

*American literature:
a vanishing subject?*

Some fifty years after the political establishment of the United States, the concept of an American literature barely existed – an absence acknowledged with satisfaction in Sydney Smith’s famous question posed in 1820 in the *Edinburgh Review*: “Who in the four corners of the globe reads an American book?” The implied answer was no one. Another twenty years would pass before this question was seriously reopened, along with the more fundamental question that lay behind it: whether a provincial democracy that had inherited its language and institutions from the motherland did or should have a literature of its own. Visiting in 1831, Tocqueville could still remark on “the small num-

ber of men in the United States who are engaged in the composition of literary works,” and he added justifiably that most of these are “English in substance and still more so in form.”¹

Yet in every settled region of the new nation voices were raised to make the case that a distinctive national literature was desirable and, indeed, essential to the prospects of American civilization. Literary production and learning were conceived as an antidote to, or at least a moderating influence on, the utilitarian values of a young society where, as Jefferson put the matter in 1825, “the first object . . . is bread and covering.” By 1837, the most notable of the many calls for literary nationalism, Emerson’s Phi Beta Kappa oration at Harvard, with its famous charge that “we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe,” was already a stock statement. By 1850, when Herman Melville weighed in against “literary flunkeyism toward England,” the complaint was a hackneyed one.

During this first phase of national self-consciousness, there arose a corollary critique of those few New World writers, such as Washington Irving,

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1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (New York: Vintage, 1990), 55–56.

who had achieved international recognition by copying Old World models – writers who, according to belligerent democrats like Walt Whitman, imitated authors who “had their birth in courts” and “smelled of princes’ favors.” These outbursts of nascent cultural pride tended to take the form of shouts and slurs (Whitman spoke sneeringly of “the copious dribble” of poets he deemed less genuinely American than himself) rather than reasoned debate. They were analogous to, and sometimes part of, the nasty quarrels between Democrats and Whigs in which the former accused the latter of being British-loving sycophants, and the latter accused the former of being demagogues and cheats.

Literary versions of these political disputes played themselves out in the pages of such journals as *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* and *The Literary World* (New York), *The Dial* and *The North American Review* (Boston), *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (first Washington, then New York), and *The Southern Literary Messenger* (Richmond) – magazines that sometimes attained high literary quality (in 1855, Thackeray called *Putnam’s* “much the best Mag. in the world”). Most contributors to these magazines had nothing to do with academic life, such as it was in the antebellum United States. The literary cadres to which they belonged developed first in Boston; slightly later in New York; and, more modestly, in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond, and Charleston. Only a very few writers or critics, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whom Harvard appointed to a professorship in 1834, maintained more than a tangential connection to any college. There were as yet no universities.²

2 Several mid-twentieth-century literary historians, notably William Charvat in *The Profession*

Then, as now, the chief business of literary journalism was the construction and destruction of individual reputations, though at stake throughout the nineteenth century were also more general claims about how and what American writers should be writing. The essays of William Dean Howells, for instance, published as columns in *The Atlantic* and *Harper’s* and later selected for his volume *Criticism and Fiction* (1892), amounted to a brief for what Howells called “realism,” as exemplified by his own fiction. Frank Norris (*The Responsibilities of the Novelist* [1903]) and Hamlin Garland (*Crumbling Idols* [1894]) proclaimed as universal the principles of whatever ‘school’ – “veritism” for Garland and “naturalism” for Norris – they were committed to at the time. Perhaps the only disinterested critic still worth reading from this period is John Jay Chapman (1862 – 1933), whose work belongs to the genre of the moral essay in the tradition of Hazlitt and Arnold.

But even such minor novelists as the Norwegian-born H. H. Boyesen (1848 – 1895) contributed occasional criticism that helped to enlarge the literary horizon. In Boyesen’s slight book of 1893, *Literary and Social Silhouettes*, for example,

of Authorship in America, 1800 – 1870 (a collection of essays written between 1937 and 1962), Perry Miller in *The Raven and the Whale* (1956), and Benjamin T. Spencer in *The Quest for Nationality* (1957), have sketched the emergence of the literary profession in these years as part of the larger construction of American nationalism in the age of territorial expansion. More recent scholars, such as James D. Wallace in *Early Cooper and his Audience* (1985) and Meredith McGill in *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834 – 1853* (2003), have deepened our understanding of the economic difficulties that writers without patronage, and without much protection by copyright law, had to overcome.

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he approved such now-forgotten writers as Edgar Fawcett and H. C. Bunner for portraying “the physiognomy of New York – the Bowery, Great Jones Street, and all the labyrinthine tangle of malodorous streets and lanes, inhabited by the tribes of Israel, the swarthy Italian, the wily Chinaman, and all the other alien hordes from all the corners of the earth.” Novelist-critics like Boyesen and James Gibbons Huneker (1860 – 1921), an advocate of impressionism in painting and music, were among many who tried, with a mixture of anxiety and approval, to come to terms with the impact of modernity on American life. Their critical writing, like their fiction, was more descriptive than prescriptive, more inquiring than inquisitorial – and therefore incipiently modern.

