

Forum

Early American Studies Now: A Polemic from Literary Studies

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Early contributions to the study of the first American novels such as Herbert Ross Brown's *The Sentimental Novel in America* (1940), Alexander Cowie's *The Rise of the American Novel* (1948), and Henri Petter's important *The Early American Novel* (1971) assessed the inconsistencies and contradictions of these texts as artistic failures of a fledgling art form.¹ It is only with the publication of Jay Fliegelman's *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (1982), Emory Elliott's *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725-1810* (1982), and especially Cathy N. Davidson's seminal *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986) that criticism shifted decisively from considerations of aesthetic quality to politics. Throughout the 1980s most critics followed this lead as they interpreted formal tensions in early American novels as reflections of ideological strains in the new republic. In such readings the gradual transition from a republican culture based on "an abiding concern for the public good, a commitment to virtue, a belief in deference to leadership by the talented, and support for a balanced government" to a "liberal society of self-made men consolidating in post-1790 America" is a major source of ideological strains that are reflected in early American novels' textual tensions (cf. S. Watts 53, 44).²

Many critics of the 1990s continued to elaborate on the links of literary culture to the emergence of liberalism as the country's new dominant ideology, though with a significant difference. Remaining within the framework of political criticism, works such as Larzer Ziff's *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States* (1991), Grantland S. Rice's *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (1997), and Michael T. Gilmore's chapter in the first

¹ This essay grows out of my second book project "Beautiful Deceptions: American Art and European Aesthetics, 1750-1828," which explores deception as a political, epistemological, and aesthetic topos in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European reflections on art and sensuous cognition as well as contemporaneous American literature, painting, and sculpture.

² For seminal discussions of the value system of republicanism, see Bailyn; Wood, *Creation*; Pocock; Shalhope; Schloss. For major accounts of liberalism in the early republic, see Hartz; Huyler; Dworetz; G. Brown. For important comparative work on republicanism and liberalism, see Appleby. See also Kelleter, who notes—drawing on Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*—that both republicanism and liberalism are modern ideologies in the sense that they recognize that the world is made by human beings rather than God, affirm industry, acknowledge self-interest as a driving social force, and oppose personalized power structures (*Amerikanische* 392-93).

volume of *The Cambridge History of American Literature* assessed the political valence of early American novels in decidedly less favorable terms than Davidson, Fliegelman, and Elliott. Generally speaking, while the earlier critics are by and large sympathetic to the emancipatory potential of liberalism and, drawing heavily on feminist scholarship, tend to read textual inconsistencies and contradictions as subversive of rigid patriarchal social structures, criticism of the 1990s betrays a roughly neo-Marxist bent as it mourns the passing of a republican culture and its communitarian ethos to argue that formal tensions in early American novels signal their complicity with an emergent liberal-capitalist order.

Within German American Studies, both varieties of political criticism have met with a charge that ties in with the critique I stage in the present essay. In the most general terms, both the Davidson and the Gilmore camps are taken to task for a presentism that threatens to deny the alterity of early American novels and the lifeworlds they engage with as it projects present ideological convictions onto them. This charge runs like a common thread through several of the essays collected in Klaus H. Schmidt and Fritz Fleischmann's edited volume *Early America Re-Explored: New Readings in Colonial, Early National, and Antebellum Culture* (2000). Thus, with a view to an earlier, colonial text, Frank Kelleter in "Puritan Missionaries and the Colonization of the New World: A Reading of John Eliot's *Indian Dialogues* (1671)" cautions fellow critics "to keep in check the widespread tendency to instrumentalize the past in the service of contemporary mythmaking and collective identification" (98). In his extensive survey and critique of scholarship up to 1997 in "From Aesthetics to Political Criticism: Theories of the Early American Novel," Winfried Fluck argues in a similar vein when he censures "a political voluntarism in which critics project those political meanings into the early American novel that best suits their needs" (254). Against such appropriations of the past for the present, Fluck suggests that political criticism needs at least a sound theory of modernization and the losses and gains it brought to ground its judgments of the politics of aesthetic works (255-56). In his monograph *Die tugendhafte Republik: Politische Ideologie und Literatur in der amerikanischen Gründerzeit* (2003), Dietmar Schloss takes to task the same critics' presentism as he questions whether their "modern and postmodern conceptualizations of society, identity, and culture, which presuppose a fundamental separation between individuals and society and always conceptualize society and culture as repressive apparatuses, can adequately capture the culture and literature of the early republic" since "contemporary observers experienced neither their state nor their society as a rigid institutional structure but as an experiment—an experiment, moreover, for which they had the highest expectations, including geopolitical ones." Schloss concludes that "the more recent critics negate the 'Other' in the literature of the early republic to make it serviceable to their own political agendas" (15; translation mine).³

³ Note that while both Fluck and Schloss censure the presentism of U.S. Early American Studies of the 1980s and 1990s, they stage their critiques from two very different vantage points: not surprisingly for a former student of Wolfgang Iser, Fluck ultimately insists on the negativity of early American literary culture, while Schloss emphasizes its affirmative stance. For Fluck,

In U.S. American Studies, one major impetus for expanding and revising the liberalism-republicanism debate of the 1980s and 1990s came from Michael Warner's Habermasian *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (1990), which provoked a flurry of publications on textual production within early American civil society and the respective importance of printed texts and oral communication for the establishment of a modern public sphere.⁴ Much of that work also challenged Habermas's focus on the bourgeoisie and postulated a multiplicity of smaller public spheres, most notably female ones.⁵

Since the late 1980s, a second group of scholars has begun to move away from many of these critics' focus on New England. Spearheaded by historians and spurred on by Philip F. Gura's repeated appeals for a move away from what he calls "novanglophilia" ("Study" 310; "Early American" 600), regions other than New England (the Middle Colonies, the Chesapeake, the Lower South, the Caribbean, Nouvelle France, and Spanish America) were given increased attention in works such as Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole's edited volume *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Modern Early Era* (1984), Greene's *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (1988), and Philip D. Morgan's *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (1998).

