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Comment by David Bromwich

A republic divided

Abraham Lincoln said in the House Divided speech that this nation could not endure half slave and half free. It would become all one thing or all the other – all free or all slave. Then he asked, “Have we no tendency to the latter condition?”

Americans face a similar question today. We cannot endure as an empire feared and distrusted throughout the world and as a constitutional republic founded on liberty and governed by consent.

Lincoln, in his speeches of the 1850s and his debates with Stephen Douglas, pointed to symptoms of a degeneration of public opinion. He believed that the reason for the change was a growing passivity to the expansion of slavery. He had carefully laid the groundwork for his criticism, speaking out against the Mexican War, against the opening of the Nebraska Territory to slaveholders, and against Chief Justice Taney’s opinion in the *Dred Scott* decision, which held that the Negro was a form of property whose

possessor was guaranteed the rights due to owners of other forms of property.

A remedy might come, Lincoln believed, from law-abiding resistance to decisions like *Dred Scott*, and from electing officials determined to put slavery back on its old footing. Slavery would then become an institution confined to a limited section of the country and treated not as a social blessing but a temporary necessity, a practice “in course of ultimate extinction.” The program was radical, in that it envisaged an end of slavery, but it was also conservative, for it aimed to return liberty to the central place it once had held in the feelings of Americans.

One difference in our present situation is obvious. We have no party of opposition in matters of constitutional liberty. No politician of national standing has offered an analysis of the loss of liberty to which many Americans in the past five years have resigned themselves – the kind of analysis that Lincoln initiated with the question, “Don’t you find yourself making arguments in support of these measures, which you never would have made before?”

Instead, we have had piecemeal demurrals and episodic complaints about measures that range from barely legal to bluntly unconstitutional.

If we hope to revive public concern with the fate of constitutional liberty, it is instructive to remember Lincoln’s courageous response to events of the 1850s that carry distinct reverberations today.

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In a six-year campaign of persuasion that began in 1854 with the speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act and ended in 1860 with the Cooper Union speech, Lincoln argued that the nation's founders had considered slavery an embarrassment to the Constitution, an "excrescence." Though this was a controversial view, Lincoln insisted on its veracity; and Americans came to know the evidence better through his teaching. He liked to remind his listeners that the word 'slavery' appeared nowhere in the Constitution. As Lincoln saw it, the record of public acts hostile to slavery that the founders supported in the years after 1788 demonstrated the significance of this omission. Those acts included a law of 1798 that prohibited bringing slaves from Africa into the Mississippi Territory, and the passage in 1807 of a measure that outlawed all African slave trade.

Propagandists today for an expanded American empire or the global spread of democracy – different names for the same thing – agree in citing as a precursor neither Washington nor Lincoln (impossible models for empire builders) but the international 'idealist' Woodrow Wilson. And it is Wilsonian enthusiasm for a permanent peace achieved through war, combined with a flattering and nostalgic interpretation of the cold war, that has underwritten the Bush administration's pursuit of a foreign policy based on intimidation, war, and the threat of war.

Of the scattered reasons offered by James Polk to justify the Mexican War, Lincoln observed: "First he takes up one, and in attempting to argue us into it, he argues himself out of it; then seizes another, and goes through the same process; and then, confused at being able to think of nothing new, he snatches up the old one again His mind, tasked

beyond its power, is running hither and thither, like some tortured creature." A dissenter from the Mexican War, Lincoln thought the United States should be exemplary in its practice of freedom: we should epitomize a political ideal rather than impose our practices on others. He agreed with John Quincy Adams, a president who was later to join Lincoln's own Whig Party, that America "goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own." Adams's warning suggests a truth he did not live to see confirmed. Eagerness for foreign entanglements always stands in inverse proportion to a regard for liberty at home.

Lincoln noticed in the early 1850s that arguments for slavery had grown bolder. A new species of religious apologetics had arisen, and he called it "pro-slavery theology." There was likewise a new shamelessness in avowing the opinion that the Declaration of Independence had set the standard of equality too high. When John Pettit, a Democrat from Indiana, remarked on the floor of the Senate that the maxim "all men are created equal" was "a self-evident lie," nobody challenged the imputation. To Lincoln, this silence was scandalous. The coarsening of political speech was bound to produce, even as it was a product of, a new and reckless brutality of conduct. Had Pettit uttered those words in Independence Hall in 1776, he would have been thrown into the street.

One need not search far to discover a resonance with the present crisis. We have heard a president boast almost casually of his unprecedented power to legalize the assassination of persons abroad. "Put it this way," he said of the targets of secret killings he authorized:

“They are no longer a problem.” Had any earlier president boasted of such acts, the insolence would not have gone unrebuked. But today we lack a public figure willing to take up the burden Lincoln took up in the 1850s: to record, respond, reiterate, and sear the offenses into the public mind.

From 1850 to 1857, the national morale regarding slavery passed from compromise to retrogression. The first great step backward was the repeal of the Missouri Compromise included in the Kansas-Nebraska Act – an action that effectively permitted slavery in new territories north of the Missouri line. The *Dred Scott* decision took the next step. The Court gave legal sanction to the bringing of slaves to the territories when it argued that slaveholders had rights under the Constitution whereas Negroes did not.

Compare the disastrous slide of 2001 – 2006. Once again, we find ourselves making arguments we would never have made before. Our version of pro-slavery theology is pro-torture sophistry. We deplore the atrocities at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, yet we refuse to acknowledge that they were a result of directives by officials of our government, which approved forbidden methods of humiliation and deliberate cruelty. As in the 1850s, the change has been accomplished by degrees, through encroachment on an old policy. This has required considerable rhetorical and legal sleight-of-hand. Formerly discountenanced methods therefore were not inculcated as doctrine all at once. Rather, the Bush administration introduced them as emergency measures – backed by Justice Department memorandums that redefined the war in Iraq so as to exclude the United States from the Geneva Conventions, and by memorandums that narrowed the definition of torture so as to permit

all abuse that did not openly intend maiming or killing.

When Lincoln asked whether the United States had no tendency to the condition of a slave republic, he was inviting his listeners to consider the machinery put in place by recent legislation and court decisions. Behind the Kansas-Nebraska Act lay a tacit determination that power and influence and sheer numbers were going to decide the admission or exclusion of slavery in new states. Lincoln believed it needed only a second *Dred Scott* decision to expand the new permissiveness toward slavery from the territories to the states.

Why did he call the *Dred Scott* decision “an astonisher in legal history”? Because it nullified rights that the Constitution implied and gave cash value to rights about which the Constitution said nothing. A similar contempt for the common understanding of basic rights appears in a recent claim by Alberto Gonzales, the former White House counsel and now attorney general. Gonzales asserts that the president has an “inherent right” to authorize warrantless searches of Americans. In assuming such a prerogative – acting outside the law and abridging the Bill of Rights for the declared purpose of protecting Americans – this president and his attorney general have produced an astonisher in legal history.

All of Bush’s and Gonzales’s innovations in justice obey this maxim: change the law if possible; if visible change is thwarted, change the law invisibly; if both tactics fail, break the law and find a justification afterward. Like President Polk in the Mexican War, President Bush was able to change the law visibly to authorize the war he wanted in Iraq. To effect a demoralization of the law on torture, he had to solicit counsel to

change the law invisibly. In the case of domestic spying, he circumvented the existing machinery and, when discovered, claimed authorization from expanded emergency powers.

Of all the equivocal utterances of the 1850s, the one that drew Lincoln's deepest scorn was Stephen Douglas's remark that he did not care whether the people in the territories voted slavery up or down. This may seem almost a predictable feature of Douglas's argument that the popular will is the highest value of democracy. But no event of the time seems to have shocked Lincoln more than this expression of indifference. It may have done as much as any other circumstance to convince him to run for president.

Lincoln had assumed that Americans agreed that slavery was wrong – a necessity, perhaps, but wrong in itself. And yet if slavery was wrong, how could anyone not care whether the people voted it up or down? This looked like saying it was right not to care whether people chose right or wrong. Yet it ought to be morally impossible to feel that something is wrong while supporting a result that makes it legally right. By this way of thinking, the “miners and sappers” against equality – apologists for slavery as well as indifferent conciliators like Douglas – cheapened the value and meaning of life for all people in all sections of the country.

A comparable sign of degeneration today is our growing indifference to torture. How many have gone from believing that torture is simply wrong to conceding that the president may declare it right against certain persons in certain situations, as determined by officials he has chosen? What president before has presumed himself virtuous enough to deserve such power?