In short, forward-looking proponents of American literary ideals tended to be outside the academy. This has been so from the era dominated by the Duyckinck brothers, whose *Cyclopedia of American Literature* (1855) helped establish a canon of major writers, through E. C. Stedman’s *Poets of America* (1885), W. C. Brownell’s *American Prose Masters* (published in 1909 by Scribners, for whom Brownell served for forty years as literary advisor), and Alfred Kazin’s *On Native Grounds* (1942), a revelatory book by a young freelance book reviewer who, like his contemporary Irving Howe, did not take a permanent academic job until late in his career. The author who emerged in the twentieth century as the central figure of nineteenth-century American literature, Herman Melville, was championed mainly by critics working outside the academy, such as Lewis Mumford, Charles Olson, and, in Britain, D. H. Lawrence. And a good number of major twentieth-century critics – notably Edmund Wilson, whose *Patriotic Gore* (1962) did much to revise our un-

derstanding of Civil War literature – expressed frank hostility toward academics as hopelessly straitened and petty.

Probably the most significant body of American critical writing to date is that of a novelist, Henry James, in the prefaces to the New York edition (1907 – 1909) of his fiction as well as in his considerable body of literary journalism. “The Art of Fiction” (1888) – James’s riposte to the English critic Walter Besant’s prescriptive essay about the Do’s and Don’ts of fiction-writing – still has tonic power for young writers who feel hampered by prevailing norms and taste. And James’s 1879 study of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the first significant critical biography of an American writer, brings into view in a few pages the whole moral history of nineteenth-century American culture. In that remarkable book, we see how theological ideas were being displaced and how the artist-observer could take pleasure in witnessing their displacement:

It was a necessary condition for a man of Hawthorne’s stock that if his imagination should take licence to amuse itself, it should at least select this grim precinct of the Puritan morality for its play ground The old Puritan moral sense, the consciousness of sin and hell, of the fearful nature of our responsibilities and the savage character of our Taskmaster – these things had been lodged in the mind of a man of Fancy, whose fancy had straightway begun to take liberties and play tricks with them – to judge them (Heaven forgive him!) from the poetic and aesthetic point of view, the point of view of entertainment and irony. This absence of conviction makes the difference; but the difference is great.

The American-born T. S. Eliot once expressed the view that “the *only* critics worth reading were the critics who

practiced, and practiced well, the art of which they wrote” – a statement that has been almost universally true in America.

At the turn of the twentieth century, however, American writing was beginning to become a ‘field’ in the academic institutions that earlier practitioners had, by and large, avoided. As early as the 1880s, Dartmouth, Wellesley, and Brown were offering, at least sporadically, courses on American authors, though the subject remained dispensable enough that NYU, which ran an American literature course from 1885 to 1888, allowed it to fall into abeyance until 1914.³ The scholar who first installed the subject in one of the new research universities was Moses Coit Tyler, the child of Connecticut Congregationalists. While a professor at the University of Michigan, he wrote the first serious history of colonial American writing, *A History of American Literature, 1607 – 1765* (1878), based on close study of virtually all published primary texts. In 1881, Tyler moved to Cornell, where he assumed the first university chair devoted wholly to American literature and produced his *Literary History of the American Revolution* (1897).

It is worth noting that Tyler began teaching at a midwestern state university and concluded his career at the quasi-public Cornell, founded in 1865 with a combination of private benefactions and public subsidies. Older, more tradition-bound private institutions such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, all of which originated in the colonial period as seminaries allied with one or another Protestant denomination, em-

braced American writing as a plausible field of study more slowly. Once its legitimacy had been established, though, professors of American literature settled into defending the virtues of the (mainly New England) ancients against what Boyesen had called the “alien hordes.” In his *Literary History of America* (1900), Barrett Wendell, of Harvard, devoted virtually all of its first 450 pages to New England writers, followed by a closing chapter entitled “The Rest of the Story.” In a preface to his new anthology of American literature (1901), Brander Matthews, Columbia’s specialist in dramatic literature, followed Johann Gottfried Herder and Hippolyte Taine in insisting that a national literature must be understood as the expression of the “race-characteristics” of the people who produce it. Writing nearly ten years after the death of Walt Whitman, Matthews confidently declared that the United States had “not yet produced any poet even of the second rank.”⁴

With the consent of such figures as Wendell at Harvard and Matthews at Columbia, the subject of American literature became an instrument by which the sons of the Anglo-Saxon ‘race’ could get better acquainted with their heritage and, presumably, protect it from the interloping hordes who were threatening to debase it. Here was the literary equivalent of the ‘Teutonic germ theory’ of American history: the idea that democratic ideas and institutions had germinated in the German forests, from which restless tribes carried them to England, where they sprouted again (against the resistance of the Celtic ancestors of the modern Irish) and from which Puritan emigrants eventually transplanted them

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3 Kermit Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy: The Roots, Growth, and Maturity of a Profession* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 110.

4 Brander Matthews, “Suggestions for Teachers of American Literature,” *Educational Review* 21 (January – May 1901): 12.

to the New World.⁵ Seen as a branch of this kind of race thinking, the academic study of American literature arose, at least in part, as a defensive maneuver by Anglophile gentlemen who felt their country slipping out of their control into the hands of inferiors.