While the bulk of this work was and continues to be done by historians, a third major development from the early 1990s onward shifted the discussion in literary studies even more decisively away from the Northeast to challenge nation-centered narratives about early America more generally. In line with a broader reconfiguration of American Studies as 'post-national(ist),' 'transnational,' or 'hemispheric,' and inspired by the work of William Spengemann, David S. Shields, José David Saldívar, Nancy Armstrong, Leonard Tennenhouse, Paul Gilroy, Edward Watts,

one major problem with both takes on the liberalism-republicanism debate is that they read textual forms mimetically, as homologous with social and political structures so that "the relation between textual surface and political subtext is no longer one of tension or contradiction" (251). In contrast, Schloss argues that "[o]ne can only really understand the literature of the early republic when one takes seriously its 'conformist' character. In some sense, this literature is indeed 'supportive of the state.' It claims to educate Americans as republican citizens and thus aspires to contribute to the 'stabilization' of the nation" (16; translation mine).

⁴ For explorations of the relative importance of speech and writing for the constitution of early American public spheres, see Fliegelman, *Declaring*; Looby; Shields, *Civil*; Gustafson; and more recently, Loughran.

⁵ See Goodman's review of some of the critiques made of Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere: "During the last six years there has been substantial debate about the validity of Habermas's theory: about the importance and significance of his Marxism, for example, and about the existence or sociological meaning of such central features of his theory as public opinion and even the public sphere itself. Questions have been raised about the possibility of multiple publics beyond the literate, 'bourgeois' one privileged by Habermas, about women's role in the public sphere and their relationship to it, and about the way in which the national cultures of England, France, and Germany figure in Habermas's basically Marxist chronology, which sees England as in the lead and Germany pulling up the rear" (1-2).

and Ralph Bauer,⁶ a younger generation of scholars has begun to challenge the exceptionalist assumptions inherited from the Myth-and-Symbol School and shared by several preceding generations of Early Americanists to embed American literary production in a broader geographical framework that includes not only Europe but also South and Central America, the African continent, and the West Indies. In the process, concepts and notions from post-colonial studies such as creolity, subalternity, and hybridity were imported into Early American Studies.⁷

The Limits of Political Readings

This is a rough description of the status quo at the end of the twentieth century, when, for the benefit of all Early American Studies scholars, Gura published in the July 2000 issue of the flagship journal of the field, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, the essay “Early American Literature at the New Century,” an assessment of major developments from 1988 to 2000. The tone of this essay is strikingly different from that of its predecessor, “The Study of Colonial American Literature, 1966-1987,” which Gura had published twelve years earlier in the same journal. The 1988 essay largely constituted an exhortation to its readers to reconstitute the study of early American literature. In Gura’s analysis, the predominance of Sacvan Bercovitch’s work on New England Puritanism was chiefly responsible for major infelicitous trends in the field: the study of early American literature not in its own right but as a precursor to the texts of the American Renaissance; exceptionalist assumptions that divorce the study of literature from its transatlantic contexts and deny the differentness of early American culture in the search for continuities between colonial and post-colonial American culture; the tendency to focus on New England culture and religious rhetoric to the exclusion of the cultures and languages of other regions; the neglect of more popular texts such as devotional tracts, captivity narratives or the sex manual of “Aristotle”; and a disregard for the embeddedness of literary and other texts in early American print culture. For Gura, Early American Studies was deeply in need of revision.

By the turn of the century, his tone has switched from exhortation to celebration. His admirably broad and knowledgeable overview of scholarly achievements since 1988 sketches a field at the forefront of American Studies. Early Americanists have successfully filled many of the gaps pinpointed in Gura’s earlier essay and opened up new lines of inquiry not envisioned there. He outlines several major developments: Puritanism is no longer considered the one defining discourse of the era, and Bercovitch’s insistence on the success of the consensual negotiation of Puritan dissent has been qualified; regions other than New England have received

⁶ For a programmatic set of essays in the postnationalist vein, see Rowe. For two succinct accounts of the ‘transnational turn’ in American Studies, see both Fishkin and Rowe. For developments in American Studies more generally, see Saldívar; Spillers; Kaplan; Kaplan and Pease; Streeby. A selective list of influential texts also include Spengemann; Shields, *Oracles*; Saldívar; Gilroy; Watts; Bauer.

⁷ See, for instance, Carretta and Gould; Gruesz; Brickhouse; Goudie; the 43.1 (2008) issue of *Early American Literature*; Bauer and Mazzotti.

due attention; oral, print, and manuscript culture have been given increasing consideration in discussions of early American public spheres; revisionist critics have unearthed the writings and voices of women, laborers, African Americans, and Native Americans; early American culture is no longer considered in isolation from its transatlantic cultural and socioeconomic contexts; comparative studies have turned their attention to texts in languages other than English; and, most importantly for Gura, a number of new literary-historical approaches to the period have abandoned exceptionalist premises and challenged text-based literary histories that seem to take us seamlessly from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. In what amounts to a summary of several of the trends outlined above, toward the end of his essay Gura writes:

We are at a point, in other words, when we are moving away from studies centered on literary influence per se toward excavations of large-scale cultural sites—such as the book distribution network, the centralization of publishing in urban areas and the ensuing mass advertising, the relation of gender to authorship, the interracial world of the Atlantic Rim, and the like. Only after we explore these sites can we turn our attention to the kinds of subjects Ziff approvingly recommended in 1988, “with strategies of the author and their effect on the reader” still the “meat” of literary analysis. (“Early” 618-19)

Summing up, we can say that what Gura welcomed in 2000 were two major shifts of focus: from (literary) text to history and culture, and from the ‘continuities school’ in literary history—which in its privileging of New England culture postulates fundamental continuities between seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century literary production—to an awareness of cultural diversity and historical discontinuity.