We used to suppose that a person arrested for a crime has a right to confront the charges against him. Without quite surrendering this idea, we have allowed ourselves to entertain a new suggestion: that by dictate of the president, certain persons may be picked out and imprisoned without charges. In Lincoln's day, the miners and sappers excused themselves by saying they did it to avoid a war. Now they say they do it to prevent an attack.

“My obligation to protect you” – in recent weeks President Bush has uttered these words again and again. But with these words, he both misquotes and misinterprets his oath of office. As specified in Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution, the presidential oath commits the holder of the office to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” A king protects his people. A president of the United States swears to protect the Constitution, for a free people do not imagine they need any protector better than laws. To address the people as if they required a personal protector is to speak the language of kings.

In the House Divided speech, Lincoln said that he thought he could see the elements of a conspiracy to nationalize slavery. He did not have in mind an organization that met in secret, but rather an unavowed design shared by well-placed persons:

When we see a lot of framed timbers, different portions of which we know have been gotten out at different times and places and by different workmen – Stephen, Franklin, Roger and James, for instance – and when we see these timbers joined together, and see they exactly make the frame of a house or a mill, all the tenons and mortices exactly fitting, and all the lengths and proportions of the differ-

ent pieces exactly adapted to their respective places, and not a piece too many or too few – not omitting even scaffolding – or, if a single piece be lacking, we can see the place in the frame exactly fitted and prepared to yet bring such piece in – in such a case, we find it impossible to not believe that Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James all understood one another from the beginning and all worked upon a common plan or draft drawn up before the first lick was struck.

Included in Lincoln's suspicious and cogent surmise were Stephen Douglas, who by opening the Nebraska Territory created a legislative crisis that gave urgency to the *Dred Scott* case; Roger Taney, the chief justice who wrote a constitutionally improbable majority opinion profoundly comforting to slaveholders; Franklin Pierce, the outgoing president, who said that the courts would soon solve the slavery issue in the territories; and James Buchanan, the incoming president, who welcomed the decision when it arrived.

Compare their efforts to the present-day collaboration of the president, the director of the CIA, and the secretary of defense, together with certain reporters, in making the case for war with Iraq. Consider the joined timbers and fitted tenons and mortices of the president, the CIA, and the Department of Defense in working out the policy of "extraordinary rendition," the legalized kidnapping and transportation of foreign nationals for interrogation at hidden sites. Look at the collusion of the office of the vice president and journalists in leaking the name of a CIA agent whom the vice president and his circle had determined to put out of action.

A conspiracy is seldom a group of people acting in concert according to a settled plan. All that need be aligned are

their interests – both overt and tacit interests – and their knowledge of each other's presence and power. As Lincoln knew, the word 'conspiracy' means literally 'a breathing together,' but in few conspiracies are the actors found in a huddle. It is more accurate to picture a group of people standing far apart but singing a tune with parts that nicely harmonize. They may catch their cues from different places in a very large auditorium.

Lincoln diagnosed in the new acceptance of slavery a "debauching" of public opinion. In his speech of July 4, 1861, he accused Southern propagandists of having "sugar-coated" rebellion, so that they exposed the country to the one peril worse than civil war: destruction of the sentiments that form the basis of civil liberty.

The Patriot Act, hurried through Congress in the panic of 2001, gave the FISA courts a broad scope to authorize undeclared searches and wiretaps. Now we find that even as Congress was passing that law, the president was secretly arrogating to himself the power to instigate warrantless searches. Some Americans, sufficiently drugged by the mystique of the war on terror, appear to believe that there are two sides to this question; that it is right not to care much whether we vote up or down the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments. It may need only the passage of a second Patriot Act to produce silent consent to the continuous warrantless monitoring of Americans.

Eventually, through the publicity from his debates with Douglas and patient explanation of the emergent Republican doctrine on the expansion of slavery, Lincoln in 1858, 1859, and 1860 gave a character to the party whose candidate he would become. Without that

record and without the national understanding it set in motion, he could not have assumed the strong position he occupied in 1861. Without those earlier steps, his speech of July 4, 1861, which drew thousands of young men to enlist in the Union army, would have been inconceivable. There had been a long work of preparation in the years when he educated the public mind on the political necessity of a constitutional opposition. A campaign of moral resistance had preceded his campaign for the presidency.

To follow Lincoln's pattern in this respect is to place a tremendous burden on the statesman as a reformer of public opinion. Such a leader does not suppose himself either a protector or a follower of the people. Instead, he is their interpreter, and there is hardly a moment when he is not explaining the choices they face. Nor does the task stop there. Lincoln believed – and his life illustrates the principle – that a true statesman is also concerned with the moral constitution of man; a work that goes beyond interpreting the fluctuating opinions held by the majority. Accordingly, Lincoln could not have been any sort of populist, just as, to remain a true republican, he could not have been any sort of imperialist. He supported the American experiment as limited and exemplary. He did not regard democracy, the idea or the political arrangement, as a charm against the violence of misery and oppression.

What would an opposition party look like today if it could emulate the resistance of the Republican Party in 1860? We are a long way from that. In 2002, the Democratic Party in Congress chose a fast authorization of war over a serious debate that might have discharged its obligation to educate the public. In 2004, the Democrats chose to dispute the tactical conduct of the war, and not the lies

and forgeries that launched it. At present, the opposition leaders and its probable candidates for 2008 endorse an escalation of the war. They urge the addition of more soldiers and more armor, and have backed away from a plan for disengagement that came from their own ranks. These acts of tactical leverage have been pusillanimous: the weakness, almost bankruptcy, of principle that underlies them is patent and easily exposed.

Though we have an opposition party in name, we are now close to the condition of the United States after the collapse of the Whigs in the mid-1850s. Where, then, do we find ourselves?

After the fall of Communism, there was an opening that passed. The United States never fully entered the world of nations. The burden of a constitutional opposition today must include education in the significance of this fact. For the sound part of the balance-of-power doctrine always lay in the idea that no one nation can control the world. We may still be the world's best hope; it should be a comfort that we are no longer its last hope. But we cannot endure half empire and half republic. We will become all one thing or all the other: an empire that expands by the permanent threat of war, and invents power after power to enlarge the authority and reach of the state; or the oldest of modern republics, vigilant against the reappearance of tyranny and firm in repelling any leader who sets himself above the law.

– February 23, 2006

Andrew Delbanco

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.

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

American literature: a vanishing subject?

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

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).

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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.

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

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-

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.

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

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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-

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-

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

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

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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.

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.

American literature: a vanishing subject?

Thomas Crow

The practice of art history in America

“... the moment just past is extinguished forever, save for the things made in it.”

– George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*¹

As the name for a discipline, ‘art history’ enacts a syntactical clash every time it is uttered or written. Which is the principal term, which its modifier? The two elements in their coupling confront one another in an undecided hierarchy. The more decorous substitute, ‘history of art,’ puts the weight on the object that history is called upon to serve, but its currency is less – and in the shorthand of everyday speech, virtually nil.

There is, of course, a large measure of convention, common to most European

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languages, in the particular use of the term ‘art’ to designate painting, sculpture, drawings, prints, and (more distantly) architecture. In any event, it primarily denotes a range of physical objects. Its true, much wider application to any creative practice or product generally requires some explicit indication – an odd reversal of the general and the particular. Is this anomaly a mere accident of usage? Or does it point to some actual eccentricities in the term’s historical formation that bear on the position of art history in the American constellation of humanistic disciplines?

The fact that the visual arts successfully lay claim to a general, honorific designation as Art may lie – and this is speculative – in the physically enduring nature of the artifacts that fall under such a description. Literature can manifest itself in any legible transcription, and the performing arts of music and theater can conjure physical actuality from a score or script, but fidelity to any original enactment can never be secured – dance is even less traceable beyond living routine and memory. By contrast, the intricate physical remains on which art history concentrates its

¹ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962), 79.

attention are the actual things fashioned and handled by the subjects of history themselves.