As a more miscellaneous blend of students began passing through the universities, these gentlemen hoped that the study of American literature could be a means of sweetening and enlightening them before they presented themselves for positions of power no longer reserved exclusively for the Brahmins. Some professors went further, claiming for themselves the moral authority once reserved for the clergy. Consider Irving Babbitt, who specialized at Harvard not in American but in French literature, and who became a public commentator on issues of the day by waging war in general-circulation magazines against what he considered the American tendency toward vulgarity and self-indulgence. Here, in a 1928 essay on H. L. Mencken, with a nod to Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt writes his own version of how Americans had fallen away from the moral realism of their forebears. James had told the tale as the story of Hawthorne liberating himself from the suppressive weight of his ancestors, but Babbitt tells it as a moral descent from self-knowledge into self-deception, as exemplified by Mencken:

If the Protestant Church is at present threatened with bankruptcy, it is not because it has produced an occasional Elmer Gantry. The true reproach it has incurred is that, in its drift toward modernism, it has lost its grip not merely on

certain dogmas but, simultaneously, on the facts of human nature. It has failed above all to carry over in some modern and critical form the truth of a dogma that unfortunately received much support from these facts – the dogma of original sin. At first sight Mr. Mencken would appear to have a conviction of evil... [but] the appearance... is deceptive. The Christian is conscious above all of the “old Adam” in himself: hence his humility. The effect of Mr. Mencken’s writing, on the other hand, is to produce pride rather than humility... [as he] conceived of himself as a sort of morose and sardonic divinity surveying from some superior altitude an immeasurable expanse of “boobs.”

Yet even as it served social ends, the study of American literature remained a secondary or even tertiary (after classics and English) part of the program for making boys into gentlemen. To read through the first scholarly history, *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917) – a book more encyclopedic than discriminating – is to be reminded, as Richard Poirier has remarked, that into the third decade of the twentieth century, American literature “was still up for grabs.”⁶ As classics departments continued to shrink and English departments to grow, even books by the New England worthies were still treated with condescension. As late as the 1950s, Harvard graduate students in English could propose American literature as a doctoral examination field only as a substitute for medieval literature, which was coming to seem arcane and archaic, even to traditionalists.

With the continued decline of philology and of Latin and Greek as college pre-

5 See Peter Novick, *The Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 87–88.

6 Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987), 19.

requisites in the 1930s and 1940s, the study of American literature finally attained a certain academic respectability. Yet the Harvard English department, which preserves in its name, “Department of English and American Literature and Language,” a trace of its origins in philological studies, did not add the phrase ‘and American’ until the 1970s. My own department at Columbia, the “Department of English and Comparative Literature,” to this day does not include in its official name the term ‘American’ – and, as far as I know, has no plans to add it.

Today, though some professors of American literature still feel outnumbered and even beleaguered, the field is populous. Since the founding of the American Literature Section of the Modern Language Association in 1921, the professional status of American literature has been secure, and members of the guild now designate themselves by the term ‘Americanist’ – a word that, like ‘orthopedist’ or ‘taxidermist,’ implies an arduously acquired training for a useful trade.

It is an unfortunate word for various reasons, not least because it obscures the fact that for many years after their subject achieved academic acceptance, Americanists were among the least professionalized of professors. Especially at a time when English departments still devoted themselves mostly to philological research and to the recovery of reliable texts, the field of American literary studies was something of a misfit. It attracted students with current political and cultural problems much on their minds and scholars who seemed unable to rid themselves of what detractors regarded as chronic presentism. For example, the immensely influential *Main Currents of American Thought* (1927–1930), by

V. L. Parrington, an English professor at the University of Washington, was an effort, as tendentious as it was ambitious, to trace the genealogy of democratic populism all the way back to dissident Puritans. Perry Miller’s great revisionary works on the Puritan mind, conceived in the 1930s partly in response to Parrington, ran parallel to the writings of such neo-Calvinist theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr, who retrieved from deep in the past an account of human psychology that might still serve as a competent description of contemporary reality as the horror of fascism engulfed Europe.

As American literary studies gained in prestige, it became apparent that its leading scholars did not trust, and were not to be trusted with, the ways and means of the English department. Many of the vanguard figures were openly and overtly concerned with the world outside the college gates. Some forged at least a tacit partnership with such historians as the senior Arthur M. Schlesinger, who, as early as 1922, had insisted in *New Viewpoints in American History* that no serious history could be written without attention to the experience of women and that “contrary to a widespread belief, even the people of the thirteen English colonies were a mixture of ethnic breeds.”⁷

Yet the originating figures of American literary studies have been described in recent years as narrow-minded men (until the 1970s and 1980s, they were almost all men) with retrograde minds occluded by the sexual and racial prejudices of their time. This is, at best, a caricature and, at worst, a slander. F. O. Matthiessen’s first published book was a

7 Arthur M. Schlesinger, *New Viewpoints in American History* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 3, 126–127.

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study of the fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett (1929). In *The New England Mind* (1939 – 1952), Miller showed, long before the ‘New Historicists,’ how close scrutiny of what most of his colleagues considered subliterate forms could reveal an alien culture. Constance Rourke, who never held an academic post but exerted formidable influence on academic literary studies, anticipated in her *American Humor* (1931) the ‘anthropological turn’ of forty years later by breaking down the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture and reveling in the mix.