Gura links the first shift to the emergence of New Historicism and the concomitant waning of textualist approaches influenced by post-structuralist theory—work that too often “seemed based in a brash and finally irrational rejection of the project of literary history as a worthwhile endeavor” (“Early American” 616). Gura’s comments reflect what continues to be a broad consensus in Early American Studies—comments that need to be qualified. His complaint about the ahistorical textualism of post-structuralist theory and criticism is familiar, but it completely ignores the fact that what is new about New Historicism is primarily its post-structuralist awareness of what Louis A. Montrose calls ‘the historicity of texts’ and ‘the textuality of history.’ While post-structuralism is not a method of historical inquiry per se, two of the questions it invites to us ask are: a) what does it mean to read historical documents of the past (as opposed to experiencing the historical real), and b) what does it mean to write historiographic texts in the present?⁸ Most importantly, by forcing historians and New Historicists alike to take seriously the ultimate constructedness of all stories about the past, post-structuralism enables them to explore in sustained fashion the processes of inclusion and exclusion that preserve some texts and some voices more than others. Post-structuralism, in other words, can and has been put in the service of writing more diverse and inclusive literary histories of the type Gura embraces.

Yet what, precisely, is literary about those literary histories? Do literary texts still have a place in twenty-first-century studies of early America as conceived by

⁸ For a characterization of New Historicism along those lines, see Thomas.

Gura? Yes, they do, but a much diminished one. To explore both the reasons for Gura's turn from literature to culture and the links that connect this turn to his rejection of the 'continuities' school, we can profitably turn to one of the responses Gura's essay received. Both of Gura's interventions had three respondents: Larzer Ziff, Norman S. Grabo, and David Levin in 1988; Carla Mulford, David S. Shields, and Michael P. Clark in 2000. Out of the second trio of respondents, Mulford most enthusiastically joins Gura in welcoming the shift from literary to historical and cultural analysis he describes. Yet her discussion of that particular shift considers it within the larger framework of debates on canon formation, thus adding a more explicitly political dimension to Gura's argument:

The greater grounding in a range of historical areas has led many early Americanists to expand their institutionalized definitional understanding of what *literature* and *the literary* are. *Literature* tends to be used in two ways. Many early Americanists identify it as the written record of persons' thinking and activities, especially as taught by scholars in departments of English. But it is also employed to mark particular kinds of imaginative, self-consciously written, aestheticized materials, typically inscribed by elites. In the second use, the term denotes a specialized kind of writing apart from oral reports and speeches, sermons, and other "practical" written materials. Those whose concerns have been with aesthetics and foundational ideologies have wished to preserve the term as designating a particular kind of intellectual inquiry apart from history and apart from more generally read writings about day-to-day activities or even, sometimes, matters of faith. Such specialized use can undermine the project of cultural recovery. For this reason, the word in its second, more special usage has come under significant scrutiny, because the term becomes the site of canon and ideology debates, which can be rancorous. Most early Americanists would agree that, however the term is deployed, *literature* names a body of materials that create and shape cultures. (Mulford 628)

Let me spell out a number of assumptions concerning the place of literature within the field that inform this passage. First, in early America, literature in the narrow sense is produced mainly by cultural elites. Second, those Early Americanists who strictly distinguish between the literary and the nonliterary are chiefly concerned with "aesthetics and foundational ideologies." Third, such strict distinctions threaten the project of recovering texts and voices heretofore excluded from the early American canon. Fourth, what generates 'rancorous' debates are too narrow definitions of 'literature.' Finally, literature in both the broader and the more narrow senses performs cultural work.

Mulford's response to Gura helps us understand how both critics' aversion to the 'continuities' school is related to their celebration of the cultural-historical turn in Early American Studies. Since most of the *literary* texts published in early America were written by a New England elite, so the argument goes, scholarly preoccupation with those texts predisposes critics to postulate continuities with the New England elite that made up the core of F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*. What is left out of that kind of literary history are not only texts that do not fit narrow definitions of the literary, but along with it the voices of people and communities that did not primarily write imaginative literature: African-Americans, Native Americans, laborers, perhaps even women.

This account has considerable explanatory power. However, it is also based on a number of assumptions concerning the social functions of literature that

I wish to problematize. First, while Mulford assigns nonliterary texts a rather specific function ("the written record of persons' thinking and activities"), she remains vague concerning the function of literary texts ("a particular kind of intellectual inquiry apart from history and apart from more generally read writings about day-to-day activities or even, sometimes, matters of faith"). This raises the question of what, precisely, constitutes the differentness (or apartness) of literature. At the same time, it raises the question of whether texts that aspire to be something other than a recording device have any real place in Mulford's account. Clark's critique in his response to Gura's essay, which is close in spirit to mine, *a fortiori* applies to Mulford: "The purpose of reconstructing the historical context is to establish a set of constraints on and expectations for the literary text that limit its meaning to the reproduction of that context or, at best, to the values of the 'reading public' and its inevitably conservative tastes and expectations" ("Persistence" 643).

Second, to call literary writing "imaginative" does capture something of the differentness of *fictional* discourse, but Mulford never pauses to ask what the function of aesthetic semblance may be. Once we let ourselves be troubled by that question, we may explore the possibility that literature does not aspire to represent—let alone record—the world. Instead, it generates new, fictional worlds. In the late eighteenth century, it was Friedrich Schiller who, in his twenty-seven letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), most eloquently asserted the social and political implications of such world-making. Standing at the beginning of a long line of thought that connects art and the utopian imagination, Schiller's vigorous defense of artists' right to aesthetic semblance merges with the argument that art critiques the status quo by contrasting it with utopia in its twofold sense: a good world (*eu-topos*) that is nowhere in existence (*ou-topos*): "The reality of things is the work of things themselves; the semblance of things is the work of man; and a nature which delights in semblance is no longer taking pleasure in what it receives, but in what it does" (193). In this understanding of the social function of art, it does not so much express or record the voices of those who are left out of the official record as provide all observers of art with a vehicle for imagining a different (read: better) world and for vicariously experiencing, within the fictional world, different subject positions. This is the kind of cultural work that Schiller envisages for aesthetic semblance.

