institutionalized preferences serve to reintegrate what has been foreignized through a sort of conversion process. Together, the foreignizing and domesticating strategies thus fill the double function of selection and simplification. What, in the end, determines the acceptability of a translation is the medium of culture, or the paradoxical togetherness of the foreign and the domestic. What counts as “foreign” or “domestic” cannot be determined once and for all but remains culture-specific. This means that what at a certain point appears alien can at another moment be considered a familiar part of one’s cultural patrimonium, and vice versa. This, I claim, has more to do with institutional dynamics than with an individual translator’s talent to highlight his or her own presence in a text.

From this perspective, foreignization and domestication constitute what Armin Nassehi has called “Vertrauthheitsstrategien” (familiarizing strategies) (1999: 194). They articulate the central code or observation schema that decides over the (un-)acceptability of a cultural item in a tradition. The purpose of a domesticating move is to make the foreign familiar, but on a more or less implicit level this also means recognizing its constitutive foreignness. In similar fashion, the foreignizing strategy presupposes that the foreignized text is no longer completely alien to us. It is this paradoxical logic at the basis of the semantics of belonging – bringing out the foreignness of the domestic and the domesticity of the foreign – that is of immediate interest here and that ultimately explains Gloria Anzaldúa’s commitment to expressing her linguistic identity as a Chicana author in the English language. The legitimacy of such a position taking, as Anzaldúa realized, does not spring from stable essences but depends on the continual oscillation between the foreign and the domestic within a given cultural space.

#### — Legends about Language in the U.S.

Two facts stand out in relation to the language issue in the U.S. context. There is (at least, up to the present) no such thing as an official language policy. Contrary to for example Canadians, Americans tend to approach the possession of a language as an individual rather than a group right. Hence, the enforcement of a common national language is regarded by many as unconstitutional. Apart from the legal aspect, however, there is the factual primacy of English in almost all social spheres. It is the language of official institutions, ceremonies, monuments, as well as a symbol of socio-economic advancement. English thus functions as the unofficial official language of the U.S. (Shell 2002). According to Charles A. Ferguson and



Shirley Brice Heath, the editors *Language in the USA*, a landmark publication in the field of sociolinguistics, this state of affairs has given rise to several “myths,” two of which are particularly persistent as well as particularly false: the myth of the decline of English and the myth of (increasing) monolingualism (1981: xxix).

The gist of the myth of decline is that (American) English is seriously endangered, and that urgent measures need to be taken to safeguard its primacy. It constitutes a “myth” in the sense that decline has been imminent for centuries, as symptoms of corruption have continually been transformed into new standards of correctness, which in their turn have generated new corruptions. This myth of decline is sometimes accompanied by fears that English is in danger of being ousted by another language. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, for example, insecurity resulting from the massive influx of Germans hardened into the “Muhlenberg legend,” according to which German would have become the national language in the U.S.A. if not for one negative (Frederick August Muhlenberg’s) vote in Congress. In recent years, the increase in Hispanic presence has spawned equally unrealistic scenarios (see, for instance, Schlesinger 1991, Huntington 2004). However different, most of these stories seem to share the same imperative mood, urging as they do a return to the true language of the nation.

In more than one respect, the myth of monolingualism is the exact opposite of the myth of decline. It states that the U.S. is essentially an English-speaking nation in which all other languages, those of the Native Americans and of other immigrant populations, have either died out or are bound to do so. This is explained in terms of Americans’ unconcern for “foreign” languages, or their unwillingness to learn them properly, as the decline in foreign language enrolments would testify. As with the myth of decline, a sense of urgency attaches to these statements: threatened languages should be saved, language departments reorganized. However, *Language in the USA* shows that many such cries of distress are unfounded. There are still very many languages in America apart from English that are actively used at home, in the media and in schools. And, even though it is true that “foreign” languages like French or German are studied less, interest in such “ethnic” languages such as Spanish has remained constant or has even increased (xxxiv-v).<sup>82</sup>

If a book like *Language in the USA* corrects some of the misperceptions about language in the U.S., it equally feeds on them. In the foreword to the first edition, Dell Hymes not only praised the book as the first comprehensive scholarly work of this kind, he also expressed regret that, up to that point, “a concerned citizen could not find such a book” (vi). Thus, by appealing to Americans’ sense of public responsibility, Hymes confirmed

some of the assumptions about language and identity which the book set out to debunk. Most contributions to a greater or lesser degree oppose the linguistic homogenization of America as well as the lack of knowledge on the part of Americans about their linguistic heritage. This shows that indicating where assumptions about language are false and why they should be rejected does not yet account for their peculiar force or attraction. The myth of monolingualism and the myth of decline are not only inversely related, they also seem to reinforce each other, as when the institutionalization of bilingual education programs leads to greater efforts on the part of legislators to pass English language bills. How can this be explained? Is there a common purpose that unites both myths?

The most obvious explanation seems to be that both of them strengthen the dominant position of English. The myth of decline does this by sketching a bleak picture of Americans' command of their mother tongue. Those who are insecure about their English will feel compelled to improve it and excise all "foreign" elements from their speech. Others will be even more devoted to the norm and defend it with almost missionary zeal. The myth of monolingualism, at first sight, does not reinforce but rather calls into doubt the primacy of English. However, this is only possible because the imposition of a common language is perceived as an unjustified, hence *un-American*, line of action. The encroachment of English upon other languages in the U.S. is resisted in the name of a truly "American" language (or family of languages), representative of the whole nation. Such a stance, moreover, only makes sense when one is sufficiently conversant in English. For those whose command of it is poor, it more likely constitutes the language of success rather than that of repression.

It is especially those who speak English "properly" who are prone to lament either its decline or its dictatorship. The myths of decline and monolingualism then articulate the gap between those who know their English, the "concerned citizens," and those who speak it poorly, the "poor" Americans. While calling for action, these myths may actually ensure that everyone remains in their assigned place. However, if such a perspective clarifies a great deal, it does not seem to do much justice to the internal dynamic of language. The hypothesis of the strengthening of English cannot explain, for example, why African American slang phrases percolate into white usage, because it assumes that only the latter (the language of "concerned citizens") requires special competencies. But, even though there are no proficiency tests in street language, it does constitute a special field of scholarly study, which means that it is not directly accessible to everyone. From a functionalist perspective this would not make sense, since there are no visible social benefits attached to remaining in a socially inferior group.

However, it may be that, even though nobody would like to remain poor, it can be beneficial for the lower classes as a whole to keep its members from climbing the social ladder. This is consistent with the view that those who succeed in doing so are often regarded as defectors by those who stay behind.<sup>83</sup> But there are also considerable disadvantages connected to such a norm against defection. It may lead to social unrest, and in the long run hamper the progress of the entire community. So, apparently, the myths of decline and monolingualism cannot (solely) be explained in terms of the benefits they bring to American society, or certain groups within it, because these benefits are highly uncertain. And even if we could prove once and for all that the advantages attached to keeping people in a less privileged position cancel out the disadvantages involved, this fact alone would therefore not necessarily explain the existence of the two myths.

In other words, the beneficial consequences of the myths of decline and monolingualism, provided that they can be ascertained, do not automatically account for why these myths are so pervasive. It would be absurd to assume, for example, that they exist because this makes publishers of style guides or dictionaries of Americanisms rich. Such consequences are definitely beneficial for certain people, but it seems clear that they are not the ultimate source of the persistence of certain fundamental misconceptions about language in the U.S. Rather than seeing the unofficial priority of English as the key to the legends about language in the U.S., it may be more fruitful to formulate “American” English not as a given but as the problem to be explained. What, after all, is the “American” language? Is there such a thing? How constitutional can it really be? How can it suggest a common standard and still remain the language of the people? It is this structural tension that I will explore in what follows.

#### — Dequarantining “American” Languages

If we go along with Benedict Anderson, language was “never even an issue” in the struggles for independence in the Americas (1991: 47). However this may be, as soon as political independence was achieved, Americans started wondering why they had no language of their own, and this retroactively changed the significance of everything that had gone before. Strictly speaking, of course, one cannot *not* possess a language. There cannot be deficits or deficiencies in communication, since without it there is no social reality. But the process of social differentiation, while greatly extending communicative possibilities, seems to create an ever-widening gap between norms of correctness and observed usage, or between the “learned” and the “popular,” or “mother” and “daughter” tongues. In close-

knit communities, language corruption does not pose a big threat.<sup>84</sup> It is only when languages start to migrate overseas and across the world that the illusion of linguistic purity is exposed and the relation between language and identity becomes more complex.

This is precisely what happened when Europeans started to colonize the New World. European colonialism triggered two opposite but connected evolutionary responses. First, apart from considerably extending the known world, it yielded an unprecedented number of grammar books and vocabularies.<sup>85</sup> Such works reacted against declining standards, which they in the same movement called into existence. Their purpose was to fix norms, usually by reference to the historical origins of the language in question. However, on risky voyages to unknown places these guidebooks were of little use. Here, and this is a second development, communicative success depended more on the development of mongrel languages composed of several mother tongues. Anzaldúa's Chicano Spanish may count as an example. Such "contact" languages have often been taken for "bad" usage of non-native speakers, while it may be more precise (at least, from the vantage point of non-prescriptive linguistics) to describe them as entirely new languages not attached to a specific locality and with no well-defined "origins" (Dillard 1975: 11).

The rise of standard reference works was thus accompanied by a parallel expansion of "irregular" expressions and idioms, which ensured acceptance by going in the opposite direction. While dictionaries and grammars are designed to reduce linguistic differences, trade languages, as well as their more recent equivalents like slang and jargon, seem to multiply them. Paradoxically, the generality of such contact languages has to do with their interchangeability. They do not commit us to what is said in the same degree as standard usage, perhaps because they mostly do not elevate but degrade, and precisely this is what appears to increase their chances of acceptance.<sup>86</sup> The question then becomes how these two variables, the standard and the non-standard, each with its own norms of "correctness," interact in the context of a steadily emerging "American" speech in the U.S.

In 1889 and 1890 Albert Barrère and Charles G. Leland's two-volume *Dictionary of Slang, Jargon and Cant* appeared.<sup>87</sup> The authors' primary aim in writing the work was to rid slang of its predominantly negative aura as the language of thieves. Contrary to what many believed at the time, slang was not peculiar to the Romanian gypsies, but had developed in all classes of society. As the authors stressed: even women and bishops used it. But slang also differed from standard usage, in that it was not directly intelligible to outsiders, and thus required special expertise to understand it. Contrary to normal language, slang words established figurative con-

nections with other words, so that their meanings could not be deciphered by going back to their etymological root in the ancient tongues. Barrère and Leland were convinced that slang, which should not be equated with non-figurative technical phraseology, was a response to new needs and new conditions arising from the spread of “Anglo-Saxony” in the world (1967: vi). In the backwoods of America and Australia, or in South Africa, standard English proved as inadequate as Latin in contemporary France.

New experiences called for new words and new idioms, which gradually had to find their way into the accepted speech ways. As Barrère put it in the preface: “there is a vast number of words which, while current, are still on probation, like emigrants in quarantine, awaiting the time when they are to be admitted to the regular haven of the Standard Dictionary” (viii-ix). The best legitimization of their project, the authors thought, was the enormous proliferation of American slang phrases in recent times. Whereas initially most of these “Americanisms” would have originated in the Northeast, it was in the West and the South that their dramatic increase was now most noticeable. According to Leland, moreover, most New England slang phrases were in fact old English “provincialisms” that, despite some admixture of Dutch and Canadian-French, were still very much “Saxon-born” terms (xxiii). The true Americanisms, he argued, could simply be raked together from the editorials of any western newspaper.

What, apparently, Barrère and Leland were trying to do in their dictionary was to redefine the English language in such a way that it would cohere with the experiences of different peoples using a variant of that language to communicate with others and the world. The rise of “American” English was thus not so much a symptom of the decline of English standards, as a reflection of their enormous flexibility and diversity. Significantly, for Barrère and Leland the norms of correctness, meaning in this context closeness to life, did not come from London or – second best – Boston (and what Howells called its little Londoners). Rather, they sprang from the frontier regions where pioneers from the most diverse social, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds were in the process of reshaping the language according to their immediate concerns. “American” English, in this sense, constituted the language of democracy and the future. Its vitality depended on the degree to which it departed from British usage.

It is this dynamic that interests us in relation to the languages in American literary history. These languages seem to operate on the basis of a paradoxical logic: they revitalize themselves by continually reacting against their own standardized forms of usage, i.e. by foreignizing the domestic. This basal logic, apparently, is the one thing that resists change. Compare Barrère and Leland’s pioneering study to a present-day equiv-

alent, for instance the *Dictionary of the American West* by the novelist Winfred Blevins. Not entirely unlike Barrère and Leland about a century before, Blevins argues that “Westerners,” whom he addresses in the first person plural, “speak a language that has arisen in particular circumstances to suit special needs and ways of seeing things” (1992: ix). In spite of this, Blevins claims, most Western dictionaries tend to exclude the vocabulary of such groups as the American Indians, women, Mormons, French Canadians, Hispanics, and blacks. “Horses play a bigger role in those books than all these disenfranchised groups put together” (x).

According to Blevins, the media have created an image of the West as “Anglo-centric, Texas-centric, male-centric, and cowboy-centric” – an image that thoroughly misrepresents “the real West.” Consequently, quite a few expressions that Barrère and Leland thought of as typical “Americanisms” are here (de-)classified as Marlboro stereotypes. But, although the conception of what constitutes “American” speech has changed considerably, the mechanism by which the vocabulary gets reshuffled is very similar. Like Barrère and Leland, Blevins justifies his enterprise by attacking the heart of “Anglo-Saxony” – as he sees it. It may seem ironic that Blevins appears to be not from the West at all, but grew up in Arkansas and Missouri, which makes him, as he says, a “converted” Westerner (ix). Mark Twain in his time used to introduce himself as a Connecticut Yankee “by adoption” (1961: 140). This shows how the definitions of “Anglo-Saxony” have shifted as the cultural center of gravity has moved from the Northeast to the Hollywood hills.

— The Continuation of “Anglocentrism continued”

In 2003 *PMLA* published an article by Marietta Messmer entitled “Toward a Declaration of Interdependence; or, Interrogating the Boundaries in Twentieth-Century Histories of North American Literature.” Messmer’s main claim was that, despite its growing awareness of cultural diversity, American literary history has only seemingly outgrown the Anglo- or Eurocentric bias that has characterized it from the start. Messmer notes that, especially since the Second World War, the discipline has strongly reached out for those groups that before had been neglected or even oppressed by the Anglo-American majority. But she stresses that the focus on intra-American pluralism has not resulted in an equivalent awareness of the cross-pollination between American and other literatures across cultural boundaries. Messmer concludes that “American literary historiography was and still remains a national narrative that reinforces American isolationist mythologies” (2003: 53).

In Messmer's account, early literary historians like Walter C. Bronson and Barrett Wendell approached American literature from "a myopically Anglo-centric perspective" (43). Under the impulse of the first *Cambridge History of American Literature*, a first attempt was made to adopt a more international line of approach that not only brought out intra-American cultural diversity but also intercultural relations between the U.S. and the rest of the world. Between 1920 and 1950, however, Americanists like Parrington, Blankenship and others propagated a return to "an almost exclusively Eurocentric point of view" (47). Although Spiller's *Literary History of the United States* once again envisioned a more global context for American literature, this promise was crippled during the second half of the twentieth century, which witnessed an "inward turn" toward intra-American pluralism (50). Recent projects like Elliott's *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, as well as the new *Cambridge History of American Literature* by Bercovitch et al., are very receptive towards the ethnolinguistic diversity of the U.S., but on the whole disregard transnational crosscurrents.

In response to these latest developments, Messmer pleads for "a genuinely intercultural and transnational approach to American literatures," which takes into account the complex interrelations between American and other literatures, not only European ones, but also those from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.<sup>89</sup> Messmer's call for a redressment is in line with a broader current in American Studies today towards a more transnational point of view that would live up to the demands of the present age. My point here is not to question the validity of this transnational turn, which testifies to a strong commitment on the part of American literature scholars to incorporate recent tendencies that go beyond the prerogatives of the modern nation-state and the Euro-American worldview. What I want to question, though, is the ease with which such early nationalist "mythologies" are cast aside. As we saw above, identifying a myth does not amount to an explanation of its persistence. By reading the history of American literary history in terms of "Anglocentrism continued," Messmer fails to take into consideration the strategies of foreignization by which the discipline has always asserted itself. By evoking an opposition between "Angloconformity" and "Anglodeviance," and by expressing a clear preference for the latter pole of the opposition, she in a sense "myopically" reproduces the basic motivational structure that has energized American literary history from its inception.

My purpose in what follows is to highlight the paradoxes at the basis of American literary history. Paradoxes, from this perspective, do not so much obstruct the discipline as drive it forward: They force it to continu-

ally call itself into doubt, to point out blind spots in its basic operations, all the while producing new blind spots and sites for criticism. The basic paradox of American literary history resides in the fact that the “foreign” or the “other,” that which falls out of the system, is always also produced by it. There is a continual oscillation between these two values. This opposition does not yet determine the identity of American literature, but merely spurs on the search for better definitions. Whether these definitions tend toward the “melting pot” view that dominated the first half of the twentieth century, or toward the “patchwork” view that is perhaps more dominant today, in the end we cannot escape the fundamental paradox that the self-descriptions of the system presuppose that it remain partially blind to itself.

It cannot be denied that the early histories of American literature were infused with a strong cultural nationalism, and were largely ignorant of or even hostile toward the new languages of the immigrant, the frontier or the big city. But we should refrain from projecting our own cultural presuppositions onto the context in which these first histories of American literature were written. Merely stating that the pioneers of the discipline were driven by a reactionary impulse to secure their social position or to awaken nationalist sentiments means copying the myth of monolingualism instead of thoroughly questioning it. These early literary historians were themselves involved in an institutional struggle between modern language studies and what were then the established languages of learning. Hence, it should not surprise that they drew extensive analogies, not only from the British tradition, but also from classical sources.<sup>90</sup>

There are quite a number of scholars who, probably in reaction to domesticated forms of multiculturalism that tend to block rather than address questions of linguistic and ethnic diversity, argue for a reconnection of American literature to other literatures in English.<sup>91</sup> In a sense, this move is not all that different from what Wendell and company were trying to achieve about a century ago. Intent on establishing American literature as an academic field of study, they objected to the eagerness with which the previous generation had signed its literary declaration of independence, and judged that the time had come to measure American literature on the basis of world standards. Obviously, many of us will now sense that these standards were not global at all, but very “provincial” indeed, too deferentially British to capture the specificity of American culture. But, for these pioneer American literary scholars, Angloconformity was not in direct conflict with a search for a distinctively American literary tradition. A critique that blocks this connection risks remaining blind to the inner dynamic of the discipline, which derives its momentum from the imperative to become ever more inclusive and representative towards American culture in its entirety.



Even while asserting the unbroken linguistic bond between England and America, the early historians of American literature stressed certain peculiarities of American speech, such as a gift for coining new words, the weight attached to clear pronunciation, and the use of simple and clear language. For them, American culture was at once derivative in nature and highly innovative. This paradoxical standpoint was fairly widespread during the early history of development of the discipline, and this not only in the U.S. Consider for example Eduard Engel's *Geschichte der Literatur Nordamerikas*, the first German history of the literature of the U.S. that I know of. In the first chapter, which set out to define the "character" of American literature, Engel argued that, contrary to Great Britain, the U.S. had as yet produced no work that could be classified as "Weltliteratur" (world literature) (1883: 5). However, whereas English literature in recent times had undergone an almost "völlige Verödung" (complete decline), most good English books now came from America.

Engel further claimed that, although language alone could not account for the distinctiveness of American literature, American English had in many ways departed from the British standard, especially as regards pronunciation: "und zwar ist die amerikanische Aussprache die reinere" (6).<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, American English contained many words, most of which were loans from other languages like German and more recently Chinese, "die wie eine neue Sprache erlernt werden müssen."<sup>93</sup> This brings in yet another paradox: the purity of the English language in America, for Engel, depended on the degree to which it mixed with other tongues. Here, the reader may remark that, while pinpointing the "Americanness" of American literature, Engel (perhaps not unlike Messmer about a century later) was indirectly strengthening the bonds between American and German culture. This may explain why, for example, even though Whittier's "Maud Müller" is enacted in Pennsylvania, Engel was convinced that it could as well have been set in Schwaben.

Engel's cultural and professional situation motivated him to construct literary analogies rather different from those on which his colleagues on the other side of the Atlantic depended. The validating mechanism by which he justified the new literature, however, was largely the same. While Wendell tried to out-English the English, Engel focused mostly on the German elements in American English to bring it home. In both cases, the identity of American literature was established through a sort of purgatorial move. This clearly shows that an institutional account of American literary history in terms of a simple division between an "Anglocentric" versus a "genuinely" American perspective, even though it may highlight certain developments and discrepancies, often fails to capture the peculiar

dialectic of the discipline. For this, we also need to account for the process by which an “outside” perspective gets internalized and, vice versa, how membership in a tradition is ascertained through a sort of externalizing gesture.

The rest of the chapter will be devoted to a detailed analysis of the language policies of two landmark literary histories of the pre-1950 period. The first is the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, which Messmer’s article praises for its “strikingly innovative treatment of America’s literary polyvocality” (45). From our current perspective, Trent’s history is indeed remarkably receptive towards non-English literatures, as well as dialect writings, oral literature, and folk songs. As I will try to show, however, this “polyvocality” was for the most part rendered in a language of ethno-linguistic continuity and authenticity. The second benchmark is the *Literary History of the United States*, which Messmer sees as the first to construct “a potentially global (or to be more precise, Western) context” for the study of American literature (50). It is true that Spiller and company tried to break open the “Anglocentric” narrative of their forerunners by adopting a more “global” perspective. What interests us here, however, is that such globalese semantics only become operative when they paradoxically presuppose what does not appear “global” (enough). By underscoring such contradictions, I intend to complicate Messmer’s disciplinary account.

#### — The Languages of P(l)ur(al)ism

From a present-day perspective, the *Cambridge History of American Literature* reveals a strong awareness of the multilingual roots of U.S. culture. The current focus on diversity in American literature makes the *Cambridge History* appear strangely in tune with current needs. On closer inspection, however, it appears that this openness towards non-English writings was couched in a version of the Anglo-Saxon roots cult that we discussed in the previous chapters. From a purely philological viewpoint, non-English writings appeared as an altogether acceptable object of study. But on the level of culture they remained “foreign” influences which had little or no impact on the development of “American” literature as a whole. As I will argue, reading the *Cambridge History*’s emphasis on the plurilingual traditions on U.S. soil as a form of proto-pluralism is misguided, because the guiding opposition of the work was not that between a dominant Anglo-American canon and its undervalued non-English alternatives. The aim was rather to legitimize a distinct American literary tradition, as separate from that of England.

This is evident, for instance, in C. Alphonso Smith's chapter on "Dialect Writers." Smith accorded special significance to Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus tales, because they painted a picture of "a vanishing civilization" (the Old South).<sup>94</sup> Apart from this, they also illustrated the development of "primitive" English, i.e. the "negro" dialects spoken on the plantations (Trent 1918: 347). The interest in these stories, as Smith stressed, was "purely historical and ethnological," not actually literary, which might explain why Harris does not figure with the other short story writers in the next chapter.<sup>95</sup> For Smith, the value of the Uncle Remus character resided in the fact that it presented a "specimen" of a race that was "now nearly extinct" (355). The world of Uncle Remus was that of the "Underman," primitive but pure. According to Smith, Harris had thus done for the "negro" what Cooper had done for the "Indian": "Just as Chingachgook is the last of the Mohicans, so Uncle Remus is the last of the old-time negroes. In literature he is also the first" (356).

It is interesting that Smith saw Harris's tales as an authentic portrayal of black culture. A journalist from Georgia interested in folklore, Harris transcribed the plantation stories (as well as songs and proverbs) for a predominantly white audience. To this end, he invented the "Uncle Remus" character, a loyal old body servant who narrates the tales to the child of his former owners. Harris thus not only transposed the tales to written form, he also made them available for an audience not directly familiar with plantation life. Clearly, part of the purpose was to give an air of authenticity to the plantation stories and to teach Northerners about the virtues of the Old South.<sup>96</sup> Smith thought that, contrary to *Uncle Remus*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was too ostentatiously designed for a cause to be called "a great work of art or even a work of art at all" (352). Smith saw little that made Uncle Tom "distinctively negro," because he came from Kentucky rather than the Deep South and because his language was indistinguishable from that of illiterate whites.

For Smith, Harris had typified the "negro character" better than any other, including the "negroes" themselves, whom he discusses "by the way" in a short paragraph (350). The one who, apparently, came closest to "the heart of his race" was Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Contrary to Douglass, Washington, and Du Bois, Dunbar was of "pure African descent" and was therefore most representative of his race (351). His dialect poems were more valuable than his other work, as his command of "correct" English was "always somewhat meagre and uncertain." Note that Smith here used the English "meagre" rather than the American "meager."<sup>97</sup> The use of British spelling may have been an accepted policy of Cambridge University Press. In this context, however, it particularly catches the eye,

as it underwrites the implicit assumption that African Americans could not (yet) be regarded as the acknowledged legislators of their cultural identity, nor, apparently, were they entitled to give their version of the “American” condition, which presupposed the use of standard (hypercorrect) English. Through his ethnological discussion of “negro” dialects, therefore, Smith at the same time betrayed a predominantly Anglocentred perspective on American culture.

Perhaps the Uncle Remus character figured so centrally in Smith’s account because he both was and was not the real thing. Not unlike Hans Breitmann, Mr. Dooley, Rip Van Winkle, and a host of other literary characters, he was both dead and alive, a “specimen” of a time long gone. In certain respects, Harris’s translation of plantation life can be compared to the minstrel shows popular at the time, which accommodated the “other” by making it picturesque and humorous.<sup>98</sup> At the end of his chapter, Smith also included “white” dialects (which however excluded dialects that were not distinctly English). He doubted, however, whether these white dialects could be called dialects at all, given the “American passion for a standardized average of correctness” (361). Such differences as there were, were not ethnic or racial but regional in kind. In time, a “compromise” dialect would develop in the West that would integrate the vocabularies of North and South (366). In other words, in this context, there was no apparent conflict between “correct” and observed usage, as the national language naturally flowed out of the different regional variants.

It thus appears that Smith applied double standards in relation to the linguistic heritage of the U.S. On the one hand, he showed a keen interest in the different vernaculars of the country, and in the ethnolinguistic roots of its population. On the other hand, such continuities were not pursued when they interfered with the main plot line of the British origins of American culture. This duplicity is apparent in some of the other chapters as well. Thus, Louise Pound accorded primarily “historical” importance to oral literature (1921: 502). The study of ballads, nursery rhymes, game songs, and so forth could offer valuable insights into how tales and themes developed, and how they migrated between cultures or were transmitted through time. But Pound did not approach them as a vital part of the American literary heritage as such. Their philological appeal resided precisely in the fact that they had no direct connection to American culture itself (in this sense, they were a lot like dead languages). For Pound, “oral literature” seems to have presented an oxymoron: little or no attempt was made to integrate it in the literary canon of the U.S.