American literary studies in these formative years was emphatically un- or even anti-academic. There was a natural affinity between professors interested in the history of their own literature – a short history, after all – and undergraduate writers who hoped to make a place for themselves in the literary histories of the future. Richard Wilbur, who was a Junior Fellow at Harvard in the 1940s, recalls that F. O. Matthiessen was always alert to “any stirrings of the creative spirit” in his students (he taught undergraduates almost exclusively) and made himself available to read manuscripts by the hopeful young poets and playwrights who passed through his courses.⁸ Lionel Trilling, though he never carried a portfolio as an Americanist, wrote extensively about American writers past and present – Fitzgerald, Twain, Dreiser, Hemingway, and Frost, among others – and took a special interest in his gifted and eccentric Columbia College student Allen Ginsberg. When Trilling’s colleague Mark Van Doren wrote his exuberant critical biography of Hawthorne in 1948, it was as if he had just heard the

8 Richard Wilbur in *F. O. Matthiessen (1902 – 1950): A Collective Portrait*, ed. Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), 145.

young Hawthorne reading in a college common room and had rushed away to report his discovery of a new talent.

Professionalization, of course, was inevitable. By the 1940s, New Criticism was the reigning orthodoxy in literary studies. Among Americanists, it was deployed to best effect in Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941) and in the books and essays of Newton Arvin, who spent his career at Smith College. The techniques of New Critical analysis revealed that at least a few American works had a density and complexity comparable to the most difficult, and therefore (according to the criteria of the New Criticism) most rewarding, modernist poems. Matthiessen made his case for Melville by setting Ahab’s speeches in verse and presenting them as every bit as intricate as the soliloquies of Hamlet or Lear. He brought to his writing the kind of formal scrupulosity associated with F. R. Leavis and William Empson in England, and along with fellow travelers Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks (who eventually converged at Yale), he inaugurated a tradition that continues today in the work of such adept close readers as Richard Poirier and William Pritchard.

Although Matthiessen and the best of his followers were never doctrinaire (fifty years after its publication, Daniel Aaron described *American Renaissance* as “fully cognizant of the social context” of its subject), the vogue of *explication de texte* threatened to become a formalist dogma.⁹ Matthiessen himself was never

9 Daniel Aaron, review of H. Lark Hall, *V. L. Parrington: Through the Avenue of Art in the New Republic*, September 5, 1994. By the early 1960s, one of Matthiessen’s successors at Harvard, Howard Mumford Jones, faulted Ralph Waldo Emerson for writing essays that amounted to “paragraphs on a string” and thereby failed the New Critical test of formal coherence. H. M.

narrowly a 'New Critic.' He was a man of the Left, who after the war was to write a naïve report, *From the Heart of Europe* (1948), about how impressed he was with life and spirit in the solidifying Soviet bloc. And in his preface to *American Renaissance*, he declared that what linked his five authors (Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman) was their "common devotion to the possibilities of democracy" – an odd assertion about Hawthorne, though one that helps explain the absence of Edgar Allan Poe from Matthiessen's book. By the 1950s, the turn inward away from politics was in full swing, and testing an author's literary significance by any political standard was coming to seem eccentric.

One dissenter from the aesthetic turn, Henry Nash Smith, who was among the first recipients of the Ph.D. from the Harvard Committee on the History of American Civilization – and whose dissertation became a remarkable book, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), a study of the frontier myth in pulp fiction, James Fenimore Cooper's novels, Wild West shows, and the writings of Jefferson and Twain – complained in 1957 that "the effect of the New Criticism in practice has been to establish an apparently impassable chasm between the facts of our existence in contemporary society and the values of art." Smith, who by then held a professorship in the Berkeley English department, lodged his objection not on behalf of a historicist understanding of

Jones, introduction to a new edition of W. C. Brownell, *American Prose Masters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), vii. This sort of opinion mongering in the guise of objective judgment was not a healthy development for the field.

the context in which works of the past had been produced, but on behalf of what would soon come to be known as 'relevance' to the present. Here was the keynote of the American studies movement, which flourished in the post-war years as an eclectic alternative to both English and history at a number of universities, including Pennsylvania, George Washington, and Case Western Reserve, as well as at Yale, Harvard, and Berkeley.

On many campuses, American studies seceded, in fact if not always in name, from the English department. American studies scholars sometimes clustered within English as a quasi-independent subdepartment or broke away into departments or programs of their own. They were impatient with the parochialism of what they regarded as Anglophile literary studies, but also, as Smith went on to suggest, with the empiricism of traditional historians: "We are no better off if we turn to the social sciences for help in seeing the culture as a whole. We merely find society without art instead of art without society."¹⁰ At its best, American studies was a hugely ambitious enterprise that aimed to lay bare the heart of "the culture as a whole" by exposing myths and metaphors that operate below the level of consciousness and by which, according to Smith's definition of culture, "subjective experience is organized." To these ends, it assumed a wide mandate, taking into its purview not just literary monuments but monuments of all kinds – there is a direct line from Lewis Mumford's *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* (1924) to Alan Trachtenberg's *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (1965).

10 Henry Nash Smith, "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?" *American Quarterly* 9 (Summer 1957): 203.

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Even in its more strictly literary manifestations, such as R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), the American studies method was to look through and beyond particular literary texts to find what Lewis called the "recurring pattern of images – ways of seeing and sensing experience" by which Americans apprehend meaning in their lives.¹¹ Leo Marx, in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), showed how writers such as Thoreau and Twain tried to chart a path between rapacious capitalism and radical utopianism – a *via media* that Marx described as a uniquely American version of pastoral. Smith's *Virgin Land* and Lewis's *The American Adam* disclosed a national dream of recovering a prelapsarian condition in which the world could begin anew – a dream painfully lost when the dreamer awakes.