Third, Mulford's intimation that reading and writing literature are elite activities cannot explain the fact that the early American novel met with fierce criticism precisely by cultural elites. The U.S. anti-fiction movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is a well-documented phenomenon whose spokespersons included some of the most prominent public figures of the era: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, Timothy Dwight, and Noah Webster. These politicians, clergymen, scholars, and educators greeted the newly emergent novel with a hostility reminiscent of the diatribes against fiction staged in England since the late seventeenth century.⁹ Such opposition to fiction testifies to an uneasiness with fictional texts whose sources Davidson identifies with accuracy:

⁹ For a good discussion of the British opposition to the novel, see Taylor. For pertinent accounts of the U.S. anti-fiction movement, see Orians; Charvat; Martin; Davidson.

Sustained misgivings as to the social and moral effects of fiction represent, then, an attempt by an elite minority to retain a self-proclaimed role as the primary interpreters of American culture. [...] As novels became increasingly available, increasingly affordable (either purchased or rented), and increasingly accessible to the public (both because of their own linguistic simplicity and their readers' improved literacy), they were increasingly perceived to be eroding the pulpit model of erudition and authority. (105-06)

In its insistence on the subversive potential of fictional discourse, Davidson's *Revolution and the Word*—a major and highly influential work which Mulford rightly critiques Gura for omitting from his account (623) even though it was published a few years outside the essay's temporal range—seems to me to capture more adequately one of the functions literature performed in late eighteenth-century America than does Mulford's dismissal of it as an elite preoccupation. As Davidson's monograph amply demonstrates, neither the plurality of voices we hear in the early American novel nor the plurality of forms it is made up of make it a likely vehicle for the promulgation of specific ideological interests, let alone a hegemonic Puritan ideology. Studying these novels hardly predisposes us to subscribe to the 'continuities' school of Early American Studies rightly critiqued by both Mulford and Gura.

Finally, I strongly disagree with Mulford's suggestion that the "specialized use" of literature "can undermine the project of cultural recovery." I agree with her that, as students of early America, we should not privilege any kind of discourse or text of the period over another, but neither should we level the differences between different discourses and texts. Instead, we should study with as much precision as possible the specific forms and specific functions of all kinds of texts and other cultural artifacts. Only then can we begin to explain how they—to quote Mulford again—"create and shape cultures."

Mulford inherits her focus on the work texts do from New Historicist practitioners, chief among them Jane Tompkins, who coined the notion of 'cultural work' in her influential *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. Granted, New Historicists' determination to read all kinds of texts (court transcripts, political pamphlets, literary texts, primers, cookbooks, and so on) side by side, their de-hierarchization of the relationship between literary and other texts, and their discussion of non-literary texts as co-texts rather than contexts is commendable and liberating not only because it challenges the totalizing tendencies of what Raymond Williams calls 'epochal analysis' but also because it greatly helped open up the canon to texts by writers heretofore excluded from it. But there is one unfortunate legacy of New Historicism that I wish to contest. In their laudable challenges to elitist presumptions about literary value and their commitment to de-hierarchization, many critics inspired by New Historicist tenets tend to downplay or overlook the differentness of different sign systems—their different shapes and different functions. By 'differentness' I do not mean 'different quality' but 'qualitative difference'—the type of difference that comes into view when we acknowledge, for instance, that despite their insistence on the veracity of the stories they tell, early American novels make truth claims that are different from those made by early American historiographies or autobiographies even if those narratives, too, contain fictional elements. Novelists not only

make different truth claims than historiographers and autobiographers, they also write differently, address different implied readerships, and are involved in different kinds of processes of print production and circulation. To acknowledge these qualitative differences between different texts and media is not to put literature back on any pedestal; it is to read literary and other texts as interventions in, contributions to, and parts of given cultures *in their different ways*.

Since Gura's 2000 essay and Mulford's response to it, more than a decade has passed, but most scholarship on the period still follows in the tracks laid out by that essay—an assessment that is confirmed by Catherine O'Donnell's review essay "Literature and Politics in the Early Republic: Views from the Bridge" (2010), the title of which already indicates that politics continues to be at the heart of not only historians' but also literary scholars' concerns. While the emphasis has shifted away from the liberalism-republican debate toward embedding literature in transnational contexts, political-historical readings of early American texts are still dominant. In fact, Early American Studies of the early twenty-first century has become more political in the sense that much scholarship has moved away from a consideration of the relationships between literary and political forms and toward reading literary texts as expressions or even symptoms of geopolitical developments. This is particularly true for the new 'economic criticism.' Eric Wertheimer's fascinating analysis of the structural similarities between literature and insurance in *Underwriting: The Poetics of Insurance in America, 1722-1872* (2006) and Stephen Shapiro's splendid re-interpretation of the rise of the American novel from the vantage point of world-systems theory in *The Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel: Reading the Atlantic World-System* (2008) are exemplary in this respect. To Wertheimer, literary writers responded to problems of representation that revolved around three notions—loss, risk, and publicity—whose primary frame of reference is not the era's discourse on art but the insurance industry; Shapiro claims that the early American novel arose as a result of economic cataclysms in the circumatlantic world that opened up the Caribbean to American trade, thus enabling the rise of a prosperous new class of re-export merchants in the early republic whose structure of feeling the novel gave expression to. Related lines of argumentation can also be discerned in recent scholarly work that follows the 'literary geography' paradigm. In his important book *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity* (2006), Martin Brückner stages an intriguing attempt to theorize what he calls 'geographical literacy' and describes the shapes that specific type of literacy took in the early republic. Brückner states his main arguments clearly in the introduction: to trace how the "signs and symbols on the map or the rhetoric and narrative structures of geography books affect[ed] the practices surrounding the production of literature" and to explore how "the internalization of geography as a kind of language shape[d] the literary construction of the modern American subject" (12).