Therein lies a rightness in the obdurate pair of nouns that name the discipline. George Kubler (1912 – 1996), the great specialist in both colonial Spanish architecture and pre-Columbian art, was one of the rare American scholars of his generation to address the theoretical underpinnings of a discipline operating under this designation. He likened the gaze of the art historian to that of the astronomer, “concerned with appearances noted in the present but occurring in the past However fragmentary its condition, any work of art is actually a portion of an arrested happening, or an emanation of past time.” The “initial commotion” entailed in the making of an art object survives – as does no other creative act – as a unique, physically sensible pattern.²

In comparison, the textual materials relied upon by the profession of history can seem, despite their profusion, thin and remote. The object of art, by contrast, allows its maker to speak in the present with the full vividness of an unforced creative act, one that can preserve a significant, if not absolutely complete, inventory of its particular traits and structural complexity. By this I do not mean to say that artists and craftsmen do not operate under a confining series of stipulations and constraints, but these are the standard conditions of all human activity, within which art production is exceptional in the scope it provides for nuanced emotional expression as part and parcel of its social utility.

The difficulty, it hardly needs stating, lies in interpreting this physical commotion from the past that arrives in

our midst like a traveler through time. Kubler observes in *The Shape of Time* that there is nothing in the cultural record so resistant to analysis and interpretation as the single work of art.³ Hence the necessary recourse to schemes of generalization and comparison around which arise the endless disputes that, in effect, constitute the history of the discipline. But the unique material object also beckons as a place of refuge and safety from any spirit of controversy. It is what it is, an epistemological difficulty readily inviting redescription as a quasi-mystical presence. The curators of museum collections and merchants of the art trade – most of whom underwent the same training as art historians in academia – frequently resort to claims of superior knowledge based largely on physical proximity and familiarity. Beyond the work of description and classification, the work of art is presumed to ‘speak for itself.’

Subtending the mutual suspicion between museum and academy is the patent reality that art history’s objects of study cross over into the category of objects of desire. The rarity, technical distinction, emotional intensity, and formal beauty that variously characterize these survivals of Kubler’s distant “commotions” have made them among the most sought-after possessions in the modern world. (A scholarly interpretation is, in its way, as much a claim on the object of art as any other.) As market prices are continually bid up to levels incommensurable with virtually any other category of human artifact, powerful players in the system – public and private – can impose demands for flattering affirmation that run counter to the requirements of historical and interpretative probity that the discipline

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2 Ibid., 19 – 20.

3 Ibid., 36.

shares with its sisters in the humanities at large.

At the same time, the operations of desire that drive the circulation of art objects, along with all the perturbations that their movement sets off in subsequent art practice, constitute a key category of research in modern art history. For example, one cannot set apart the antique fragments incorporated into the basilica of San Marco in Venice, spoils of predation on Constantinople, from any other element of its design history and meaning. And the same spectacular desire for possession has resulted in the reproduction at a reduced scale of the entire Piazza San Marco, with all of its layered accretions of form and symbol, as the facade of the largest hotel in the world, the Venetian in Las Vegas. This gambling and entertainment resort additionally boasts a joint branch of the Guggenheim and Hermitage museums – the latter collection itself the plunder of the monetary raids by the Czarinas Elisabeth and Catherine the Great on the artistic trophies of western Europe.

Such phenomena already lie firmly on the agenda of ‘visual culture’ studies, a hybrid category embraced by a number of art historians to whom the cult of fine aesthetic discrimination appears an unsustainable relic of the past. The global entrepreneurship of the Guggenheim Museum, of which the Las Vegas franchise is just one part, has thrived on the disdain of museum traditionalists, which has only served to enhance its intended aura of postmodern glamour and friendliness toward popular culture. But these latest episodes directly echo the process by which the great exemplars of European fine art came to this country in the first place. Selection and promotion by entrepreneurs like the Duveen brothers placed this legacy in the hands of Gilded Age magnates

who had grown staggeringly wealthy on the leading industries of the era – rail, oil, and steel – but were still short of the requisite cultural polishing. The American discipline of art history would be unthinkable without the public collections subsequently endowed by these direct ancestors to a figure like hotelier Steve Wynn of Las Vegas, whose personal museum of art at the Bellagio hotel rivals the institutional weight of the Guggenheim-Hermitage effort.

Both of these new institutions of art strive to present objects of art in a manner that is as deracinated, as divorced from the circumstances under which they arose, as human ingenuity can contrive. Paintings that satisfied the courtly aggrandizement of Russian potentates come to stand in perfectly isolated splendor against the pitted reddish-brown walls of industrial steel stipulated by architect Rem Koolhaas. In no environment could the visitor be less encouraged to probe the internal complications of any one of them, that is, to search out the telltale imprints of the particular past commotion that brought each one into being. The cult that surrounds the displaced objects in all of America’s museums reach a kind of pure extreme in this, their ultimate desert outpost. A layered, intricately worked physical artifact hovers before the eyes as an ‘image,’ that is, a mental event; and its promise points exclusively toward the realm of pleasure – the single-minded purpose of the entire built environment in which they find themselves.

Elucidating fully the sources and wide effects of this phenomenon would require concentration on the anthropology and psychology of the fetish. For the purposes of this essay, taking some measure of its distorting effects is sufficient. Among these are an exaggerated sense

of possession and a blindness to the particular and contingent circumstances in which these fascinating works are experienced. Colleagues in the cognitive sciences – lately the most vocal commentators to set their sights on art from outside the field – have tended to adopt the Las Vegas mindset as their idea of a universal human norm in the experience of art objects. Linguistic psychologist Steven Pinker, summing up the lessons of recent research into what he calls “evolutionary aesthetics,” informs us that “art is a pleasure technology, like drugs, erotica, or fine cuisine – a way to purify and concentrate pleasurable stimuli and deliver them to our senses.”⁴ It follows for him that any form of art that might irritate or confound the viewer’s perceptual faculties must be a perverse and willfully unnatural deviation from the path dictated by our common genetic predisposition.

Foremost among such deviations have been the formal experiments of twentieth-century modernists, who cast aside with startling abruptness “all the tricks that artists had used for millennia to please the human palate” in favor of “freakish distortions of shape and color and then to abstract grids, shapes, dribbles, splashes” Such behavior Pinker can only comprehend in terms of some imposed, partisan agenda: if art holds a mirror up to nature, then modernism represents a willful campaign to assert that the social world itself had lost all harmony with just human needs and aspirations.⁵ But any scholar of art could

inform him that artists and their patrons have, over those millenia, just as often sought to elicit somatic and emotional responses that lie far from the loci of pleasure. The entire gamut of human feeling and knowledge has been fair game for artists since the advent of the first “man-made object to which we assign a more than utilitarian value” (citing Erwin Panofsky’s degree-zero definition of art).⁶ As often as not, the decidedly unpleasant experiences of intimidation, guilt, exclusion, taboo, and dread have been the intended effect of the objects that come under the scrutiny of the art historian. Take the colossal stone block bearing the ferocious likeness of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue/Cihuacoatl, with her monstrous countenance of opposed rattlesnake profiles emerging from her severed neck, which today constitutes one of the artistic glories of the National Anthropological Museum in Mexico City. Consider the range of emotions likely to have been felt in its presence by any potential victim of the priest’s obsidian knife, and then try to equate that with the hedonist’s menu of sensory gratifications adduced by Pinker.

Surely wiser in this regard is Kubler, who had a profound knowledge of the Mesoamerican traditions from which the Aztec effigy arose. No particular partisan of modern avant-gardism, he describes the same European aesthetic revolution circa 1910 in these terms:

to demonstrate such conscious political leanings in the practice of exemplary modern artists – and have usually come up empty.

⁶ Erwin Panofsky, “The History of Art,” in *The Cultural Migration: The European Scholar in America*, ed. W. R. Crawford (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1977), 83.

⁴ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), 405.

⁵ A further weakness in this assertion lies in the fact that many assiduous scholars on the Left, devoutly wishing that Pinker could be correct, have spent at least a generation attempting

The fabric of society manifested no rupture, and the texture of useful inventions continued step by step in closely linked order, but the system of artistic invention was abruptly transformed, as if large numbers of men had suddenly become aware that the inherited repertory of forms no longer corresponded to the actual meaning of existence The nature of artistic invention therefore relates more closely to invention by new postulates than to that invention by simple confrontation which characterizes the useful sciences.⁷

A postulate on the order of the heliocentric planetary orbits, the movement of tectonic plates, or, indeed, natural selection itself can force as abrupt (and to many as freakish) a reordering of cognition as the eruption of a new, antinaturalistic set of criteria for success in painting.