It is hard to imagine a new edition of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* with all the spirituals and folk songs at the end. The

*Cambridge History*, however, made the chapters on language and folklore a sort of annex to the actual history. In “The English Language in America,” Harry Morgan Ayres argued that “[f]ew would now feel that the dignity of the nation requires that it should have a language entirely its own” (557-8). Rather than speculating on the linguistic divide between Great Britain and the U.S., Ayres noted the vitality and variety of the English language, which he defined as the “authentic speech of free peoples” (566). At the same time, he stressed that American English had a history of its own, and should not be cramped by outside standards. So-called perverse dialect words had their root “deep in the soil” of the American continent (563). Either the first settlers had coined such words in response to new conditions, or they were original English terms that had fallen into disuse on the other side of the Atlantic. Contrary to the English, who had become obsessed with “proper” speech, Americans had retained the “Elizabethan love of exuberant language” that had carried English into the remotest parts of the world (570). Paradoxically, therefore, American English appeared very new and very old, at once highly standardized and resistant to standards.

More than anything else, Ayres thought, the persistent debates about proper spelling and pronunciation had obstructed the formulation of appropriate standards for American English. Such homemade standards, however, were badly needed, “[w]ith Italian-American, Yiddish-American, Scandinavian-American, German-American yammering in our ears” (568). Thus, even while stating that standards should grow naturally out of the normal speech of the American people, Ayres clearly did not expect everybody to contribute to the same degree. His democratic notion of the “authentic speech of free peoples” was thus fused with cultural conservatism. Following Ayres’s account, two chapters on “Non-English Writings” rounded off the *Cambridge History*. The first was divided in separate sections on German (Albert B. Faust), French (Edward J. Fortier), and Yiddish (Nathaniel Buchwald) writings in the U.S., of which the editors thought that they constituted “something like a special literature of their own” (572). The final chapter was written by Mary Austin and focused on the “aboriginal” heritage.

Faust, Fortier, and Buchwald were not only specialists in their fields, but clearly presupposed on the part of the reader some understanding of the languages concerned. This appears from the fact that most titles were rendered in the original languages (the Yiddish sources obviously in Roman alphabet), as well as from the regular mention of translation problems, as when Faust remarked that the “virile style” of Hermann von Holst’s *Verfassung und Demokratie der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika* was entirely lost in the English version (586). Most authors that Faust, Fortier,

and Buchwald thought of as important have gradually been filtered out of standard literary histories during the last half-century, such as Daniel Pastorius (whose *Bienenstock* has recently been rediscovered by compilers of anthologies), the prolific Louisiana author Charles Etienne Arthur Gayarré, or Morris Rosenfeld, the acclaimed voice of the Jewish ghetto whom Buchwald considered “a poet of high merit” (602). All this suggests a degree of familiarity with the “polyvocality” of American culture that is absent in present-day American literary studies.

However, before we put forward the *Cambridge History* as an admirable example of multicultural awareness, a couple qualifications are in order. To begin with, the chapter on German, and French, and Yiddish writings was out of key with the chronology of the history as a whole, since these writings were discussed *en bloc* with their own generic subdivisions, from their early beginnings up to the recent past. The embargo on living authors was thus not observed. In the previous chapter, we noted the *Cambridge History*'s rather inconsistent treatment of writings produced after 1900, particularly in relation to the non-*belles-lettres* chapters. The non-English literatures, likewise, appear to have lacked a moving wall between past and present, or between “literature” and “writings,” which may indicate that they were not regarded as literature at all. For Faust, at least, German-American writings were “of greater historical than literary interest” (572). Precisely because there was no real continuity with the present, it seems, the inclusion of contemporaries posed no threat. Least resistant to the present seems to have been the drama, which is also the genre that dates most easily.

All this seems to indicate that Faust, Fortier, and Buchwald were not so much concerned with “American” literature in German, French, and Yiddish, as with “German,” “French,” and “Yiddish” writings – some of them literary – that happened to be produced in America. This also appears from their hesitant policy toward temporary residents. It would be difficult to keep out Henry James from a history of American literature on the ground that he became a British citizen. Fortier, however, suppressed Victor Séjour (whose short story “Le Mulâtre” is now acclaimed as one of the earliest pieces of African American fiction) because he had left the U.S. “at an early age” (593). Similarly, Buchwald decided to focus on those Yiddish authors who had permanently settled in America, even though he realized that it was as good as impossible to impose geographical limits on Yiddish writings. Faust, by contrast, included such “German” authors as Charles Sealsfield, Friedrich Gerstäcker, and Balduin Möllhausen, all of whom had returned to Europe.<sup>99</sup> Even Ferdinand Kürnberger's *Amerikamüde* was mentioned, although the author never even set foot in the U.S.<sup>100</sup>

On the other hand, Faust was not inclined to give much consideration to those authors who also wrote in English, even if this meant barring some of “the most valuable writing” done by Germans or German-Americans (585). Carl Schurz, for instance, despite his fame as an important ethnic leader, was mentioned only in passing, because most of his works had appeared in English.<sup>101</sup> Buchwald, by contrast, paid considerable attention to Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*, which in his opinion presented “a better reflection of Jewish life in American surroundings than all American-Yiddish fiction put together” (606). The book, moreover, was of particular interest to “Americans” (which thus implies that Jews belonged to another category), because Cahan had deliberately conveyed the Jewish experience for a reading public not acquainted with ghetto life. How can we account for the different literary historical fates of Cahan and Schurz, both of them prominent “voices” of their respective ethnolinguistic groups? What can be the cause of such apparent inconsistencies?

One explanation may be that, contrary to the Germans, most Jews had come to America quite recently (mostly from an unsettled Russia), and were confronted with very different problems, which made their presence more threatening but in a sense more newsworthy too. Another element that could have played a role is what Kathleen Conzen has identified as the “submergence” of the German-American identity as a consequence of the anti-German mood during and after the war as well as earlier tensions within the ethnic group itself, which may have induced German-Americans to downplay their ethnic roots (Conzen 1980).<sup>102</sup> Nor should we exclude from consideration the problems inherent in any scholarly collaboration, and the differences between different languages of scholarship. Whatever cause is accorded most weight, a satisfactory explanation of the problem, I think, has to take note of the paradoxical constellation in which so many non-English “Americans” found themselves: at once part of the American dream and yet excluded from it, both a “Bürger von Nordamerika” (the title of honor engraved on Sealsfield’s Swiss tomb) and, because of this, always also a foreigner. More than anything else, in my opinion, this paradoxical logic explains the discrepancies in the *Cambridge History’s* treatment of non-English writings.

In several respects, therefore, German-American, French-American, and Yiddish-American literatures constituted an appendix to the story of American literature, to which they both did and did not belong. These writings were of interest because they shed light on how the folk spirit of a “foreign” people developed in a New World setting. But, as to the “American” folk spirit, they were of little consequence. On the whole, Faust, Fortier, and Buchwald did not focus much attention on literary cross-breedings be-

tween non-English and “American” writers: nothing was said, for example, about Cooper’s influence on Gerstäcker, or that of Gayarré on Kate Chopin, or the affiliations between Yiddish “skitze” writers and their “American” counterparts. In a sense, interest in non-English writings even increased when there was less intercourse, since this could give insight into the true identity of the people and the historical properties of their language. Pennsylvania German, for example, was a valuable research object for the philologist because it had had “an independent growth” (584). And although Yiddish in the U.S. had absorbed many English words, literature in that language would have remained “relatively free of these Anglicisms” (599).

Similar contradictions underlie the concluding chapter on “aboriginal” literature by Mary Austin. Austin regretted that the Americans bore “so little conscious relation” to their “native” heritage, even if this heritage had so much to offer to a nation frantically in search of origins (610). It was about as old as Greek literature, or even older. Contrary to the latter, moreover, it was the product of “an unmixed racial psychology.” Austin not only thought that from Alaska to Argentina the American native peoples constituted a single race (the “Amerinds”), but also that they belonged to one and the same language family, and that their literature had therefore developed “on a consistent warp of language.” What further characterized the tribes between the St. Lawrence and the Rio Grande was their “complete democracy of thinking and speaking” (611). Their literature was almost entirely communal and oral, and would have “admitted no aristocracy of talent” (617).<sup>103</sup> In other words, the literature of the Amerinds could provide the Americans with the folk culture that they were looking for but could not find among “the mixed races” of Europe (630).

Austin constructed several analogies among the culture of the “Amerinds” and that of classical and early Christian Europe: the Amerind orators would have resembled those of Athens, as well as the Old Testament prophets (613); their tribal wisdom called to mind that of King Solomon (614); their festivals took the form of the *commedia dell’arte*, while their farce comedies anticipated those of Aristophanes (624); their heroes were like Abraham and Ulysses (631); and so on. The purpose of such analogies was not to bring America closer to Europe, but rather to rid it of “the incubus of European influence” (634). Instead of looking eastward for guidance, Austin claimed that Americans had to tap from their unexplored aboriginal heritage, which was deeply rooted in the American environment. As a matter of fact, American authors had already (unwittingly) made use of those folk sources, as appeared from the typically American humor of Mark Twain and Edgar Lee Masters, or the Amerind roots of the Uncle Remus stories, which Austin classified as “Cherokee inventions” (615).<sup>104</sup>



And if Longfellow had been “more of an American and less of an academician,” he would not have had to borrow from Finnish sources for his *Hiawatha* cycle (619).

It thus appears that, despite her apparent aversion to dry-as-dust scholarship, Austin drew on more or less the same set of oppositions and analogies as the other contributors of the *Cambridge History*. Rather than approaching the literary culture of the “Amerinds” as that of an “alien and conquered” people, Austin tried to demonstrate its essential “American-ness” by stressing its devotion to the art of oratory and the organic connection with the fabric of daily life (633). In this way, she subscribed to the recurrent idea that language in America should be the “authentic speech of free peoples,” simple and direct, the common possession of the whole nation.<sup>105</sup> Like Ayres and the others mentioned above, however, she could only express this idea by performing a kind of purification ritual, whereby those elements that from her standpoint did not contribute to the American spirit had to be driven out. In order to establish the literary sources of the “Amerinds” as the folk beginnings of the American tradition, they had to remain “uncontaminated,” which means free from European interferences (610).

Despite her passionate interest in their cultural traditions, Austin talked about the “Amerinds” in the past tense, as if their culture was dead. Because their literature had developed in isolation, it provided a valuable source for the study of the development of literary forms (such as the Greek chorus). Like the other non-English literatures in the U.S., therefore, Amerind literature remained an influence, a source, but had no existence in its own right. Even while asserting continuities, Austin fostered a form of apartheid by stressing the ethnolinguistic purity of the Amerind heritage. In an age that describes itself as multicultural, Austin’s chapter may still strike us as highly relevant and ahead of its time. From this perspective, it is highly ironic that the *Walam Olum*, which Austin described as “the earliest American book,” only crops up in the final pages of the *Cambridge History*.

#### — The Limits of Cosmopolitanism

In spite of its allegiance to “economic determinists” such as Parrington (whom she thinks of as downright anti-European), Messmer claims that the *Literary History of the United States* was the first to go beyond the unproductive dichotomy between “America” and “Europe” to arrive at a kind of synthesis in which both traditions could find their place. In other words, if we follow Messmer’s reasoning, Spiller and his team initiated the

kind of anti-parochial approach to American culture that the self-appointed “new” cosmopolitans such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Bruce Robbins, David Hollinger, and others are so emphatically promoting today. What interests me here, though, is not whether Spiller’s history actually achieved the goals it set out for itself, but rather how the semantics of cosmopolitanism took hold.

“At mid-point,” the preface states, “the twentieth century may properly establish its own criteria of literary judgment; indeed, the values as well as the facts of modern civilization must be examined if man is to escape self-destruction” (1949: vii).<sup>106</sup> This quote articulates two conflicting demands. On the one hand, it reveals a strong desire for autonomy, a desire to shed off inherited standards of evaluation. The sentence following the semicolon, on the other hand, seems to go against this need for self-sufficiency by urging for a recuperation of the social relevance of literary studies.<sup>107</sup> The pompous rhetoric is no doubt indicative of the prevailing mood of the times. It also shows how receptive the academy had become to the charge that it had failed in its duty to society through excessive specialization. We could even say that American literary studies responded to the inflated professionalism of the previous generation with an equivalent inflation of culture by coupling the fate of America to that of humanity at large.

Here, the paradox of culture unfolded itself, not so much through the love-hate relationship of American literature towards its British roots as through the symbolic unity of America and “modern civilization” as a whole. The distinctiveness of the American tradition was thus located in its internationalism, or, in other words, in its refusal to entrench itself inside its own borders. The language used was perhaps less that of genetics (as in a mother-daughter relationship) than that of salvation (the U.S. as the guardian of Western culture). As Spiller would later recall, the plan for the *Literary History* materialized on a memorable night at Henry Canby’s Connecticut house in the spring of 1940, where, apart from Spiller and Canby, Howard Mumford Jones and Stanley T. Williams were also present. This is how Spiller recounts the event:

The party at Killingworth was a great success. The spring country air, accompanied by the best of food and drink and the gracious hospitality of the lovely Lady Canby, made decisions easy and comfortable. It was unanimously agreed that such a history as Henry proposed was an urgent necessity for the sustaining of American cultural life. (1977: 121)

The irony of this passage lies in the opposition between the rusticity of the occasion on the one hand and, on the other, the enormous sense of importance that accompanies it (at least in Spiller's recollection of the event). The get-together party did not, however, reflect a broader consensus in the American literature profession or American society at large (Lady Canby's hospitality must have had its limits too).

The subsequent success of the *Literary History*, which remained virtually unrivalled over four decades, together with the sense of mission that it bestowed upon itself, may have blurred the fact that it was really a private undertaking without official support from the American literature profession. Precisely for this reason, perhaps, Spiller and his team (soon joined by Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Dixon Wecter) insisted so emphatically on speaking with one unfaltering voice.<sup>108</sup> Not long before the meeting in Connecticut, Canby had written an editorial in *The Saturday Review of Literature* in which he had stressed the need for a "living history" rather than "just another encyclopedia" in the style of the *Cambridge History* (1939: 8). At the same time, however, the new history would equally have to steer clear from the biases of single-author works such as Parrington's, which almost completely ignored aesthetic considerations. The new history, therefore, had to combine the advantage of collaboration and specialization with the possibility of maintaining a single, unified point of view.

Above all, Canby (a full-time journalist since 1920) wanted to avoid writing one more history "by scholars for scholars." This intention is also evident from the list of collaborators of the *Literary History*, which apart from regular professors of English includes six historians (Com-mager, Curti, Gabriel, Goldman, Hudson, and Nevins), two philosophers (Blanshard and Koch, who was the only woman in the list), and one American Studies scholar (Henry Nash Smith). Further, a couple of critics and creative writers were involved (Mencken, Sandburg, Cowley, and Farrell).<sup>109</sup> By enlisting scholars from other fields as well as non-academics with some renown in the public sphere, the editors wanted to appeal to a broad readership. Yet, the history was more academic than it appears. Despite Spiller's resolve to include young promising scholars, almost all academic contributors were (associate) professors. Twenty of them, moreover, came from the four dominant institutions of the East and several others had earned their Ph.D. at one of these universities.<sup>110</sup> Among the editors themselves, the only western representative was Wecter, who worked at the Huntington Library, but who had studied at Oxford and Yale.

Although he delivered four chapters (including the one on Twain), Wecter's role in the making of the *Literary History* (somewhat like that of Sherman in the *Cambridge History*) would remain rather marginal given that he was so far removed from the other board members. The latter preempted the most important chapters of the history (e.g. they almost entirely monopolized the central section on "Literary Fulfillment"). On the whole, about one fourth of the chapters was written or co-authored by the editors. Apart from this, there seem to have been many implicit editorial interventions to bring out the overall storyline, especially at the ends or beginnings of chapters. A short note above the table of authors at the end of the second volume, stressing that differences of opinion "have been allowed to stand," had to suffice as acknowledgment (1393). It is only at this point, moreover, that the reader gets to see who wrote which chapter, since the table of contents does not mention names and the individual chapters are unsigned. No biographical or institutional information about the authors is given.

Part of the rationale of the history was to break with the philological paradigm that purportedly still belittled American literature as if it were a "branch" of English. The "Address to the Reader" (written for the most part by Canby) stressed the fact that America was not just a "transported" but also a "transformed" European culture (xiv-xv). Literature, in its highest manifestations, comprised not just "writings" relevant to the nation; it had to be defined as "speech made expressive of values." Contrary to the English language in which most Americans continued to express themselves, these values were peculiarly "American." What, above all else, set American authors apart from their European colleagues was their "cosmopolitan" outlook. American literature was not just influenced by the tradition of Great Britain but also by the European mainland as well as the "Orient." Moreover, it had been able to turn these sources into something new and different. The "foreign" seeds that had taken root in the new world had grown into an "indigenous" plant.<sup>111</sup> Thus, the transplantation metaphor was extended to prove that American literature was more than a mere "offshoot" of European traditions and had developed in ways peculiar to the U.S. context.

The institutionalization of the *Literary History* as a standard reference work seems to have somewhat dulled the edge of the underlying story, which was mostly Spiller's design (but heavily inspired by Foerster and Parrington). Spiller had conceived of the history of American literature as a series of interlocking "cycles" or "waves" beating in from the Atlantic on the American coastline and eventually rolling back to Europe. Spiller thought that, so far, American literature had gone through two such cycles. The first culminated in "the era of Emerson, Melville, and Whitman" when

American culture first came to self-awareness but was still dammed by the Appalachian Mountains as well as by sectional divisions (xix). The figure of Whitman already announced the second cycle, which reached its peak during “the age in which we are living today.” During this second phase, which roughly spanned the first half of the twentieth century, America had truly become a “continental” nation, whose cultural products had spread all over the globe.<sup>112</sup>

The two cycles were neatly contained in two volumes, each subdivided in five sections tracing different stages in the growth curve of the literature. The central section of the first volume dealt with the “Literary Fulfillment” of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman. “The United States” formed the high point of the second volume, with key figures like Robinson, Eliot, Dreiser, Faulkner, and O’Neill. Spiller’s literary history thus departed considerably from earlier accounts in that it interpreted the post-Civil War period as the transition toward a new “renaissance” rather than merely as the end of an existing cycle.<sup>113</sup> This confidence in the present, no doubt, had something to do with the changed position of the U.S. in the world, the Cold War, as well as the rise of new technologies such as the radio and the movies, which spread American culture far beyond its physical borders. The *Literary History* was infused by a strong feeling of responsibility toward the whole of Western culture. This raises the question as to how this massive overflowing of the semantics of culture, if we can call it that, was absorbed.

The *Literary History of the United States* replaced the Elizabethan roots mythology of the earlier generation, which traced the roots of the “American” language predominantly to the English Renaissance, with an antipodal Lincoln myth, which located the beginnings of an American folk culture in the pioneer regions of the Southwest, which heretofore had been regarded as uncultured or backward. However, as I will show below, the two myths were by no means mutually exclusive. Beneath the new national narrative, the old origins myth remained (at least in part) operative. The question then becomes how American culture, in its “continental” phase, could still arm itself against the frustrations of non-belonging. If Victorian morals no longer offered a foothold, as supposedly they still did in the case of the *Cambridge History*, what was it that kept American culture together? How “cosmopolitan,” given that the world is never enough, could the “American” language become without therefore falling prey to a Babel-like confusion?

Spiller and his team did their best to show that they had “cut the linguistic umbilical cord” that purportedly still kept American literature from becoming entirely autonomous (1977: 115). Whereas the *Cambridge His-*

tory had argued three decades before that the first settlers became Americans by keeping the language of their British ancestors, the Spiller history related the beginnings of American literature to the systems of thought that underpinned European colonialism in its entirety. According to Howard Mumford Jones, who wrote the first chapter on “The European Background,” the colonial founders were mostly “unlettered men,” less driven by democratic ideals than by pragmatic interests reflecting a complex mixture of conflicting medieval, humanist, and protestant values (1949: 11). Jones emphasized that the English had stumbled upon the new world almost by accident. But it was precisely the fact that they were later than the other colonial powers in recognizing the possibilities of the American mainland that allowed them to “put down roots” and adapt to the environment (15).

In the chapter on “Reports and Chronicles,” Randolph G. Adams drew attention to the “cosmopolitan beginning” of American literature: “The British colonial period was but an episode – a major episode to be sure – in our cultural history” (24). This sentence already captures the duplicitous stance Adams adopted in relation to colonial writings in languages other than English. On the one hand, he used these writings, which he labelled “our first literature,” to break open the narrowly British perspective of established accounts of the colonial period. On the other hand, however, he doubted whether they had real literary value or whether they could be classified as “American” unless they had been translated into English. Thus, the manuscripts dealing with Leif Ericsson’s journey were “merely parts of that Scandinavian literature which has occasionally inspired American writers from Longfellow to the present” (25). The collections of Richard Hakluyt, however, including several translations of reports by or about Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, as well as French explorers, belonged to American literature, for the reason that they were published in English.<sup>114</sup>

Even while refusing to interpret the colonial past in terms of *post hoc* political and linguistic divisions, therefore, Adams reaffirmed some of these divisions by downplaying the importance of writings that failed to address an English-speaking audience, whether directly or through translation. Thus, since Columbus’s *Epistola* did not immediately circulate in English translation while Núñez’s *Relación* did, Adams found it appropriate to let the literary history of the U.S. begin in Texas. Here, he showed little concern for the fact that, for Núñez, there had been no such thing as the U.S. and that he would have understood “Teyas” as the name of a Native American tribe. Similarly, when discussing colonial writings in French, Dutch, and Swedish, Adams rather unquestioningly assumed that these were also the product of Frenchmen, Dutchmen, and Swedes, as if

these nationalities were historically unchanged. Louis Hennepin's *Description de la Louisiane*, for example, was classified along with other writings of Franciscan explorers as part of the "French" heritage, even though Hennepin always referred to himself as a Fleming.

Several chapters of the *Literary History* directly addressed the literary intercourse between America and Europe. In "The American Dream," for instance, Gilbert Chinard discussed how Europeans from Shakespeare to Tocqueville had imagined America. At the end of the first volume, Harold Blodgett traced the European reception of American literature during its first cycle of growth. In the best American writing, Blodgett thought, "foreign influence" accorded with "native purpose" (621). Those who cultivated the former often betrayed nostalgia for European culture, as in the case of Irving, Willis, or Longfellow. Those, on the other hand, who scorned European influence, such as Cooper or Hawthorne, at times displayed a form of cultural parochialism. But the "writers of magnitude" managed to bring the foreign and the domestic to a synthesis: Emerson's study of European thinkers "confirmed his own faith" (625); Whitman's origins were "in Europe as well as in America" (631); Twain's travels abroad "confirmed and accentuated his national characteristics" (634); and James's "international style" never obscured "its American center" (635).

The case of James at the same time reveals the limits of American cosmopolitanism. In "The Discovery of Bohemia," Harry T. Levin argued that, while James's internationalism had strengthened his Americanism, some of his contemporaries had completely lost touch with the homeland. This was the case, for example, with expatriates like the "French" symbolists Stuart Merrill and Francis Vielé-Griffin, whom Levin consigned "to the foreign cultures they embraced" (1066). Other bohemians such as Lafcadio Hearn, Edgar Saltus, or James Gibbons Huneker, if they had helped to rid American literature of "the taint of provinciality" through translations and critical appraisals of foreign texts, had nevertheless failed to produce lasting creative work themselves (1077). The *Literary History* thus embraced the foreign but apparently only insofar as it remained within the meaning horizon of English-speaking audiences. This paradox did not prevent Malcolm Cowley in the final chapter of the history (the counterpart of Blodgett's contribution in the first volume) from ranking American literature among "the major living world literatures" (1374).

The chapters directly pertinent to the problem of language, however, came at the beginning of the second volume in the section titled "Expansion." The point of this (remember that in the *Cambridge History* the language chapters all appeared at the end) was to accentuate the caesura between the two Americas. In the opening chapter on "The Widening of

Horizons” Henry Nash Smith argued that one of the most remarkable points of disconnect between what he called the “First” and “Second Republic” lay in the “changing attitude toward language” (649). After the Civil War, writers no longer wanted to outdo the English, but rather tried to capture the vernacular directness of the American folk experience so as to forge a “truly American” literature that transcended sectional divisions (651). The drift of H. L. Mencken’s contribution on “The American Language” was similar. The title already suggests a marked departure from Harry Morgan Ayres’s chapter in the *Cambridge History*, which had refuted the idea of an autonomous “American” language as distinct from English.<sup>115</sup>

What, for Mencken, differentiated “American” from English was that it had developed according to a “purely democratic process” (665). Contrary to the English, Americans were fond of neologisms and borrowed heavily from non-English languages. Since the Civil War, moreover, and even more so with the advent of the movies, English resistance to “Americanisms” had gradually subsided. It was not Oxford English, which Mencken considered “affected and absurd,” but “General American,” with its “vigorous and masculine” speech, that was to dominate the future (675).<sup>116</sup> The irony is that despite his outspoken opposition to Anglocentrism Mencken clung to a version of the Anglo-Saxon roots myth that had infused the literary histories of the previous generation. Not unlike Ayres in the *Cambridge History*, for instance, Mencken linked the democratic character of American speech to the “Elizabethan boldness” of the “expansive” English race that had settled on the Atlantic seaboard in the seventeenth century (664). While in England Puritan dogmatism had stifled this initial hospitality to the new, in the U.S. the Elizabethan mindset had continued to prosper thanks to the westward movement and the influx of immigrants.<sup>117</sup>

In Mencken, therefore, opposition to Anglocentric parochialism was paradoxically expressed in the language of Anglo-Saxon superiority. His celebration of the American “libido” for word making inverted the “Anglophilia” of the conservative academics he had so vocally castigated in some of his critical pamphlets, and thus left at least part of it intact. Similar contradictions seem to underlie the next chapter on “The Mingling of Tongues” by Henry A. Pochmann. Pochmann consistently classified the writings of “German” travellers as “German-American” literature, because their point of view was “always that of the immigrant and settler, never of the European observer merely” (682). Pennsylvania German or Dutch, he thought, constituted “more nearly a language than a dialect,” so it filled a separate paragraph (683). Apart from Yiddish authors, the part on “Jewish-American” literature also dealt with Hebrew (mostly religious) litera-



ture and the work of American Jews writing in English. Other prominent non-English literatures in the U.S. were those produced by the French, the Spanish, the Italians, and the Scandinavians.