Admittedly, to read literary texts, as Wertheimer does, as articulations of cultural assumptions about monetary value is a critical move that is extraordinarily bold, and Shapiro's analysis of novelistic production in the 1790s as "convey[ing] a re-export-associated middle-class experience as a means of compensating for its exclusion from traditional institutions and modes of address" is just as daring (27).

Brückner's tracing back of not only literary structures but also early American subjectivities to discourses revolving around map-making likewise paves new ground. But all these critical moves fit in with a more general trend in contemporary Early American Studies: the contextualization of literary production and reception within large socioeconomic frameworks that are said to exert a considerable shaping power on not only the social functions but also the forms of literary writing. This is especially true for the recent 'hemispheric turn' in the field. Ralph Bauer's *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity* (2003) has been instrumental in importing this turn into Early American Studies. Bauer shares Wertheimer's, Shapiro's, and Brückner's convictions that literary texts are shaped primarily by extraliterary forces: "history *mattered* in this Atlantic world [so] that the differences in literary and generic evolutions in various places must be understood in terms of their distinct socio-historical developments" (8).

I believe it is high time to test the limits of such readings and to address what Ed White and Michael Drexler have diagnosed as contemporary Early Americanists' "unspoken apprenticeship in the guild of History," which "diminishes our theorization of textuality" (469) and has turned "early American literary criticism" into "largely [...] a textual subfield of history" (472). What I take issue with is less that historians tend to ignore related work in Early American literary studies while literary scholars readily cite historiographical work than the move from textualism to contextualism *within* Early American literary studies. However, I do not agree with Eric Slauter's assessment that "the real divisions in Early American Studies are probably between individuals whose methodological expertise inclines them toward or away from the close analysis of written texts, as opposed to the contextualization of those texts" (167). To my mind, the one makes little sense without the other. What I object to is the use of literature as historical evidence and the often far too ready postulation of homologies between literary and social forms that go along with much contextualist work. To give but one example: poetry is not and can never be "a barometer by which scholars can measure the history of slavery and the rise of so-called scientific racism during the long eighteenth century" (Carretta, Rev. 573). This is not to say, as many a historian would, that literary texts are weak evidence but to point out that we cannot do justice to literary texts if we read them as barometers. Literary forms never simply reflect or reiterate extraliterary ones—be they economic, scientific, or ideological. To my mind, literature should not be regarded as—in O'Donnell's characterization—"the bird who rides around on the rhinoceros—a sweet little creature worthy of attention only by its odd connection to that great beast of early republic history, politics" since this "sorely limits our understanding of literature's role in the world, and perhaps also limits, at least in this historiography, our understanding of politics" (290).

Aesthetic Ideology

Along with canon revision and the politicization of literary studies, the aesthetic has also come under critical scrutiny. In seminal works such as Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (1983), Barbara Herrn-

stein Smith's *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (1988), and most influentially (but also most ambivalently), Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), 'the aesthetic' variously refers to features of works of art themselves or to communications about art. In the present context, I am primarily interested in these thinkers' critiques of the kinds of professional communications about art we call 'aesthetics.'

Smith's dismissal of scholarly reflections on art is among the more aggressive. Charging aestheticians with a circular logic that proclaims those sensory or cognitive experiences 'aesthetic' that are elicited by certain objects that are labeled 'aesthetic' because they elicit those experiences, she writes:

[T]he academic aesthetician trained to flourish in this sort of circle can spend his or her professional career describing (a) the nature of the "experiences" that are produced by those objects that are readily identifiable as works of art by virtue of their having the properties that elicit such experiences, and (b) the nature of the "properties," unquestionably, possessed by what are unquestionably works of art, that elicit the experiences that only artworks can elicit. (This is a parody, but not by much). (35)

As if intimating that such endeavors are basically a waste of time was not enough ('entire' is missing from "can spend his or her professional career," but we get the point), Smith adds that they are also ideologically baleful because they reinforce an exclusionary canon:

[T]hese academic exercises also perpetuate a thoroughly unproblematized conception of art, which is to say an essentialist definition of the *label* "art." [...] [I]t is no surprise that "essentially aesthetic experiences" always conform to those typical of the Western or Western-educated consumer of high culture and that "essentially aesthetic properties" and "essential aesthetic value" always turn out to be located in all the old familiar places and masterpieces. (35-36)

What we can witness in Smith's argument here, and in her book as a whole, is a kind of slippage that has left its traces in contemporary literary and cultural criticism. A cursory, more philosophically inclined critique of aesthetic concerns (Smith's charge is circularity) quickly transforms into a more political attack on aestheticians' essentializing tendencies and ethnocentric high-culture bias. What happens along the way is a reduction of aesthetic concerns about the forms of art and the nature of aesthetic experience (both of which Smith does acknowledge) to matters of evaluation. It thus comes as no surprise that the section that immediately follows the passages I quote above is titled "Matters of Taste." The problem with this slippage is fourfold.