In fact, over the millennia evoked by Pinker, naturalistic depiction has been the exception rather than the rule (though the technical barriers to its achievement are quite low) because it is not, on the whole, what human beings have desired from their art. One key element in any explanation for the drastic artistic transformations of the early twentieth century, as Kubler conceives them, lies in the grafting of tribal and non-Western formal sequences in all their historical concreteness onto an otherwise played-out European line that had lost, by any objective measure, most of its capacity for fresh invention. The new African, Oceanic, and archaic models offered, in addition to an expanded range of expressive intensity, an advanced capacity for rendering volumes into linear patterns transferable to a flat surface, in a way that acknowledged with a new realism the painting as a two-dimensional thing. Any single

⁷ Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 70.

object in this new sequence captured for the future its concrete moment of active translation between two symbolic technologies.

The task of understanding such a moment necessarily entails a patient unpacking of a process, many layers of which are only partly visible or indeed entirely obscure to the immediate, untutored glance. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, perhaps the prime moment in this process of translation, has enjoyed just such an unpacking by Leo Steinberg, the recondite scholar of Leonardo da Vinci and High Renaissance art.⁸ The work's legions of admirers share with art historians like Kubler and Steinberg a fascination with the moment of invention and with the creative act itself, into which this prime modernist work finds ways to draw its spectators – and the same could be said of an equally foundational object for a previous tradition, say, Leonardo's cartoon for his *Virgin, Child, and Saint Anne*. This higher order of communication virtually necessitates that the artist confound comfortable habits of viewing, pushing aspects of form toward or beyond the limits of what might be comfortable or even legible at any given historical juncture. The evolution of what is heard as a 'dissonance' in European music provides an instructive parallel almost too obvious to mention.

It is not the case, however, that the scholars who established art history in American universities necessarily resisted the temptation to regard the apparent immediacy of visual art as a relief from the more laborious demands

⁸ See Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel," pt. 1, *Art News* 71 (5) (September 1972): 20–29; *Ibid.*, pt. 2, *Art News* 71 (6) (October 1972): 38–49.

of historical interpretation. In an essay of 1929, Charles Rufus Morey, the most influential figure in the development of the field at Princeton, lamented the absence of historical depth in the environment surrounding American students compared to the palpable sense of tradition enjoyed by their European counterparts. To amass a commensurable awareness through the study of languages or history consumed years and, even then, might yield only uncoordinated fragments of knowledge: “the *disiecta membra* of the history of human action and thought.” In the history of art, however, “the student is conducted to the spirit of an epoch by his most direct sense, the eye ... [which] provides a history capable of exposition within the narrow limits of time and effort which have been left for such integrating disciplines by the multiplicity of the modern college curriculum.”⁹

No hint here that the proper unpacking of even one representative object requires no less elaboration of philological and historical knowledge than that required by any cognate discipline – in fact, one could argue that it requires a good deal more. Morey’s own scholarship, in particular his founding and use of the monumental *Index of Christian Art* as a comprehensive guide to the visualization of doctrine over the entire body of medieval art, belies his own proposition. The achievements of medievalists like Morey and Arthur Kingsley Porter, his equally forceful and accomplished colleague at Harvard, had been impressive enough to elicit the admiration of jealously nationalistic Europeans.¹⁰ But

both of these founding figures also professed in their teaching and polemics an avowedly conservative social agenda, wherein the perceived hierarchy and dogmatic certainties of the Middle Ages could be held up as an alternative model for Americans, one to be set against the democratizing forces of advancing industrial technology, mass immigration, urban growth, and materialistic consumption. As Morey wrote in 1944: “There is revealed in every work of mediaeval craftsmen, from the macrocosm of the cathedral to the microcosm of the miniature or ivory carving, an element bitterly missed in the modern scene, an element whose restoration would do most to integrate a new and more human civilization, in a new and more reasonable world. And that is unity of faith.”¹¹

A good deal of faith, in fact, underlies this pronouncement, as it sets aside the distinct possibility that the eclectic corpus of medieval objects present in American public collections could themselves appear as so many *disiecta membra*, cut off from one another and divorced from their inspiring original contexts. Porter simply gave up the struggle, retiring to a castle on a remote Irish coast, there to shut out the modern world amid his pious rural clients. The more practical Morey sought a less drastic solution; he championed the fashioning of an architectural pastiche from the architectural remains of five French monasteries – financed by the devout John D. Rockefeller, Jr. – in order to create the Cloisters museum in New York, where the bulk of the Metropolitan Museum’s medieval objects have come to be housed. The Cloisters, he wrote,

9 Charles Rufus Morey, “The Value of Art as an Academic Subject,” *Parnassus* 1 (3) (March 15, 1929): 7.

10 Panofsky, “The History of Art,” 85–88.

11 Charles Rufus Morey, “Mediaeval Art and America,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 7 (1944): 6.

represent the maturity of American museum planning towards the evocation of the mediaeval scene The rugged height of Fort Tryon park provided a typical monastic site, and the cloisters, halls, and details of five French monasteries furnished the core of the architectural complex, which was brought to consistency by judicious copying of necessary elements from other South French abbeys In the landscaping, most difficult of all mediaeval aspects to recapture, a great deal of diligent research resulted in a convincing lay-out of monastic orchards, and even included a garden of medicinal herbs conforming to a Carolingian list of the year 812.¹²

The yearning of fantasy is palpable in this passage. The Cloisters can boast the actual stones of the Middle Ages, and the intervening decades have lent the complex its own patina of age, but the conceptual difference between its re-creations and those of the Las Vegas Venetian have remained more a matter of degree than of kind.

As the Cloisters opened in 1938, the unfolding political catastrophe in Europe was surpassing the worst fears these American medievalists may have harbored for their own culture. Touchstones of European artistic achievement had been arriving in America piecemeal over the previous half-century; in a burst, the cream of Old World scholarly achievement in interpreting those objects followed, as a wave of Jewish art historians sought refuge across the Atlantic. The Institute of Fine Arts, housed within New York University, established itself in a few short years as the peer of any Ivy League program by incorporating the largest number of refugee Europeans. Its director, Walter Cook, likened

his initiative to the acquisition of physical objects, frequently declaring (with a somewhat disturbing insouciance): "Hitler is my best friend. He shakes the tree and I collect the apples."¹³ That anecdote was reported by Panofsky, one of Cook's chief recruits, who went on to occupy the first chair in the discipline at the Institute for Advanced Study. Similarly, by gathering in Rudolf Wittkover, a commanding authority on Renaissance architecture and humanism, Columbia lifted the ambition and performance of its already established program. Nor was the exodus limited to Jewish refugees. Yale's program did not really exist prior to the arrival of Henri Focillon, a polymath with a strong theoretical inclination toward autonomous formal developments in art, who migrated in 1940 from occupied France.

Because the discipline's traditional core in the study of classical antiquity and the Italian Renaissance had remained under recognized German dominance, the one field of conspicuous American investment and prestige to that date had been in early Christian and medieval art. This influx of talent from the German-speaking sphere was bound to undo the medieval idyll of art history in the United States. It further set the stage for a marked expansion of the field in the aftermath of World War II. Within the elite universities, the increasing ease and frequency of overseas travel had begun to stimulate a need for training in the history and meaning of significant European monuments. As more meritocratic admissions made this preoccupation less socially exclusive, art history began to assume its habitual position as a favored elective, and the charismatic survey teacher became a campus staple. For the proportionally smaller

12 Ibid., 2.

13 See Panofsky, "The History of Art," 95.

number of majors who chose to continue in the field, relatively plentiful opportunities existed in two sectors (double that generally offered in the other humanistic disciplines): there was the continuing higher-education expansion, which was feeding on itself and spreading the discipline into state schools and smaller colleges; at the same time, there was an equally growing museum sector in need of curators and administrators.

But this climate of postwar optimism and opportunity did not at first alter the conservative tendencies of the American discipline. The first wave of European professors, as they stepped in to meet the demand for trained personnel, found their new American charges lacking the level of erudition they would have assumed in their European counterparts (and cultural misunderstandings doubtless led these professors to exaggerate both the norms they had known and the deficiencies they were discovering). Thus they tended to prune away many of the more complex and speculative elements of art history in favor of conceptually simple and often mechanical tasks: decoding iconography, tracing fragments of dispersed ensembles, identifying hands, dating. Ascertaining points of fact that European scholars – and other humanists in America – would regard as just the starting point for interpretation became sufficient justification for a successful research career. Irving Lavin, until recently the long-serving professor of art history at the Institute for Advanced Study, has been forthright about the pedagogy offered by “those miraculously translated Elijahs bringing the good word from the Old World to the New,” going so far as to celebrate as a lost golden age the times when “Panofsky would hand over to every member of his seminars a specific new idea or discovery of his own,

just waiting for the enterprising graduate student to work up into an article.”¹⁴

Not to underestimate the difficulty of detective work frequently entailed in these endeavors, but they had in common a fulfillment in some definite conclusion. This pedagogically reduced version of European art history largely set the limits for the entire discipline in its postwar American translation. An inherited social conservatism thereby joined itself to a structurally generated intellectual conservatism, both reinforced by material rewards that could go well beyond comfortable salaries and tenure.