The patterns that interested American studies scholars tended to be expressions of progressive hope, and it is perhaps a measure of their intense personal investment in the promise of America that a striking number of leading figures in the field fell into disappointment and even despair. Like Matthiessen, John William Ward, a leading member of the 'myth and symbol' school (who, during the Vietnam era, became an outspokenly antiwar president of Amherst College and later a political activist on behalf of public housing), died by suicide. Perry Miller hastened his own death at age fifty-eight

11 A cogent critique of the 'myth and symbol' school is Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 24 (4) (October 1972): 435–450. Kuklick doubts that we can apprehend anything so vague as 'popular consciousness' by elucidating the structure of artifacts, such as books or paintings, or even political events, such as speeches or elections.

by poisoning himself with alcohol a few weeks after the assassination of President Kennedy.

The range and imagination of these scholars were far-reaching, but their intellectual force was centripetal. They wanted to penetrate through a great variety of texts to some unitary core of *Americanness*. (They construed broadly the word 'text' long before the 'cultural studies' movement of the 1980s and 1990s discovered the semiotics of fashion, advertising, or sports.) The titles of their books commonly included what today's scholars would dismiss as 'totalizing' or 'reifying' phrases, like 'American character' (the subtitle of Constance Rourke's book on humor was "A Study of the National Character") or 'American mind,' as in Alan Heimert's *Religion and the American Mind* (1966) or Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1968).

Recently, their movement has come under sharp attack as a collection of insouciant dreamers – men who elided ethnic, racial, class, and gender differences and confused the fantasies of elites with the experiences of ordinary people. In a recent retrospective essay, Leo Marx, now in his eighties, vigorously defends the American studies movement as having always acknowledged discontinuities between America's claims to egalitarian democracy and the realities of life in a brutally competitive society, where equality of opportunity, much less equality of condition, has never been fully achieved. There was always, Marx insists, an emphasis on the 'unfinishedness' of American society as well as a sense that scholar-teachers could contribute to the tradition of "dissident social movements, including, for example, the transcendentalist, feminist, and abolitionist movements of the antebellum era; the populist movement of

the 1880s and 1890s; the pre-World War I progressive movement [of which Partridge's *Main Currents* was a belated expression], and . . . the left-labor, anti-fascist movements (and Cultural front) of the 1930s . . .” By and large, American studies scholars looked for inspiration not to the mainstream academy, but to what Marx calls an “uncategorizable cohort” of “deviant professors, independent scholars, public intellectuals, and wide-ranging journalists and poets” – among them, Constance Rourke, Thorstein Veblen, Alexis de Tocqueville, D. H. Lawrence, and W. E. B. Du Bois.¹²

Amid the enormous upheaval of the 1960s to which Steven Marcus alludes in his overview essay in the present issue of *Dædalus*, American literary studies, like virtually every other activity in America's universities, was profoundly transformed. A series of traumatic assassinations (John Kennedy, Medger Evers, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X) and the spiraling disaster of the Vietnam War inevitably darkened the myths and symbols that drew Americanists. The individualist frontiersman of Smith and Lewis became the marauding Indian-killer of Richard Slotkin in his *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600 – 1860* (1973) – a book that read the Vietnam War back into the nineteenth-century Indian wars. Henry Nash Smith issued a *mea culpa* in a late essay (1986) in which he wrote that when he had composed *Virgin Land* as a young man, he had been under the spell of Frederick Jackson Turner and had already “lost the capacity for facing up to the tragic dimensions of the Westward Move-

12 Leo Marx, “Believing in America,” *Boston Review* 28 (6) (December 2003 – January 2004): 28 – 31.

ment.”¹³ By the 1970s, Perry Miller's protoexistentialist Puritans, who had struggled to preserve their Calvinist piety in the face of Arminian rationalism, were giving way to Sacvan Bercovitch's Puritans in his *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1978) – millenarian crusaders who proclaimed themselves a chosen people charged by God to seize the “wilderness” from the heathens and erect in it a New Jerusalem.

A leader of what might be called second-wave American studies, Bercovitch tried to come to terms with the first wave by dissociating himself from the “tribal totem feast” at which a new generation of scholars was feeding on Miller's corpus. In 1986, having moved from Columbia to Harvard, he dedicated to Miller and Matthiessen an edited collection of essays by a number of younger scholars whom Frederick Crews, in an unfriendly essay-review, grouped under the rubric “New Americanists.”¹⁴ But reconciliation was elusive. The New Americanists accused Matthiessen of “silencing dissenting political opinions,”¹⁵ by which they seemed to mean that he had been locked into a binary

13 Henry Nash Smith, “Symbol and Idea in Virgin Land,” in Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 28.

14 Sacvan Bercovitch, ed., *Reconstructing American Literary History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986). Crews coined the term in “Whose American Renaissance?” *New York Review of Books*, October 27, 1988, and carried his critique further in “The New Americanists,” *New York Review of Books*, September 24, 1992.

15 Donald Pease, “Moby-Dick and the Cold War,” in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed., Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pease (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 119.