Pochmann detected different literary patterns before and after the Civil War. The former were mostly responses to conditions similar to those that had motivated the early English settlers to commit their experiences to paper. These writings, as they became more consciously literary, usually displayed a “strongly romantic cast” (677). After 1870, immigration became more intense and assimilation more problematic. The new immigrant groups were less inclined to abandon their ancestral culture and language and rejected the melting pot theory of assimilation. Consequently, they wrote in a “realistic” and often highly critical fashion. The dialectic between romantic and realistic literary modes or currents is largely in accord with the overall plot of the history. Unlike earlier literary historians concerned with minority literatures, Pochmann did not see non-English writings in the U.S. as a part of “foreign” literatures that happened to be produced in America, but insisted that they were “indigenous” growths, irreducible to either the literature of the country of origin or the “main stream” of Anglo-American literature. This was in line with the broader area studies approach propagated by the editors.

At the same time, however, Pochmann’s insistence on social-racial distinctiveness as well as his explicit rejection of an “impossible cosmopolitanism” pretending to annihilate national differences jarred with the consensual design of the *Literary History* (691).<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, his concluding assertion that, rather than posing a threat to national unity, ethnolinguistic minorities “increase the vitality of the culture of the United States” somewhat puts into perspective Messmer’s claim that the pluralist turn only set in during the second half of the last century (693). Yet, Pochmann’s pluralism retained strong Anglo overtones. As before, the most important measure of literary worth for non-English literatures resided in the degree to which they had exerted influence on the dominant Anglo-American tradition, which thus represented the American tradition as such. When commenting on Charles Sealsfield’s impact on “native American” writers, Pochmann was not using that label as we would today, but had in mind authors writing in English born and raised in the U.S.: Longfellow, Simms, and others (681).

Pochmann’s chapter thus obeyed a contradictory logic, which denied authors writing in languages other than English their “American” identity even while asserting their right to it. As it appears, the different languages of American literature at once could and could not mingle. This is also evident if we consider Pochmann’s use of familiarizing epithets accompanying

certain author names: Möllhausen was qualified as the “German Cooper” (681); Gayarré was “Louisiana’s Walter Scott” (685); Solomon Rabinowitz (Sholom Aleichem) counted as the “Jewish Mark Twain” (693). Ironically, Pochmann here used the very same legitimizing procedures that not so long before had served to differentiate American literature from that of Great Britain. In this context, however, these naturalizing analogies for the most part served to deny non-English authors membership in the American tradition.<sup>119</sup> By presenting non-English ethnolinguistic groups as un- or non-American, Pochmann accentuated the divide between the domestic and the foreign aspects of American culture.

In Spiller’s cyclical theory, a truly “native” literature had to grow out of a folk heritage. In its purest form, such a heritage was the exclusive possession of a group that had lived in relative isolation for long enough to develop a common culture transmitted in oral form from one generation to the next, preferably without interference of the written word. This heritage displayed recognizable patterns, cycles and variants that could be studied by the folklorist. In this conception, folk traditions differed from actual literature in that they were communal, primitive, and oral. But they also formed part of that literature because the latter grows organically out of these shared folk traditions and customs.<sup>120</sup> In the end, Spiller’s cyclical framework was not so much unlike the model offered by earlier literary histories like Barrett Wendell’s. The crucial difference was that here it was, at least in principle, disconnected from the criterion of language.

If there was such a thing as an American folk experience, Stith Thompson suggested, it could not be found in its “The Indian Heritage.” According to Thompson, there was “really no such thing” as a written Indian literature, which was another way of saying that they had no literature at all (694). The value of the *Walam Olum*, which came closest to a written record, was “entirely linguistic and historical, not actually literary” (695). Despite its “continental” scope, therefore, the Indian heritage could not provide American culture with an authentic folk tradition. Its translation and transposition into writing (apart perhaps from the tales) proved exceedingly problematic: the words were often less significant than the repetitious musical pattern, which “never becomes pleasant to the unaccustomed ear unless profoundly modified by some professional composer” (700). In reaction to Mary Austin, Thompson rejected the notion that Indian oral art had left a significant mark on the rhythm of “American” poetry. The oral literature of the Indians and the written literature of the whites of European origin had “largely remained unassimilated” (702).

After this came a chapter on “Folklore” by Arthur Palmer Hudson, who argued that, in spite of its ethnic diversity, the U.S. had managed to de-

velop an indigenous folk tradition out of the “culturally unifying memories of several profound experiences peculiar to the American people” (704). Apart from Spanish, French, and German contributions (which remained “foreign” sources), the framework of the American folk tradition was mainly British. While circulating on the American continent, English proverbs, songs and ballads had acquired a more homely cast (strange names, customs, and habits had either been dropped or else “rationalized”), which had made them “as thoroughly American as anything not Red Indian can be” (706). Apart from this, over time new forms and themes had developed that could be called peculiarly American, such as the tall tale or the spiritual, which according to the latest findings was not of “Negro” origin, since the white versions were older. Hudson’s conclusion ironically mirrored that of Stith Thompson in the previous chapter: the U.S. could boast of a “massive, vital, and portentous heritage” (727).

A final chapter more or less directly pertaining to the problem of language was that on “Humor” by Harold W. Thompson (however with “passages” by Canby). Thompson thought that, contrary to folklore, to which it was closely affiliated, humor did not normally develop in isolation but rather sprang from differences between people. More than anything else, it was an effective means for absorbing ethnic and social incongruities, with which the U.S. was rank. Synthesizing the experiences of people of the most diverse origins, American humor tapped from “cosmopolitan sources” to end up with something distinctively American (728). Faithful to the overall storyline of the history, Thompson used the Civil War period as a hinge point between two phases of national humor, with Lincoln and Twain as transitional figures. In the first phase (exemplified by Artemus Ward), humor primarily served to relieve the growing pains of the expanding nation. In the second phase (as in Clarence Day), it provided a significant outlet for the tensions pervading an increasingly multiethnic, urban society.

Thompson stressed the unifying function and the democratic character of American humor, which had a lot to do with its use of language. Most humorous writings preserved the qualities of oral narrative through the use of dialect, slang, or “bad” English. In this way, they had helped to forge a speech common to all Americans.<sup>121</sup> Not unlike oral storytellers, American humorists drew on popular types or characters (often pseudonyms of literary comedians), representing different regions and races, each with its own speech form, and which together symbolized the national character. The most memorable ones, like New York “Yankee” David Harum, the Southern veteran Judge Priest, or “Hoosier” Abe Martin, always displayed a mixture of both satire and sympathy. At the same time, these types seem to reveal the Anglo-American leanings of the cosmopolitanism that

Thompson ascribed to American humor. Thus, in his Remus tales Joel Chandler Harris, whose gift for picturesque storytelling would have been the product of his “Celtic” roots, pleasantly instructed his readers about the Old South “through the eyes of a benevolent, aged Negro” (748).

Among the African American authors to “learn the literary lessons” of Harris, Thompson thought that Dunbar was the most prominent, because, unlike James Weldon Johnson and Countee Cullen, he “was usually content to be the sympathetic humorist of the folk” (748-9). Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown were credited for showing “that laughter was still not drowned in tears and wrath.” Among them, Brown displayed the most “sympathetic vision,” which made him the most accomplished “Negro humorist” since Dunbar. Finally, Zora Neale Hurston deserved mention because, in her descriptions of the life of colored people in Florida, she never lost her “humanity and zest.” It thus appears that all were encouraged to explore their “common humanity,” but only insofar as they kept a healthy sense of humor about it. Ethnolinguistic diversity could best contribute to the unity of the nation when it was mediated by such humorous types as immigrants struggling with their adopted tongue, the Negro minstrels, or the “Indian Cowboy” Will Rogers.

#### — America as a “Unipolar” Culture?

My aim in the foregoing has not been to weigh up which authors or texts have been unduly in- or excluded from American literary history. Rather, I have tried to highlight the dynamic by which the domestic and the foreign are sorted out within the semantic framework of the discipline. Distinguishing between domesticating and foreignizing strategies does not suffice to bring out this dynamic. For Venuti, a translation is by definition a translation of a “foreign” text. Instead of clarifying the contradictions of language, such a perspective risks reifying cultural traditions. What, in other words, gets lost in this kind of approach is the motivational structure at the heart of American literary history, which drives it to constantly foreignize itself. Both the ethnological slant of Trent’s history and Spiller’s cosmopolitan rhetoric reveal a paradoxical inclination on the part of American literary studies to direct its attention to that which it fails to understand. It is this peculiar dynamic that I have tried to illuminate, also because it may help us to understand the current plight of the discipline.

A few days after Saul Bellow’s death on April 5, 2005, David Brooks published an editorial in the *International Herald Tribune* entitled “A Culture adrift without transatlantic tension” (April 11, 2005). Brooks’s argument was that American authors have been engaged in an “Oedipal strug-

gle” with European high culture. These writers were attracted to European traditions of high seriousness, but, at the same time, they derided its intellectualism and tried to infuse it with a typically American sense of humor. For Brooks, Bellow exemplified this tension between American democracy and European aristocracy to the full. While his readers sometimes objected to a “kind of foreignness” in his books, Bellow’s whole oeuvre revolved around the question as to what it means to be “American.” With Bellow’s death, Brooks claimed, an era had come to a close. Present-day students of American literature, he thought, are no longer in touch with the European canon against which Bellow’s generation asserted its own distinctiveness (Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Proust, etc.). As Brooks concluded, America is now living in a “unipolar moment.”

My objective in this chapter has been to point out how such narratives have served to structure the semantic universe of American literary history. Brooks’s doom scenario entails a double move. First, it drives a wedge between the present and the past by indicating that Bellow’s oeuvre (and with it, apparently, the American tradition as a whole) is getting more and more “foreign” to present-day readers. Whether this position is right or wrong is difficult to ascertain (perhaps it is both). The point to note, however, is the complicity of such predictions in the whole process. Their function is to foreignize the past by locating it beyond the sphere of the known. But this recognition of the foreignness of one’s own tradition at the same time licenses attempts to reconnect to it. When Brooks states that we have arrived at a “unipolar” moment, he fails to note that this moment has been announcing itself ever since American culture started to reflect upon itself. Such statements reaffirm the motivational structure of American culture by denying it. American culture has always defined itself in opposition to itself, by casting off a part of itself and designating it as “foreign.”

This does not mean that nothing has changed. While the central observation schema, the constitutive opposition between America and its Others, has remained stable, the semantic programs articulating that opposition have shifted a great deal. Initially, America was primarily defined in opposition to Great Britain, that is, its cultural independence depended on its “Old World” roots. Later accounts tried to bring America into contact with the traditions of Western Europe as a whole, which generated new paradoxes. The literary historians who cut the linguistic umbilical cord did so in English. Even in 1953, T. S. Eliot felt compelled to state reassuringly that “we are now justified in speaking of what has never, I think, been found before, two literatures in the same language” (1988: 51).<sup>122</sup> Nowadays, literary historians are no longer looking for the “American” language. The central opposition energizing American culture has rather

become that between whites of European descent on the one hand and people of color on the other hand. Language problems are now usually only thematized when they are linked to skin color, when they serve as a vehicle for racial differences.

Reading the early development of American literary history through such a race-inflected lens may help us to better understand the role of culture in the perpetuation of inequalities. It is part of the job of the cultural historian to indicate the discrepancies between current and earlier world-views and to show where a culture has fallen short of its promises. At the same time, however, evaluating the precursors in the field exclusively in terms of their commitment to contemporary concerns, by lining them up along a diversity axis, may also function to obscure what connects us to these early Anglo- or Eurocentric models. What has persisted, and what gets hidden from view if we invest all our energy in what our predecessors have excluded, is precisely the imperative to be ever more inclusive. It is this impossible desire at the basis of the discipline that again and again leads it to expect the refutation of its own promises.



## PRECURSORS AND EXEMPLARS: GENEALOGIES IN AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY

Voicing the concern that Saul Bellow's oeuvre is getting ever more "foreign" is at the same time a way of underwriting its domesticity. Positing that contemporary Americans are out of touch with the tradition of Western literature that constitutes the meaning horizon of Bellow's work thus entails an incentive to reconnect to it. Behind this is the idea that a people's identity depends on its association with and remembrance of a body of classics. Interestingly, the same logic underlies an infamous quote that Charles Taylor attributes to Bellow: "When the Zulu's produce a Tolstoy we will read him" (1994: 42). Taylor cites this provocative statement, not because he thinks Bellow is not entitled to pass judgments on other cultures, but because it is problematic to measure the cultural achievement of the Zulu's exclusively on the basis of a tradition of "dead white males" (71). Moreover, Bellow locates that achievement entirely in the future. He thus assumes in advance that the time is not yet ripe for the Tolstoy of the Zulu's to stand up.

Taylor enlists Bellow's remark about the Zulu's as an instance of ethnocentrism, whereby the standards of the West are unduly imposed on the Third World. Here, however, we are not so much concerned with the (lack of) ethical correctness of such utterances as with their communicative aspects. It is clear that Bellow would not have been able to say what he said (if, indeed, this is how he said it) in a society that does not put a high price on recognition. The idea of equal recognition, as Taylor suggests, is a relatively recent phenomenon that only became accepted somewhere during the eighteenth century.<sup>123</sup> This, once again, confronts us with a paradox. Bellow's statement not only expresses the self-assumed priority of Western culture vis-à-vis non-Western cultures. More or less implicitly, it also draws a line between the two. The superiority of Western culture thus only becomes manifest when it is compared to other (supposedly inferior) traditions.

From a functionalist perspective, the quote imputed to Bellow not only bespeaks a form of cultural arrogance but also more or less explicitly establishes a genealogy. The most obvious function of genealogies is to impose a linear valuation order on things. By saying that the Zulu Tolstoy has not yet arrived, Bellow suggests that Western culture is prior to that of Africa, not just historically but also in terms of its intrinsic worth. At the



same time, however, such a lineage is also an instrument for comparison. Comparability, as Harrison White argues, comes as an “unanticipated by-product” of attempts at dominance (1992: 13). Comparison can thus be said to constitute a second, hidden function of genealogies. As appears from the stir it caused, Bellow’s rather inadvertent remark about the literature of the Zulu’s is difficult to put aside. It can be condemned or extenuated, but it cannot be entirely ignored. At least, the comparison is hard to resist. Some may declare an urgent need for a Zulu Tolstoy to answer Bellow’s self-satisfaction. Others will say that there is no need for one, because there already *is* one. But, whatever the response, a measure of achievement has been set that has to be reckoned with.<sup>124</sup>

In fact, Bellow’s genealogy tells a rather familiar story. The comment is not so different from John Macy’s sneer at those compatriots who, even while displaying excessive deference to standards of “European high culture,” all too eagerly proclaimed the advent of the “Milton of Oshkosh” or the “Shelley of San Francisco” (1913: 8). Although the directionality of the two statements is different, in Macy’s remark the Americans play the role of Bellow’s Zulu’s, there is the same underlying genealogical impulse. Even while the valuation orders have been inverted, this structural impulse has remained intact. Twenty years after Macy complained about the misdirected nationalism of American literary critics, Howard Mumford Jones could still express his regret about English departments’ reluctance to include American literature offerings because it “has no Shakespeare” (1936: 384).<sup>125</sup> Even in 1960, Leslie Fiedler insistently asked: “Where is our *Madame Bovary*, our *Anna Karenina*, our *Pride and Prejudice* or *Vanity Fair*?” (2003: 25).<sup>126</sup> Again, all of these utterances spring from very different contexts. But the validating mechanism in each case is rather similar. Designations such as the “Zulu Tolstoy” or the “Milton of Oshkosh” can be regarded as condensed paradoxes in the sense that they articulate the singularity of a national culture through its kinship with another tradition.

This chapter is about the function of such kinship ties in American literary history and the laws of succession that govern the discipline. I will focus on three cases in particular: the line that runs from Jonathan Edwards to Emerson, the institutional trajectory of Emily Dickinson, and Robert Lowell and the confessional school of poetry. It has not been my aim to rectify certain misperceptions in the history of American literature or to arrive at a better distribution of literary credit. Rather, what I have tried to show is the involvement of this kind of corrective behavior in the process of canon formation itself. I have selected these cases because they are familiar to most readers and because the canonical status of the authors and texts involved appears beyond dispute (which is not to say, of course, that

they really are). Similar patterns, I suppose, can be discerned elsewhere too. What unites the following analyses is the hypothesis that the memory system of a dehierarchized social order is somehow complicit in the dissent it generates. In such a constellation, remembrance of the founding texts presupposes a failing memory.<sup>127</sup>

#### — The Priority of Jonathan Edwards

In the end, the debate over the Zulu Tolstoy is perhaps not all that different from the controversy between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War over who constructed the first hydrogen bomb. At the time, Robert Merton compiled a “calendar” of conflicts over priority in science. As Merton argued, the persistent disputes over who discovered something first cannot sufficiently be explained in terms of the egotism of scientists, given the enormous “concentration of affect” surrounding such issues even when there is little credit to gain (1973a: 295). These conflicts serve to reinforce the reward system of science, in which originality is at a premium. The taboo on multiple discoveries – which, as Merton documents, are much more frequent than one would suppose – could thus be attributed to an institutionalized emphasis on outstanding achievement, which means that the system constantly falls short of its highest expectations. In what follows, I want to extend some of Merton’s insights, which are still highly relevant today, to the domain of literary history.<sup>128</sup>

A peculiar instance of a multiple discovery is the lineage connecting Jonathan Edwards to the Transcendentalists. This well-established genealogy is generally attributed to Perry Miller, whose essay “Jonathan Edwards to Emerson” first appeared in 1940. David Shumway cites Miller’s essay as the “point of emergence” of the literary descent line running from Edwards to Emerson (1994: 334).<sup>129</sup> Miller’s essay was very influential for a generation of Americanists, especially after Miller included it (under the title “From Edwards to Emerson”) in his *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956b), a book that played an important role in the institutionalization of puritan studies. The reason I single out Miller’s taxonomy here is because I see it as an interesting case of institutional myopia. The classification was so important for American literary studies, I argue, because it already existed at the time when Miller first published his essay. By this I do not want to slight Miller’s undeniable originality as a literary historian. What I do want to point out, rather, is the role institutions play in the way literary works get classed together.

When scanning some standard literary histories, one cannot but notice how codified the discourse on Edwards is. Most critics agree on the

contradictions that this figure embodied, the conflict between old and new that he acted out in the service of the American people. With this usually comes the sense that he has been systematically misunderstood as the preacher of hell fire. Thus, in the first *Cambridge History*, Paul Elmer More regretted that Edwards's "memory in the popular mind today is almost exclusively associated with certain brimstone sermons and their terrific effects" (Trent 1917: 60). Thirty years later, in the Spiller history, Thomas H. Johnson stressed that the minatory sermons, which were "seldom used by Edwards in fact," "misrepresent him as one who despised men when in fact he loved them as fellow beings sometimes forgetful of the warnings of a compassionate father" (Spiller 1949: 75-76). In the Columbia volume published forty years later, Alan Heimert still takes pains to reclassify *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* as a "highly unrepresentative sermon" (Elliott 1988: 113). And even more recently, Emory Elliott concludes in the new *Cambridge History* that the sermon is "not typical of Edwards's style" (Bercovitch 1994: 297).

What is interesting about these statements, all of them by established puritan scholars, is not so much that they differ on the legacy of Edwards but rather that they agree that Edwards has been systematically misrepresented as the arch-puritan. The injunction to rectify the misperceptions about the author appears equally persistent as the stereotype itself. Returning to Miller, we find the same kind of ritualized language. In his biography of the theologian, he portrays Edwards as "one of those pure artists through whom the deepest urgencies of their age and country become articulate" (1949: xi). This formulation catches the eye because it seems so absolute and contradictory. Edwards is described as both outstanding ("pure") and representative. His personal destiny is recursively fused with that of the American nation. But this is still a far cry from seeing Edwards as a precursor of the nineteenth century romantics. We have perhaps forgotten how unlikely this correlation was at the time.<sup>130</sup> To understand how Miller arrived at this position, we have to look into the institutional context from which it emerged.

As it appears, Miller's essay was not greeted with general acclaim when it was first published in 1940. In the headnote accompanying the 1956 reprint, Miller felt compelled to defend himself against the charge of "obscurantist divination" (185). He noted how many readers had misconstrued his argument, as if he had suggested a direct historical link between Edwards and Emerson. What he had meant, instead, was a broader similarity of "ideas" between the two figures:

What is persistent, from the covenant theology (and from the heretics against the covenant) to Edwards and to Emerson is the Puritan's effort to confront, face to face, the image of a blinding divinity in the physical universe, and to look upon that universe without the intermediacy of ritual, of ceremony, of the Mass and the confessional (1956b: 185)

What, for Miller, bound Edwards and Emerson together (and what connected them with the puritan founders of the seventeenth century) was their shared desire to confront reality directly ("face to face") without the mediation of institutions. Miller thus invoked an opposition between the (puritan) self and institutions, which justifies his taxonomy. For Miller, this was at the same time a way of justifying his own position as an intellectual historian. While defending the legitimacy of his taxonomy, Miller in the same movement propagated a specific way of doing literary history that goes beyond institutionalized discourse to perceive "deeper" continuities. He explicitly opposed this approach to a narrow "mail-order catalogue" view of literary history, which he regarded as too mechanical and deterministic (185). Here, Miller had in mind the social (literary) histories of the time, which according to him failed to comprehend the greatness of Transcendentalism because they were too intent on class struggle. They focused on Emerson's views on the 1837 depression, or Thoreau's comments on the Mexican war, but they frowned upon the more "literary" writings, which were too smug, too optimistic, or too "foreign" for their tastes.

Miller tried to prove the contemporary relevance of Transcendentalism by showing that it "betokened less an Oriental ecstasy and more a "natural" reaction of some descendants of Puritans and Quakers to Unitarian and commercial times" (189, italics mine). The word "natural" is vital here, because it brings to the fore the belief system on which Miller's taxonomy hinges. Miller saw two distinct strains in the puritan heritage, one that stood for the "spirit," and another representing "reason" (192-3). In the eighteenth century, however, some people got very rich very quickly and the two strains drifted apart. For Miller, Edwards tried to counter this tendency by establishing a counterculture of the emotions. But his attempt to fill Calvinism with a "new and throbbing spirit" was still constrained by an oppressive theology (195). It took Emerson – "another Edwards" – to "recapture the Edwardsian vision" in a new language, that of transcendental idealism (197). Miller's point, therefore, was that if one scraped away the "rhetorical embellishments" (the language of orthodox theology in Edwards's case, and Hindu and Germanic pedantry in the case of Emerson), the direct ancestral line between the two authors became apparent.

What, for Miller, connected the mystical writings of Edwards to those of the Transcendentalists was that both were part of the neglected, spiritual strain of Puritanism.

All along, while talking about the puritans, Miller was implicitly attacking the social historians. Why, he rhetorically asked, do the Transcendentalists, who “by all the laws of economic determinism” should be embracing the new languages of rationalism and Unitarianism, revert to the earlier doctrine of Calvinism (200)? By pointing out the continuities between Edwards and Emerson, Miller was at the same time securing his own position in the academy as a historian of ideas against the social historians. This connection has been pointed out before (Reising 1986: 53-57). But the point to note is how this pragmatic aspect gets obscured. For Miller, the social historians reduced literary history to class conflicts in the same way as the Unitarians in the eighteenth century reduced theology to Newtonian calculations. In a similar fashion he extended specific mystical metaphors to defend his genealogy against the charge of “obscurantism.”<sup>131</sup> Miller’s story appeals to the emotions, because we intuitively favor those who go against the grain, those who act naturally, those on the side of the light and the spirit.

Such analogies reinforce both Miller’s taxonomy and his way of doing literary history. We thus get a cascading, self-implicating structure that can be visualized as follows:

spirit : reason  
 Revivalists : Deists  
 Transcendentalists : Unitarians  
 historians of ideas : social historians

The first opposition, that between “spirit” and “reason,” can be seen as the semantic schema that maintains the whole structure. The primacy of the “spirit” over “reason” is not motivated, it is assumed. It is catapulted beyond question. This, one could argue, is how the self-replicating causal loop emerges on which institutions are founded: the spiritual lineage running from the founding fathers over Edwards to the romantics (up to forties America and after) is not only a product of a specific class of interpreters. It at the same time produces that class and provides it with a patent of nobility.

To recapitulate the argument so far, I have tried to show that the lineage running from Edwards to Emerson did not just appear out of the blue, but served to validate specific institutional formations in the academy, in this case the paradigm of intellectual history. Paradoxically, the geneal-

ogy fulfills this legitimating function by suggesting that the institution in question is not an institution at all, but rather approaches the past “face to face,” without the mediation of established academic standards. Just as Edwards tried to reconnect to the spiritual values of Calvinism obscured by superficial dogma, so Miller tried to go beyond what he perceived as the deterministic story line of Marxist literary histories. I will now illustrate that Miller was not actually the first to discover the genealogy for which he is usually credited. The question then becomes why Miller continues to be regarded as the father of the pedigree, despite evidence to the contrary.

#### — Multiple Awakenings

Contrary to what his essay might suggest, Miller was not a lone rider heroically opposing Marxist orthodoxy. Once we realize this, it becomes clear that Miller is not the only father of the taxonomy for which he is usually given credit. The link between Emerson and the puritans must have been evident even to contemporaries of the Concord sage. About six decades before Miller, the Scottish literary historian John Nichol saw Emerson’s “combination of stern practical rectitude with an ideal standard” as the latter’s “point of contact with Puritanism” (1882: 279). At the turn of the century, William P. Trent described Transcendentalism as both a “mental” and a “spiritual” movement, the latter aspect being the more important and defining. For Trent, Transcendentalism was above all a religious movement that signified a return to Calvinism. He concluded that “[e]ven the author of *The Freedom of the Will* had been a poet-mystic” (1903: 303). That same year, George Woodberry described Emerson’s writings as the culmination of the puritans’ search for God: “Emerson was their gift at the great altar of man” (1903: 92).

In *America’s Coming-of-Age* Van Wyck Brooks famously distinguished two currents in the American mind: the “current of Transcendentalism” originating in the more pious side of Puritanism and still evident in the “final unreality” of contemporary American culture, and the “current of catchpenny opportunism,” already present in the practical bend of the puritans but “becoming a philosophy” in Franklin and resulting in modern-day (equally unreal) business life (1915: 84). Both the “progressive” and the more “conservative” factions in literary studies seem to have called on these two currents. While Brooks at the time represented the former, Stuart Sherman actively campaigned for the latter. In his *Americans*, he tried to save Emerson for posterity by claiming that the author transcended both “the hard and merely practical genius of the Yankee” and “the narrow and inflexible righteousness of the merely traditional Puritan” (1923: 74).

Emerson thus became the “destined and appropriate counsellor” of America, since he represented “the vital force of their [the two strains in America: that of Franklin and Edwards] great moral traditions.” At the same time, he emancipated them “from the ‘dead hand,’ the cramping and lifeless part of their past.”