Here, the unanalyzed power of the physical art object worked once again to set the discipline apart from its text-based counterparts in the humanities. Because of the inherent charisma of European masterpieces, generous patrons were willing to provide an exceptional level of financial support for fellowships and study centers abroad. As the center of the field shifted, thanks to the émigré influx, toward the Italian Renaissance and Baroque, Rome and Florence became regular destinations for summers and whole years of leave. What was more, the resulting exclusivity benefited a significant number of art historians who could present themselves to the art market as the sole experts in the attribution of works by a particular artist – fees for this kind of expertise could mount into six figures.

Even if many art historians steered clear of overt dealings in the market, the mindset that naturally followed from this activity, the identification with the interests of wealthy collectors and their manner of living, filtered widely through the field and became internalized as a re-

14 Irving Lavin, “The Crisis of ‘Art History,’” in Mieke Bal et al., “Art History and Its Theories,” *Art Bulletin* 78 (1) (March 1996): 14.

quirement for professional acceptance. For those who were benefiting so abundantly from this system, the stigma of the soft option, a certain disdain from colleagues outside art history, was a price worth paying. Their first line of defense became the mystification of an intuitive 'eye' that allowed the expert to perform feats of connoisseurship that no merely bookish historical scholar could accomplish. Even the close connections to Europe and to foreign scholars, a potential boon in an American academic scene prone to a certain parochialism, fostered the imitation of a high-handed, authoritarian treatment of students out of keeping with the more collegial style of graduate training that characterized the contemporaneous development of other disciplines.

The foregoing picture, despite its largely unflattering character, represents an attempt to describe a system according to what might be called its default functioning. While much sincere and valuable work was accomplished in the 1950s and 1960s, the system nonetheless worked against this collective acumen coming together in such a way that it could take the study of visual art to the next intellectual level. This has in fact happened over the last three decades – and Anglophone art history has in the process come to set the pace for the world. But the system had to change before what was still an immature body of thought and procedures, too long diverted to noncognitive ends, could truly grow up.

The persistence of the old system depended on conditions that could be maintained for only so long. Chief among these was keeping the research agenda of art history close to the centers – both geographical and chronological – that the first postwar generation

commanded. Of the many forces that undid that restricted compass was the progressive shift of interest among new entrants to art history toward the modern period, meaning roughly Western art since the mid-nineteenth century. During the same years that John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was financing the medievalists' dream at the Cloisters, his forward-looking wife, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, planted the seed of this development. In 1929, with the support of two female friends, she established the Museum of Modern Art in New York. They chose a young art history instructor from Wellesley College, Alfred Barr, as the museum's founding director. And Barr used his growing collection and landmark special exhibitions to stamp a historical schema on the art of the very recent past where none had existed before.

The early program of the museum included gestures toward native artists and vernacular forms consistent with a philanthropic mission in Depression-era America. But the heart of its activities, like those of the Gilded Age collectors and academic medievalists, lay in the imported culture of Europe. The distinction of Barr's enterprise resided in the fact that the Europeans themselves were not producing a competing body of scholarship or museology. Writing in the early 1950s, Panofsky acknowledged that a systematic history of modern European art had required the intervention of Americans. On their home ground, he opined, the immediate impact of the European avant-gardes "forced the *littérateurs* into either defense or attack, and the more intelligent art historians into silence. In the United States such men as Alfred Barr . . . could look upon the contemporary scene with the same mixture of enthusiasm and detachment, and write about it with the same respect

for historical method and concern for meticulous documentation, as are required of a study of fourteenth-century ivories or fifteenth-century prints.”¹⁵

Those art historians then devoting themselves to such objects did not, in the main, share Panofsky’s sympathy for this development. “Modern art,” Morey declared, “is on the whole an art of disillusionment, struggling to free itself from the ruins of abandoned shibboleths Hence its emphasis on the material aspects of our civilization, and especially on those more sinister ones of economic stress and social injustice, which stir the modern artist, writer, musician, to conscious or unconscious satire.”¹⁶ These words, written during the mid-1940s, appeared in a leading scholarly journal, at a moment when Barr’s prestige had reached something of a peak. Indifference or active resistance on the part of the established academy was such that training in the history of modern art remained distinctly marginal compared to the established subject areas from classical antiquity to around 1700; even the eighteenth century lay near the edge of the discipline’s zone of chronological comfort.

This self-imposed restriction had effects on the study of all periods. The discipline’s principal intellectual tools had evolved from a preoccupation with stable symbolic systems as yet untouched by the secular tumult and corrosion of modernity. There was next to no intellectual equipment available for gauging the impact of conflict, disruption, or even of change itself, the *raison d’être* of any historian. In the same essay cited above, Morey gave passionate voice to this assumption of stability, implausibly

declaring, “The forms in which the concepts of Christianity were cast showed remarkably little variation throughout the Middle Ages and throughout the mediaeval world.”¹⁷

In contrast, the increasingly independent, disenchanted, and rapidly changing art of modernity impelled its interpreters to begin comparing an arrangement of pigments in an oily emulsion with rapidly evolving phenomena like the Industrial Revolution or mass urbanization. The two phenomenal orders – aesthetic and historical – could at first be made only tenuously commensurable with one another because few, if any, ready mental maps existed that were adequate to both.

In the face of such a challenge, the first plausible explanatory strategy, adopted from the aesthetics of the Bloomsbury group in England and promoted by Barr, was to steer art history in a direction parallel to that of New Criticism in literary studies, giving pride of place to an artwork’s internal relationships and transformations of acknowledged precedents and prototypes (thereby bracketing historical determination and the consequent need for wide research). The new power of American abstract painting in the postwar period seemed to confirm criteria of value that required no justification outside the formal character of any individual work, and this intensional approach came to have its heyday during the early 1960s under the aegis of New York critic Clement Greenberg and his followers in the academy, chief among them Michael Fried of Harvard and later Johns Hopkins.¹⁸

17 Ibid.

18 Fried’s principal work in this vein has recently been collected in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

15 Panofsky, “The History of Art,” 91.

16 Morey, “Mediaeval Art,” 5.

The historiography of art has habitually shadowed the expanding self-consciousness of the advanced art practice contemporaneous to it (which has had far more to contribute than the well-meaning efforts of the aestheticians in departments of philosophy).¹⁹ As American artists moved away from formal abstraction toward the context-dependent strategies of Minimalism and Conceptual Art, this narrow set of formal preoccupations largely ceded the field – or, better, found itself incorporated into a more comprehensive brief. The emerging direction in studies of the modern period bore the imprint of those developments in advanced art around 1970 that brought to the fore the determining conditions of art making itself. This new tendency in scholarship likewise sought to align an object’s formal properties with the production of social meaning, turning even the defensive hostility toward theory and speculation on the part of most American art historians into a means to this end.

The principal compensation for the paucity of explicit theorizing in art history had been an obsession with empirical discovery – of unknown drawings, variants, contracts, recorded iconographic programs, original locations of objects – that had inculcated in generations of art historians a strong set of skills in archival research. And a further latent strength lay in the equally undertheorized activity of connoisseurship, that is, the concentrated attention to objects in search of telltale clues to condition, authorship, and quality. What

came to be called, in misleadingly reductive shorthand, ‘the social history of art’ succeeded to a significant extent by tapping this unique and underexploited combination of pursuits. The two halves of established art history – the mania for documentation and the cult of fine discrimination – had both represented a silencing of the demand for interpretation. But when these categories of analysis were put back together, they were to spark a collective release of pent-up energy and a recovery of lost time.

Each phase in the development of American art history appears to require a privileged geographical locus. For the first phase, it probably hovered somewhere near the relic-rich cathedral town of Santiago de Compostela, the western hub of the routes followed by medieval pilgrims. For the postwar generation, it was Rome and its Italian tributaries. For the social history of art, it was surely Paris.