First, on the basis of the assumption that the real interest of literary works lies in their embeddedness in and contributions to larger social and political configurations, it dismisses more general reflections on art and aesthetic experience as a frittering away of scholars' time—as if one could think seriously about the social and political ramifications of artworks without considering their specific forms, without, in other words, considering their aesthetic makeup. Second, it reduces aestheticians' manifold concerns to questions of value and taste. These categories are indeed ideologically charged *if* they remain tied to unproblematized notions of meaning and truth or to a pre-modern understanding of art as part of a specific

form of life—an understanding that still underlies early American painter John Trumbull's conviction that the fine arts "add dignity to our sentiments, delicacy and refinement to our manners" as they "humanize the soul, and polish away that rugged ferocity of manners, which is natural to the uncultivated nations of the world" (4-5). In fiction, we can see the exclusionary logic of taste at work in Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy*, where she mercilessly satirizes the social upstart Mr. Marney, who "affect[s] to be a complete connoisseur [sic] in matters of taste" (68) but is exposed to ridicule when he confuses a painting about the judgment of Paris with a representation of the Garden of Eden (77). Yet judgments of taste are reserved to elites only if we understand the notion in its most narrow, i.e., elitist, terms. Third, from its beginnings in the eighteenth century, aesthetics has been concerned with a number of additional issues that Smith either downplays or ignores: the more general investigation of sensory cognition proposed by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, which is by no means restricted to reflections on the experience of art;¹⁰ Joseph Addison's, Edmund Burke's, David Hume's, Johann Jacob Bodmer and Johann Jacob Breitinger's, Johann Georg Sulzer's, Immanuel Kant's, and others' divergent reflections on the role of the imagination in the production and reception of art;¹¹ the status of new descriptive categories such as the sublime and the picturesque in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), and Uvedale Price's *An Essay on the Picturesque* (1796); the *subjective* quality of judgments of taste in Hume and Kant; and, most strongly in Kant and in Schiller, the individually and politically emancipatory force of aesthetic experience. When Smith charges aestheticians with reifying a restricted range of objects as timeless works of art, I wonder whether her real targets should be not the eighteenth-century theorists of art she critiques (most prominently Hume and Kant) but seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century rationalist aestheticians such as Charles Batteux, Christian Wolff, and Thomas Rymer, whose belief in the timelessness of the art of classical antiquity came under considerable pressure from precisely those theorists Smith censures.¹² In fact, empiricist aestheticians such as Hume, who emphasized the *subjective* nature of the experience of art in their writings on taste, are indispensable precursors to Smith's reflections on the contingencies of value. Finally, as Iser reminds us in "Why Literature Matters,"

¹⁰ Baumgarten's major treatises on aesthetics are the two-volume *Aesthetica* (1750/1758) and the *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (1735) in which he coins the term "aesthetics" and defines it as "the science of perception" (par. 116, 78).

¹¹ Some of the most important contributions to eighteenth-century debates concerning the imagination are Addison's *Spectator* essays no. 421-27 on "the pleasures of the imagination" (Addison and Steele 2: 132-47); Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*; Hume's reflections on the topic dispersed throughout *A Treatise of Human Nature*; Bodmer and Breitinger's essays collected in *Die Discourse der Mahlern*; Sulzer's entry on "Einbildungskraft" (*imagination*) in his *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* (2: 10-14); and Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

¹² For good accounts of the eighteenth-century shift from an aesthetics of imitation that was grounded in the divine order of nature, in reason, and in the timeless rules of classical antiquity to an aesthetics of experience that valorized innovation and originality, see Beardesley (140-208), Townsend (15-24), Luhmann, *Art* (162, 78-79, 262-63, 71-72, 311), and Iser, "Toward" (273-76).

the notion of literary value that Smith subjects to critical scrutiny ultimately also informs the project of canon-revision she espouses. While I would put it less categorically, Iser makes an important point when he writes that "the current debate about the canon is in the last analysis nothing but an attempt to claim some of the cultural capital which, in the past, was the object of appropriation by the dominant classes" (16).

Yet it seems to me that the kind of argument that Smith makes has won the day, in American Studies more generally as well as in Early American Studies. To give but a small sampling: it informs religious scholar Tracy Fessenden's conviction that, while earlier scholars assigned literature to "a different, 'aesthetic' order of things," we "no longer associate literature so singularly with the aesthetic, or imagine that aesthetic concerns are absent from other kinds of writing" (185); it resonates in literary scholar Russ Castronovo's assertion that "history's influence upon Early American Studies has had salutary effects in staving off canonizing tendencies by encouraging explorations of less strictly recognizable literary materials in ways that have opened up teaching and research to texts by and about women, new-world Africans and African Americans, and Native Americans" (487); it enables historian Cathy Matson to assert that "theorists such as Archibald Alison promoted an emotional, imagination-driven aesthetics in which beauty was not in objects themselves but rather in the mind of the spectator, thereby liberating individuals to consume not only useful goods but decorative ones as well" (788); and it is at the heart of urban historian Domenic Vitiello's conviction that the spatial turn allows historians "to move their work from the realm of style and aesthetics towards a more meaningful place in debates about social, economic, and urban history" (689). In these and many other critics' understanding, a scholarly focus on "the aesthetic" is variously taken to be complicit with an elitist understanding of culture that marginalizes and excludes cultural productions by non-elites (Fessenden, Castronovo), with divorcing the study of literature from more serious social and political concerns (Fessenden, Vitiello), or with individualist bourgeois ideology (Matson). Paradoxically (but not contradictorily), aesthetic considerations are censured both for being apolitical and for giving expression to class-bound interests.

Another constant of the 'aesthetics as ideology' paradigm is that the critique of aesthetics is, in most cases, bound up with a desire to revise and expand the canon. Much of the power of persuasion of *Contingencies of Value* derives from this conjunction, and Smith's scholarly work has given literary critics engaged in recovery work and canon revision an intellectual foundation. Yet Smith's book was published over two decades ago, as were Jerome McGann's and Terry Eagleton's, and in the meantime, the canon-revisionists have won the day, at least within academic discourse. As far as Early American Studies is concerned, one need only browse the tables of contents of recent issues of major journals such as *The William and Mary Quarterly*, *Early American Literature*, *Early American Studies*, or the *Journal of the Early Republic* to verify that the (generic, ethnic, social, national, and linguistic) range of texts discussed has expanded dramatically since 1990, and our field is all the richer for it. These developments in Early American Studies are, of course, very much in sync with developments in American Studies more generally. If the canon is at least partly defined by what gets taught, the selections made by

the editors of recent editions of both major anthologies of American literature, the *Heath* and the *Norton*, likewise testify to a democratization of the curriculum that is as welcome as it is impressive.¹³

Yet it is the very success of these redefinitions of American literature that makes charges that narrow definitions of literature or scholarly preoccupations with aesthetic questions continue to exclude texts written by the downtrodden and marginalized ring somewhat false at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Perhaps it is once again safe to ask ourselves what reflections on art produced by elites as well as non-elites can teach us. In John Joughin and Simon Malpas's words, it may be time to embark on the recovery of a "sense of art's specificity as an object of analysis—or, more accurately, its specificity as an aesthetic phenomenon" (1).