This makes it sufficiently clear that Miller’s double genealogy was already firmly ingrained in academic discourse when “Jonathan Edwards to Emerson” appeared in 1940. Ultimate proof of this, perhaps, is that the link was obvious even to Miller’s immediate opponents, the social historians. When he wrote his essay, Miller in all probability had his knife into Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought*. Parrington’s “main currents” were, on the one hand, that of “liberalism” (but not the kind that Miller propagates) represented by Roger Williams, Franklin, and Jefferson, and, on the other hand, that of “Puritanism,” running through John Cotton, Edwards and Alexander Hamilton (1927a: vi). Not only did Parrington differentiate between these opposing tendencies in American culture, he also explicitly drew a connection between Edwards, the puritan mystic, and the romantics: “as the expounder of philosophic idealism [Edwards] was looking forward to Emerson” (156). Parrington had probably received this conclusion without much flourish of trumpets from Barrett Wendell, his tutor at Harvard for whom “[t]he real distinction between the Puritan idealists and the Transcendental idealists of the nineteenth century proves little more than that these discarded all dogmatic limit” (1900: 293-294).<sup>132</sup>

Somewhere between his stay in England (where he encountered socialism) and his move to the West Coast (far away from the intellectual centers of the North-East), Parrington must have reinterpreted Wendell’s “little more” as “little less.” In his *Main Currents*, he stressed that Edwards had failed to fulfill his youthful promise to become a “transcendental emancipator” (1927a: 165). Edwards, though a potential Emerson, presented a tragic and anachronistic figure, who for Parrington had merely quickened the demise of Calvinism in favor of Franklin’s liberal philosophy, that of the unpretentious commoner. Parrington reinforced his position in the academy vis-à-vis Harvard orthodoxy by placing Edwards not at the beginning but at the (dead) end of a literary lineage, which made him the epitome of everything that appeared backward in American society. Interestingly, Parrington tried to save Emerson from the grip of Puritanism by linking him to Jefferson: “they were both romantics and their idealism was only a different expression of a common spirit” (Parrington 1927b: 383). In this way, Emerson was coupled to the vital current in American thought and divorced from the influence of puritan orthodoxy.

Although both Parrington and Miller recognized the continuities between Puritanism and Transcendentalism, there was a strong institutional incentive for the former to downplay it, and for the latter to draw our attention to it. For Parrington, Edwards's theology was diametrically opposed to the common experience of eighteenth century America. For Miller, on the other hand, it rather signified a return to that common experience in a time when the spiritual values of the founding fathers were increasingly becoming obsolete. What, in each case, counts as "common" is for the most part determined by the institutions in which the viewpoints of both scholars were articulated. If, therefore, Miller's taxonomy has stayed the course, this may be because he managed to turn Jonathan Edwards into common property by highlighting those features that make the author both outstanding and representative.

That the invocation of Edwards as an important American author (rather than a theologian or metaphysician) legitimates specific institutional formations is, I think, sufficiently clear. Apart from that, Edwards as a pivotal figure between the puritans and the Transcendentalists also provides the discipline of American literary history with a principle of coherence, a way of spreading the burden of remembering. Like Franklin, Edwards stands for a specific tendency in the eighteenth century. Most importantly, perhaps, by stressing the spiritual kinship between Edwards and Emerson, Miller has drawn attention to the "native" roots of Transcendentalism. In this way, he has successfully contributed to the creation of a national literary tradition (one that extends further back than Parrington's, who had to rely on the French Physiocrats to justify an American brand of liberalism). Miller's genealogy again made Transcendentalism into a major "American" movement rather than the product of an archaic and conservative caste society. But this was only possible because the institutional groundwork for the taxonomy was already established.

#### — The Dickinson Myth

The 2005 spring issue of *The Emily Dickinson Journal* contains an article by Amanda Gailey on "How Anthologists Made Dickinson a Tolerable American Woman Writer," in which she argues how American literature anthologies published between 1897 (following the first posthumous collection of Dickinson's poetry) and 1955 (when Johnson's authoritative variorum edition appeared) have systematically projected a false image of Dickinson as a reclusive and eccentric poetic genius invariably dressed in white. Gailey locates the roots of this misrepresentation in a male-domi-



nated society increasingly put on the defensive by the growing autonomy of women.

This naturalized type – the feminized private explorer – was arguably a response, intentional or not, to fears that hung on through the early century of the New Woman, whose characteristics are countered in these anthological caricatures of Dickinson. (2005: 65)

The paradoxical public image of Dickinson as a confined explorer thus provided a “tolerable” counterpart to the modern woman claiming her right to dress, talk and act like men, a right that could no longer be denied her through inherited mechanisms of repression.

Looked at this way, Gailey’s case is highly compelling. However, Gailey does not just present the Dickinson myth as a product of fears about the emancipation of women. In her opinion, the frequent inclusion of Dickinson in early anthologies also served to keep other women authors out, especially those who conformed less easily to the private explorer image. In this way, the myth “helped to check early feminist forces in the academy and to serve the conservative impulse to domesticate educated women” (67). From this perspective, then, the patriarchal social order that provides the immediate context for the early, erroneous reception of Dickinson at the same time motivates the misrepresentations of the poet’s public image. This explanatory move allows Gailey to account not just for the origin of the Dickinson myth but for its remarkable persistence as well, a phenomenon that is related to two further factors: a “prevalent sloppiness in the editing of anthologies” and the “increasing disdain for historicizing poetry, a critical move championed by critics such as T. S. Eliot” (74).

I will focus on these two additional reasons for the dissemination of the myth first, and then return to the enveloping cause, i.e. that of a patriarchal society in need of justification. The case of hack scholarship is the weakest. As Hobsbawm and Ranger have stressed, repetition constitutes a crucial element in the “invention” of traditions. From this perspective, Gailey is definitely right when she claims that anthologies can be regarded as devices for the inculcation of the Dickinson myth in schoolchildren. However, although the profitability of textbooks may partly explain why the myth acquired such wide currency, it cannot account for why it took the shape it did. Moreover, it should be noted that the reason why so many textbooks appear so much alike is precisely because they react to each other. Thus, it does not suffice to state that early anthologists of American literature were just cribbing one another to make easy money on the text-

book market, and that this is the reason why Dickinson has been so painfully misunderstood. At least, this explanation does not take us very far in accounting for the success of the distortion.

As a second explanation for the lack of interest in the “real” Dickinson, apart from editorial sloppiness, Gailey enlists the ahistorical method of many early anthologies of American literature, which she associates with the aesthetic doctrines of the New Criticism. This seems surprising at first, given that the New Critics have often been credited for (re-) discovering Dickinson as a “modern” poet. If anything, their formalist principles were designed to pierce through the biographical criticism of the foregoing generation, in Dickinson’s case the easy mystifications of Martha Bianchi and others.<sup>133</sup> Gailey’s point, though, is that the formalist anthologies – such as Frederick Houk Law’s *The Stream of English Poetry* (1931) – displayed an “ambivalent historicity,” which means that they only embraced formalist doctrines in principle but not in fact (78). In other words, the apparent universalism of these textbooks was a way of justifying the immured explorer image of Dickinson in the name of its correction. Even while rejecting biographical information as the basis of sound criticism, the New Critical anthologies thus relied on unexamined myths about Dickinson’s personal life.

Citing Alan C. Golding, Gailey notes that since the middle of the nineteenth century anthologies of American literature have resisted contextualization, but she adds that the New Criticism has considerably strengthened this tendency by imposing a false sense of scientific objectivity.<sup>134</sup> Only fairly recently, Gailey argues, anthologies such as the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* have begun responding to the long felt need for better historical scholarship by selecting more and longer pieces, including some of Dickinson’s letters.<sup>135</sup> In an academic climate that puts a lot of emphasis on historical contextualization, Gailey’s argument about the false universalism of the New Critics strikes a familiar chord. Indeed, it seems so self-evident that she can advance her claim without discussing their work in detail.<sup>136</sup> But is it really true that the New Critics deliberately assumed a misleading ahistoricity so as to obfuscate their subjective, male-centered poetics? More importantly, still, did they actually perpetuate the passive explorer stereotype of Emily Dickinson?

As it appears, Gailey’s argument is neither entirely right nor entirely wrong. She deals with the tradition of Dickinson scholarship selectively, gearing it to specific institutional needs. We do not have to get embroiled in Dickinson studies to bring this out. Consider Richard B. Sewall’s 1963 *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Except for Conrad Aiken’s seminal 1924 essay in *The Dial*, this book contains no pieces

published before 1930, an exclusion which Sewall justified on the ground that the pre-1930 criticism was “largely biographical” and “fragmentary” (1963: 2). Several contributors were members of the New Critical school or were closely associated with it: Tate, Winters, Blackmur, Ransom, Austin Warren, and MacLeish. Significantly, about two-thirds of the essays stemmed from the post-1955 period (an excerpt from Johnson’s interpretative biography, equally published in 1955, divides the two critical periods). As we will see, the later essays are also the ones most frequently cited in critical debates from the 1970s onwards, when the New Criticism went out of fashion but also started to acquire the coherent profile it had lacked before.

These preliminary observations already render Gailey’s decision to restrict her research to the period before 1955 problematic, and thus partly undermine the validity of her claim about the role of the New Critics in the persistence of the Dickinson myth. The centrality of Johnson’s 1955 edition in Sewall’s collection seems to be a clear indication of the strong need at the time for an original text to establish a kind of basal consensus onto which critical disputes could be anchored. In the decades following 1955, problems relating to the chronology of the poems, their authenticity, the (absent) titles, the use of punctuation marks (Dickinson’s famous dashes), etc. seem to have gradually dissipated.<sup>137</sup> Apparently, Gailey’s purpose in confounding the New Critical perspective on Dickinson (as represented in contemporary anthologies) with the pre-1955 period, when the poet’s oeuvre was not yet fixed, was to underwrite the lack of historical vision that she attributes to that doctrine. At the same time, it allowed her to discard the important role of the New Critics in the canonization of the poet since the year 1955.

Let us look in more detail at two essays included in Sewall’s collection, one from the earlier and one from the later (post-1955) period, namely Tate’s “Emily Dickinson” (1932) and John Crowe Ransom’s “Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored” (1956). A comparison of these chapters will bring out certain continuities that Gailey’s essay glosses over. Beforehand, I wish to stress the diversity of critical viewpoints united in Sewall’s collection and the futility of grouping them together under one heading. At this time, the (capitalized) “New Criticism” had not yet coalesced into the monolithic ideology with which it came to be associated only later. In his introduction, Sewall took issue with some contributors (notably Blackmur, Ransom, and Winters) and objected to the continuing tendency to condescend to Dickinson. If this confirms Gailey’s argument about the persistence of the image of the childlike genius, it is equally indicative of a desire

to burst through the myth even before feminist critics started to question the false objectivity of the New Critics.

Tate's essay articulates an outspoken refusal to interpret Dickinson's poetry in terms of her personal life. Echoing Aiken, he claimed that the poet's reclusion could not be taken as a sign of renunciation or passivity, but was a "deliberate and conscious" rejection of the age in which she lived (19). Tate thus in no way endorsed the stereotype of the passive explorer. Rather than as a docile spinster disappointed in love, Dickinson here appears as a rebellious poet who intentionally withdrew from life. However, for Tate this did not therefore mean that she was totally disconnected from the world. On the contrary, Dickinson belonged to her time through the "unconscious discipline" of her art (25). In other words, precisely by (consciously) rebelling against it, Dickinson (unconsciously) acted out the discrepancies of her age and thus gave voice to its deepest aspirations. "The poet may hate his age ... but this world is always there as the background to what he has to say" (25). Far from locating Dickinson in a timeless void, therefore, Tate situated her work in relation to a specific historical moment.

Tate was not only reacting against the biographical commentaries of Dickinson's earliest exegetes. More or less directly, he was also opposing the Marxist critics of his time, who thought that great poetry had to be revolutionary but who (at least, in Tate's opinion) failed to consider in what ways it relates to the culture from which it springs. Implicitly drawing on T. S. Eliot's views on tradition, Tate argued that Dickinson's work displayed the "perfect literary situation," by which he meant a point in time when a homogeneous culture starts to dissolve. Tate was convinced that Dickinson had lived during such a period break, as she witnessed the transformation of New England from a puritan theocracy into a province of an eclectic, industrial nation (here, Tate's agrarian leanings become apparent).<sup>138</sup> Dickinson's greatness resided in the fact that she captured this "perfect literary situation" without resorting to didacticism or empty abstractions. Unlike Emerson or Hawthorne, Dickinson exhibited a continual tension between abstractions and sensations, which made her poetry at once deeply implicated in her culture and still wholly individual.

It thus appears that Tate's essay neither projects a clichéd image of Dickinson as a docile spinster nor irresponsibly dislodges her from her own time and place.<sup>139</sup> One may well ask, then, why Gailey faults the New Critics for the dissemination of the Dickinson myth. One reason can be found in the fact that, when discussing the general properties of "the" great poet, Tate was talking about a "he." In a sense, this already brings us back to Gailey's first explanation of the myth, or the hypothesis that the image of the homebound poetic genius presented a projection of a male-centered

society. It can hardly be denied that in Tate's framework Dickinson's womanhood was largely irrelevant to her poetry. Tate situated her in a genealogy running from Edwards and Cotton Mather to Henry James, with whom she shared a heroic but tragic inclination to withdraw from the world. He further links her to John Donne who, in spite of being a very different poet, equally lived at a juncture (the dissolution of the medieval system), which would explain their shared desire for personal (rather than religious) revelation. From Donne, of course, it is only a small step to Eliot and the New Critics.<sup>140</sup>

Gailey's reason for targeting the New Critics may thus have less to do with their so-called ahistoricity than with the fact that they claimed Dickinson as one of theirs. Since the seventies, feminists have placed Dickinson in entirely different genealogies. In *Naked and Fiery Forms*, for example, Susanne Juhasz located Dickinson at the source of a "new tradition" of American women poets (including Moore, Plath, Sexton, Leverlov, Brooks, Rich, and Giovanni).<sup>141</sup> What, for Juhasz, united these poets was the fact that they shared an often painful awareness of the contradictions involved in being both a poet and a woman, or what Juhasz calls the "double bind" of the woman poet: "Traditionally, the poet is a man, and 'poetry' is the poems that men write" (1978: 1).<sup>142</sup> Similar things have been said about the role of the critic too. Gailey's remarks about the New Critics therefore have to be situated within an ongoing feminist project to claim Dickinson as a leading female poet.

It is from within such a reconstructive framework that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* have strongly criticized John Crowe Ransom for misrepresenting Dickinson as a "gentle spinster," whose mysterious "romance" with an unreachable lover allowed her to "fulfill herself like any other woman" (Ransom 1963: 97; Gilbert & Gubar 1979: 594).<sup>143</sup> In his "Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored," Ransom depicted Dickinson as a homely figure whose sole inspiration was the hymnbook. In reaction to this, Gilbert and Gubar present her as "the latest and most consciously radical" in a succession of nineteenth century Anglo-American women writers including the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, and George Eliot (585). Dickinson's radicalism, for Gilbert and Gubar, resides in her ambivalent enactment of fantasies of renunciation and rebellion that other women authors expressed indirectly in their gothic romances. Rather than childish vanity, her posing would have been a deliberate effort at resolving the constraints inherent in being a woman artist in a male-dominated society.

It is not my intention to counter Gilbert and Gubar's compelling critique of Ransom, which would merely lead into another reconstructive pro-

gram instead of explaining the underlying dynamic. If we take a closer look at Ransom's essay, however, it appears that it already highlights certain gothic elements in Dickinson's work.<sup>144</sup> Ransom makes a crucial distinction between Dickinson the "actual person" and her "literary personality" (97). The former was indeed a "spinster" who in her own lifetime could not but be regarded as an "unusually ineffective instance of the weaker sex," given her reclusion, the fact that nobody knew about her poetry, as well as "man's complacent image of woman" at the time (98). In her poems, by contrast, Dickinson put on a "mask" allowing her to transform her apparently uneventful life into a "heroic history," just as her contemporary Whitman had projected an image of masculinity antithetical to his real life.

In other words, Ransom by no means disposes of Dickinson's poetic self-dramatization as a mere eccentricity, but rather sees it as a central feature of her art, which allowed her to transcend her "gentle" natural character. Despite its somewhat patronizing tone, one cannot say that Ransom's essay naively subscribes to the stereotype of Dickinson the otherworldly recluse. The difference is that for Gilbert and Gubar Dickinson's posing is fundamentally different from Whitman's, since in her case artistic self-assertion paradoxically takes the form of an eventually disastrous self-effacement, which is intimately linked to her identity as a woman.<sup>145</sup> The opposition between man and woman – or, as they put it, "Somebody" and "Nobody" – articulates the central fault line of Gilbert and Gubar's study. It is the cognitive device that justifies their genealogy of women writers. As the feminist paradigm gets institutionalized, everything is gradually realigned in terms of the distinction that functions as the basic structure of that paradigm.

Christopher Benfey has shown that feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar, in spite of their claims to the contrary, principally agree with the New Critics about Dickinson's rebellion against society as well as about her literary personae as a key to that rebellion (2002: 46). Where the two parties do differ is in their interpretation of what Dickinson rebelled against. Whereas for critics such as Tate and Ransom Dickinson subverted the values of the Gilded Age, Gilbert and Gubar claim that she opposed patriarchal society as such (including the agrarian society that Tate and Ransom construct as a corrective to the modern, industrial order).<sup>146</sup> I think this discrepancy reveals two things about the workings of institutions in literary history. First, it shows that Dickinson's priority is functional for the accreditation of critical schools and the allocation of roles in an academic system based on equal worth. Second, the opposing viewpoints of New Critics and feminists also reveal the strong "concentration of affect" in Dickinson studies.

It is this affective component that leads Gailey and others to block out continuities between their own perspective on the author and the “myths” spread by other critics.<sup>147</sup> Every critical school or doctrine produces its own myths. Feminist critics have replaced the private explorer image with that of Dickinson the sexual rebel, which has generated interesting new approaches to her complex poetry. The point to note, however, is not just that an author such as Dickinson is called in to legitimate specific social groupings, but rather that she can only fulfill this legitimating function because she is represented as unrepresentable. Founding figures do not just embody certain ideals, they at the same time spread suspicion as to the extent to which a given order succeeds in living up to these ideals. Thus, taking issue with the “phallogentric” approach of Tate, Blackmur, and Ransom, Juhasz urges us to think “not about what [Dickinson] did, but about what she did not do” (1978: 11). Here, Dickinson appears less as a representative figure actively promoting the values central to society (such as self-reliance) than as a martyr, whose “sumptuous destitution” anticipates a different kind of order. Such an order manifests itself in a paradoxical way, by opposing its own established doctrines.

#### — How Dickinson Became an Intolerable Woman Author

Does Gailey eventually answer the question as to how early anthologies of American literature turned Dickinson into a “tolerable” woman poet? If, as Gailey insists, Dickinson’s work needs to be contextualized (the question is of course which context is most fitting), the scholarly reception of that work deserves to be put into perspective too. If critics like Tate and Ransom have not actively questioned the confined explorer myth, they have not slavishly furthered it either. Obviously, Gailey’s essay is less concerned with New Critical ideas than with how these ideas have percolated into school manuals to offer a pseudo-scientific justification for the imposition of a male-centered valuation order during the first half of the twentieth century. However, she never really broaches the problem as to how patriarchal values got institutionalized into practices, or how effective the anthologies were in generalizing these practices. It yet remains to be shown to what degree the Dickinson myth was actually instrumental in the domestication of women.

What seems clear from the above is that this myth is not readily reducible to a mere instrument for symbolically subjecting women, because the malefactors, so to speak, cannot be pinpointed that easily. If the New Critics (as well as some of the anthologies infected by their ideas) have spread certain misconceptions about Dickinson, which they undoubtedly

did, they also seem to have undone some of them, if only by virtue of their disagreements. But even if we grant that the Dickinson myth has in some ways proved socially “useful” for the U.S. or particular social groups in that society, does this also mean that it exists because of this? When asking why the public image of Dickinson has been distorted, we should perhaps also ask what comes in place of the distortion once we have dispelled it and to what degree the distortion has itself been subjected to distortion, i.e. how certain misinterpretations have been exaggerated or simplified to bring out the originality of a new (mis-)interpretation. Instead of looking for the causes of the myth, therefore, it may be more fruitful to ask why everybody seems to agree that Dickinson has been misrepresented. Without the unshakable conviction that the author has been misunderstood (and the sense of duty that comes with it), the New Critics would never have felt the need to reject the “fragmentary” speculations of Dickinson’s early biographers. Similarly, feminist critics like Gilbert and Gubar would never have applied themselves to blaming the New Critics for disarming Dickinson’s poetry by representing her as a “gentle” little girl.

One obligation that Dickinson studies has towards itself as an institution (in the form of critical disputes, scholarly editions, anthologies, conferences, journals, societies, a “Dickinson Room” in the Houghton Library, etc.) is to keep itself going. To achieve this, Dickinson needs to appear as an intolerable author. Seeing Dickinson as fundamentally unrepresentable creates a degree of coherence in past interpretations, because none of them is believed to truly capture the complexity of the author’s oeuvre. Since all of them are partial, they have at least one thing in common. On the other hand, insistently representing Dickinson as a misrepresented author is also a way of justifying one’s own interpretation by suggesting that it responds to an urgent need to “restore” the poet to her rightful place (while at the same time muffling the fact that earlier interpretations sprang from a similar desire to finally put things straight).

The rationale behind these restorations, however, is not to come closer to the actual historical context hidden behind the mystifications (at least, this is not what drives Dickinson scholarship as an institution), but to realign the facts with governing classificatory styles. As Jan Assmann has put it, traditions can only be exchanged for other traditions (1992: 42). Something similar can be said about the myths surrounding classic authors. Dickinson’s famous white dress has been variously associated with madness, marriage, death, cloistral life, resistance to patriarchy, the Pre-Raphaelites, etc. Another “fact,” the dog Carlo, which Dickinson described in one of her letters to Higginson as her only true companion, seems to have gradually disappeared from view, perhaps because it ill fits the image of



Dickinson as a “radical” woman author.<sup>148</sup> Still other elements – Dickinson would have been fond of horse riding – seem to contradict both the passive image of the “Amherst Moth” and the more militant one of “Judith Shakespeare.” My larger thesis, therefore, is that the semantics gravitating around the figure of Dickinson typically take the form of a self-correcting mistake. Literary history does not proceed continuously (building on known facts), but by inversion: obstacles to understanding are continually transformed into clues for understanding, which then generates further complications. Most debates in Dickinson studies revolve around recurrent themes, such as her lover(s), the father figure, her reading, her eccentricities, etc. Let me focus on one such theme, namely Dickinson’s style.

In a famous letter to Dickinson, T. W. Higginson called the style of the poems she had sent him “spasmodic” and “uncontrolled” (Johnson 1958: 409). In her response, Dickinson half-mockingly cited these reservations (she actually puts them between brackets), which on some level already turned them into badges of honor. Ever since the correspondence between Dickinson and her (supposedly) uncomprehending “Preceptor” came out, Higginson’s words have been repeated time and again (often verbatim) as a sort of disclaimer to underscore how much she has been wronged and how urgently she needs to be rehabilitated. At the same time, the continued allusions to Higginson’s remark seem to function as a means for unburdening Dickinson studies from having to engage directly the vast body of scholarship that has sprung up ever since it was uttered, now almost one and a half centuries ago. Drawing on Higginson’s words in this way serves to justify yet another interpretation of Dickinson’s style, which is then given a chance to correct Higginson’s (as it appears, incorrigible) “mistake.”

In what ways have literary histories attempted to make sense of Dickinson’s formal irregularities? In the first *Cambridge History*, Norman Foerster noted Dickinson’s “defective sense of form,” despite her undeniable originality as a poet and her rather large following (Trent 1921: 32). He linked her style to the Transcendentalists, and through them, to the puritan tradition, of which she represented the “last pale Indian-summer flower.” Although she “was not a spontaneous singer,” her poetry had an “artless” spontaneity that gave her an “inconspicuous but secure” place in American literature (34). Conrad Aiken, in the 1924 essay mentioned above, thought that Dickinson’s “disregard for accepted forms or regularities was incorrigible” (1963: 15). In 1938, Yvor Winters argued along similar lines that “probably no poet of comparable reputation has been guilty of so much unpardonable writing” (Sewall: 28). Around the same time, Ludwig Lewisohn said that the “very discords” and the “fragmentariness” of Dickinson’s verses finally had to be taken at face value (1939: 358).

Both Winters and Lewisohn were responding to a temporary upsurge of Dickinson's popularity instigated by the release of previously unpublished poems and letters. Ten years later, Stanley Williams argued in the Spiller history that Dickinson's fame had "passed far beyond the applause of a cult into established acceptance" (Spiller 1949: 907). Although it undoubtedly had its faults, Williams thought that the "spasmodic quality" of Dickinson's poetry, rather than an aberration of a half crazy mind, had to be seen as a reflection of the "incongruities and frustrations of human experience" (911). Undoubtedly, these "incongruities and frustrations" sprang from Dickinson's personal life (which nevertheless remained a mystery); but they also had to do with larger changes (the war, industry, and science) that had affected American society during her lifetime. Even if, given her relative isolation, she was not entirely conscious of the impact of all this, and although she remained tied to conventional forms (unlike Whitman), her irregular verses were nevertheless symptoms of the new America that started to manifest itself at the time of the Civil War.

Rather than as a late Puritan, Williams thus portrayed Dickinson as a precursor of the "new flowering" of American literature that set in somewhere around the 1920s. The "spasmodic" character of her poetry was transformed from a defect into a specifically modern "quality" that anticipated the "metaphysical strain in the verse of today" (916). At the same time, however, Williams rooted Dickinson firmly in the New England tradition by juxtaposing her to Sidney Lanier, whom he counted as her Southern counterpart. Both poets were products of the "sectional" (rather than the "continental") nation, but in their formal experiments they already signalled the changes to come (although Williams found Lanier's style much less adventurous than Dickinson's).<sup>149</sup> Dickinson's peculiar poetic style was thus both a manifestation of her regional identity and a way of transcending the constraints of her cultural background in the direction of a truly "modern" sensibility.

Starting out as a latter-day Puritan, Dickinson has gradually moved up the valuation order to become a pivotal figure between the New England tradition and the modernists. Those who stressed her New England roots have generally attributed her stylistic irregularities to the limitations of her milieu. Richard Chase thought that the "spasmodic and unstable emotional texture" of her verses revealed the monotony and isolation of the New England scene (1951: 24). Echoing some of the opinions mentioned above, he concluded that "[n]o great poet has written so much bad verse as Emily Dickinson" (203). For those who saw Dickinson more as a forerunner of the formal innovators of the twentieth century, her so-called eccentricities signalled the extent to which she had broken free from her cultural back-

ground. In *The Literature of the American People*, Arthur Hobson Quinn argued that Dickinson's "spasmodic leaps" of perception were not just the product of an "undisciplined child" but revealed a "purposed defiance" of formal regularities (1951: 734).