Walter Benjamin, in his studies of Baudelaire, had memorably called Paris “the capital of the nineteenth century,” and a new wave of art historians took this aphoristic dictum to heart. In this same moment began the belated process of publishing and translating Benjamin’s own immense, unfinished project on the Parisian arcades, for its time a profoundly idiosyncratic attempt to correlate the most sophisticated art with the states of mind induced by an incipient consumer capitalism. But Benjamin, fortunately for the ultimate reception of his work, had an American counterpart of commensurable foresight and scholarly energy in Meyer Schapiro, the Columbia art historian with whom he shared a brief and poignant meeting in 1939. (Schapiro had sought out Benjamin with the aim of persuading the exiled German scholar

19 As Kubler observes (*The Shape of Time*, 67), “The work of many artists often comes closer to philosophical speculation than most aesthetic writings, which retrace the same ground over and over, sometimes systematically and sometimes historically, but rarely with originality.”

to seek safety among his old Frankfurt School colleagues in New York; Benjamin declined and met his death while fleeing toward Spain in the following year.)

Two years before their meeting, Schapiro had broached the connection between habits of consumption, particularly the newly intensified marketing of fashion and organized leisure, with concurrent developments in the artistic avant-garde. Taking Barr to task by name (and by implication his museum), he disputed the assumption that the history of modern art could adequately be “presented as an internal, immanent process among the artists.”²⁰ Addressing the historical moment commonly taken as the founding moment of modernism in painting, he observed:

It is remarkable how many pictures we have in early Impressionism of informal and spontaneous sociability, of breakfasts, picnics, promenades, boating trips, holidays and vacation travel. These urban idylls not only present the objective forms of bourgeois recreation in the 1860's and 1870's; they also reflect in the very choice of subjects and in the new aesthetic devices the conception of art as solely a field of individual enjoyment, without reference to ideas and motives, and they presuppose the cultivation of these pleasures as the highest field of freedom for an enlightened bourgeois detached from the official beliefs of his class. In enjoying realistic pictures of his surroundings as a spectacle of traffic and changing atmospheres, the cultivated rentier was experiencing in its phenomenal aspect that mobility of the

environment, the market and of industry to which he owed his income and his freedom. And in the new Impressionist techniques which broke things up into finely discriminated points of color, as well as in the “accidental” momentary vision, he found, in a degree hitherto unknown in art, conditions of sensibility closely related to those of the urban promenader and the refined consumer of luxury goods.²¹

It would be difficult to overestimate the degree to which this single passage anticipated the later development of the discipline. It is a mark of the time in which it was written (1937) that Schapiro was by vocation a young scholar of medieval art. And his ability to envision this schematic but prescient program for the interpretation of early modernism coincided with his single-handed effort within that subfield to counter the certainties of Porter and Morey with an alternative intellectual model.

The Marxist pedigree evident in much of Schapiro's vocabulary points to his preoccupation with conflict and change in the arts of Romanesque France and Spain, particularly as manifested in the dramatic expansions of trade and town life as countermovements to ecclesiastical hegemony around the turn of the twelfth century. The dominant approaches in the American art history of his time tended toward the amassing and cataloguing of ever more examples in a given category of object with the aim of establishing something like a statistical norm for the type – one in keeping with the stable complex of beliefs assumed to underwrite such a norm. Projects of this kind were for all intents and purposes boundless, endlessly postponing the interpretative challenge posed by any single work.

20 Meyer Schapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art,” *Marxist Quarterly* 1 (January – March 1937), reprinted in Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 188.

21 *Ibid.*, 192 – 193.

Schapiro adopted a diametrically opposed method, advancing the hypothesis that the most productive cases for art-historical inquiry will involve objects that constitute disruptive exceptions against the matrix of related works that surround them. And here his command of the modernist critic's alertness to innovation and internal artistic form came to serve that enterprise: instead of proceeding from the preponderance of examples that are most alike and defining everything else as peripheral or exceptional, he began by analyzing what happens when the reassuring regularities of form break down, so as to posit the operations of a larger signifying system from virtually a single instance.²²

In this wager, everything rested on what the most searching internal analysis of that chosen object could yield: bringing to light the fissures, discrepancies, and contradictions on which the exceptional artist had to impose some resolution, all without repressing the fractious heterogeneity of the concepts and techniques with which he was enjoined to work. A viewing intelligence schooled in the intricacies of Picasso and Braque's Cubism could come to the task with the requisite acumen. Schapiro's articles of the late 1930s advanced the art history of the Middle Ages by more than a generation – it remains an

22 Meyer Schapiro, "From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos," *Art Bulletin* 21 (4) (December 1939): 312–374, reprinted in Meyer Schapiro, *Romanesque Art: Selected Papers* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 28–101; Meyer Schapiro, "The Sculptures of Souillac," in *Medieval Studies in Memory of A. Kingsley Porter*, ed. W. R. W. Kohler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939), 2:359–387, reprinted in Schapiro, *Romanesque Art*, 102–130; see also Thomas Crow, *The Intelligence of Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 1–23.

open question whether the discipline has yet caught up with his example.²³

When he turned to the genesis of modernism, Schapiro reversed this maneuver, bringing to bear the medievalist's preoccupation with decoding obscure symbolic subject matter – what art historians designate as iconography in a technical sense. To the degree that the realists and impressionists of mid-nineteenth-century Paris set aside overt literary and mythological content, modernism had been assumed by both its admirers and detractors to lack significant subject matter: its motifs were deemed to be little more than pretexts for experiments in optical vividness or emancipated color, line, shape, and physical gesture. Schapiro's contrary contention was that the artistic avant-garde was advancing another systematic account of subjectivity to replace the outmoded 'official beliefs' of established religion and state power. He posited that the advanced artist, after 1860 or so, succumbed to the general division of labor as a full-time leisure specialist, an aesthetic technician picturing and prodding the sensual expectations of other, part-time consumers. In the hands of the avant-garde, Schapiro argued, the aesthetic itself became identified with habits of enjoyment and release produced quite concretely within the emerging apparatus of commercial entertainment and tourism – even, and perhaps most of all, when art appeared entirely withdrawn into its own sphere, its own sensibility, its own medium.

23 Remarkably, a tired and incoherent rehearsal of all the old mainstream resistances to Schapiro's ideas has recently been published in the journal of the discipline's principal professional organization: John Williams, "Meyer Schapiro in Silos: Pursuing an Iconography of Style," *Art Bulletin* 85 (3) (September 2003): 442–468.

But some three decades had to pass after Schapiro's first interventions before the kinds of resistance adumbrated above could be overcome. Crucial in this success was the building of a systematic iconography for Parisian modernism undertaken by Linda Nochlin, then at Vas-sar, and by Robert Herbert with several of his students at Yale.²⁴ And, by the late 1960s, new tools of interpretation from beyond art history's own store of techniques and practices came to hand, a kit that proved particularly useful in rendering analyzable structures out of the scale and fluidity of modern historical experience.

That moment represented a cusp when French structuralism and semi-otics had achieved sufficient coherence to be apprehended by a curious student, but still remained a minority interest, even in film and literary studies, let alone in art history. A work like Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, his landmark anatomization of Balzac's novella "Sarrasine,"

came close to an ultimate pulling apart of the disparate strands that an artist maneuvers into an effect of unity.²⁵ Adding to the appeal of such an enterprise was a new style of social history based in Britain, within which this same body of French theory took its place alongside equivalent commitments to neo-Marxist social theory and diligence in the archives. At the same time, the incipient British school of cultural studies was turning a similar set of tools toward contemporary society, making possible a new acuity in the dissection of vernacular culture, with an emphasis on the ways that disaffected subcultures were repositioning and creatively redefining mass-produced products.²⁶

The first of these strands had a head start in America, largely through the prescient efforts of Annette Michelson, a scholar of avant-garde cinema who extended her reach to the contemporary visual arts in a way that has made her one of its most formidable intellects.²⁷

24 Nochlin's contribution at first centered on the rural and working-class imagery that distinguished the realism of Gustave Courbet in the late 1840s and 1850s and that set the stage for Manet's more urban set of motifs. Two particularly important articles took up and extended the insights of Meyer Schapiro, "Courbet and Popular Imagery: An Essay on Realism and Naïveté," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 4 (3–4) (April–June 1941): 164–191, reprinted in Schapiro, *Modern Art*, 47–86. These were Linda Nochlin, "Innovation and Tradition in Courbet's Burial at Ornans," in *Marsyas Studies in the History of Art*, suppl. 2, "Essays in Honor of Walter Friedlaender" (New York: Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1964), 119–126, and Linda Nochlin, "Gustave Courbet's Meeting: A Portrait of the Artist as a Wandering Jew," *Art Bulletin* 49 (3) (September 1967): 209–222. Herbert's research is represented in Robert Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988); see also Paul Hayes Tucker, *Monet at Argenteuil* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982).