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view of the world that pitted American individualism (of which Whitman's poetry and the free consciousness of Melville's Ishmael were his prime examples) against repressive totalitarianism (as exemplified in Captain Ahab). Bercovitch himself made a potent argument, similar to that of Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), that America lacked any political alternative to a property-oriented, individualist liberalism. His implication was that Americans were peculiarly impoverished in the realm of political ideas, and were condemned, by their inheritance from the millenarian Protestantism of the Puritan founders, to live with the illusion that the American Way is God's Way.

For the generation of New Americanists who followed Bercovitch, the failure of earlier critics such as Matthiessen (who was often dubbed a 'cold-war intellectual' even though he did his major work before the United States entered World War II) was in having erased "potentially disruptive political opinions" from what amounted to a sanitized account of American culture. Matthiessen and his ilk had left conflict out of the story – or so the charge went. As Crews put it, the New Americanists repudiated their predecessors as "timidly moralizing" scholars in thrall to a "genially democratic idea of the American dream and its gradual fulfillment in history."¹⁶

The patricidal assault took place on two fronts: by trying to show how the major (according to Matthiessen & Co.) works of American literature obscured the oppression of racial minorities as well as America's history of imperialist expansion, and by recovering from the putative prejudice of the Matthiessen school what Crews called "an ethnic-

16 Crews, "New Americanists," 32 – 34.

and gender-based anticanon" – literary works by racial minorities and women, who had been ignored and who revealed in their writing that the American dream had always been an American nightmare.

By the late 1990s, the heat of the polemics was subsiding, and the New Americanists were starting to sound old. They fought with their predecessors, after all, mainly over texts whose significance both parties assumed. After the sound and fury of the 1980s – the decade in which the 1960s college generation came into tenured positions and Ronald Reagan came into the White House – a heightened awareness of sexual as well as racial and ethnic difference now almost universally informed American literary criticism. A number of new anthologies, notably the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (first edition, 1989), edited by Paul Lauter, and well-researched literary histories, such as Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993), synthesized the work of the preceding two decades and presented a new narrative of American literary history. Previously marginal writers (Martin Delany, Ann Petry, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen) were now key figures in the story; writers who had long been central, such as Cooper and Melville, were revealed as struggling with unresolved racial and sexual preoccupations.

In 1983, while the *Heath Anthology* was still in progress, Lauter could write that "only a few syllabi meaningfully integrate the work of Hispanic-American, Asian-American, or American Indian writers."¹⁷ His choice of verb was tell-

17 Paul Lauter, ed., *Reconstructing American Literature: Courses, Syllabi, Issues* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1983), xiv.

ing. Representation is one thing, but integration is another. The confines of what had once been regarded as American literature had been exploded. There had once been a more or less official literature, in which writers from John Pendleton Kennedy (*Swallow Barn* [1832]) to Margaret Mitchell (*Gone with the Wind* [1936]) portrayed black people chiefly as plantation darkies. And most critics had passed over such representations of the serving-class – the sort of people whom Edith Wharton blithely referred to in *The House of Mirth* (1905) as “dull and ugly people” who must, “in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce” her delicately bred heroine, Lily Bart. But now the reviled and exploited moved to the center of the story – and their voices were heard strongly in the classroom for the first time.

“The changes in our profession,” Lauter wrote, “. . . are rooted in the movements for racial justice and sex equity. Those who worked in the movements came to see that to sustain hope for a future, people needed to grasp a meaningful past.” In this sense, the revision of the American literary canon was what the Yale cultural critic David Bromwich, playing on Clausewitz’s famous definition of war, has called “politics by other means.” The good news was the enlargement of the canon – an expansion that was, in fact, consistent with the spirit of openness characteristic of American studies from its beginnings. The bad news was the implication that progressive-minded people – people committed to diversity and inclusiveness – could find nothing ‘meaningful’ in what had once been the mainstream American tradition.

But even the changes that made reading lists unrecognizable to students who had attended college just twenty years earlier did not tell the full story of what

had happened. Leslie Fiedler, a prolific critic who participated in both waves of the American studies movement, issued, in 1982, what amounted to a farewell to the whole business of academic literary study. “Literary criticism,” he wrote, “flourishes best in societies theoretically committed to transforming all magic into explained illusion, all nighttime mystery into daylight explication: alchemy to chemistry, astrology to astronomy.”¹⁸ This was a restatement of the call for the “grass-roots anti-hierarchical criticism” (Fiedler’s phrase) that Susan Sontag had made in the famous title essay of her book *Against Interpretation* (1967), where she proclaimed an end to pleasure-deadening literary analysis and called for an “erotics of art.”¹⁹

Fiedler went further. Always a marginal figure with respect to the academic power centers – his teaching posts were at Montana State University and the State University of New York at Buffalo – he had his finger on the pulse of the larger culture. In the age of television and video, he saw that literature was being permanently demoted, at least as a category to which only certain academically certified books were allowed to belong. (Consider the valedictory title he gave to his 1982 collection, *What Was Literature?*) In *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Fiedler had long ago ventured into sexual and racial themes that previous critics had evaded; for him, popular culture was where one heard the heartbeat of America. If one were to pay attention to novels, it was

18 Leslie Fiedler, *What was Literature?: Class Culture and Mass Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 37.