In time, the forward-looking Dickinson has won out.<sup>150</sup> In 1965, Albert J. Gelpi claimed that Dickinson "sought to speak the uniqueness of her experience in a personal tongue by reconstituting and revitalizing – at the risk of eccentricity – the basic verbal unit" (1965: 147). According to Gelpi, this deliberate, anti-romantic aesthetic proved her kinship to such later poets as Pound, Williams, Moore, and Cummings. Gelpi further distinguished between a "Dionysian" and an "Apollonian" strain in American poetry. While the former "derived palely from Emerson and descended lustily through Whitman to Carl Sandburg and Jeffers, and more recently to Jack Kerouac and Brother Antoninus," the latter proceeded "from Edward Taylor through [Dickinson] to Eliot, Stevens, Frost, and Marianne Moore, and thence to Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop" (146). By characterizing Dickinson as an Apollonian rather than a Dionysian poet, Gelpi disaffiliated Dickinson from Emerson, with whom most critics had associated her, and turned her from a belated Transcendentalist into a precursor of the moderns.<sup>151</sup>

Not much later, Ruth Miller argued that Dickinson had forged a "unique style, a poetic manner altogether at home in the twentieth century" (1968: 4). For David Porter, Dickinson's "modern idiom" not only announced the American modernists, but also pointed to "certain kinds of postmodernist poems that are being written today" (1981: 7). Marshall Walker claimed that Dickinson's "highly individual use of imagery, off-rhyme and unconventional syntax give a foretaste of modernist emphases on impersonality and language" (1983: 116). Most recently, Molly McQuade has suggested that Dickinson wrote "as if to bid farewell to the Victorians and urge on the modernists" (2004: 373). More examples could be given, but I think the trend is sufficiently clear.<sup>152</sup> During the last half century, Chase's assertion that "perhaps two thirds" of Dickinson's work is substandard has come under serious attack (1951: 203). Similarly, Ransom's claim that no more than "one out of seventeen" of her poems are destined to become "public property" is approached with very deep suspicion (1963: 89).<sup>153</sup>

How can we explain Dickinson's metamorphosis from a late "Indian summer flower" of Puritanism into a proto(post-)modernist? We may point the finger at the early critics and stress how deluded they were. But, if this kind of reaction can be legitimate, it also partly obscures the extent to which it is itself responsible for producing precisely that against which it

is a reaction. In other words, the canonization of Dickinson as an important American author requires that every interpretation of her oeuvre will have to remain, at least in part, a misinterpretation. The resulting mistakes or myths paradoxically reinforce Dickinson's immaculacy by boosting the debate about the true import of her poems. As it appears, Dickinson's "spasmodic" style has been retroactively sanctioned by the body of criticism that it has engendered.<sup>154</sup> By making Dickinson into a precursor of the modernists, a feminist *avant la lettre*, an early postmodernist, or what not, the literary institution continually predicts itself.

#### — The (Not So) Personal Voice: The Confessional Poets

As Sigrid Weigel has argued, "when a genealogy has developed, then comes the question as to its origins" (2002: 266). Genealogies do not so much solve the problem of origins as call it into existence. In other words, without genealogies, we would not have to worry about where they begin. In what follows, I will focus on the emergence of the so-called confessional school in American poetry. In a first section I will trace out the problems inherent in this designation. Who belongs to this school? What kinds of criteria determine its membership? How has this particular classification developed? Who are the leaders and who are the disciples? Are there significant precursors? Is there such a thing as a "confessional" poetic mode or style, and if so, how can we define it? I will then try to develop a functional explanation of the persistence of the label "confessional," despite the fact that it apparently fails to contain the above questions. In the final section, I will zoom in on the status of Robert Lowell as the professed leader of the confessional school.

When tracing the origins of the confessional school, it appears that there has never really been a clear understanding as to what exactly makes a poet or poem "confessional." Instead, we merely encounter a generalized dissatisfaction or discomfiture about the label, a sort of negative consensus. M. L. Rosenthal, who is usually credited for having introduced the designation "confessional" in an often-cited review of Lowell's *Life Studies* for a September 1959 issue of the *Nation*, later argued in his study on *The New Poets* that "it was a term both helpful and rather limited" (1967: 25).<sup>155</sup> He further noted that "possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage." This shows that, already in 1967, the term "confessional" had become sufficiently institutionalized to call it into question. By that time, Lowell had abandoned the "confessional" style of his *Life Studies* and had entered his so-called "public" phase, while younger poets like Frank O'Hara had started to openly attack what they

perceived as the exaggerated emotionalism of the confessionals.<sup>156</sup> These younger poets initiated a return to a more impersonal poetic style that in their opinion was better attuned to urban life.

Yet, Rosenthal's doubts about the usefulness of the term "confessional" did not lead him to dismiss it entirely. Rather, he tried to specify what set the truly "confessional" poems apart from the frauds. In a paradoxical move, he argued that the really "confessional" poem was not really confessional, but in fact highly skilled. Instead of abandoning all poetic principles, the best confessional poets insisted emphatically on form.<sup>157</sup> Thus, Lowell's "Skunk Hour" and Plath's "Lady Lazarus" counted as "genuine" examples of confessional poetry, whereas Sexton's "Music Swims Back to Me" or Snodgrass's "The Operation" were not, because these poems failed to achieve a "fusion of the private and the culturally symbolic" (80). Lowell remained the *chef d'école* thanks to his superior mastery of form, which made him the "natural heir" of the modernists, especially Eliot, Pound, and Hart Crane (141). Plath and Ginsberg at their best managed to include the cultural dimension that was less clearly present in the work of Roethke, Berryman, and Sexton.

Although the label "confessional" seems to have persisted, the canon behind it has changed a great deal. Rosenthal's 1967 study did not yet include such poets as Snodgrass, Kumin or Wakoski, who are now considered to be important representatives of the confessional school.<sup>158</sup> Clearly, Rosenthal's conception of an unconfessional confessionalism was a response to the recurrent charge of critics trained in Eliotic impersonality that the work of the confessional school, as one review of *Life Studies* put it, was "too unique to be universalized" (Standerwick 1972: 79). But Rosenthal may also have been reacting against a widespread opinion among the younger generations that confessional poetry was merely a "transitional mode" that remained "too solipsistic and extreme" to reflect a more general postmodernist poetic sensibility (Altieri 1979: 53, 60).<sup>159</sup> Rosenthal tried to counter this double critique from the old and the new guard by making *Life Studies* an "indispensable phase" in Lowell's own development and that of American culture as a whole (1967: 78).

Rosenthal's universalization of the "confessional" mode may have served to disaffiliate it from an overpowering Eliotic modernism and thus free it from the charge that it represented a complacent period in American literary history that was, as Geoff Ward has formulated it, "parody-modernist rather than postmodern" (2002: 166). The retention of the label "confessional," despite the definitional problems that it continued to engender, can from this perspective be explained in terms of the effort on the part of the poets and critics who came into their own immediately after the Second

World War to assert their difference from the previous generation.<sup>160</sup> The institutional concerns of this “middle” generation may indirectly have reinforced the conception of a “confessional school” of American poetry. This classification was naturalized through the opposition between “public” and (merely) “private” poetry, and the paradoxical notion that the universal appeal of the former depends on the extent to which it manages to link the poet’s personal life with broader social concerns.

When he coined the term “confessional,” Rosenthal could not have predicted that it would get accepted as a designation of a dominant poetic mode during the first half of the 1960s. In other words, he could not have intentionally introduced the label to promote a specific “school” of poetry, because at the time there was no such thing. The term “confessional” only acquired this significance when it started to function as a mark of both distinction and disapproval. But the fact that the institutional effects of the classification were largely unintended does not therefore mean that they went entirely unrecognized. On the contrary, Rosenthal could only proffer the notion of an unconfessional confessionalism because the “confessional” style had started to generate resistance, not just from outside the “school” but also from some of its leading representatives. When trying to set apart the true “confessionals” from the false or less representative ones, therefore, Rosenthal was clearly aware of the strategic interests involved.

In one way or another, the demand for recognition on the part of a poetic generation feeds back into the literary pedigrees that underwrite its existence. This filter-effect will normally be apparent to most members of the institution in question, even if they do not feel that what they are doing when interpreting and classifying literary texts is reducible to the politics of recognition. This distinction between intention and recognition seems to me a crucial one when it comes to understanding the inner logic of the literary institution. Most classifications are not deliberately designed for political purposes. Assuming as much, would be to commit an intentionalist fallacy. On the other hand, it is equally problematic to overestimate the degree to which scholars are fooled by institutions. An example of such an overstretched inference is the often-voiced idea that we are furthering vested interests, even in the process of dismantling them. This kind of argument is not necessarily false, but it can result in misleading half-truths that deny the possibility of institutional change.

A filter-explanation of the success of the confessional school recognizes that an institution may have beneficial consequences not strategically designed to that purpose.<sup>161</sup> Yet, such an explanation also has limitations. It fails to account for the fact that those who should reap benefits from the

institutionalization of the confessional school have had so much trouble with recognizing the label. Even those most closely associated with the “confessional” style have approached the term as, at best, a misnomer. A complicating factor is that those perhaps most active in promoting the confessionals happened to be British critics like Alfred Alvarez, who in 1962 published an anthology titled *The New Poetry*, which suggested a break with the generation of Larkin and which included work by the American poets Lowell and Berryman.<sup>162</sup> Later, in *The Savage God*, Alvarez identified Lowell, Berryman, Plath and Ted Hughes as the leading exponents of post-Eliotic “Extremist” art concerned with an often fatal exploration of the poet’s psyche (1972: 279). This involvement of English critics should come as no surprise, especially given Plath’s, and later also Lowell’s removal to Great Britain. Would it be plausible, then, to attribute the ambiguous standpoint of American critics regarding the usefulness of the term “confessional” to a dispute with some of their British colleagues over inheritance rights?

The body of scholarship on confessional poetry that has sprung up since the 1970s reveals that the American critics do not just quarrel with their English counterparts, but also among themselves.<sup>163</sup> In an influential article titled “Realism and the Confessional Mode of Robert Lowell,” Marjorie Perloff took issue with Rosenthal and some other critics in his wake, who would have “completely misunderstood” the nature of the “confessional” poem by treating it “as *confession* rather than as *poetry*” (1970: 470, 471). According to Perloff, the best “confessional” poets, in particular the Lowell of *Life Studies*, were not just driven by a romantic desire to break free from the symbolist mode of Eliot and the New Critics; what set Lowell apart from the work of his “less accomplished disciples” (Anne Sexton, for instance), who shared his penchant for “titillating confessional content” but not his artistic genius, was his “superb manipulation of the realistic convention” (476).

The issue here is not whether or not Perloff is right in criticizing Rosenthal by pointing out the “realistic” structure of Lowell’s “confessional” poetry; what is of interest, rather, is that she formulates her critique by copying the latter’s paradoxical ideal of a universal confessionalism, or the assumption that what makes a “confessional poem” confessional is that it is not merely confessional but in fact highly crafted. The same logic seems to underlie Louis Simpson’s *Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell*, which came out a couple of years later. Simpson singled out the authors mentioned in the title because, for him, they represented an “American movement” in poetry, which he traced back to the Imagists: “those who have given American poetry a character,

who have made it possible to speak of American as distinct from English poetry, have followed in the steps of the Imagists” (1978: xi).<sup>164</sup>

However, the idea of a golden age only makes sense when it is interrupted by a period of decline, which then serves to highlight the greatness of that golden age. In Simpson’s narrative, the strong influence of the later Auden in the U.S. after the Second World War accounts for the fact that “the stream of experiment that had begun with the Imagist poets (...) receded into the background” (xii). It would take Dylan Thomas to finally remove the “Audenesque facade” and to initiate a new period of experimentation, of which Ginsberg, Plath, and Lowell were the most important exponents. Simpson thus projected the poets of the “confessional school” as the culmination of a characteristically “American” tradition in poetry. Only, here, the label “confessional” was associated with English rather than American poetry. In the American context, Simpson argued, the term as Rosenthal had introduced it “can mean very little – in fact, is misleading” (120). It is no coincidence that the only American poet who for Simpson conformed to the label was Sexton, whom Rosenthal had identified as one of the lesser members of the movement.

“The confessional writer,” Simpson concluded, “is at all times aware of the profit to be made from exhibiting his soul” (169). By contrast, what he called the “personal voice” in the work of among others Ginsberg, Plath, and Lowell, was not merely a representation of life but the transformation of personal experiences into an often highly experimental art. Simpson’s position was something like the inverse of Rosenthal’s. Neither his canon nor his poetics departed dramatically from that of earlier exegetes. Where he did differ was in his very negative evaluation of the designation “confessional” and its association with English (Auden-inspired) poetic traditions. But, even here, his perspective was in a sense an extension of earlier doubts about the validity of the term.

The paradoxical idea that less confessionalism equals more confessionalism is equally evident in Charles Molesworth’s *The Fierce Embrace*. This work discussed Lowell and Ginsberg in a separate chapter immediately preceding that on “confessional poetry” in order to accentuate that both these poets had “advanced beyond the psychological mire of ‘confessionalism’” (1979: 41). Here, also, it seems that the negative application of the term “confessional” served not so much to oust the classification altogether, but to separate the sheep from the goats. The goats, in this case, were the actual “confessionals” Plath, Sexton, Snodgrass, and Berryman. Molesworth further claimed that the “confessional” vogue, although its idiom had survived in the surrealist parables of contemporary poets, was largely over. The poets identified with this mode (which Lowell and



Ginsberg had managed to transcend) formed a sort of lost generation, which had “neither the energy to accept the terms of its forebears nor the determination to reject them in favor of a newer, more truly public discourse” (76).

That the public/private paradox has persisted in more recent criticism is apparent in William Doreski’s *The Modern Voice in American Poetry*, which discusses the work of Lowell in conjunction with that of established modernists like Frost, Stevens, Williams, Moore, Pound, and Eliot. Doreski faults Harold Bloom, who in a 1987 essay collection identified Lowell’s rhetorical stance in *Life Studies* as a “trope of vulnerability” (1995: 137). Bloom saw this trope as a washed-out version of Williams’s poetics and a weak reaction against former idols Tate and Eliot, which had given rise to a “confessional” school of poetry that, despite its temporary fame, now turned out “period pieces” rather than truly lasting work.<sup>165</sup> In response to Bloom, Doreski tries to prove that Lowell’s “trope of vulnerability (...) remains a central rhetorical motif in contemporary poetry” by indicating how it has strongly influenced three poets at the high-point of their careers, John Ashbery, A. R. Ammons, and Louise Glück (138).<sup>166</sup>

Doreski stresses Lowell’s originality by turning a reputed critic’s depreciative identification of Lowell’s poetics with the “trope of vulnerability” into a mark of distinction on the one hand, and, on the other, by once more pointing out the inadequacy of the term “confessional”: “[e]ven M. L. Rosenthal (...) has repudiated it as obviously inaccurate and sensationalist” (139).<sup>167</sup> This allows Doreski to dissociate Lowell from his “sometimes rather histrionic” followers. In his readings of individual poems, however, Doreski does not actually drop the label “confessional,” but seems to use it interchangeably with Bloom’s “trope of vulnerability.” Thus, while Ammons’s “Easter Morning” is “as confessional as anything in Lowell,” Ashbery’s vulnerability is most apparent when he “confesses to having attempted to avoid confessing” (144, 147). Doreski concludes that the “poetry of confession,” rather than being an “outmoded form of discourse,” in fact constitutes “the poetry best prepared to accept the consequences of misreading” (148).<sup>168</sup> In other words, since the “confessional” poet is most liable to being misunderstood, he is paradoxically best placed to articulate the impossibility of adopting a purely confessional stance.<sup>169</sup>

My larger aim in documenting these shifts in appreciation has been to show that the “confessional school” of American poetry was not institutionalized through some ulterior design but as it were by default. The institutional pattern has paradoxically sustained itself through the critical resistance it has engendered. Few will deny that, on some level, every social group needs a renaissance of some kind to postnatally underwrite its

existence.<sup>170</sup> Even if social memory is much too capricious for individuals to be able to deliberately institute a usable past, it is clear that one's membership in a specific cultural community will condition the connectivity of communicative themes. This is a recognized effect of cultural belonging. Without therefore trivializing the importance of individual agency in the process of institution formation, I think that a functional perspective may considerably deepen such an account by making it responsive to the paradoxical nature of literary evolution. Institutions are irreducible to either the intentions of its constituent members or the hidden motivational needs of the group as a whole, although these elements are often indispensable to the explanation. What is crucial, however, is that the starting point is not some kind of initial consensus but rather a communicative deficit, which at once obstructs and fuels the debates.

For every renaissance there is a dark age. A genealogy only becomes operative when a gap appears between the founding moment and the present. Every generation necessarily remembers and forgets more or less in the same way, but each remembers different things. During the early sixties, T. S. Eliot was such a dominant presence that few were inclined to confront his work head on. Snodgrass said: "I read *The Waste Land* if somebody tells me to but I never tell myself to" (quoted in Perloff 1970: 473). For later poets, however, it became once again rewarding to reach back to Eliot. Importantly, this opening was only created because there was a sense that Eliot had been neglected by the foregoing generation whose "confessional" style now seemed threadbare. The reaction against Eliot's poetic doctrines during the "Age of Lowell" can thus be seen as a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for the later revival of his oeuvre. The incentive to break free from the previous generation blinds us to what binds us to it (and there is always a connection, if only the desire to be different). Hence, the function of the "confessional school," apart from its more overt serviceability as a vehicle for articulating the identity of a poetic generation, is the paradoxical one of establishing a basis for difference. The communicative purpose of the classification is not so much to dissociate the "confessional" poets from the previous generation, to divorce American from English poetry, or to distinguish the true members from the falsies; rather, it lies in the comparison of dissimilar things.

## — The Matthew Effect

In the eighth and last volume of the new *Cambridge History of American Literature*, which focuses on poetry and criticism after 1940, Robert von Hallberg argues that the publication of *Life Studies* in 1959 “initiated a turn toward what has been called confessional poetry” (Bercovitch 1996: 22). The quote shows, first, the remarkable persistence of the contested term “confessional poetry” for over a quarter century, and second, the unquestioned priority of Lowell as the father of the school (although the verb phrase “has been called” already indicates that the label was applied retrospectively). If anything, this reveals literary history’s relative unconcern with historical facts.<sup>171</sup> W. D. Snodgrass had published parts from *Heart’s Needle* several years before 1959, and Lowell had read the entire volume in manuscript when working on *Life Studies*. Moreover, Lowell at some point explicitly acknowledged that his reading of Snodgrass had motivated him to develop a more “confessional” poetic idiom: “He did these things before I did, though he’s younger than me and had been my student” (1987: 245).<sup>172</sup>

We do not have to look hard to retrieve such a statement (in fact, it first appeared in an often-cited *Paris Review* interview). Most if not all experts on post-war American poetry are aware of the fact that, chronologically speaking, Lowell did not start off the “confessional” mode. But, even while it is explicitly acknowledged that others “did these things” before him, Lowell’s firstness has seldom actively been questioned. For instance, in the second volume of his *History of Modern Poetry*, David Perkins notes that Ginsberg “was Confessional before Lowell” (1987: 410).<sup>173</sup> But this assertion in no way seems to affect Lowell’s originality as a poet (in fact, it was uttered in a chapter exclusively devoted to him). Nothing in the make-up of Perkins’s history reveals a desire to challenge the established view that Lowell was the head of a school of “confessional” poets.<sup>174</sup> We could even say that this view has to be presupposed for an utterance like the above to be understood at all. Even while citing evidence to the contrary, Perkins thus in a sense reaffirms Lowell’s priority.

How can we account for this? What about those who wrote “confessional” poems before there even was such a thing?<sup>175</sup> Are we dealing with what the Oulipians, referring to their literary models, ironically categorize as “plagiarisms by anticipation” (Motte 1986: 5)? Lowell’s apparent immunity from incriminating fact may suggest that there is some hidden cause at work that indirectly sustains his status as a literary founder. What makes Lowell more representative than, for instance, W. D. Snodgrass? For Rosenthal and others, Snodgrass was one of the lesser “confessional”

poets, because unlike the others he did not generalize from his personal experiences to make wider claims about the human condition. Molesworth thought that Snodgrass's work had a "period feel" to it (see, in this regard, Bloom's remark about the "confessional" poets as writers of "period pieces") in that it was "too self-consciously protective of the speaker's emotional weakness to be totally private" on the one hand, and "too engaged with a barely warded off self-pity to be instructively public" on the other hand (1979: 63).

It thus appears that Snodgrass failed to bring the dimensions of the "public" and the "private" to a fruitful synthesis and that, for this reason, he was unfit to become the leader of the "confessional school" of American poetry, even if he had in some ways anticipated Lowell's turn away from formalist poetics.<sup>176</sup> This perspective, however, is not consistent with the initial reception of *Heart's Needle*, for which Snodgrass received the Pulitzer Prize in 1960, the year when Lowell was awarded the National Book Award for *Life Studies*. Does this mean that the early reviewers were blind to the bathetic banality of Snodgrass's poetry, which no more than a decade later appeared so obvious? For Molesworth, the initial excitement over *Heart's Needle*, "though it was a first book," was an indication of how fed up the public had become toward the end of the fifties with "the desiccated, argumentative ironies of post-Eliot poetry" (62).

Other critics, however, may in their turn reject Molesworth's position as the product of a peculiar 1970s academic thought style. Critical opinions do not suffice to explain Lowell's firstness, which, as we saw, has scarcely been challenged over the years. By attributing Lowell's status as the founder of "confessional poetry" to his superior literary merit, we end up in the kind of tautological loop that we set out to explain. Merely stating that Lowell voices a generational vision obviously begs the question. However, the very fact that Molesworth felt compelled to account for the initial flurry over *Life Studies* may already point to another possible explanation of Lowell's primacy, which has less to do with the intrinsic qualities of his poetry than with the inner logic of the literary institution.<sup>177</sup> As the contrastive conjunction in "though it was a first book" seems to indicate, a successful debut writer tends to awaken suspicion among literary scholars. Why should this be the case?

Whereas Snodgrass was a new face on the poetic scene in 1960, Lowell's reputation had been established at least since the publication of his second poetry collection *Lord Weary's Castle* (which earned him the Pulitzer Prize in 1947). As the story goes, Lowell started out as an over-enthusiastic disciple of Tate and Ransom (his mentors at Kenyon), only to find his true voice in the late 1950s after a period of prolonged personal

and mental troubles.<sup>178</sup> In a sense, then, Lowell's personal trajectory was emblematic of a broader evolution in modern American poetry. This effect was no doubt strengthened by the fact that he was descended from a respectable New England lineage (which, as is well known, included James Russell and Amy Lowell), but also by his own qualms with this family history. His mental instability, as translated in his poetry, could thus easily be taken as a symptom of a larger cultural predicament. Snodgrass, by contrast, could not boast of such an outstanding curriculum. At the beginning of his career, Snodgrass had no visible part in an existing tradition, and for this reason he could not be taken for a trend-breaker.

It seems illogical to consecrate a debut writer as the leader of a poetic school, when this school also includes a one-time mentor and an accomplished poet in mid-career. All this calls to mind Zuckerman and Merton's observations on the Matthew effect in science. This is how Merton describes the phenomenon:

The Matthew effect consists of accruing of greater increments of recognition for particular scientific contributions to scientists of considerable repute and the withholding of such recognition from scientists who have not yet made their mark. (1973b: 447)

As Merton has convincingly documented, even though the nasty implications of the Matthew effect for up-and-coming researchers are usually painfully obvious, its social function in the communication system of science mostly goes unobserved. This function, according to Merton, is to "heighten the visibility of new scientific communications" (447).<sup>179</sup>

Could it be that there is an invisible hand involved in the case of Lowell's status as the initiator of confessional poetry? Can we argue that there has been an institutionally motivated misallocation of recognition, which makes that praise which should have gone to a younger poet has been bestowed on an established colleague, and that this transference of credit has served to "heighten the visibility" of the "confessional" mode in American poetry? It certainly makes sense that Lowell's *Life Studies* has struck many observers as a clean break from New Critical poetics, because Lowell himself had been a promising exponent of that tradition. His conversion to a more personal idiom may have helped to turn "confessional poetry" into a dominant poetic mode during the early sixties and after. Surmising an invisible hand effect in the case of Lowell and the confessionals thus appears legitimate, since this would allow us to explain why Lowell has been credited as the founder of the school, even though historically speaking this does not make sense.

However, the invisible hand mechanism cannot seem to explain why, at least initially, Snodgrass did not suffer from a lack of recognition. On the contrary, his poetic career may have been smothered by excessive early praise. Rather than a dearth of recognition, there appears to have been too much of it too soon. This, at least, is how Snodgrass himself at one stage must have perceived it, as the following rather laconic statement testifies: “As soon as it becomes obvious that you could do some good work, and you receive recognition, you’ve got trouble” (quoted in Gaston 1978: 155). In this respect, then, we are not dealing with an instance of the Matthew effect as Merton described it. However, Merton notes that under certain circumstances the reputation of scientists can work against them. In such cases, the Matthew effect turns suicidal; it becomes an “idol of authority” that blocks rather than facilitates the progress of science (457). This may account for Snodgrass’s ambivalence towards his early success. A literary classic suffers by definition from a lack of recognition, since otherwise we would not keep investing in it. One way of extending the life of a literary text, therefore, is by making sure that it does not get overpraised.

Lowell once said of his great-granduncle James Russell that he had been “pedestaled for oblivion” (quoted in Axelrod 2004: 293). However, as minority communities started to assert themselves in the academy and society at large, the author of *Life Studies*, with his oppressive New England pedigree, seems to have undergone precisely such a fate. Not unlike T. S. Eliot a generation before, Lowell came to suffer from what Thomas Travisano in an article on Elizabeth Bishop refers to as the “Papa Haydn” syndrome (Travisano 1995: 923). As classicism gave way to romanticism, Haydn’s dominance began to work against him; likewise, from the 1970s onward, Lowell’s reputation came under increasing pressure when the confessional mode began to run out of fashion and efforts were made to get away from a conception of poetry as the exclusive province of privileged white males. In this context, Lowell was no longer enough of an outsider to be considered representative. But, even though what I have discussed above pertains to a very specific episode in American literary history, roughly between 1940 and 1960, similar mechanisms are at work in the pluralistic canons that emerged later.<sup>180</sup>

What Travisano describes as the “Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon” is a case in point. In reaction to critics like Cary Nelson, Travisano stresses – quite rightly in my opinion – that the remarkable transformation of Bishop from what John Ashbery referred to as a “writer’s writer’s writer” into a founding mother of the feminist tradition cannot be explained in terms of a simple repression and recovery scheme. For one thing, Bishop was never really “repressed.” A close friend of Lowell, she was never short of influ-

ential admirers and advocates (Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and John Ashberry, to name just a few) and, more often than not, her work received favorable, if at times patronizing, reviews. Long before she became something like a phenomenon, Bishop was the American Poet Laureate from 1949 to 1950. At the same time, and because of this, Bishop was never really “recovered.” As Travisano points out, contrary to what one now might expect (or predict), early feminist critics like Alicia Ostriker strongly objected to the impersonal and apolitical character of Bishop’s poetry as opposed to the more directly autobiographical profile of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, or Adrienne Rich.