25 Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970). The lesson of Barthes's project for established literary-critical assumptions follows Kubler's formula, written a decade before (*The Shape of Time*, 28), for unpacking the apparently unified work of art: "... the cross-section of the instant taken across the full face of the moment in a given place, resembles a mosaic of pieces in different developmental states, and of different ages, rather than a radial design conferring its meaning on all the pieces."

26 The founding text was Phil Cohen, "Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community," Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Working Papers in Cultural Studies 2, Spring 1972, 5–51, reprinted in Phil Cohen, *Rethinking the Youth Question: Education, Labour and Cultural Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998).

27 See as an example Annette Michelson, "Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression," in *Robert Morris* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969).

Settled at New York University after an extended sojourn in Paris, she would join with Rosalind Krauss (the leading scholar of modernist sculpture, who was then guiding a small, insurgent program at the CUNY Graduate Center) in building on this new foundation and encouraging an impressively sophisticated circle of younger art historians and critics that had gathered around their jointly edited journal *October*. Accelerating the incorporation of all three currents into a unified project was the arrival of T. J. Clark, a young British art historian who spent an initial period at UCLA during the mid-1970s, moving later to Harvard before settling at UC Berkeley. In his work on impressionism, Clark returned to the territory for which Schapiro had provided a rough map in 1937. Alongside much archival research in the spirit of Benjamin's notebook citations for the Arcades project, Clark brought to bear a new analytical penetration of the internal workings of individual pictures, one that made concrete and detailed Schapiro's acute but generalized characterizations of Parisian modern-life painting.

A striking example of this occurs in his discussions of those motifs that most easily lent themselves to comfortably brain-soothing harmonies: scenes of strollers and yachtsmen on the banks of the Seine's great curves north and west of the city. "[H]ere was a subject," Clark states, "which lent itself normally to simple rhythms and sharp effects: sails bending in unison, rigging arranged in casual geometries, reflections laid out as counterpoint to the world above."²⁸ While canvases by Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, or Alfred Sisley

most obviously fall under this characterization, Clark gives pride of place to a painting like *Canotiers à Argenteuil* by Édouard Manet, the older artist who had led the way for the larger impressionist group. In the summer of 1874, when Manet fashioned this work, his friend Monet was living in the suburban town of its title, then a transitional settlement of weekend villas, boat basins, and intruding factories in search of available land and river access. And the avant-garde painters who gravitated to such locations formed a marginalized subculture in themselves, one compelled to improvise an identity in the as yet ill-defined spaces of metropolitan pleasure and consumption.

The granular degree of detail in Clark's extended account of the painting does not permit the succinctly summarizing quotations supplied by Schapiro. The following passage, however, which comes at the end of several pages of analysis, has the virtue of moving rapidly from a set of totalizing propositions to their anchor in the technical fabric of the painting via minutely particularized description devoted to a seemingly insignificant segment of its surface – one that the recreational art lover would in all likelihood overlook:

Signs, things, shapes, and modes of handling do not fit together here. Paint does not make continuities or engineer transitions for the eye; it enforces distinctions and disparities, changing completely across an edge, insisting on the stiffness of a pose or the bluntness of blue against yellow. This is the picture's overall language – this awkwardness of intersection, this dissonance of colour . . . For example, the hank of rope which hangs over the orange side of the boat towards the right. No doubt we decipher the flecked rope and the fluffy tassel without too much dif-

28 T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 167.

ficuity, and proceed to examine the more elusive trail of paint which starts down from the gunwale, bends, and seems to peter out into the orange – peter out for no good reason. And in due course the eye makes sense of the situation: we begin to see the wandering line as a shadow, and realize eventually that the orange surface is not – as it first assumed to be – simply flat. It is curved, it is concave; and the curve explains the peculiar shadow and is explained by it – or, rather, is half explained and half explaining: the broken triangle of brushstrokes is not mended quite so easily, and never entirely proves the illusion it plays with. It stays painted, it stays on the edge of a likeness.²⁹

Impressionism is conventionally celebrated for its objectivity in rendering the play of light and color in the world as one sees it, but Clark identifies in the studied ambiguities and discrepancies of Manet's portrayal of these two awkward urban pleasure seekers a higher order of objectivity about the troubled and uncertain transition of the traditional city to the modern one, an historical watershed experienced by old and new city dwellers as a continual succession of unresolved edges and illegibilities.

This marriage of scholarly object and approach proved particularly fruitful for the discipline's belated engagement with questions of sexuality in general and the ethical imperatives of the women's movement in particular. The redoubtable Nochlin, before and after moving to the graduate Institute of Fine Arts at NYU, had for some years been extending the social-historical model in the service of an emergent feminism.³⁰ Younger scholars like Hol-

lis Clayson and Carol Armstrong – now at Northwestern and Princeton respectively – were later able to seize upon the impressionist rhetorics of ambiguity and disguise as preeminently figuring relations between the sexes, where the centrality of these very qualities had defeated the old (male) art historian's compulsion toward iconographic certainty.³¹ This level of explanatory ambition presented demands that led art history, at least for a time, to an engagement with the material intricacies of its physical objects of study that surpassed anything that the postwar establishment had ever contemplated.

Nor did this achievement necessarily depend upon the particular set of tools that Clark and others selected for the job – nor indeed on the particular opportunity later nineteenth-century Paris offered as a subject. The early 1980s, during which Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life* appeared, proved particularly rich in landmark books by art historians. The book that launched the wave was Michael Baxandall's *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, which contains next to no acknowledgment that any new climate of theoretic-

Power and Other Essays (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), and Linda Nochlin, *Representing Women* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

³¹ Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991; reprinted Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003); Hollis Clayson, *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life Under Siege, 1870 – 1871* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Carol Armstrong, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991; reprinted Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003); Carol Armstrong, *Manet Manette* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).

²⁹ Ibid., 166.

³⁰ For representative collections of her work in this vein, see Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and*

cal speculation in the humanities even existed.³² Baxandall instead looked toward codified forms of knowledge, all strictly contemporaneous with the objects of his study, in fields as far from the practice of sculpture as the guild-lore of the Meistersingers or the “chiromancy” of the alchemist Paracelsus (which has the salutary effect of demonstrating that interpretative theories are just tools, the sophistication of which does not depend upon their date or upon the particular vocabulary in which they are expressed). His approach yielded a level of analysis applied to the inner workings of form that set a standard for all those who came after, in any period or medium, a standard all the more impressive because he was confronting exceptionally complex ensembles of sculpture, painting, and cabinetwork typically produced by a number of hands.

Baxandall becomes a part of this specifically American story when he began during the 1980s to combine his old position at the Warburg Institute in London with teaching alongside Clark in UC Berkeley’s ascendant graduate program. As such, his account of pre-Reformation piety, with its acute attention to doubt, anxiety, and tension between the sinful appetites excited by wealth and the concomitant capacity of the new affluence to fund extravagant expressions of faith, brought up-to-date Schapiro’s original insight that the greatest religious art arises from just such circumstances.

Attention to these strong forces of renewal within the discipline can serve to disqualify a common assumption that helpful outsiders from other disciplines,

observing the weakness of postwar art history, have stepped in to give the field its new energy and place at the broad humanities table. Any palpable benefits have largely accrued to the career profiles of these outsiders, not to positive gains for art history as a discipline. Among historians, lack of experience – positive or negative – with the protocols of the connoisseur has made for flat and unrevealing descriptions of works of art, which too often amount to the visual equivalent of reading for the plot. Literary critics, for their part, have tended to apply their resources of close reading and armatures of theory without the clarifying resistance generated by sustained work in the archives, which is to say, without equal concern for how works of art come to be made as for the ways in which these works can be consumed.

But it is difficult to deny that the energy of that moment has diminished in the intervening couple of decades. From its beginnings as a minority – and immediately embattled – position, the so-called social history of art has grown in the meantime to constitute something of a new default function for the field: virtually every contribution to the *Art Bulletin* (seen as the scholarly journal of record) represents a variation on this approach, even when these components are not explicitly acknowledged. The expected level of competence is far higher than was the norm a generation ago, as is productivity, whether measured by individual output or by the percentage of actively publishing scholars within the overall population of the field. And an increasingly complete picture of art practices across a wide geographical and chronological territory is consequently taking shape – including territories outside of Europe and North America. Nonetheless, with a certain domesti-

32 Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980).

cated version of ideology-critique now the norm, the outcome of many studies has become a fairly predictable affair. In one obvious sense, however, the center has ceased to hold. From the preeminent position that it occupied a generation ago, the study of later nineteenth-century French painting has markedly receded in prominence, ceasing to promise any smooth path of professional success.