19 Ibid., 117. Sontag’s essay was itself a restatement of an argument against argument put forth around the same time by Roland Barthes.

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best to focus on such disrespected (by academics) books as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or George Lippard's Gothic potboiler *The Quaker City* – in which sadism and secret cravings are unmodified by literary refinement. Fiedler was interested in prose fiction not for the modernist virtues of intricacy or allusiveness but for its democratizing power as an early form of mass art. The popular novel, he saw, was the precursor to Hollywood movies and TV soap operas; it had, he thought, a power of democratic leveling comparable to the 'ready-made garments' that, in the early twentieth century, "made it impossible to tell an aristocrat from a commoner."²⁰

While younger Americanists were settling scores with their predecessors over such issues as the proper interpretation of *Moby-Dick* or *The Scarlet Letter*, or whether Margaret Fuller should be rescued from Emerson's shadow, Fiedler recognized that the commercial productions of popular culture – mass-market movies and television, but also comic books, advertising, and fashion – were entering academia as legitimate subjects, and that the old academic disputes over literary classics were devolving into quibbles. It was not surprising that by the 1980s there had arrived onto course syllabi such nineteenth-century best-sellers as Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854) – now championed by feminist critics such as Jane Tompkins (in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* [1985]), who made the case for exactly those books that Nathaniel Hawthorne had dismissed more than a century earlier as drivel by a "damned mob of scribbling women."

²⁰ Ibid., 99.

Today, students of American literature are still working out these issues: What kinds of cultural artifacts allow access to the inner life of the culture? What role, if any, should aesthetic judgment (and according to what criteria) play in the study of written texts? New lines of internal relations within American literature have lately emerged with the rise of a movement known as 'ecocriticism' – lines that run, for instance, from Thoreau through Aldo Leopold to Rachel Carson and up to Barry Lopez.²¹ The histrionics and name calling of the 'culture wars' are gone if not entirely forgotten – yet literary studies seem likely to remain divided for a while between those who follow the Frankfurt School critics Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin in regarding mass culture as a kind of soft propaganda by which the public degenerates into the mob, and those who celebrate popular culture as a roiling scene of imaginative liberation – as does University of Pennsylvania Americanist Janice Radway in her influential book *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984), and, more recently, in her *Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month-Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire* (1997).

Today, the situation seems strikingly symmetrical with that with which this essay began. In the early nineteenth century, a case had to be made for the existence – not to mention the significance –

²¹ The impact of environmentalism in American literary studies is well represented in two books by Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), and Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

of American literature. In the early years of the twenty-first century, this case has to be made again.

There is reason to feel a certain sense of déjà vu. For one thing, the legitimacy of the very idea of the nation-state is under siege in academic circles, where perhaps the most cited book of the last three decades is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Shocked by the resurgence of nationalism in a century when Marxist intellectuals expected it to decline before the advance of international worker solidarity, Anderson defined nationalism as a kind of atavism for which deluded millions have been willing to kill and die. In this context, the idea of a national literature seems, at best, to furnish an opportunity to expose the mechanisms (such as the literary creation of patriotic myth) by which the nation-state maintains itself and, at worst, to be complicit with the criminality of the nation-state itself.

Another way to see what has happened is to recall Robert Bellah's famous *Dædalus* essay written in 1967, in which Bellah accurately predicted that the American nation would split apart into factions of "liberal alienation" and "fundamentalist ossification" with respect to the "set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals" that he called "civil religion."²² Among academic humanists, who are overwhelmingly liberal and alienated from religion in both its civil and fundamentalist forms, it is hardly possible today to use the term 'American' without irony or embarrassment.

We all recognize the gestures of disavowal. Scholars in many fields are going through the same motions; here is

22 Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 183.

an example from a recent book on a subject that once would have been called Chinese art:

This book is very deliberately called *Art in China*, and not Chinese Art, because it is written out of a distrust of the existence of any unifying principles or essences linking such a wide range of made things, things of very different types, having very different dates, very different materials, and very different makers, audiences, and contexts of use.²³

In 1999, Janice Radway, in her inaugural address as president of the American Studies Association, suggested that the phrase 'American studies' be deleted from the name of the organization in favor of the term 'United States studies' – an act of purification that would save its members from implicitly endorsing the hegemonic ambitions of the United States to dominate (at least) the north and south 'American' continents.

Without embracing the strategies of self-acquittal these scholars propose, one may share their wariness toward the nation-state as an object of veneration. Quasi-genetic ideas of race solidarity have always polluted feelings of nationalness (as late as 1934, one finds Edith Wharton blithely remarking on the "boyish love of pure nonsense only to be found in Anglo-Saxons"²⁴), and no one who has come of age since World War II can dissociate such ideas from the hideous consequences that have sometimes followed from them.

Moreover, there is no blinking the fact that American literary studies must now make their way in a postcolonial

23 Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

24 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Scribners, 1934), 157.

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world in which we are perforce conscious that nations are fragile works of artifice; we have lately witnessed bloody struggles over just what sort of nation is (or was) Kuwait, Israel, the former Yugoslavia, a future Palestine, Iraq, and Ukraine, to name just a few – and Americans, as citizens of the sole superpower, must continually consider what sort of obligation these and other nations exert upon us to preserve what used to be called their ‘right of self-determination.’