It was Rich who, in a 1983 review of *The Complete Poems* published five years after Bishop’s death, acknowledged the poet’s “essential outsiderhood” linked to her unacknowledged lesbianism. As Rich admitted, Bishop’s reputation as an impersonal poet in the line of Marianne Moore “made her less, rather than more, available to me” (Rich 1983: 15). As long as she read Bishop’s work through the (male, heterosexual) lens of her artistic artistry, Rich was unable to appreciate the poet as part of a feminist tradition. As the troubled woman identity underneath the artistic persona became apparent, however, Bishop could be restyled from a poet who was not personal enough into one whose refusal of a purely confessional stance revealed her courageous embrace of a divided identity. Bishop could now serve as an inspiration for female and lesbian poets aiming to transcend the more blatant confessionalism that by the end of the 1960s was starting to run out of fashion. In view of the initial unease toward Bishop’s obliqueness, it is ironic that Bishop studies now abounds with autobiographical and political readings of her work, many of which, as Bonnie Costello remarks, tend to allegorize the poems’ personas into a selectively autobiographical image of “an alcoholic-asthmatic-lesbian-homeless orphan,” thus neglecting Bishop’s strong links to the modernist tradition (Costello 2004: 340).

Bishop’s extreme make-over from a “modest maiden-aunt” into a “conscious resister,” whose reticence does not so much bespeak an apolitical stance as underwrite a strong personal involvement in world affairs, has been accounted for in terms of deliberate efforts on the part of women writers and critics during the last half century to build a countertradition challenging existing patriarchal norms and traditions.<sup>181</sup> But the Bishop case also reveals that the feminist paradigm could only claim her as an important “outsider” figure because it had itself been involved in marginalizing her. As Travisano puts it, “before feminism could contribute its momentum to the Bishop phenomenon, feminism had first to recognize and claim Elizabeth Bishop” (908). What this reveals, in my opinion, is that a

purely causal explanation of the making of an author or literary grouping or lineage fails if it does not register the paradoxical dynamic of American literary history as an autotelic process. What gets “repressed” in a regime that derives its legitimacy at least as much from the cultivation of martyrial outsiderhood as from the remembrance of founders is not merely whatever does not fit into the dominant thought style, since being off center in a system that continually off-centers itself may not be such a bad place to be in. Rather, what tends to get repressed – which I mean in a functional sense, i.e. what has to remain latent to guarantee the survival of the established order – is the self-implicatory dynamic of canon formation.

Early success as a bar to success, rejecting praise as a way of accepting it, taking credit by giving credit: literary history abounds with such contradictions. In a sense, these are different manifestations of the basic problem of the discipline, namely the fact that recognition is only attainable when there is not enough of it. Literary histories respond to this problem of recognition by bestowing praise on misrecognized authors and texts, by constantly filling the gaps as it were. In doing so, they at the same time nourish the desire for recognition. If there is something like a Matthew effect in American literary history, therefore, its function is not primarily to “heighten the visibility” of specific groupings or schools, but rather to articulate the paradoxical togetherness of the visible and the invisible in the process of attributing literary value. Genealogies and literary canons in general can therefore not one-sidedly be reduced to devices for imposing power relations. Even while establishing valuation hierarchies, they inevitably open up the possibility of seeing things differently.





## CONCLUSION: NOTHING REALLY ENDS

The main objective of this book has been to conceptualize American literary history as an open-ended system. Such a system stabilizes itself by keeping open the question as to what constitutes its founding teleology. On the level of its operations, however, such a system is not open but closed. Precisely this operational closure, which situates every communication about American literature in a self-referential network, ensures that the system fails to live up to its end. It is this complex interplay between openness and closure that I have tried to unpack in the foregoing chapters. Every type of society tends to develop its own classificatory styles and valuation orders. Whether we argue with Mary Douglas that cultural bias is moving in individualistic and enclavistic directions, or follow Niklas Luhmann's hypothesis about the primacy of functional differentiation in modern society, in each case the reasoning comes down to the realization that the complexity of the modern world requires its own form of organization. What are the implications of this evolution towards increasing dehierarchization for literary history?

Conceived of as an open-ended system, the main function of American literary history becomes the negation of the functions it constructs for itself. Its "end" (its hidden function) is then to postpone that end. As a consequence, every cultural hierarchy almost automatically evokes suspicion. American literary history, when approached in this way, is governed by a persistent semantics of suspicion. Every taxonomy can in principle be rejected as not inclusive or not representative enough. This "addiction to discontent," as Wilbert Moore has called it in a different context, may explain the sense of responsibility that now pervades the discipline (1966: 765). Thus, John Carlos Rowe's proposal to "extend the history of U.S. imperialism beyond the Revolution to the colonial period" entails a recursive culpabilization of American culture to include even its prehistory (2000: 11). In this way, a debt is created that can never be repaid. Every attempt to come to terms with U.S. imperialism then appears suspect for slighting its own role in the reproduction of the phenomenon it purports to dismantle.<sup>182</sup>

One could argue that Rowe's achievement as a cultural critic lies in the fact that he holds out an impossible post-imperial future and warns us to a mission that cannot be accomplished. As he puts it, "there is no simple solution to the problem of U.S. neoimperialism" (24). Yet, extending the burden of imperial violence over three centuries of European presence in

the Americas is also a way of normalizing it as a more or less natural part of U.S. culture. The best literary works, from such a perspective, understand the impossibility of resisting imperialism and anticipate their inevitable incorporation in the ideological machinery of U.S. exceptionalism. Thus, for Rowe, Melville, Twain, and Du Bois are better “teachers” than Brown, Poe, and Henry Adams because they “challenge the dominant ideology while recognizing how all cultural acts remain to some degree captives of their historical and thus ideological situations” (79). The quasi-universalization of the principle of suspicion thus presupposes a concomitant expansion of a semantics of ignorance. The role of cultural criticism, in this context, is no longer to produce knowledge about the world, but rather resides in the sly exploitation of one’s own ignorance.<sup>183</sup>

Niklas Luhmann at one point defined the modern expert as “someone who, when asked questions he cannot answer, can be led back to a mode of uncertainty” (1998: 70). In a system where everything can arouse suspicion, the authority of the critic and the literary historian depends on the degree to which they manage to foresee the disqualification of what they put forward as valuable or important for the maintenance of American culture. Such a system thus legitimates itself in a paradoxical fashion, as it were by continually sabotaging itself. In the foregoing, we have isolated four instances of this paradoxical logic. In chapter one, we discussed literary history’s investment in origins as a response to the decreasing legitimacy of the past as a source of authority. Chapter two offered an explanation for the enticement of the future as a result of its growing indeterminacy. Chapter three linked the insistence on language as a marker of identity to the increasing unreliability of such a category in an increasingly complex world. And chapter four, finally, can be summarized as an attempt to deal with the American cult of genealogies in relation to the progressive corrosion of confessional ties.

It is important to stress that in the framework adopted here these problems cannot be conceptualized as remnants of a hierarchical social system that relies primarily on inherited distinctions and racial or ethnic markers for its legitimacy. Rather, they have to be approached as consequences of the rise of American literary history as a self-substitutive order, i.e. an order that can only legitimate itself through change (by dislocating its roots; by discrediting what only yesterday appeared new and exciting; by allowing its dictionaries to contradict each other; and by multiplying pedigrees). Even if the “need” for origins, (modern) classics, a common language, or a literary descent community appears backward, this can only be so from the perspective of a society that describes itself in such a way. Most literary historians too easily assume a radical break between their own and

preceding generations. Several developments that are now at the forefront of discussions in the humanities, such as the effects of globalization and mass culture on the ways in which cultural belonging is experienced, can be related to specific socio-structural changes that are irreducible to a mere alternation of generations.

In the introduction to this book, I suggested a forensic approach to American literary history that would avoid the temptation to go “beyond” established notions about American literature (as when Rowe proposes to go “beyond the Revolution” to include the prenatal roots of U.S. imperialism). As I have shown, the articulation of such a “beyond” perspective has to remain internal to the semantics by which the discipline constitutes itself. One objective of this study has been to arrive at a better understanding of how this works. When change appears as the normal condition of a discipline, propagating change will not get us very far in analyzing its workings. This means that we must abandon the imperative mood that characterizes most debates in literary studies.<sup>184</sup> As Luhmann once put it in an interview with William Rasch: “We start with seeing, defining, and handling problems” (2000b: 203). If *Predicting the Past* has a reconstructive ambition at all, then this ambition resides in the attempt to get at a better understanding of how American literary history as an institution manages to justify itself by constantly reconstructing itself.

Such an approach can prove particularly relevant in relation to the ongoing debate about the “postnationalism” of American literary history, a particularly persistent catchphrase in recent theorizing. There is a growing consensus among literary scholars that the national model has lost its legitimacy. Developments associated with the process of globalization seem to render the established framework of the nation-state as the natural term of address of a people or culture painfully inadequate. At the same time, however, the national model remains a powerful means for organizing literature. This is evident, for instance, in a controversy that broke out a couple of years ago over “interventionist” literary histories. Such literary histories tell a story of progress and development in order to articulate a common identity. In other words, they actively intervene in the social order by furthering specific political interests. In nineteenth century struggles for national liberation, this narrative served to consolidate the newly achieved political union. Now, a new type of interventionist literary histories seems to be developing in relation to emergent groups whose identity is not (primarily) based on nationality but on ethnicity, gender, or sexuality.

What is interesting about the new interventionists is that they to a certain degree copy the teleological narrative of national literary history, which has often discriminated against them in the name of equality and freedom. The debate, therefore, centers on the question as to whether minorities are justified in using a model which they know to be problematic, even it can further their cause. One position in the discussion states that interventionists should not be denied the right to recycle a model that has not yet fully exhausted its strategic potential, despite obvious shortcomings. Linda Hutcheon subscribes to this position when she calls to mind the “manifest utopian power” of teleological narratives (1998: 416). Others claim that interventionists are mistaken in appropriating the national model, not because their identity politics are unjustified, but because this is not what literary history is or should be about. Stephen Greenblatt adopts this view when he argues that literary history should always commit itself to a “vision of truth” (2001: 57). For Greenblatt, the teleological story is misleading because it falsely suggests a stable identity (national or other). For this reason, it should be abandoned, even if it can help minorities in their struggle for recognition.<sup>185</sup>

It is not my intention to participate in this ongoing debate, which is much more complex than I can hint at here. What I want to draw attention to, though, is the institutional basis of the above claims. In both cases, the end (whether empowerment or truth) justifies the means (the strategic use or disruption of narratives of progress). But what legitimates the end itself remains unspecified. Greenblatt pleads for a return to world culture, but he fails to specify what form such a world culture should take, or why it should be global at all. Similarly, Hutcheon gives at best a tautological answer to the question as to why the developmental narratives of emergent groups should be more authentic than certain others. In a sense, then, the acuteness of the controversy derives from shared ignorance.<sup>186</sup> Neither Hutcheon nor Greenblatt can motivate why literary history serves the ends they ascribe to it and precisely this may explain the tenacity with which they hold to their respective positions. At the same time, both assume that one can more or less freely adopt or resist certain ways of mapping reality. This, in my opinion, is where institutions intervene by creating a choice between two options, even while hiding the social foundation of such a choice.

The apparent persistence of the national model of literary history, I claim, cannot be explained in terms of its continuing strategic usefulness for emergent groups alone. This is because the boundary between (progressive) use and (reactionary) misuse is not fixed, but constantly needs to be renegotiated within the discipline of literary history itself.<sup>187</sup> Similarly, proclaiming the end of the national model by suggesting that it has

lost all relevance in a time of multicultural citizenship is to remain blind to its continuing appeal, as the organizational structure of most literary departments still testifies.<sup>188</sup> From our perspective, the relation of American literary history to society cannot be sufficiently understood in terms of either its “manifest utopian power” or its dedication to a “vision of truth.” The conflict between these two positions, which in a way is nothing but a replay of the rather familiar opposition between scientific “facts” and cultural “factors,” has always energized American literary history. Rather than ends in themselves, therefore, “truth” and “agency” appear as means for organizing American literary history as a scholarly discipline.

In *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has embraced a “to come” perspective as a possible solution to the problems besetting comparative literature. Wai Chee Dimock for her part sees a future in the concept of “planetarity” as used by Spivak and Paul Gilroy, but stresses that it is only useful as a “generative principle” whose “heuristic value lies in its not having come into being” (2007: 5). Inevitably, every attempt to go “beyond” an established framework has to be formulated within such a framework.<sup>189</sup> The “post”-prefix thus serves to postpone the end of the institutionalized order even while asserting it. The point to note, however, is not that the nation is here to stay but rather that its claims to legitimacy as a measure of cultural belonging depend on a lack of legitimacy. The overall aim of *Predicting the Past* has been to arrive at a better understanding of this paradox. Why should American literary history describe itself as “post-national”?<sup>190</sup> Inflated claims about the future of the discipline will not bring us any closer to the “end” of the nation-state. Thus, the assumption that the national model is dead and buried detracts from the fact that the nation constitutes itself by constantly reacting against itself, by going “beyond” itself. The opposite position, however, which holds that postnationalism is just another form of nationalism, appears equally one-sided. Not only does it underrate the massive impact of the social shifts of the last quarter century. More importantly, still, it tends to copy rather than explain the temporal distinction between now and after that has animated American literary history since its inception.<sup>191</sup>

In spite of dramatic changes in the field of literary and cultural studies during the last couple of decades, this internal dynamic of the discipline seems to have remained relatively intact. For instance, in response to the growing ethnic and racial diversity of the U.S. and the impact of global migration, Emory Elliott has proposed to “redefine the parameters of ‘art’ and formulate new questions for evaluating cultural expression in ways that are fair and just to all” (2000: 9). Elliott’s plea to reach out toward the “lived experiences” of Americans of whatever race, class or gender springs

from a genuine concern to rethink the study of literature and art in a society that no longer accepts the elitist aesthetic doctrines of the New Critics (11). But the inclusivist gesture to diversify the canon in function of changes in society at the same time links Elliott's project to that of earlier generations, all the more so because it continues to operate within the meaning horizon of the U.S. nation. The tendency to regard American culture as unfulfilled, and the concomitant urge to correct governing aesthetic standards, is what explains at once the remarkable persistence of American literature as a relevant category and its high tolerance for falsification.<sup>192</sup>

In *The Trouble with Diversity*, a pointed analysis of multiculturalist policies in the university and American society at large, Walter Benn Michaels makes an ironic reference to a lawyer for Morgan Stanley who said that "[d]iversity is always enhancable" (2006: 115). For Michaels this proves the complicity of the diversity theme in the logic of corporate expansion. The non-zero sum logic of multiculturalism signals that we are never diverse enough, that we constantly fall short of our promise to be entirely open.<sup>193</sup> Instead of focusing on diversity, Michaels argues, we should go back to the old question of inequality. When it comes to inequality, it is clear that one person's gain is another person's loss, a reality that the focus on unlimited diversity has eclipsed. Some of the issues Michaels addresses exceed the scope of this book, but I think that my observations do in some ways illuminate the wider debate. Saying that multiculturalism is a kind of aphrodisiac for the "real" problems affecting the United States, as Michaels seems to do, may help us to raise awareness about certain hidden motivations at the base of the American ideology of openness, but it is a partial solution at best. Suggesting a return to economic issues may even obscure our understanding of the self-reproductive logic of modern function systems, which assert their autonomy precisely by offering an impossible return to reality pure and simple. What we need, first and foremost, is a better grasp of how this works.

Ever since it became a university discipline toward the end of the nineteenth century, American literary history has justified its existence by describing itself as "provincial," "sectional," "racist," "classist," "sexist," "nationalistic," "Anglocentric," "Eurocentric," or recently even "Amerocentric." Such temporary programs, as I would call them, serve to differentiate in specific contexts between legitimate and illegitimate versions of American culture. They do so by upholding the possibility of a better, more inclusive or representative American literary tradition in the future. But, of themselves, these programs can never entirely make up for what we have identified as the constitutive problem of American literary history, i.e. the fact that an expert perspective on American literature can only develop

when it anticipates the possibility of revision or negation. Among other things, this means that there is not a single approach to American literature that will bring universal happiness. At the same time, it is precisely this disaffection of the discipline with itself that stimulates it to continue its search for more adequate ways of making itself redundant.





## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Douglas distinguished between four cultural models or biases in terms of a two-dimensional model of “group” and “grid” influences, the former referring to the forces that hold people together, the latter having to do with their use of classification systems. Since she first proposed this model in the first edition of *Natural Symbols* (1970), Douglas has regularly changed her mind about the grid and group dimensions and the nomenclature involved. Generally, however, she has distinguished between four types of society: isolationist, hierarchical or positional, competitive, and sectarian or enclavistic systems.
- <sup>2</sup> Luhmann’s *Soziale Systeme* (1984), which made his name as an original new voice in sociology, was translated into English in 1995 as *Social Systems*. As much as possible, I will reference to this book.
- <sup>3</sup> Even a sidelong glance at some recent titles in the field shows a strong reconstructive tendency. See, for instance, Lauter’s *Reconstructing American Literature* (1983), Bercovitch’s *Reconstructing American Literary History* (1986), LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Ward’s *Redefining American Literary History* (1990), Lenz’s *Reconstructing American Literary and Historical Studies* (1991), Greenblatt and Gunn’s *Redrawing the Boundaries* (1992), Lipsitz’s *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (2001), Pease and Wiegman’s *The Futures of American Studies* (2002), and Davidson and Hatcher’s *No More Separate Spheres!* (2002). If this stream of publications is an indication of an inclination within the discipline to anticipate changing conditions, it at the same time seems to reveal a powerful normative commitment to the new and, thus, an increasing resistance to everything that violates this norm of institutionalized change.
- <sup>4</sup> Although there are some overlaps, my approach differs considerably from that of the so-called neofunctionalist school in American sociology, which has tried to rehabilitate Parsonian functional analysis by incorporating some of the critiques (Alexander 1985, 1998).
- <sup>5</sup> Terry Eagleton’s assertion that Victorian novels were “admirably well-fitted” to keep the underclasses at bay may appear as the epitome of absurd reductionism but, as I will argue in the following chapters, comparable claims have been put forward about the rise of American literary history (1996: 22).
- <sup>6</sup> Luhmann’s *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (1995) was translated in 2000 by Eva Knodt as *Art as a Social System*. I should note that, contrary to some of his followers, Luhmann has generally avoided addressing specific generic or spatio-temporal divisions of art as a functional domain (exceptions are Luhmann 2001 and Fuchs and Luhmann 2001). By conceptualizing art as a global system, he attempted to go beyond inherited distinctions and valuations. In spite of this ambitious design, Luhmann’s analyses revealed his dependence on established categories and mostly European standards and canons. Instead of categorically denying the validity of institutionalized concepts and distinctions, therefore, I think it is more fruitful to acknowledge their potential to shape reality.

- <sup>7</sup> Examples are Massieu's *Histoire de la poésie française* (1739), Tiraboschi's *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1772-95), and Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1780). To be sure, it is possible to point out earlier attestations of national tradition formation, such as Fauchet's *Receuil de l'origine de la langue et poesie françoise, rymes et romans* (1581), or Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), but it seems to me that here the study of a nation's literary exploits remains largely undifferentiated from rulebooks for poets or studies in rhetoric. At least in Europe, the rise of literary history as distinct from poetics seems inseparable from the rise of nations, which generated growing insecurity about the universal validity of classical standards.
- <sup>8</sup> Something similar goes for Tocqueville's 1835 statement that "[t]he inhabitants of the United States have then, at present, properly speaking, no literature" (quoted in Sampson and Churchill 1970: 779). Compare this to Lord Durham's assertion that the French Canadians were a people "without a history and without literature," which indirectly called into existence a body of writings that served to prove him wrong (for a discussion, see Cambron 2001).
- <sup>9</sup> For some of the early debates on national literature and culture, see in particular Jones (1966), Miller (1956b), and Spencer (1957).
- <sup>10</sup> The idea of a "Nazareth of the Mind" not only suggests cultural scarcity, but also the promise of future salvation. In however modified shape, this semantics of inferiority and hope seems to have survived until today. Compare Griswold's utterance with Kenneth Rexroth's assertion, more than a century later, that the U.S. constitutes "a kind of rich, sanitary, educated Afghanistan" (1971: 130).
- <sup>11</sup> In his *Hand-Book of American Literature*, Joseph Gostwick sided with Griswold on the copyright issue. According to Gostwick, English reviews could suddenly make American authors famous, who otherwise would have remained unnoticed in their home country. American literature had not yet developed native standards to determine the merits of its authors, and therefore it still lacked "a distinct national tone" (1856: xiii).
- <sup>12</sup> As Edward L. Widmer argues in his excellent study on the Young Americans, the heated polemics between Griswold and the Duyckincks clearly reveals "the fallacy of assuming ... that a 'conservative' American canon emerged in the nineteenth century without challenge" (Widmer 1999: 94).
- <sup>13</sup> After Sandys three representatives from New England were enlisted: William Vaughan, William Morell (author of the completely forgotten Latin poem *Nova Anglia*) and William Wood (*New Englands Prospect*). Contrary to the others, Sandys seems to have survived and is still often excerpted among the first American authors.
- <sup>14</sup> The qualification of a "Golden Age" of American literature would later be applied to the middle years of the nineteenth century (the so-called "classic" period of American literature), as in Perry Miller's anthology *The Golden Age of American Literature* (1959), which includes not just Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman (the authors that Matthiessen singled out in his *American Renaissance*), but Poe as well. Lewis Mumford's earlier characterization of this period as *The Golden Day* fuses the classical analogy with the daily periods: Emerson embodies "The Morning Star," Thoreau "The Dawn," Whitman stands for "High Noon," and Hawthorne and Melville represent "Twilight." Mumford further naturalized the hierarchy by means of orientational metaphors such as up/down: "If one explored the white summits of the glacier with Emerson, one might also fall into the abyss with Melville" (1933: 142).

- <sup>15</sup> Thus, Francis August March, a pioneer of English studies in America, tried to make this new scholarly field attractive by “reading Milton as if it were Homer” (1989: 26). Doing so would make the study of English amenable to philological scrutiny and set it apart from mere rhetoric, as practiced in the old college. As he put it, professors “can now make English as hard as Greek” (27).
- <sup>16</sup> For instance, in his *Short History of American Literature*, Walter C. Bronson claims that the value of colonial and revolutionary periods is mainly historical and that, therefore, they “should be passed over lightly or omitted altogether” when the class was not ready for it; only when the class is more advanced might some study be devoted to them, because they illuminate “the life and character of our forefathers” (1900: v-vi).
- <sup>17</sup> An envisioned third history on the period of the republic was aborted by the untimely death of the author.
- <sup>18</sup> The plantation metaphor remained fashionable until the 1920s, when the image of a “stream” or “current” became more effective to express the cultural independence of America versus Europe. Some random examples show the frequency of the plantation metaphor in the early textbooks. Bronson, for instance, defines American literature as “one branch of the greater English literature, a part of the life of a great race as well as of a great nation” (1910: 3). Around the same time, William P. Trent and Benjamin W. Wells bring out a three-volume anthology on *Colonial Prose and Poetry* (1901), the first volume of which is titled *The Transplanting of Culture, 1607-1650*. Some ten years later, William B. Cairns’s *History of American Literature* (1912) still defines literature in America as “an off-shoot from that of England” (1969: 1). In 1919, finally, Percy H. Boynton declares that “[i]n its beginnings American literature differs from the literature of most other nations; it was a transplanted thing” (1919: 1). Boynton adds that, apart from a few place-names, the Indians have contributed nothing to American literature, which is why it lacks the “primitive” stage of development characteristic of European literatures.
- <sup>19</sup> See Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs* (1985).
- <sup>20</sup> I use the 1891 popular edition, which joins the two volumes in one book.
- <sup>21</sup> If Stanley’s 1872 best-seller *How I Found Livingstone* never became a founding document of Central African literature, it nevertheless became a reference point against which African writers could assert their difference. See, in this regard, David Rubadiri’s “Stanley meets Mutesa” (1963).
- <sup>22</sup> Ever since its rediscovery during the fifteenth century and its reinterpretation for patriotic purposes by Konrad Celtis and others, Tacitus’s *Germania* has counted as a measure of the durability of the German (Germanic) cultural tradition (Fohrmann 1989: 70, 73).
- <sup>23</sup> Ironically, Richardson’s emphasis on the Hebraic roots of the Puritan Founders was inversely proportional to his receptiveness towards the culture of the quickly expanding community of mostly Russian Jews in the U.S. during the 1880s.
- <sup>24</sup> Significantly, the 1904 textbook version of the history, which Wendell published with the help of Harvard colleague Chester Noyes Greenough, was titled *A History of Literature in America*.
- <sup>25</sup> Claudia Stokes misses this point when she characterizes Wendell as “an American version of Edmund Gosse” (2006: 176).

- <sup>26</sup> In a move that already foreshadows Norman Foerster's "factors" in American literary history, Hawthorne and Lemmon opted for what they saw as the most "natural" procedure to classify contemporary authors by assigning them to national periods or themes (e.g. the Civil War, the negro, the frontier). Emerson and Thoreau were grouped with Alcott, Fuller, and Channing under "Religious and Social Reformers." While Hawthorne (Julian's father) remained *hors concours*, Whitman was ranked with Harte, Miller, and James among the "Innovators."
- <sup>27</sup> Apparently, Matthews did not regard (Anglo-)Indian literature as a separate division of the English tradition. The reason may have been that India, perhaps more than the other (former) colonies, presented a twin society with persistent indigenous traditions.
- <sup>28</sup> Stokes interprets Matthews's opposition between living and dead literatures as a defense of Native American traditions (2006: 47). I see little indication of this in the text.
- <sup>29</sup> As Elizabeth Renker argues, the fluidity of the boundaries between secondary- and college-level courses and course textbooks was itself indicative of the precarious institutional status of American literature at the time (2007: 59). Most of the students in college courses on American literature were expected to become high school teachers.
- <sup>30</sup> The story, as Baym paraphrases it, goes like this: After facing numerous initial obstacles (no national language, no "primitive" stage, the unliterary character of the early colonists) American literature finally flourishes in nineteenth century New England, which for various reasons is more disposed towards serious literature than the other regions. The figureheads of the new literature are the Cambridge and Concord authors, the descendants of the seventeenth century Puritans, whose values they express but without falling into the religious dogmatism of their forebears. Once the repressive theology was stripped away, the Puritan values became paradigmatic for American culture as a whole.
- <sup>31</sup> Baym's perspective can be compared to that of early anthropologists trying to make sense of primitive cults by loading them with solidarity-enhancing functions. These anthropologists claimed that clan members performing a rain dance manage to trick themselves into believing that in so doing they propitiate the gods, when in fact they are reasserting the tribal hierarchy. The problem with this view is that it explains rites in terms of their (supposed) psychological effects, about which very little can be known. Does a rain dance really fortify the group? And, provided that this is the case, how can we know for certain whether the tribe members are unaware of this function?
- <sup>32</sup> As examples of American invented traditions Hobsbawm enlists public rituals such as the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, or the greeting of the flag in class, all of which were established towards the end of the nineteenth century.
- <sup>33</sup> George Woodberry, for instance, argued that American literature was still, and would remain for some time to come, an inadequate expression of the entire nation: "Our literature is rightly described as a sectional product, in a stage lying beyond its original colonial condition, it is true, but not advanced to national unity; and here again it reflects the fact that our political union preceded that community of mental and moral culture, of ideas, beliefs, purposes, of deep decisions and fundamental agreements, which is still in relation to the whole country, partial and approximate only" (1903: 207).