Returns to the Aesthetic

Indeed, since the mid-1990s there has been a resurgent interest in the aesthetic. In Anglophone literary studies, George Levine's *Aesthetics and Ideology* was among the first to bring the aesthetic back into the discussion, and that essay collection was soon followed by further edited volumes and monographs such as James Soderholm's *Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in an Age of Cultural Studies* (ed., 1997), Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), Michael P. Clark's *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today* (ed., 2000), Isobel Armstrong's *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000), Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne's *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* (ed., 2001), and Joughin and Malpas's *The New Aestheticism* (ed., 2003). These books invite us to re-read major aesthetic concerns and treatises in the light of current debates concerning the cultural work literary and other texts perform. What can their diverse returns to the aesthetic teach Early American Studies scholars? In the most general terms, I fully concur with William Walker's assessment in his discussion of Addison's essays on the imagination—that aesthetic treatises are interesting first and foremost for what they have to say about art and what they have to say about perception:

[R]egardless of how one understands the political meanings of Addison's essays on the pleasures of the imagination, it is not the case, as many critics now seem to think, that these meanings constitute *the* meaning of these essays, that they are their essential meaning, or that all other meanings in some way reduce to these meanings. [...] It is possible that, in writing about art, a person might be doing many things besides defending the interests of a social group, such as intentionally or unintentionally presenting a critique of the general concepts governing our perception and understanding of art; intentionally or unintentionally describing how his and others' erotic energies are implicated in their perception of art; intentionally or unintentionally revising earlier accounts of art;

¹³ Clearly, the publication of the first (1989) edition of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* has been a major catalyst in this process. Paul Lauter, the anthology's general editor, and Lois Leveen, the website editor of its online presence, rightly describe the first edition as "a symbol and a tool" that "symbolized the desire among many teachers, critics, and students to study the full range of the literatures produced in America rather than the very limited number of works that had come to be known as the 'literary canon.'"

intentionally presenting an account of the nature of art and how we respond to it. And, if a person was doing some of these other things, it is hardly self-evident that they are all superficial, surface actions that are in some sense reducible to the deep, real, essential action that is social, material, and political. (79)

Surprisingly perhaps, Walker's critique not only applies to adherents of the 'aesthetics as ideology' paradigm, it also applies to much discussion generated by what has variously been labeled 'the return of aesthetics,' 'the revenge of the aesthetic,' 'the new aestheticism,' or (in Isobel Armstrong's phrasing) 'the radical aesthetic.'¹⁴ As we read on the back cover of Elliott, Caton, and Rhyne's *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, it is not so much aesthetics itself that many of these critics attempt to move back into the discussion; it is the relationship of aesthetics to the political concerns that dominate literary and cultural studies these days: "Addressing the vexed relation of the arts and criticism to current political and cultural concerns, the contributors to this volume attempt to bridge the two decades-old gap between scholars and critics who hold conflicting views of the purposes of art and criticism." Do not get me wrong: I share Elliott et al.'s desire to bring the aesthetic into a dialogue with the political; my concern is that this should not happen too quickly lest the results be the inverse of those reached by the 'aesthetics as ideology' camp—that instead of being seen as perpetuating dominant (bourgeois) ideologies, aesthetic objects and aesthetic theorizing are now reconceptualized as allies of more progressive, emancipatory sociopolitical projects and agendas.

This is a danger that I see at work, for instance, in Armstrong's insistence on "the democratic and radical potential of aesthetic discourse" (2) as well as Scarry's interweaving of the social, the moral, and the political in *On Beauty and Being Just*. For Scarry, the experience of beauty predisposes us to work toward social justice and an ethically viable care for the world and its objects: "Beauty," she writes, "intensifies the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries. [...] Beautiful things give rise to the notion of distribution, to a lifesaving reciprocity, to fairness not just in the sense of loveliness in aspect but in the sense of a 'symmetry of everyone's relation to one another'" (95). In her desire to put beauty in the service of other values, Scarry not only overestimates the direct, real-world effects our encounters with beauty may have, but she also ignores the fact that some of those aesthetic objects that actually did promote justice and social change were anything but beautiful in Scarry's sense; think of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) or Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). With regard to both Armstrong and Scarry, I concur with Levine's assessment: "it seems that one will get nowhere now in ethics, aesthetics, or politics without recognizing also the failure of the project of conflating the three" ("Saving" 908).

My own take on aesthetics is closer to Gabrielle Starr's, who notes that, reading Scarry's and Armstrong's work as well as that of fellow proponents of a return to the aesthetic, one may be led to believe "that thinking the aesthetic all but requires its immediate translation into something else, whether it is ethics, ideol-

¹⁴ Nicholas Shrimpton traces the emergence of the term "new aestheticism" to Rei Terada's enthusiastic review of Jonathan Loesberg's *Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida and de Man* (1991) in the fall 1993 issue of *diacritics* (Shrimpton 8).

ogy, or politics; aesthetics may well be uninteresting without such transformation” (366). Against this ready conflation of the political, the ethical, and the aesthetic, Starr aims “to explore what happens when the temptations of hermeneutic and ethical approaches to the aesthetic are held, even briefly, at bay” (362). To my mind, two words are particularly apposite here: “even briefly.” My own take on aesthetics starts from the assumption that neither art nor philosophical reflections on art are either politically emancipatory or ideologically suspect *per se*, and it insists that asking aesthetic questions about the forms and functions of artworks—a category in which I emphatically include literary texts—is not only a worthwhile endeavor in itself but also an indispensable foundation of any serious exploration of the cultural work done by art, by artworks of any period in the history of art, or by one specific work of art. From such a vantage point, one can again begin to look into the strangeness of works of art, the unique qualities of individual works of art, aesthetic experience, and the specific forms and social functions of different media of art in ways that reduce art neither to the political and historical nor to the apolitical and ahistorical. What is called for, then, is a turn from the hermeneutics of suspicion to a newly configured aesthetics that abandons the “reluctance” of much recent theory and criticism “to recognize the specificity of the poetic work in the field of social action” (Clark, Introduction 4) and acknowledges the insights gained through the politicization of literary and cultural studies without being subsumed by them.

