

## Early American Studies Now: A Response to the Respondents

PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER

My three colleagues' highly welcome, spirited responses to "Early American Studies Now: A Polemic from Literary Studies" come with two surprises: first, they are more generous than I thought they would be; second, the most incisive critique is staged by the scholar from whom I expected least opposition. Let me begin by reporting on my second surprise. At least in part, I saw my own return to aesthetics—and thus to questions of artistic forms and their social functions—as a way of responding to Ed White and Michael Drexler's call for "reading practices attentive to the work's formal and generic elements, as counter to the tendency to read thematically." Like Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin, whom White and Drexler enlist for their cause in "The Theory Gap," my return to aesthetics aims at "sustain[ing] the gap between text and context" (482). Upon re-reading their essay, though, I realize that my own project is quite different from theirs: while they call upon fellow literary scholars to make their professional reading skills useful for more refined political readings of early American texts that would allow literary criticism of the period to emancipate itself from its current status as "a textual subfield of history" (472), I am primarily interested in exploring these texts' self-reflexive interrogation of the status of art vis-à-vis other social realms. To my mind, the question of how literary works, sculptures, and paintings negotiate and intervene in sociopolitical debates of their time cannot be divorced from a more general inquiry into the positionality of art in that time. Thus, the gap I wish to open up between text and context is not unbridgeable but wider than that envisaged by White and Drexler.

This might help explain why, for me, White's response to my polemic remains squarely within the political readings of aesthetic theory that I take issue with. In its determination to "ma[p] the constituent political dimensions of nascent aesthetic formulations," it subjects aesthetic writings to the hermeneutics of suspicion. My unease with this take on aesthetics does not derive from a belief that aesthetic thinking is in any way politically neutral or that "historicist objectivity" is an attainable or even desirable goal. My unease derives from the conviction that reflections on art and sensuous perception are interesting in their own right and should be understood and appreciated as such *before* being correlated with history and politics. To my mind, 'symptomatic' readings of aesthetic theories do not suffice. Yes, the "distinction between 'Art' and the artisanal" is indeed "arbitrary," at least in a Saussurean sense, but the arbitrariness of that distinction says little about either its heuristic potential or its real-world effects.

Furthermore, while I am not entirely sure that my essay "enact[s] the fantasy of an aesthetic object fundamentally distinctive from other 'things,'" I do believe in the enabling and emancipatory power of that fantasy. Schiller's letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* are indeed apposite here for they stage a powerful

argument that aesthetic experience has an emancipatory political force precisely *because* it is one step removed from empirical reality. One and a half centuries before the Frankfurt School, Schiller invites us to ponder Adorno's paradox that "[a] sociality becomes the social legitimation of art" (234). Schiller's guiding question at the close of the eighteenth century was how the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment project could be salvaged given that its most powerful social and political actualization, the French Revolution, had descended into *terreur* by the time Schiller was writing his letters. Schiller's answer was basically this: if the Enlightenment project is to succeed, it must speak not only to human beings' reason but their feelings, too. And aesthetic experience is the space of play where reason and feeling (the 'form-drive' and the 'sensuous drive' in Schiller's anthropology) are reconciled so that subjects are liberated from the constraints of each. Thus, Schiller's reflections on aesthetic education provide a corrective to Robespierre's grim determination to erect an "empire of reason," an "order of things where all the low and cruel passions are enchained, all the beneficent and generous passions awakened by the laws" (3). This is why Schiller writes, in a quote adduced by White, that "Beauty alone can confer on him a *social character*" (215). Schiller starts from the individual and ends with the collective: an emancipated sociality depends on individuals emancipated in the course of aesthetic education. This is at the heart of the most often quoted phrase from Schiller's letters: "it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom" (9).