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the legitimacy of American literary studies, narrowly – that is, nationally – construed, is under skeptical scrutiny. Ever since the Vietnam War, many American intellectuals have been more or less ashamed of America, and the recent Iraq War, with its unilateralist and messianic rhetoric, has only made matters worse. In 1963, the Voice of America organized a series of radio lectures on American literature in which the scholarly authorities of the day, including some who held strong Left views, participated: Henry Nash Smith, Wallace Stegner, Daniel Aaron, Carlos Baker, Irving Howe, Kay House, David Levin, Richard Poirier, John Berryman, among others. It is simply impossible to imagine such a collaboration between the government and the academy today.

Nor is it surprising that what is sometimes called America-centrism has become an embarrassment to today’s Americanists. To use a prevalent term, the field is being ‘decentered’ through study and translation of texts written in America in languages other than English (one doubts how far this movement can go, since our educational system is almost entirely monolingual) by such scholars as Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez, Lawrence Rosenwald, Werner Sollors, and Marc Shell. In 2000, Sollors’s and Shell’s *Multilingual Anthology of American*

Literature presented a host of hitherto unknown texts in more than a dozen Native American, European, and Asian languages, with English translations on facing pages. There is, as well, a movement afoot – inaugurated some twenty years ago by Bell Gale Chevigny and Gari Laguardia, the editors of *Reinventing the Americas: Comparative Studies of Literature of the United States and Spanish America* (1986), and lately forwarded in such books as Anne Goldman’s *Continental Divides: Revisioning American Literature* (2000) – to reject the nation’s borders as impermeable lines dividing ‘American’ literature from the literature of adjacent and overlapping cultures.

In January 2003, a special issue of *PMLA*, devoted in a skeptical mood to “America: The Idea, the Literature,” included an essay asserting that “American literature should be seen as no longer bound to the inner workings of any particular country or imagined organic community but instead as interwoven systematically with traversals between national territory and intercontinental space.”²⁵ And there are efforts under way to ‘redraw the map of American literature’ by pushing back its boundaries in time as well as space. The Yale Americanist Wai Chee Dimock has proposed a new set of coordinates by which she would redraw Emerson’s literary affiliations and see him in relation not so much, say, to Bronson Alcott, as to the Vishnu Parana or the Koran. “Deep time” is Dimock’s name for this temporal reorganization, and, she adds, “deep time is denationalized space.”²⁶

25 Paul Giles, “Transnationalism and Classic American Literature,” *PMLA* 118 (1) (January 2003): 63.

26 Wai Chee Dimock, “Deep Time: American Literature and World History,” *American Literary History* 13 (4) (2001): 760.

So far, these attempts to develop post-national ideas of American literature are too diffuse to bear much weight. And, as is often the case, transformations in the academic humanities tend to be secondary to more basic transformations in the world. Once a province of Europe, America has become the power center of a planet convulsed by a variety of resistance movements – armed and otherwise – against it. Yet accompanying the sense of America as a center of consolidated power is a sense that any coherent notion of American identity is coming apart. Can we call American a business corporation whose employees work in factories in Sri Lanka and whose assets are deposited in Caribbean banks? Is an illegal immigrant who crosses from Mexico into Texas in order to find menial work an American? With such questions in the air, why should the idea of an American literature escape interrogation?

As for what kind of answers might emerge, the old ones will clearly no longer do. At the beginning of our story, the proponents of an American literature proclaimed its distinctiveness chiefly with respect to the burdensome precedent of the literature of England – but to dwell on that distinction today would seem to participate in what Freud called the “narcissism of minor differences.” Matthew Arnold’s point is again oddly pertinent: “I see advertised *The Primer of American Literature*,” he wrote in 1874. “I imagine the face of Philip or Alexander at hearing of a *Primer of Macedonian Literature*! . . . We are all contributors to one great literature – English literature.” These sentences, quoted by Marcus Cunliffe at the opening of his *The Literature of the United States* (1954), would have once pleased only culturally conservative Anglophiles; but today, Arnold’s words (if not his tone) are per-

fectly consonant with the view from the cultural Left, for whom the hyphen in ‘Anglo-American’ marks a trivial division between two barely distinguishable nations driven by the same imperialist aims. The idea of an American literature has come to seem provincial again.

Yet if one looks beyond the insular academy to a new generation of young American writers, one encounters a salient – and historically recurrent – difference in tone and attitude that continues to divide academic critics from actual practitioners. To read, say, Gish Jen’s novel *Typical American* (1991) or Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (1995) is to be struck by how a few changes in the scenic incidentals, or a few substitutions of Yiddish for Chinese or Korean phrases, would render these works, with their historically recurrent tale of Old World parents versus New World children, almost indistinguishable in plot and structure from the Jewish immigrant novels of Abraham Cahan (*Yekl*, 1896) or Anzia Yezierska (*The Bread Givers*, 1925). Writers present have always felt the parental presence of writers past. They register their debts with large acts of homage, as when Ralph Ellison honors the man after whom he was named, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *Invisible Man* (1951), or with small allusive gestures, as when Philip Roth opens *The Great American Novel* (1973) with a Melvillean sentence: “Call me Smitty.”

The work of redefining, and thereby sustaining, American literature has always been mainly carried on by writers who aspire to become part of it, not by professors who dismiss its validity or doubt its existence. In that respect, not much has changed.

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