- <sup>34</sup> Even those who embrace a form of “provincialism” seem to do this in reaction to (narrower forms of) provincialism. See in this regard Josiah Royce’s “wholesome provincialism” (discussed in Sollors 1986: 179-181), or also, Allen Tate’s “New Provincialism” (1999).
- <sup>35</sup> In *The American Adam*, for instance, R. W. B. Lewis states: “We have not yet produced a Virgil, not even Walt Whitman being adequate to that function” (1955: 4).
- <sup>36</sup> “If Dickens were dead, one could write his biography (...) Unluckily Dickens is still alive and refutes the biographies written about him.” [All translations from the French are mine.] Taine discusses six contemporary authors (Dickens, Thackeray, Macaulay, Carlyle, Mill, and Tennyson) as “spécimens” of a literary tradition that he regards as still too close to be described in full (i).
- <sup>37</sup> This may explain the “intellectual alcoholism” that Ankersmit associates with postmodernism: “the most recent book or article on a particular topic always pretends to be the very last intellectual drink” (1989: 138).
- <sup>38</sup> “A new book can only justify its publication by offering something new.”
- <sup>39</sup> “The shared desire of the two authors has been to react against this excess, to which we have grown so accustomed that it has inscribed itself into our very optic.”
- <sup>40</sup> “We know the living less well than the dead.”
- <sup>41</sup> Gosse’s series also included histories of Ancient Greek, French, Modern English, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Russian, Sanskrit, Chinese, Arabic, Hungarian, Latin, German, and Hebrew literature.
- <sup>42</sup> The second edition (1904) of his history (as well as in the 1905 textbook edition) includes an additional chapter on the post-Civil War period, which indicates an even greater “indulgence” towards the new.
- <sup>43</sup> Saintsbury consistently downplays the formative influence of French literature on that of England: “What has already been said must be repeated, that ... the foreigners had little, or practically no, literature to offer as an example to England” (41). Moreover, whereas the prosody of the Romance languages showed a tendency toward “slurring,” English prosody was rather close to that of Latin by virtue of an innate propensity in Anglo-Saxon to stress the difference between heavy and light syllables (46-7).
- <sup>44</sup> Initially, Trent envisioned a two-volume history, but the extensive bibliographies (about half of the total pages) made this impossible. Ward and Waller’s history, which played a key role in the institutionalization of English as an earnest scholarly field, was in its turn inspired by the highly successful Cambridge histories of the ancient world. This clearly shows that the new paradigm of living literatures derived part of its legitimacy from the classical model with which it had to compete.
- <sup>45</sup> I should note that Ward and Waller equally started from a rather broad conception of literature. Moreover, the history is not totally impervious to contemporary works either, especially when it comes to writings produced in the English colonies or countries under English dominion. The chapter on “English-Canadian Literature” in the fourteenth volume (by Pelham Edgar), for example, begins as follows: “By the scheme of this History the writer is constrained to confine his investigation to the ranks of the illustrious dead. Now, whereas a moderately favourable case may be made out for our current literature, our dead are neither numerous enough, nor sufficiently illustrious to stimulate more than local enthusiasm, and our few early writers of distinction inevitably suffer in a discussion that fails to link them with their living descendants” (1961: 343). In the third edition of Sampson’s 1941 epitome,

however, these reservations are replaced by the assertion that the existence of the English literature of Canada “must be accepted as a fact” (1970: 744). This third edition also includes additional chapters by R. C. Churchill on American literature, which did not figure in Ward and Waller’s history, as well as on the literature of “the English-speaking world” (1970).

<sup>46</sup> Thus, Brander Matthews’s literary work was included even though he was involved as a contributor. The same goes for the popular author Mary Austin.

<sup>47</sup> Winship was the only contributor officially affiliated to Harvard, but Sherman, More, Foerster and Parrington had graduated there.

<sup>48</sup> Thus, Richardson’s literary history is laconically described as “the American Victorian Age, before and after,” while Wendell’s counts as nothing more than “a history of the birth, the renaissance of New England” (1917: ix).

<sup>49</sup> For example, George H. Putnam got a Litt.D. (i.e. Litterarum Doctor, or doctor of literature) from Columbia for his achievements as publisher and author, although he never even obtained a college degree (Zarobila 1999: 5). He contributed the chapter on Irving (his father, George Palmer, had been Irving’s publisher and friend).

<sup>50</sup> The *American National Biography* notes that Trent could have become “a truly distinguished Southern historian” had he not abandoned that field too early, and “a more permanently influential critic” if the academy at the time had not been so unresponsive to incipient changes (Gale 1999: 821).

<sup>51</sup> Women were clearly not yet in the picture. This also appears from the constitution of the *Cambridge History*, which counts but five women contributors: Ruth Putnam (George Haven’s sister), Mary Austin, Louise Pound from Nebraska (who was to become the first female president of the Modern Language Association), and Cook from Columbia. Only Thorndike contributed an actual *belles-lettres* chapter (on James Russell Lowell).

<sup>52</sup> In the introduction to the work, Sherman underlines his allegiance to the new humanist cause and his opposition to the fashionable “naturalistic philosophy,” or the idea of that one can make “one’s truth as one needs it” (1963: 1310). Indirectly, Sherman may have turned to contemporary culture under the guidance of French critics like Sainte-Beuve and Anatole France. See, also, Jules Lemaître’s *Contemporains* (1886-1918).

<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that, at this time, in Germany the philological method was also under fire, as appears from the rise of the so-called “Geistesgeschichte,” which once again emphasized the link between literature and “Erlebnis” (as in Dilthey 1906). So, Erskine’s charge of the “Germanization” of American higher learning had little or no connection with the ways in which literary scholarship was conducted in contemporary Germany.

<sup>54</sup> At this time, the critical controversy over the status of Howells was by no means settled. A few years before, Hamlin Garland published an article in the *North American Review* on “Sanity in Fiction” in which he took pains to prove that Howells was “as sane as Whitman” (1961: 95). Given Whitman’s own institutional trajectory, this comparison is particularly telling. In recent debates, this talk about sanity in fiction seems to persist but the valuation order has been inverted. For instance, in her 2005 presidential address to the American Studies Association, Shelley Fisher Fishkin expresses her dismay at the “sanitized version of American literature” projected by established publishing houses like Oxford (2005: 18).

- <sup>55</sup> This hypothesis can be supported by the fact that the drama has been progressively filtered out of American literary history. Whereas Trent's *Cambridge History* still devotes considerable attention to the evolution of the genre from the early national period up to the 1910s, the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* has but a single chapter on the drama, written by Ruby Cohn. At the beginning of his chapter, Cohn remarks that "it is a virtual miracle that American drama merits admission to a history of American *literature*" (Elliot 1988: 1101).
- <sup>56</sup> After his retirement from Harvard in 1912, Santayana returned to Europe for good.
- <sup>57</sup> For the 1922 abridged edition, Van Doren wrote a new chapter exclusively devoted to Melville. On the recovery of Melville during the 1920s and after, see Lauter's "Melville Climbs the Canon" (1994).
- <sup>58</sup> A similar duplicity seems to characterize John Macy's *Spirit of American Literature*, which equally criticizes the professors' excessive emphasis on "doubly dead worthies" (1913: vii). Yet, despite his originality as a critic, Macy's history has the outlook of a conventional textbook, a series of author chapters from Irving to Henry James. Among contemporary American authors Macy found but two writers of note (Wharton and Dreiser), although he did not find them important enough to discuss them in a separate chapter.
- <sup>59</sup> Compare this with F. O. Matthiessen's claim that an author like Theodore Dreiser got his inspiration, not from literary models, but "directly from life itself" (1951: 15).
- <sup>60</sup> Compare, for example, Spingarn's *Creative Criticism* (1917) with Babbitt's *On Being Creative* (1932).
- <sup>61</sup> See Sherman's *The Main Stream* (1927), a collection of (posthumously published) review essays originally published in the *New York Herald Tribune*.
- <sup>62</sup> Except perhaps for *Harper's*, all the established monthlies lost ground during the twenties. The first independent weekly devoted solely to books was the *Saturday Review of Literature*, edited by Henry Seidel Canby. See Ohmann (1996b) for an explanation of the rise of the magazines around the start of the twentieth century.
- <sup>63</sup> As Radway states, new magazines like *Cosmopolitan* or *McClure's* "implied by their practices that knowledge was evolving, that the new was always better than the old, and that the expert was more authoritative than either the amateur dabbler or the generalist" (2004: 225). For a more extensive account of the rise of middlebrow culture in general, see Radway (1997).
- <sup>64</sup> In 1927 the anonymous pamphlet "Has America a Literary Dictatorship?" appeared in the *Bookman* (a forum of the New Humanists), which was very likely written by Foerster. The article argues that after Sherman's death there was nobody left in America to promote free critical inquiry. The few who could make themselves heard, had "sold out" (the author aimed at Henry Seidel Canby in particular) (1927: 191).
- <sup>65</sup> The Book-of-the-Month Club, the first of its kind, was founded in 1926 by the visionary marketeer Harry Sherman. In the following years, several clubs would copy Sherman's successful formula, like The Literary Guild (headed by Carl Van Doren).
- <sup>66</sup> Obviously, some of these binaries go as far back as Aristotle's "prodesse aut delectare" and Horace's "dulce et utile" (see Compagnon 1998: 36).
- <sup>67</sup> For a similar case, see Young (2001). Young argues that Oprah's Book Club "has coalesced a national audience of women readers, highlighting the often hidden gender and racial dynamics of popular literary culture" (186).



- <sup>68</sup> As Farr puts it: “I know of English PhDs (and one former university president) who claim they won’t read a novel that is fewer than 100 years old. Contemporary (even modernist) novels haven’t yet stood ‘the test of time.’ To my mind, this is ivory tower elitism at its worst, not only avoiding real life and civic engagement but also misreading the history of the novel, a genre that has always claimed a social function” (2005: 62).
- <sup>69</sup> In fact, the period divisions that Pattee suggested were quite conventional. He distinguished between the “Colonial period” (or the “seed time” from 1790 up to 1830), the “era of New England,” and that of the “new America” after the Civil War (18-9).
- <sup>70</sup> The authors of the other case studies were Jay B. Hubbell (“The Frontier”), Howard Mumford Jones (“The European Background”), Kenneth Murdock (“The Puritan Tradition”), and Paul Kaufman (“The Romantic Movement”).
- <sup>71</sup> Van Doren ranked the realists among the “later” novelists, although he did note a “little renaissance” during the eighties (Trent 1921: 85).
- <sup>72</sup> Perhaps tellingly, Clark did not mention the *Cambridge History*, which Schlesinger described as “admirable and encyclopedic” (171).
- <sup>73</sup> For example, Clark discusses three poems by Freneau in relation to their political, social and philosophical backgrounds as well as the wider pattern of Gothic art in order to show how the background adds to the significance of the poems. Unlike the later New Critics, he seems less interested in textual constraints.
- <sup>74</sup> A revised edition of Lewisohn’s history was published in 1939 as *The Story of American Literature*.
- <sup>75</sup> James’s cosmopolitanism is thus read as a form of parochialism. That Blankenship’s environmental perspective was not wholly consistent also appears from the preface to the 1949 revised edition, which applauds the recent James revival as “a belated but wholly laudable atonement for decades of critical and popular neglect.”
- <sup>76</sup> Lewisohn’s psychoanalytic perspective did not direct him toward D. H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1924), whose creative work he dismissed as “pornography” (158). This moralism caused him troubles when dealing with such authors as Whitman, whom he could not help but regard as “a very dreadful person indeed” (202).
- <sup>77</sup> It should be noted that, four years before, Lewis had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize (which he refused to accept). So, at least in the U.S. his fame was already firmly established.
- <sup>78</sup> In an absorptive age like the present, this problem may appear particularly pressing. Thus, in a review of Elliott’s *Columbia Literary History of the United States* for the *New York Times*, Robert Adams noticed how the work “makes desperate if doomed efforts to catch up with a ‘present’ that disappears as fast as the proverbial light inside the refrigerator door” (1988: 6).
- <sup>79</sup> Probably in reaction to such objections, and inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of minor literatures, Venuti has recently shifted his terminology from “foreignizing” to “minoritizing” translation strategies. However, this label displays similar problems. How “minor” does a text have to be to be recognized as such? Venuti seems to be aware of the problem when he says that “[a]ny translating can bring about unexpected cultural results” (1998b: 141). Yet, he fails to incorporate this insight into his conceptual apparatus. What mechanism, if not the translation itself, settles the institutionalized value of a translated text?

- <sup>80</sup> In principle, we also have to take into consideration strategies that domesticate the domestic, or those that foreignize the foreign. An example of the former would be the continual reinterpretation of canonical works according to changing academic thought styles. The latter strategy may apply to completely forgotten or excluded texts, i.e. works that are too foreign to be even called “foreign.”
- <sup>81</sup> Here, my perspective differs considerably from that of Tymoczko, who rejects the use of binary distinctions in translation studies, because they would be “ultimately problematic” (38). Instead, she sees more promise in cluster categories in the vein of Wittgenstein, but it remains unclear how this could be turned into a method.
- <sup>82</sup> As James Crawford has noted, the number of “minority” languages has increasing in proportion to the rate of anglicization of non-English immigrants (Crawford 1992: 236). The question is, of course, what constitutes a “minority” language. When does a language stop being “ethnic” and turn “foreign” (or vice versa)? It thus appears that the debate on language in the U.S. has to be framed in relation to the medium of culture, which symbolizes the paradoxical togetherness of foreignness and domesticity.
- <sup>83</sup> The desire to get a better life at the risk of betraying one’s community constitutes the central dilemma in most up-from-the-ghetto stories (Ferraro 1993).
- <sup>84</sup> To be sure, in tight communities there are usually several speech forms, from lofty to dialectal ones. But there is comparatively little interchange between these registers, so that there is no generalized *malaise* as to the status of the language as such. According to Melvyn Bragg, discussions about language “corruption” only became current in England from the seventeenth century onwards, with the proliferation of printing presses throughout the country and the rise of Grub Street (Bragg 2003: 204). Several observers expressed the fear that soon Chaucer and other literary masters would only be accessible in translation. All this must have motivated Samuel Johnson to write his *Dictionary*, which banished all (that Johnson thought of as) vulgar speech.
- <sup>85</sup> A classical example is Elio Antonio de Nebrija’s *Gramática sobre de la lengua castellana*, apparently the first grammar of a European vernacular, published the very year when Columbus landed in the Caribbean. What is less often noted is that, a couple of years earlier, Nebrija had already published a grammar of Latin, which shows that the upgrading of the vernaculars and the revaluation of the classics were paradoxically related (Hagège 2000: 20).
- <sup>86</sup> As Paul Roberts has phrased it, slang expressions “have their highest frequency in those districts where policemen would prefer to go in pairs” (1963: 158).
- <sup>87</sup> Barrère was a professor of French at an English university. Leland was a native of Philadelphia who had studied in Germany. He is especially known as the author of the once-popular *Breitmann Ballads*, which were (and sometimes still are) erroneously regarded as authentically German-American, while in fact they are a parody of the life and ways of this immigrant group. Apart from German-American, Leland had also studied the languages of the gypsies in Britain (he even discovered a secret language of the Irish tinkers called Shelta), as well as Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Chinese (or pidgin English), which are both discussed in the *Dictionary*.
- <sup>88</sup> The American love of neologisms has been a recurrent theme in the semantics of language in the U.S. ever since John Pickering published what is supposed to be the first collection of Americanisms in 1816. The idea pops up as recently as 1993 in the ninth edition of Etienne and Simone Deak’s *Grand dictionnaire d’Américanismes*.

- <sup>89</sup> As promising examples of this kind of research, Messmer enlisted the research on multilingual literatures by the Harvard *Longfellow Institute*, the *ICLA Comparative Literary History* series, as well as two ambitious literary history projects then being completed at the University of Toronto: the *Oxford Comparative History of Latin American Literary Cultures* (edited by Valdés and Kadir), and the *Oxford Comparative History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe* (by Cornis-Pope and Neubauer).
- <sup>90</sup> Thus, Emerson was often compared to Aristotle, Melville to Sophocles, Lincoln to Caesar, Franklin to Socrates, and Jefferson to Plato (of which Margaret Fuller counted as an “unsexed” equivalent), and Boston constituted the Athens of America. Most of these classical analogies have gradually evaporated or have been ousted by other, more suitable ones (as when Cassius Clay renamed himself Mohammed Ali).
- <sup>91</sup> Thus, William Spengemann states that the history of American literature “is inseparable from the history of literature in English as a whole” (1985: 477). Christopher Clausen argues along similar lines that dividing literature written in English into separate national traditions serves to “balkanize forever a collective literary achievement and field of study that offers such extraordinary rewards to exploration as a multiethnic, multicultural whole” (1994: 71).
- <sup>92</sup> “But American speech is purer” [trans. mine].
- <sup>93</sup> (...) “which have to be learned like a new language.”
- <sup>94</sup> In the introduction to the revised edition of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* Harris characterizes Uncle Remus as “an old Negro who appears to be venerable enough to have lived during the period which he describes – who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery – and who has all the prejudices of caste and pride of family that were the natural results of the system” (1921: xvii).
- <sup>95</sup> In fact, Pattee does mention Harris in relation to Richard Malcolm Johnston, but only very briefly (Trent 1918: 389).
- <sup>96</sup> The pedagogical intent of the *Uncle Remus* tales appears from the fact that it is included in the chapter on “Books for Children” by Algernon Tassin, which concludes the second volume. Tassin stresses the “reverent kindness” of the “negro” servant (Trent 1918: 408).
- <sup>97</sup> Webster’s spelling reforms, such as the preference for the final “-er” rather than “-re” or the preference for “-or” rather than “-our” in unstressed syllables, have come to be accepted as distinguishing features of American English. On the divergence between British and American English, see John Hurt Fisher’s contribution to the *Cambridge History of the English Language* (2001).
- <sup>98</sup> In the introduction to *The Book of Negro Folklore*, Arna Bontemps clearly reacted against the Uncle Remus stereotype when he noted how most writings about the “lore of the Negro” were overpopulated with “favored house servants, trusting and trusted Aunties, Uncles, and Grannies” (1958: vii).
- <sup>99</sup> The case of Sealsfield is peculiar, since it was only posthumously revealed that he was not a native of Pennsylvania, but had been born Karl Postl in a part of the Austrian empire that is now the Czech Republic. However, the fact that he was thought to be an authentic German-American did not prevent Jonas Winchester from making a fortune on English translations of his works (Grünzweig 1997: 336-347). In spite of his American citizenship, therefore, Sealsfield counted as a continental author, so that American copyright laws did not protect him against piracy. Currently, it appears, Sealsfield is quite commonly classified as an Austrian writer (see, for instance, Sebald 1995).

- <sup>100</sup> No trace of Karl May though! To be sure, May did eventually visit the U.S., but he never went to the West (apparently out of fear that the sights would disappoint him). Neither did Cooper, for that matter, whose Western novels were for the most part inspired by the reports of Lewis and Clark.
- <sup>101</sup> Faust is mistaken when he claims that Schurz's highly popular *Reminiscences* "were first written in German" (586). In fact, Schurz wrote only the first volume in German, which dealt with his youth in Europe, while the other two (the third volume remained unfinished), covering his American life, were composed in English. Schurz, who soon after his arrival in the U.S. became fluent in English (purportedly by reading the *Philadelphia Ledger*), always defended the right of immigrants to retain their mother tongue. Moreover, he was convinced that certain things could better be expressed in German (the poetry or his youth), while others lent themselves more to English (his later public speeches), and therefore that knowledge of both languages posed a marked asset for the German-Americans. However, the bilingual nature of the work was soon undone when a family friend (Eleonora Kinnicutt) translated the first volume into English, while Schurz's daughter Agathe translated the second and third volumes into German (with the help of her sister Marianne and Mary Nolte). Faust's erroneous classification of *Lebenserinnerungen/Reminiscences* as a monolingual German text thus in a sense testifies of the resistance of literary history to its own "polyvocality." For a more detailed analysis of Schurz's memoirs, see Boyden (2005).
- <sup>102</sup> Schurz also pops up in Paul Monroe's chapter on "Education," where he is briefly discussed with fellow immigrants Jacob Riis, Edward E. Steiner, Mary Antin, Abraham M. Rihbany, and M. E. Ravage. Monroe thought that no other group of writers of educational literature possessed "anything like their charm, originality, or significance" (1921: 421). It should be clear, however, that in this context the "significance" of these writings did not reside primarily in their literary qualities, as was the case for example with Franklin's *Autobiography*, or their contribution to the American tradition, but rather had to do with the fact that they were powerful instruments for the Americanization of the immigrant. Here, again, the *Cambridge History* applies double standards when it comes to the literary value of non-literary writings.
- <sup>103</sup> The idea that language was related to democracy was by no means new. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* Jefferson already linked the oratorical skills of the Indians to the republican ideals that he envisioned for the U.S. (Gray 1999: 106).
- <sup>104</sup> Here, Austin squarely contradicts Alphonso Smith, who in the second volume of the *Cambridge History* argued that the evidence was "overwhelmingly in favor of an African origin" of the Uncle Remus tales (1918: 358).
- <sup>105</sup> The Amerind orators as Austin typifies them would have possessed the same rhetorical (or rather anti-rhetorical) skills which Nathaniel Wright Stephenson in another context associates with Lincoln's speeches: "a wonderful blend of simplicity, directness, candour, joined with a clearness beyond praise, and a delightful cadence" (1921: 378).
- <sup>106</sup> I use the second printing, published in 1949. The pagination is continuous.
- <sup>107</sup> Interestingly, the publisher reproduces the conditional clause "if man is to escape self-destruction" on the back cover but without the qualification "self," as if to absolve academia from any direct complicity in world events.

- <sup>108</sup> Spiller's objective in pointing out the dinner party as the immediate cause of the *Literary History* may have been to contrast its old-boys' atmosphere to the antagonistic climate in the American Literature Group, which eventually made the editors decide to go independent.
- <sup>109</sup> Other public intellectuals, like Edmund Wilson, Van Wyck Brooks, and T. S. Eliot had declined (Vanderbilt 1986: 458). Wilson and Brooks are explicitly acknowledged among the honorary group of critics in the preface.
- <sup>110</sup> Columbia and Princeton had five representatives, Harvard had four, and Yale six. Compare this to the morphology of the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), which has seven contributors from Harvard, five from UCLA, five from Berkeley, three from Princeton, and two from Columbia. This seems to reveal a marked gravitational shift to the West in matters of cultural and scholarly prestige.
- <sup>111</sup> The *Literary History's* turn away from language as a regulative concept for literary history may have proved an inspiration for other traditions where language posed a problem, either because there was no national language or because there were several. Mukherjee (1977), for instance, explicitly refers to the U.S. as a model for the construction of a (multilingual) literary history of India.
- <sup>112</sup> Spiller deepened this two-cycle theory in *The Cycle of American Literature*, which divides American literary history into the first and second "frontier" (1955). In a republication of this work, Spiller also hinted at the beginnings of a third cycle, which could be called "truly cosmopolitan" thanks to the contributions of Jewish and African American authors (1972: 229). Interestingly, the "Postscript" to the second edition (1953) of the *Literary History* (written by Spiller and Thorp) explicitly refers to the years following the Second World War as the "End of an Era." The third edition, though, again raises different expectations as it includes a further contribution by Ihab Hassan on the "new literature" beginning after 1945 (1963: 1412).
- <sup>113</sup> Spiller explained his theory design in more detail in his "Blueprint for American Literary History," a pamphlet later collected in *The Third Dimension*: "We need two histories of our literature, the one the literature of the new nation, the other that of the whole nation" (1965b: 28). Just as the literature of the "new nation" could not be approached as a part of English literature, Spiller thought, that of the "whole nation" could not be judged (and dismissed) on the basis of nineteenth century standards.
- <sup>114</sup> Hakluyt's *Divers Voyages touching the discovery of America* (1582) in particular was explicitly designed as a stimulus for the planting of an English colony on the American mainland, which was at the time for the most part in the hands of Spain. The classification of the *Voyages* as the first collection of "American" writings retrospectively turns this exhortation to the English crown into a prediction of the successful English settlement of North America.
- <sup>115</sup> In a further chapter of the *Literary History* on "The Battle of the Books," dealing with the critical controversies of the 1920s and 30s, Spiller described Mencken's *The American Language* as "a gigantic work of art" that had "given the American people their language as Emerson and Whitman gave them their literature by cutting the umbilical cord" (1145).
- <sup>116</sup> In the first edition of *The American Language* (1919) Mencken still insisted that "American" was to be regarded as a language distinct from English. In the fourth edition, however, he dropped his case for a separate American language, but only to assert that English had become "a kind of dialect of American," just as American had once been a dialect of English (1946: vi).