What Now?

So what would a turn to a newly configured aesthetics entail? Let me sketch, in all brevity, three possible avenues. First, scholars could explore questions concerning the social functions of literature in ways that are different from those suggested by the notion of ‘cultural work’ that New Historicism bequeathed to today’s critics. One example of such an approach is exemplified by Oliver Scheiding’s *Geschichte und Fiktion: Zum Funktionswandel des frühen amerikanischen Romans* (2003), which draws on several varieties of German *Funktionsgeschichte*—a term that one of its major practitioners translates as “history of the changing functions of fiction” (Fluck, “Why” 376)—to probe how early American novels self-reflexively challenge epistemic and generic hierarchies and boundaries (most notably those between historiography and fiction) by way of a “laying bare of the fictionality or narrative nature of [all] sense-making processes” that aims at “prying open contemporary determinations of the function of literature that commit it solely to pragmatic purposes” (243; translation mine). Next to *Funktionsgeschichte*, systems theory provides another theoretical framework that does not start out with the question of how specific literary works position themselves to and intervene in social and political issues of the era. Both approaches begin with a more general inquiry into the position and function of literature (and art) within the social whole at a specific moment in time. In doing so they allow us to see that both the often noted formal tensions and the strikingly high degree of self-reflexivity in early American novels have *both* political valence *and* bear witness to processes

of modernization, the autonomization of art, and (in systems-theoretic terms) the differentiation of modern societies into self-organizing function systems such as politics, the economy, religion, and art, which fundamentally changed the place of art in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America.¹⁵ Such approaches are neither ahistorical nor apolitical; they probe the *specificity* of the contributions art makes to the social whole and, by showing that art performs different functions at different points in time, strive to avoid the presentism of some of the more overtly political readings.

A second avenue of exploration could expand on well-established discussions of early American novelists’ challenges to the era’s dominant empiricist epistemology (see Kindermann, Hagenbüchle, Glasenapp). In the early republic, this is nowhere more evident than in the Gothic fictions of Charles Brockden Brown, but a host of other texts of the period, including Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s *Modern Chivalry*, Tabitha Gilman Tenney’s *Female Quixotism*, and Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*, to name but three, also probe the limits of human sense perception. Once we remind ourselves that, in the eighteenth century, ‘aesthetics’ was not only a theory of natural and artistic beauty but also, in Baumgarten’s definition in the *Aesthetica*, “scientia cognitionis sensitivae” (par. 1, I: 60), i.e., “the science of sensuous cognition,” we can see how these writers’ challenges to Enlightenment epistemology also constitute self-reflexive interrogations of their own artistic practices. Art, after all, negotiates, initiates, and participates in processes of perception and cognition.

Finally, my brief remarks about the original meaning of ‘aesthetics’ may be taken to suggest that a more general exploration of the convergences between eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European reflections on art in the emerging discipline of aesthetics and contemporaneous American literary and artistic production could prove fruitful. Edward Cahill’s recent *Liberty of the Imagination: Aesthetic Theory, Literary Form, and Politics in the Early United States* (2012) makes an important step in that direction as it shows just how closely aesthetics and politics were connected in the revolutionary and early national public spheres: “aesthetic ideas [...] provided a means of articulating notions of liberty, equality, virtue, community, and difference during a time of political revolution and social improvisation” (3). What I appreciate particularly about Cahill’s book is that it thinks aesthetics and politics together while refusing to reduce the former to the latter. Instead, he shows how

¹⁵ According to systems theorists, each social system performs one unique function for modern societies. “[T]he function of art,” Niklas Luhmann suggests, “seems to lie in the production of world contingency. The ingrained, mundane version of the world is shown to be dissolvable and becomes a polycontextual reality that can also be read differently” (“Das Kunstwerk” 624; translation mine). Luhmann’s major treatise on art is *Art as a Social System*. Siegfried J. Schmidt and Niels Werber provide competing systems-theoretic descriptions of the function of art. “[I]ts function for society as a whole,” Schmidt argues, “consists in [...] the suspension, by way of the communicative treatment of life world and culture, of the alienation subjects suffer as a result of social differentiation” (422-23; translation mine). Focusing on literature, which he describes as a subsystem of the system of art, Werber argues that its function is to provide entertainment to address the modern problem of leisure time and growing demands for its structuration (27, 64, 76-77).

“the politics of aesthetic theory is inherent in the language of its rhetoric” (8). While Cahill focuses almost exclusively on British aestheticians—his single reference to Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* as concerned with “philosophical questions of taste” (3) is telling in that respect—future scholarship might elaborate on his excellent work to include continental European thinkers. For instance, two major aesthetic treatises of the era that are mentioned only in passing in *Liberty of the Imagination*—Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*—were not read in the early republic but in their reflections on the autonomy of judgments of taste, the free play of the human faculties in aesthetic experience, the aesthetic education to freedom, artists’ right to aesthetic semblance, and—yes—disinterestedness forcefully testify to a transatlantically shared aesthetic discourse structured by what Cahill calls a “dialectical drama of liberty and constraint” (189) that is not limited to the Anglophone world.

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