Still, White's comments on the class-bias and political import of Schiller's aesthetic theory are perfectly accurate and justified (as are, *a fortiori*, his analogous comments on Uvedale Price's theorization of the picturesque). At the same time, they do not engage with what seems to me central to Schiller's argument: the emancipatory potential of autonomous art and aesthetic semblance. And speaking of 'aesthetic semblance': White rightly points out that the passage I quote from Schiller concerning the liberating potential of aesthetic semblance is preceded by a distinction between "extreme stupidity and extreme intelligence" (193). To my mind, though, the passage that follows my quote is more apposite. There, Schiller makes a strict distinction between 'logical semblance' and 'aesthetic semblance,' declaring the former inadmissible while defending the latter. This distinction, which Schiller develops with the autonomy of art in sight, is crucial when it comes to analyzing the kinds of deceptions that White points out in Brown's *Ormond*: "Dudley's misreading of Ormond, his misreading of the yellow fever, his blindness, Baxter's dream, Constantia's miniatures, and so on." As is well known, deceptions of all kinds abound in Brown's gothic novels, from *Wieland* to *Ormond* and *Arthur Mervyn*. And of course, political criticism has often read them as anxious responses to the rise to prominence of self-interested individuals in the emerging liberal paradigm. Yet a careful consideration of Schiller's defense of aesthetic semblance also allows us to see that deception in Brown is not always marked negatively. While Carwin's multiple deceptions may indeed precipitate the Wieland family's downfall, deception and delusion in *Wieland* are also sources of artistic creativity. This is why Clara Wieland does not care "[w]hether," in sketching Carwin's face, her "hand was aided by any peculiar inspiration, or [she] was deceived by [her] own fond conceptions" (61), and this

is what allows the ever-ambivalent Carwin to identify himself as an artist figure when he claims that his deeds “self-expelled” him “from a scene which the munificence of nature had adorned with unrivalled beauties, and from haunts in which all the muses and humanities had taken refuge” (241). Such passages add a decisively self-reflexive dimension to Brown’s novel in that they stage an interrogation of the power of make-believe that is central to the art of fiction. To conclude my response to White, let me add that I am all in favor of his proposal of a ‘negative genealogy’: studying those aesthetic forms and practices that did *not* travel across the Atlantic may turn out to be as fruitful as studying those that did, be it from the perspective of his hermeneutics of suspicion or the newly configured aesthetics that I advocate.

Let me turn to my first surprise. I am grateful for Stephen Shapiro’s characterization of my polemic as a “conversation-enabling intervention” and hope that my brief response to his response will be received in the same gracious spirit. Let me start out by noting that Shapiro is entirely right to point out that my critique of currently dominant approaches within Early American Studies is restricted to the field itself and does not sufficiently take into account that, partly due to scholars’ (most often critical) engagement with U.S. foundational myths, the field “remains more tightly policed by extra-academic forces than almost any other sphere of American Studies” even as its findings have not yet reached a wide enough audience beyond academia. For a European Americanist such as myself, it is all too easy to forget the extent to which what I call ‘the politicization of literary and cultural studies’ is a response to the political instrumentalization of the nation’s past (as well as its present) by reactionary forces outside the academia. Speaking from where I speak, I am highly unlikely to receive, as did a U.S. colleague of mine, death threats for publicly denouncing the reiteration of the Vietnam-era slogan ‘support our troops’ during the 1990/91 edition of the Persian Gulf War. But what conclusions should we draw from our awareness of the historical and cultural situatedness of past and present discourses about the nation? Should we acknowledge, as Shapiro does, that talk about “aesthetics” and the “play of the text” may jar in the ears of graduate students socialized in a new era of austerity? And if so, should we revamp, as Shapiro suggests, questions concerning aesthetics in terms of (collective) emotions and “structures of feeling” and their socially transformative potential? Perhaps we should. But before we go down that road, we should also remind our students that play is a decidedly serious affair for both Schiller and Derrida. When, in 1795, Schiller wrote that “to mince matters no longer, man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully a human being when he plays*” (107), he did so because he considered play and aesthetic experience privileged paths toward the emancipation of subjects that the Enlightenment promised but appeared to withhold as it was descending into state-sponsored bloodshed during the final stages of the French Revolution. In a different but related vein, while the connection between play and freedom is more implicit in Derrida’s language philosophy, it is useful to remind oneself once more that it has proven crucial for explicitly political reworkings of deconstruction in post-colonial and feminist challenges to dominant discourses. Finally, while I would not replace ‘aesthetics’ with ‘emotions,’ I wholeheartedly welcome

revisiting Raymond Williams and the Birmingham School, adding merely that ‘feeling’ and ‘emotion’ are *also* key aesthetic terms. After all, aesthetics is, we have learned from Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the theory of *aisthēsis*, i.e., of sense perception, sensation, and feeling. Shapiro is entirely right in dismissing any facile distinction between literature and history; let us also apply that to that other distinction: aesthetics and politics.