- <sup>117</sup> This association of Americanness with Elizabethanism has proved remarkably persistent. Thus, for instance, in his 1960 foreword to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Walker Evans comments on the “Elizabethan colors” of James Agee’s prose style (Agee 1975: x).
- <sup>118</sup> Note that, still very much in line with the melting pot ideology, Canby’s “Address” evoked Whitman’s romantic dream of an American “race of races” (xii).
- <sup>119</sup> When Sholom Aleichem and Mark Twain met late in life, the latter purportedly introduced himself as the “American Sholom Aleichem.” Paradoxically, this act of humbleness at the same time seems to have underscored the fact that “American” and “Jewish” literatures do not mingle.
- <sup>120</sup> The division of labor between the literary historian and the folklorist seems to follow the same logic as the differentiation between the literary historian and the critic that we observed in an earlier chapter, with that difference that here it is the literary historian who is on the side of the present (embodied by timeless masterpieces), while the folklorist is the one who is more concerned with the preservation of the past (in its precarious, oral shape).
- <sup>121</sup> According to Cowley, who contributed the chapter on Lincoln, Old Abe’s humorous language “ranged from the plainest of street vernacular to hoary and archaic Anglo-Saxon terms” (785).
- <sup>122</sup> In fact, Eliot was echoing an old refrain. See, for instance, Pattee: “In no other case in all history have there been two distinct literatures written in the same language” (1896: 4).
- <sup>123</sup> Taylor links the emergence of the modern notion of recognition to two changes in modern culture: the substitution of the idea of individual dignity for that of hierarchical honor, and the emergence of the new ideal of authenticity, which located the moral sense of right and wrong in the individual rather than in a God-given order (28-9).
- <sup>124</sup> I should stress that I am not using the concept of genealogy in a Foucauldian sense as an anti-science (1997: 10). In my view, the function of genealogies is not to reactivate local *savoirs* inscribed in the power hierarchies of science (although, of course, they can be made to serve that end). Rather, I conceive of genealogies as paradoxical configurations that drive communication along, quite irrespective of whether it is considered oppressive or liberating. Power is but one medium of communication, next to and apart from others. Even while denying its existence, Bellow is implicitly validating a Zulu tradition simply by initiating a theme and calling on further communication about it. From this perspective, therefore, there is no such thing as bad press.
- <sup>125</sup> Elizabeth Renker cites Jones’s statement as an indication of the fact that the excessive deference towards the British tradition even among the most active advocates of American literature “exacerbated the institutional identity that attached American literature to socially inferior populations” (35). While Renker’s argument about the gendered and racialized dimension of the curricular career of American literature is highly revealing, I would like to stress the limitations of such a causal explanation when it comes to explaining the systemic dynamic of American literary history. The internalized opposition to American literature study certainly served to marginalize African Americans and women by assigning them the low-prestige curriculum, but on a more implicit level it at the same time worked as a powerful institutional motivator. As a matter of fact, similar mechanisms can be observed at other times and in other national cultures. Thus, in Klinck’s 1965 *Literary History of Canada*,

Northrop Frye noted the “absence of a Shakespeare in Canada,” which he refused to regard as an unfavorable condition, since it kept open the promise of future greatness (1995: 218). While such a remark may work to exclude certain social groups, this exclusionist logic by no means exhausts its communicative function.

<sup>126</sup> This situation is by no means typical. In a 1991, a French senator critical of a proposed law on Corsican language education would have said: “Mais où sont vos Rimbaud?” (Where are your Rimbards?) (Jaffe 1999: 41).

<sup>127</sup> My choice of case studies may appear somewhat arbitrary and some readers may even find it sexist or ethnocentric, given that I hardly touch upon the efforts to broaden the American literature canon to accommodate minority voices since the 1960s. Why focus so much attention on Robert Lowell and not on, say, Elizabeth Bishop, whose reputation, contrary to that of Lowell, has continued to soar. Part of my aim, however, has been precisely to make sense of the inclusivist dynamic of American literary history by showing how it operates irrespective of the content of the canon. On that level, the following analyses do not reveal anything that cannot also be read in standard reference works of American literature. The information value of this chapter, rather, resides in the way the inclusivist logic of the discipline is theorized in terms of the paradoxical operational dynamic of the discipline. As I hope to show, this dynamic is by no means peculiar to the more recent canon debates.

<sup>128</sup> Contrary to Merton, however, I am less intent on exposing the “dysfunctional” effects of priority disputes. If anything, Merton’s remarks about the “pathogenic” nature of the culture of science reveal his own commitment to a value system that expects you to get what you deserve (323). However commendable in itself, such a position may not result in a better understanding of the mode of operation of scientific reward systems, because it itself depends on historically defined standards of achievement. My aim, therefore, is not to get at a fair correlation between achievement and reward in American literary history, but rather to explain how institutions intervene in this process.

<sup>129</sup> Shumway stresses, though, that this interpretation rests on a (partial) misreading of Miller’s article. My aim here is not to correct such “misreadings” but to explain their function in the history of American literature.

<sup>130</sup> Miller not only linked Edwards with Emerson, but also with Melville, Twain, and even Dante and Milton.

<sup>131</sup> Miller even explicitly links his own position to Emerson’s: “I am as guilty as Emerson himself if I treat ideas as a self-contained rhetoric, forgetting that they are, as we are now discovering, weapons, the weapons of classes and interests, a masquerade of power relations” (198). By proving the contemporary – spiritual – importance of Transcendentalism, therefore, by showing that it has never been out of touch with American life despite its seeming irrelevance to modern-day social struggles, Miller also proves the relevance of his own academic position.

<sup>132</sup> That the connection between Edwards and Emerson was not an exceptional piece of news to Parrington appears from the fact that he already establishes a comparable connection between Roger Williams, whom he described as a “transcendental mystic,” and the Concord writers (1927a: 62).

<sup>133</sup> Bianchi was a niece of Dickinson who published a collection of her work as *The Single Hound* in 1914. Ten years later followed *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson*.

- <sup>134</sup> Oddly, Gailey only refers to Golding's 1984 article on American poetry anthologies in Robert von Hallberg's *Canons* and fails to mention his book-length study devoted to this topic, *From Outlaw To Classic: Canons in American Poetry*, which contains an entire chapter on the role of the New Critics in the constitution of an American poetry canon. In that chapter, Golding argues that only around 1950 American literature anthologies began to "move toward a 'depth' rather than 'breadth' model of representation" as propagated by the New Critics, which squarely contradicts Gailey's argument that this kind of model dominated anthologies before 1955 (1995: 112).
- <sup>135</sup> However, as Gailey notes, the most recent edition of the *Norton* (2003) still focuses almost entirely on Dickinson's epistolary relationship with T. W. Higginson and fails to include letters to or from her sister-in-law Susan.
- <sup>136</sup> See, in this regard, James Bennett's review of twelve critical anthologies published during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, all of which reveal a marked toleration of different critical theories, except for the New Criticism. As Bennett concludes, the New Critical precursors of postmodern literary theory "have been found lacking, yet indispensable to the new" (1992: 687).
- <sup>137</sup> See, however, R. W. Franklin's 1998 variorum edition of Dickinson's poems, which significantly revises the Johnsonian chronology.
- <sup>138</sup> Tate's conception of the "perfect literary situation" still had little or no connection with adequate historical contextualization. It seems clear, however, that Robert Spiller's two-cycle theory of American literary history was at least partly inspired by Tate's emphasis on the post-Civil War period as a crucial period of transition in U.S. history. If anything, this shows that the received opposition between (ahistorical) critics and (uncritical) literary historians is misleading.
- <sup>139</sup> Whether we agree with Tate's conception of tradition is of course another matter. For current observers, it is clear that the New Critics propagated a highly selective canon (in terms of categories such as race, sex, gender, etc.) that was almost exclusively modelled on the English metaphysical tradition (as they reconstructed it). But this is still a far cry from saying that they entirely ignored the historical specificity of literary texts.
- <sup>140</sup> Tate did not explicitly draw this connection between Dickinson and the New Critics in the 1932 essay. But the link is clearly implied in his later *Six American Poets from Emily Dickinson to the Present* (1969), which discusses Dickinson, Robinson, Moore, Aiken, Cummings, and Crane as precursors of the modernists (the chapter on Dickinson is by Dennis Donoghue).
- <sup>141</sup> Adrienne Rich's 1975 essay "Vesuvius At Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson" may have been instrumental in establishing this genealogy of women writers. Like Sewall, Rich argued that most biographies of Dickinson "have been condescending, clinical, or sentimental" (1979: 157). She differed with Sewall, however, as to the causes for this condescending attitude, which she associates with the "laws and taboos underpinning patriarchy" (183).
- <sup>142</sup> Racial minorities in the United States have similarly drawn attention to the paradoxical situation in which their literary productions are caught. Gwendolyn Brooks, for instance, once remarked that "[p]oets who happen also to be Negroes are twice-tried" (quoted in Ruland and Bradbury 1991: 402).
- <sup>143</sup> The chapter on Dickinson was almost entirely written by Sandra Gilbert, but since the authors put a lot of emphasis on their joint effort, I stick to their preferred form of address.



- <sup>144</sup> Ransom in particular draws attention to instances of “Gothic relief” in Dickinson’s poems dealing with death and immortality (90).
- <sup>145</sup> Gilbert presents a somewhat modified perspective in her essay “The American Sexual Politics of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.” Here, she argues that Whitman and Dickinson became the “father and mother” of American poetry by virtue of the fact that they wrote radically antipoetic poetry that subverted the sexual stereotypes of their times (1986: 128). In Whitman’s case (and that of his “descendants,” such as Stevens), however, this “not poetry” emerged from a covert or skewed identification with governing poetic modes, while, for Dickinson (as well as for female poets in her wake, especially H. D.), it entailed a further distancing from the conventions of poetry in the direction of quasi-narrative modes. It thus appears that, in Gilbert’s view, poetic productions by men and women are fundamentally different, because their psychosexual energies are channelled through different poetic genres.
- <sup>146</sup> In her *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers* Mary E. Galvin goes a step further than Gilbert and Gubar by arguing that Dickinson’s poetic mask enabled her to “evade the demands placed on her existence by the exigency of heterosexism” (1999: 20). In this way, Dickinson becomes the predecessor of a tradition of lesbian woman authors, including Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, H. D., and Djuna Barnes. Mina Loy was not actually a lesbian, but Galvin nevertheless counts her in because she “not only associated with lesbians and other queer modernists, but in her work she enacted a strong questioning of the heterosexist paradigm” (8).
- <sup>147</sup> In her contribution on Dickinson in Bercovitch’s *Cambridge History of American Literature*, Shira Wolosky claims that “the ideologies of selfhood which Whitman and Emerson might pursue are a priori different for Dickinson simply because of her gender” (Bercovitch 2004: 476). This categorical language (“a priori,” “simply”) suggests that, for Wolosky, Dickinson belongs by definition to a different literary class than her male contemporaries Emerson and Whitman in spite of all the continuities there may be.
- <sup>148</sup> Equally problematic for feminist critics intent on stressing Dickinson’s kinship to other women authors, may be Dickinson’s taste for Ik Marvell’s country books.
- <sup>149</sup> The decision to treat Dickinson and Lanier together, apart from the more obvious reasons (both were formal experimenters, both died young and received recognition only posthumously, etc.), seems to have been given in by the need to be equally representative toward the North and the South, which would confirm David Perkins’s claim about the important role of logical and aesthetic patterns in the making of literary taxonomies (1992: 82). *The American Tradition in Literature* followed the Spiller canon by grouping Dickinson with Lanier and Whitman in the first section of its second volume, entitled “Pioneers of a New Poetry” (later relabelled “New Voices in Poetry”). Ever since its first publication in 1956, however, the anthology has detracted from Lanier’s fame, while the space devoted to Dickinson has gradually expanded. The first three editions still contain seven selections by Lanier (including a prose piece), the fourth and the fifth only include four poems, and from the sixth edition onwards Lanier’s share has been reduced to three poems (he fares even less well in the shorter edition in one volume, which only retains “The Marches of Glynn”). The *Norton* and the *Heath* anthologies, which came onto the market somewhat later in 1979 and 1990 respectively, even entirely exclude Lanier from consideration. One consequence of this development seems to be that Dickinson’s regional identity is increasingly lost on contemporary students of American literature. For an extensive study of the “protocols” of the three two-volume anthologies mentioned above, see Olsson (2000).

- <sup>150</sup> This is not to say that the former interpretation, that of the backward-looking Dickinson, entirely disappeared off the stage (or, for that matter, that the two views are entirely incompatible). Thus, twenty years after Chase and Quinn, Marcus Cunliffe still assumes that nowhere but in New England could Dickinson's poetry have been "so uneven, so unfinished despite her genius" (1973: 188).
- <sup>151</sup> By reclassifying Dickinson in this way, Gelpi was at the same time implicitly commenting on the literary culture of his own time. In the fifties and sixties, Nietzsche's distinction between "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" forces came into fashion under the influence of Norman O. Brown, who applied the opposition in his *Life Against Death* (1959) to indicate the repressive character of modern Western society. More specifically in the field of literary scholarship, Glauco Cambon argued in 1962 that the post-war era signalled a retreat from "Apollonian intellectualism" in favor of a "Dionysian intensity of utterance," as appeared from the work of among others Brother Antoninus (1962: 36-7). By claiming Dickinson as an "Apollonian" poet, therefore, Gelpi indirectly attacked critics such as Cambon, who identified the "new" poetry explicitly with a complete departure from traditional verse forms (this may be why Cambon valued the work of, for example, Kinnell and Logan above that of Merwin and James Wright).
- <sup>152</sup> I by no means want to suggest that all recent interpretations of Dickinson tell the same story, but rather that there is a strong tendency to highlight Dickinson's status as a forerunner. Thus, in *Beneath the American Renaissance* David Reynolds argues against the predominant feminist viewpoint that Dickinson's "linguistic disruptiveness does not represent a rejection of male language systems but rather a full incorporation of these systems" (1988: 427-8). What Reynolds does share with the other critics, however, is the assumption that Dickinson's "progressive" use of language puts her at the beginning rather than the end of a literary genealogy.
- <sup>153</sup> Ransom uttered this remark in response to the publication of Johnson's variorum edition, which created the need for a more selective critical edition. In view of the number of Dickinson's poems included in recent anthologies of American literature – the latest *Norton Anthology of American Literature* includes 81 poems or about one twentieth of Dickinson's total output – Ransom's estimate was not so far from the mark.
- <sup>154</sup> It is not my intention to detract from Dickinson's undeniable originality as a poetess. Here, we are exclusively concerned with the inner dynamic of the semantics that gravitate around her comparatively small oeuvre. This discourse, I argue, is for a large part (but not exclusively) institutionally motivated.
- <sup>155</sup> Rosenthal's review "Poetry as Confession" first appeared in the *Nation* (September 19, 1959). References are to its republication in Price (1972).
- <sup>156</sup> In 1965 O'Hara voiced his dissatisfaction with Lowell's "confessional manner," which made that he could "get away with things that are really just plain bad but you're supposed to be interested because he's supposed to be so upset" (quoted in Lehman 1999: 346).
- <sup>157</sup> This was in line with Lowell's method of working in *Life Studies* which, as he stressed on several occasions, had to convey the illusion of transparency.
- <sup>158</sup> In *The Modern Poetic Sequence* (1983) Rosenthal and Sally Gall do include Snodgrass in a chapter on "The Confessional Mode," where he is discussed along with the Irish poet Austin Clarke.

- <sup>159</sup> Already during the early seventies, Altieri distinguished between “symbolic” (or modernist) and “immanentist” (or postmodernist) poetic styles, the former going back to Coleridge, the latter deriving from Wordsworth, with confessional poetry perched somewhere in between (1973: 614).
- <sup>160</sup> It should be stressed that what we are dealing with are poetic generations, which may or may not coincide with actual generations in the sense of people born around the same time. Thus, despite the fact that Charles Olson was older than Berryman and Lowell, literary historians usually observe a generation gap between these poets. Sexton and Plath, who chronologically speaking belong to the same generation as Robert Creeley, appear to be a generation older in literary historical terms, which may have to do with the fact that they died young. Maxine Kumin, who belongs to the same age group, is mostly grouped with the “new confessionals” (born in the thirties and forties).
- <sup>161</sup> The concept of a filter-explanation is inspired by Jon Elster (1990), who takes it from Nozick (1974).
- <sup>162</sup> But already in *The Shaping Spirit*, published four years earlier (even before *Life Studies* came out), Alvarez referred to the work of Richard Eberhart, Lowell, and Roethke as “confessional poetry” (1958: 187). In this sense, Rosenthal has been wrongfully credited for coining the epithet “confessional” – unless, that is, we are dealing with multiple discoveries.
- <sup>163</sup> The same, for that matter, goes for the British critics. In the volume on American literature of the *New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, for instance, David Holbrook disagrees with Alvarez’s claim that the “confessional” poets did their best work “when the personal self goes under” (Ford 1988: 534). For Holbrook, the work of Lowell, Roethke, and Plath all too frequently degenerated into “sensational journalism,” which in his opinion pointed to a typically “modern weakness” (552).
- <sup>164</sup> As with most genealogies of twentieth century American poetry, Simpson placed Walt Whitman at the absolute beginning of the movement.
- <sup>165</sup> As the chief members of the “confessional” school, Bloom identified Sexton, Plath, the early Snodgrass, and the later Berryman.
- <sup>166</sup> Even more recently, Stephen Gould Axelrod (2003) has argued along similar lines that Lowell should not be regarded as a late modernist, but rather as an early postmodernist who left an indelible mark on later poets as John Ashbery.
- <sup>167</sup> Doreski states quite bluntly that Bloom, by assuming the existence of “confessional school” in American poetry, “has taken too seriously a superficial designation from the literary journalism of the early 1960s” (139). However, in his introduction to a collection of essays on John Berryman, Bloom noted that British critics like Alvarez “seem to like their American poets to be suicidal, mentally ill, and a touch unruly,” which rather seems to suggest that for him too the idea of such a “confessional school” was at least partly inadequate (1989: 1).
- <sup>168</sup> Here, probably, Doreski is implicitly referring to Bloom’s *Map of Misreading* (1975). Again, the strategy is to recycle established critical concepts and turn them against themselves.
- <sup>169</sup> This paradox equally undergirds Michael Thurston’s argument that “even the most confessional of postwar verse” reveals a dedication to public history (2000: 81). In reaction to earlier critics, Thurston proposes to read Lowell’s work “as political in a broadly Aristotelian sense” (84).

- <sup>170</sup> In the context of American literature, this is particularly clear in the recent reassessments of modernism, especially by African American and feminist scholars (Hoffman and Murphy 1992: 11). What is striking in this regard is, first, that a new renaissance never comes out of the blue but has to be pasted onto an existing one (this much is clear from the etymology of the word); and second, that cultural memory does not usually register more than two such renaissances, so that a re-count is necessary every time a new one comes along.
- <sup>171</sup> Clearly, I do not want to suggest that factual knowledge is entirely irrelevant for literary history, but rather that the *modus operandi* of social memory is different from that of everyday, communicative memory. In other words, societies and individuals have their own ways of confronting the past.
- <sup>172</sup> Others who may have had a hand in Lowell's "confessional" changeover are Randall Jarrell, Lowell's former roommate at Kenyon who advised him to abandon his early impersonal idiom, his long-time mentor Elisabeth Bishop (more about whom below), Allen Ginsberg, whose *Howl* appeared in 1956, and John Berryman, who started working on *77 Dream Songs* as early as 1955.
- <sup>173</sup> Perkins further mentions the influence of Larkin and Snodgrass on the Lowell of *Life Studies*.
- <sup>174</sup> Some pages back, the publication of *Life Studies* is cited as a crucial step in the turn towards greater poetic immediacy that was "widely imitated" (382). The next sentence then enumerates the poets more or less closely associated with the "confessional school," including (apart from Lowell) Roethke, Ginsberg, Berryman, Plath, Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Snodgrass, and Wakoski. Even though Perkins does not explicitly state that *Life Studies* initiated the "confessional" mode, the sequence of the sentences implicitly re-establishes Lowell's privileged position by suggesting that the poets mentioned in his wake have been regarded as his followers.
- <sup>175</sup> Even though he stresses Lowell's importance as the "originator of confessional poetry," von Hallberg traces its roots as far back as Sappho (Bercovitch 1996: 147).
- <sup>176</sup> It is a fact that Snodgrass always denied being a founding member of the "confessional school," which eventually may have backfired on him. But Lowell too, as we saw above, repeatedly stressed that his poetry was not merely confessional. If anything, Snodgrass should have benefited from his ambivalence toward the term "confessional," especially when it went out of fashion. Apparently, Lowell was more successful at negating being a "confessional" poet, which paradoxically made him the natural leader of the movement.
- <sup>177</sup> As has frequently been noted, most classifications are derived from extrinsic criteria rather than observed similarities between texts. In the case of the "confessional school," for instance, the fact that Plath, Sexton, and Snodgrass had participated in Lowell's creative writing classes at Boston University may have been a decisive factor in grouping them together. But it seldom happens that extrinsic criteria suffice to sanction a class. Here, literary criticism comes in to perceive deeper connections where at first, apparently, there were only haphazard or provisional affinities. This recursive sense making does not explain; it is the *explanandum*. Obviously, this is not to say that criticism is not a valuable activity in itself. But it is of comparatively little use when it comes to explaining the institutional career of an author or movement.
- <sup>178</sup> The fact that *Life Studies* appeared after eight years of silence further accentuates this sea change in Lowell's career.

- <sup>179</sup> Merton notes that several Nobel laureates “have sensed” this social function of the Matthew effect (448). But, on the whole, they too tend to focus on the individual dysfunctions rather than the social functions.
- <sup>180</sup> In spite of its perceived inadequacy, the label “confessional” is still used by literary historians to map out new terrains. For instance, Richard Gray identifies a school of “new confessionals” that has emerged after the deaths of Plath, Berryman, and Lowell, and which extends to the poets born after the Second World War. Interestingly, Gray distinguishes between those who, like Ai, Carol Frost, Yusef Komunyakaa, Naomi Shihab Nye and Elizabeth Spires, are very conscious of working in a specific tradition, and those, on the other hand, who still commit to “a poetry of the primal scream,” such as Sharon Olds, Olga Broumas, Kimiko Hahn, Li-Young Lee (Gray 2004: 599). So here, too, a divide emerges between “pure” confessionalism on the one hand and more crafted or less directly personal poetry on the other.
- <sup>181</sup> What has made Bishop’s reputation soar in recent years is therefore also what has constrained Lowell’s, in spite of all affinities between the two poets. It will be interesting to observe whether and how Travisano’s 2008 edition of the two poets’ correspondence will reactivate specific lineages.
- <sup>182</sup> Rowe’s own account has not remained impervious to suspicion. Thus, Paul Giles wonders whether Rowe’s argument “might not in itself constitute a more emollient form of American cultural imperialism” (2001: 137). Similarly, Harilaos Stecopoulos claims that, by supposedly opening the American canon to the “foreign literatures of color” affected by U.S. empire but marginalizing them in fact, “Rowe might well reinscribe the very imperialism he decries” (2002: 101).
- <sup>183</sup> Rowe defines the function of criticism as follows: “The ideological means by which a society refuses to accept responsibility for dominating and exploiting others must always be central to our cultural criticism, insofar as the ultimate aim of such criticism is an understanding that brings about cultural change” (166). Paradoxically, therefore, this “understanding” entails an acknowledgement of ignorance, of the ways in which everything is implicated in imperialism. The responsibility of the critic then no longer resides in propagating or defending the values of civilization, since nobody knows any longer what that is. Rather, the role of the critic lies in pointing out the (ir-)responsibility of those who are unaware of the fact that they are ignorant.
- <sup>184</sup> Clearly, this does not entail that an engaged perspective on American literature should be *a priori* trivial or meaningless. What I do want to question, however, is the assumption that there is no other alternative. Precisely this polarizing logic, I argue, precludes a balanced understanding of American literary history as an institution.
- <sup>185</sup> At the 1997 MLA Convention, both Hutcheon and Greenblatt participated in a panel specifically devoted to the topic of interventionist literary histories. Their positions briefly sketched here are the outcome of that discussion. A slightly reworked version of Hutcheon’s standpoint, together with a reprint of Greenblatt’s article, is included in Hutcheon and Valdés (2002).
- <sup>186</sup> I should stress that, in this context, the term “ignorance” does not necessarily entail a lack of knowledge on the part of the scholar. Instead, it has to be understood as a lack of communicative themes that indirectly urges on communication. In this sense, ignorance constitutes a necessary condition for an institution to establish itself.

- <sup>187</sup> Hutcheon claims that the appropriation of the national model by minorities is justified as long as it is done “in full awareness of its ideological limits” (1998: 406). Ironically, Hutcheon herself already partly undercuts this requirement of complete awareness, when she notes that the stubbornness of the national model only “came to [her] attention” when she was involved in two literary history projects that tried to develop alternative ways of charting cultural realities (408).
- <sup>188</sup> According to Greenblatt, the legitimacy of a global approach to literary history is evident from “the very substance of the objects we study” (2001: 59). In so doing, however, he merely repeats the “literature itself” argument that has provoked the discipline of literary history from the moment of its institutionalization in the academy.
- <sup>189</sup> Jürgen Habermas notes this paradox when discussing the possibility of a postnational democracy that goes beyond the traditional nation-state. Apparently, however, this does not prevent him from urging “den Söhnen, Töchtern und Enkeln eines barbarischen Nationalismus” (the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of a barbarian nationalism) to daydream about a more social and cosmopolitan Europe (1998: 156). For the contrary position, I refer the reader to Luhmann’s polemical article “Jenseits von Barbarei” (1999).
- <sup>190</sup> It should not surprise that the taboo on provincialism, which we discussed in chapter one, also structures the debate on postnationalism. Thus, Carolyn Porter argues that focusing on the history of the Americas as a whole rather than the U.S. alone may be a way of “overcoming the parochialism of traditional, and even not so traditional, American literary studies” (1994: 506). Similarly, Paul Gilroy’s theory of the “Black Atlantic” (1993) was designed in reaction to the exceptionalism of traditional African American studies. This, in turn, has led Houston J. Baker in his *Turning South Again* (2001) to fault Gilroy for his Britishly “provincial” approach to black popular song (discussed in Bone 2005). In *The New American Studies*, finally, John Carlos Rowe encourages Americanists to go beyond “an older exceptionalist model,” among other things by integrating foreign theories (2002: x). All this clearly reveals what Peter Carafiol has described as an “institutional addiction to ahistoricist narrative models” (1992: 545). As it appears, Carafiol’s own plea for an unpolemical post-Americanist approach only imperfectly kicks off the ahistoricist habit, as it partly copies the oppositional vocabulary of the dominant revisionist accounts.
- <sup>191</sup> In his article on “Nationalist Postnationalism,” Frederick Buell similarly warns against unfounded assertions about the fate of nationalism. He proposes to conceptualize globalization as a “sedimentary process,” that does not make nationalism go away but that does not leave it unchanged either (1998: 580). According to Rudolf Stichweh, the process of globalization by no means signifies the demise of the nation-state. On the contrary, it is to be expected that the number of nations will continue to increase along with the number of intergovernmental organizations (2000: 61-2). The economists Alesina and Spolaore have argued along similar lines that the internationalization of trade reduces the “costs” of political separatism (2003). In this sense, Robert Spiller’s 1935 assertion that literary history may be “the only field of endeavor today in which there is no danger of unemployment” may still hold true today (1965a: 21).

<sup>192</sup> To repeat, it is not my intention to suggest that the U.S. is free of oppression or that such problems should not be addressed in the academy (Elliott's argument for a multicultural aesthetics makes perfect sense from an ethical or educational point of view). The question I want to raise, however, is whether making strong pronouncements about the fate of American culture can really offer a structural solution. Declaring the nation to be postnational does not in itself give much information as to the larger dynamics of modern society. The differentiation of society generates new forms of exclusion on a global scale that can no longer sufficiently be explained in terms of a (mere) breach of national unity. That such assertions continue to be made in spite of this fact may suggest that they are themselves an effect of the institutional identity of American literary history, which reproduces itself by continually disappointing the expectations it puts out.

<sup>193</sup> A similar critique can be found in Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, where he says that because of affirmative action "it became hard to say when a person ever *stops* being disadvantaged" (2005: 161).

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