Baxandall, in his book on German limewood sculpture, documented the ways in which the fragile synthesis of nearly incompatible components – held together in the art of a Veit Stoss or Tilman Riemenschneider but already on the verge of flying apart under the least added stress – was utterly dispersed by the iconoclastic forces of the Reformation. In the various specialized genres to which sculptors then turned in a climate of diminished expectations, one can identify the distinct elements obscured in their previous intertwining. A similar unraveling has occurred within art history, which has suffered to a certain degree from this conspicuous period of success. While impressive advances have continued in social-historical documentation, elaboration of theory, expansion into vernacular culture, and engagement with modernism, each of these pursuits has become increasingly self-sufficient and consequently less able to inform the others.

Shorn of reflection on the neo-Marxian theories that originally framed the social-historical project, the new mainstream has not discovered any comparable source of conceptual renewal. Later, competing claims to the semiotic and poststructuralist element of ‘theory’ have been lodged on behalf of distinctly different interests. To put it unkindly, these lie in making a metaconversation about the possibility or impossibility of a history of art into a self-sufficient

enterprise, one easily leveraged into an aura of interdisciplinary glamour and a comparatively effortless proliferation of talks, papers, and books. To this end, it has been a convenient conclusion drawn from ‘theory’ to say that any intelligible pattern drawn out of historical data represents an inherently spurious metanarrative (even though the original efficacy of the turn to theory had precisely been to identify analyzable structures in the historical record). The component of art history that has required hard graft in the archives then can be set aside – and disparaged in the bargain as a lesser, if not misguided, pursuit.³³ Indeed, “the Archive,” in the wake of Michel Foucault, has been isolated as a disciplinary social construction toward which the theorist can freely condescend.

This metahistorical pursuit has had little time for the recalcitrant physical immediacy and uniqueness of an individual object of art. This distrust of close-range sensory evidence has passed into the broad, ill-defined tendency called ‘visual culture.’ From Schapiro to Herbert, Clark, and Baxandall, the conduct of the most sophisticated art historians has entailed a deep curiosity about the varieties of vernacular expression that inevitably enter into the synthetic imagination of the artist. While never denying the independent fascination of that material, all nonetheless retained the perspective that Baxandall framed in intentionally provocative terms: “Only very good works of art, the performances of exceptionally organized men, are complex and co-ordinated enough to register in their forms the kinds of

³³ For a symptomatic expression of this mode of thought, see Norman Bryson, “Art in Context,” in *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis*, ed. Mieke Bal and Inge Boer (New York: Continuum, 1994), 66–78.

cultural circumstance sought here; second-rate art will be of little use to us.”³⁴ His advised use of the masculine gender in this passage (there were no women known in the relevant trades of the period) matters less than his insistence on the cognitive value of aesthetic distinction, which now runs against a prevailing tide in which no special case can be made for one category of artifact against another.³⁵

The question remains as to what field of study actually remains once one sacrifices its former core, its point of departure and return, in self-conscious and highly wrought objects of art. The proliferation of potential examples extends to near-infinity, and necessarily results in a reduction of material specificity to the single plane of the image, which is phenomenal rather than actual. And, given that much of the art historian’s brief has entailed accounting for processes of conception and manufacture that are not strictly sensible in the final product, emphasis on ‘visual’ commonalities imposes a drastic narrowing of the aspect through which interpreters can grasp this newly vast field of inquiry.

A further tendency toward disaggregation lies in an unabated push toward the modern. A rule of thumb applied to new entrants is that roughly half of them will concentrate in ‘modern art’; what is more, the dividing line between ‘the modern’ and what came before it keeps creeping forward (which has left impressionism and postimpressionism in

a growing scholarly limbo, despite their huge popularity with undergraduates and the general public). A good guess would place the current median boundary (half of the graduate students before it, half after) somewhere in the early twentieth century, say 1912 or so. And the change may be more exaggerated than that figure might suggest, since the fastest growing area is better named ‘contemporary,’ meaning art produced from around 1960 forward.

The drive toward the modern, then, is in danger of shooting past the point where it can find common ground with the legitimate preoccupations of art historians working in earlier periods. As often as not, the media favored by younger scholars – film, video, reproduced texts and photographs, assemblage installations – are impermanent, impatient with the layered density of the unique physical objects around which the discipline was built. The skills required to decipher the messages of those time travelers in their vast and largely unexplored numbers and then to speak on their behalf will reside, it seems, in a shrinking number of scholars.

That bifurcation of the available skills within the discipline may nonetheless carry within itself the potential for a new synthesis at a higher level, much as the paired fetishizing of documentation and connoisseurship did among the immediately postwar generation. One can read the recent preoccupation with ephemeral and time-based works of art as saying something about the larger brief of art history: the sample of objects from which art history fashioned itself constitutes the merest fraction of the universe that an ideal form of the discipline would address, that is, all the artifacts of densely symbolic expression that have ever been made. Forever out of view are all those destroyed

34 Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, 10.

35 See, as a representative example, the comments of Keith Moxey, “Motivating History,” *Art Bulletin* 77 (3) (September 1995): 392–401, reprinted in Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Persuasion: Paradox and Power in Art History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 65–79.

by war, vandalism, demolition, renovation, neglect, and natural decay; as well as the colossal if uncountable number that have been lost to time because they were never intended to be preserved in the first place (the sculptures of Michelangelo modeled in snow offer just the most spectacular instance of these submerged continents).

Other kinds of documents allow such works to be indirectly retrieved and hypothetically reconstructed, so that the actual survivors from the past can assume their places within a historically comprehensive matrix of technical and expressive possibility. From everything one can tell by such investigations, the divisions observed in our own time between high art and vernacular culture are far more difficult to maintain, such that a properly comprehensive art history obviates to a significant extent the contemporary rationale for a visual-culture alternative to the inherited field. In this regard, it has been the push of younger researchers – out ahead of the preceding generation’s preoccupation with avant-garde painting and sculpture – into the unconventional art practices of the twentieth century that has shown the way.

To the degree that one learns to ‘see’ ephemeral events, happenings, performances, film, and video under the rubric of Art (which is where their makers have placed them), then a corresponding receptivity to the historical totality of art production should follow. Some confirmation for this proposition exists in the renewed currency of one other art-historical pioneer, the visionary German scholar Aby Warburg, whose deep contributions from the 1890s to the 1920s had remained, until recently, unassimilable within the normative discipline. In a compelling series of articles, Warburg

had looked to the gesticulating mummers of the Florentine street processions as lying behind some of the most august (to the eyes of posterity) rediscoveries of classical prototypes in art.³⁶ Even when elevated by a Botticelli to the most refined movement and costume of court pageantry, the frozen gesture carried a deeper, unbroken inheritance from the ancient world, one of barely sublimated sexuality, violence, and magical thought, which lay beyond any merely bookish catalogue of mythological stories and aesthetic canons. For him, the figure in motion, derived from the direct experience of performers in the guise of ancient deities, constituted the true subject of advanced Florentine mimesis in the 1480s (and his having discerned living parallels to this history in the festivals and artifacts of the Hopi, whom he sought out during an American sojourn in 1896, provides the strongest early example of the bridge building required to render traditional Western fields of study commensurable with those devoted to the diverse cultures of the wider world).

Warburg’s legacy can, without danger of anachronism, project the artistic recognitions of the present into art history’s old heartland of the Italian Renaissance – and by extension into all older bodies of material. Beside the compellingly affective character of surviving art objects, he had been able to discern the equivalent value of their heuristic properties, which distribute networks of meaning over a much wider but more elusive field. These enduring works of painting or sculpture still provide an ir-

36 See Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999), 161 – 167.

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replaceable opportunity for instruction in historical interpretation, one all the more needed when even very recent art works have left behind only a litter of residual artifacts, documentary records, and fallible memories. But each was once a physical encounter of palpable order and coherence, however fleeting the moment of its particular Kublerian “commotion” may have been. To recreate that moment in the absence of the work itself requires the trained imagination that comes from the encounter with those objects that render their own long-ago commotions in *fixed* formations.³⁷

37 I am grateful for the assistance of Alison Locke and Doris Chon in the preparation of this essay.