Out of my esteemed trio of respondents, it is Duncan Faherty who most explicitly characterizes my contribution as “provocative.” He rightly takes me to task for overemphasizing the success of canon-revision over the last quarter of a century or so. There are, I readily admit, countless texts waiting to be recovered, some of which may fundamentally change our view of what constitutes early American literature. So why stray once more across the Atlantic to engage with European cultural elites’ reflections on art and sensuous cognition that were not even read in the early republic? Why pursue such “ethereal connections” and “imaginary avenues” when many far more tangible local and hemispheric connections of cultural production, circulation, and exchange remain unexplored? In answering this question, let me return to one of the avenues for further exploration that I sketch in “What Now?”—the final section of my essay. In my understanding, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American artistic production and European reflections on art are connected not so much through a transatlantic exchange of texts or human beings, but through a trans-atlantically shared modernity. What I have in mind here is a very specific understanding of processes of modernization that is broadly accepted in German-speaking academia and is only gradually being introduced into anglophone scholarship. I am talking about systems theory as laid out in Niklas Luhmann’s *Social Systems, Art as a Social System*, and his opus magnum *Theory of Society*, the first part of which has just appeared in English translation with Stanford University Press. Luhmannian systems theory conceives of modernity as a process of functional differentiation in the course of which Western societies differentiate into self-organizing yet interacting social systems such as religion, politics, and art that each function according to their own logic and perform a unique function for society as a whole. Such an understanding of modernity helps us see that the autonomization of art from religion, morality, politics, and science, which was well underway in the eighteenth century but only reached its first apex in romanticism, is not an isolated phenomenon at all but the manifestation of a much more general process of functional differentiation in one social system, the system of art. What it also helps us see, and this is more crucial to the argument I develop in my essay “Book and Wax: Two Early American Media of Deception” and my book manuscript “Beautiful Deceptions: American Art and European Aesthetics, 1750-1828,” is that American art (novels, sculptures, paintings) of the early republic and contemporaneous European reflections on art and sensuous cognition share a keen awareness that the position of art within society is fundamentally changing in the process of functional differentiation, that it is moving toward autonomy, a position from which it “radicalizes the difference between the real and the merely possible in order to show through works of its own that even in the realm of possibility there is order after all. Art opposes, to use a Hegelian formulation, ‘the prose of the world,’ but for precisely this reason

it needs this contrast" (Luhmann, *Art* 146). I cannot outline my argument concerning art's self-reflexive awareness of its autonomy in detail in the space of this text. Suffice it to say that it manifests itself as much in American artists' however cautious assertions of the right to fiction (Brackenridge, Tyler, Tenney, Patience Wright, Charles Willson and Raphaelle Peale), their self-reflexive interrogation of the kinds of knowledge art can impart (Brown, the Peales), and their probing of the fallibility of characters' sense perceptions (Brown, Rowson, Tenney) as it does in European aestheticians' reflections on sensuous cognition (Baumgarten), disinterestedness in the experience of beauty (Kant), the autonomy of judgments of taste (Burke, Hume, Kant), and aesthetic semblance (Schiller). Now I am fully aware that to adopt a systems-theoretic macroperspective is by no means uncontroversial given that we have (rightly) become wary of historical master narratives, and I am equally aware that my plea for a return or (as White has it) a turn to aesthetics, let alone autonomy aesthetics, will at first strike many in the field as ahistorical and apolitical. And yet there is a rich tradition of modern thinking about art—from Schiller to Adorno and beyond—that locates the political force of art precisely in its autonomy, in the gap or distance between art and empirical reality without which art's potential for negativity and crucial critique would always already be neutralized. It is ultimately from within this tradition that I write, well aware of its low currency in U.S. literary-critical circles today. This is why I am especially grateful not only to have this transatlantic exchange with three generous and inspiring American scholars but also to be given the opportunity to respond to the respondents.

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