Reflections on American Studies, Minnesota, and the 1950s*

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My wife, Jane, our two young sons, and I arrived in Minneapolis in time for me to start teaching in the university's American Studies program at the beginning of the 1949 fall semester. We had been preceded, a year or two earlier, by our friends Barney and Lucy Bowron, and Henry and Elinor Smith. I had been a student and course assistant of Henry's during his year as a visiting professor at Harvard, 1945-6, when I returned to civilian life after four years in the navy.

In that post-war era the American studies program at Minnesota was very much a child of the English department. Soon, however, more and more members of other departments—Dmitri Tselos and Don Torbert (Art), Mulford Sibley (Political Science), David Noble and Clark Chambers (History)—became active in the program. Still, most of the original core faculty—Smith, Bowron, Tremaine McDowell, Mary Turpie, Joe Kwiat, and I (along with William Van O'Connor, who edited the new journal, *American Quarterly*, during its brief Minnesota sojourn), and later, J.C. Levenson—belonged to the English department. Since American studies was not a full-fledged department, most of us had joint appointments in the English department, which was our administrative home.

Intellectually, pedagogically, politically, the Minnesota English Department of the 1950s was roughly subdivided into three groups. At the center was a core of accomplished mainstream scholars of a predominantly literary-historical bent. They included Joseph Warren Beach, John Clark, Samuel Holt Monk, and E.E. Stoll. To their "right"—the political analogue

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is proximate at best—were the formalist "New Critics," among them Robert Penn Warren, William Van O'Connor, and Leonard Unger—soon joined by Allen Tate, and (in his idiosyncratic fashion)—John Berryman. During teaching stints at Minnesota, such well-known writers as Saul Bellow, Isaac Rosenfeld, and Irving Howe, though not in any sense strict adherents of the New Criticism, allied themselves with Warren, Tate & Company, whose modernist avant-garde aestheticism they found congenial. On the "left" were the more socially-conscious Americanists, disparagingly known as the "*peaux rouges*"; they—we—retaliated by referring to Tate & Co. as the "mandarins." Tremaine McDowell was the spiritual godfather and cheer-leading adminstrator of American studies, and Henry Smith was our intellectual guide. Mary Turpie, our godmother, was—from the student vantage—the most assiduous, consistently supportive faculty member. She set unmatchable standards of devoted, self-effacing mentorship.

In the 1950s the English department's governing troika represented conflicting, yet by no means unresolvable, approaches to literature. (In retrospect it is striking to notice what a diminished role literary study now has in American studies—and in the humanities generally.) At that time practitioners of the New Criticism were seen—and saw themselves—as specialists in precise textual analysis (as exemplified by the critical apparatus of the best-selling canonical textbook, Cleanth Brooks's and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry*), whereas the Americanists were known as practitioners of the contextualist (or historicist) approach (exemplified by Henry Smith's *Virgin Land*). Text versus context: the extent, seriousness, and comprehensiveness of this archetypal division was then—still is—oversimplified and exaggerated. Nonetheless, the close formalist study of texts as if they had an autonomous existence—the painstaking examination of the linguistic, imagistic, tonal, and semantic nuances within a poem or novel, emphasizing the immeasurable cognitive and affective reach of language when embedded in the putative "organic" unity of a poem or novel—was greatly enlightening to apprentice Americanists. But of course there was no reason, logical or pedagogical, to assume that such a formalist method was irreconcilable with the study of the interplay between literary works and their societal and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, that dubious assumption was widely adhered to at the time.

One lesson to be drawn from this exercise in retrospection is the need for skepticism about alleged dichotomies between academic practices like the New Criticism and American studies. In fact, the notion that the New Critics were interested in texts to the exclusion of all else, and that practitioners of American studies were so devoted to contextualizing that they denied the integrity of works of art is simply wrong. Anyone who knows Allen Tate's critical essays, say those on Dickinson or Poe, recognizes the extent to which he brought his knowledge of regional cultures to bear on

his assessment of particular writers. Much the same can be said about the historical and cultural knowledge inherent in Warren's *All the King's Men.* The fact is that New Critical doctrine, so far as it was made explicit, chiefly consisted of guidelines for close reading; an elaborate exercise in extrapolation and inference is required to transform those guidelines into an all-purpose method. On the other side, similarly, scholars identified with American studies—I think of F.O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, and Henry Smith—were gifted close-reading critics. It is hard to imagine how those who parrot the simple-minded text-versus-context formula nowadays account for F.O. Matthiessen's admiring study of T.S. Eliot's poetry, or Perry Miller's painstaking analysis of Jonathan Edwards's prose style, or Smith's close readings of Mark Twain's vernacular humor.

Why, then, did this infamous killer dichotomy ("text versus context") come to be accepted as the decisive ideological schism of American literary studies in the 1940-1960 era? One explanation, I believe, has to do with the widely felt desire to avoid, conceal—or somehow deny the existence of—more profound political disagreements. In spite of our differences, members of the Minnesota English Department were a remarkably gregarious, collegial, bibulous lot. Our friendships and social relations straddled intellectual party lines, and we worked together in reasonable if argumentative harmony. We might, in fact, be said to have anticipated Gerald Graff's later proposal that literary faculties cope with their divisiveness by having the contending parties "teach their differences," that is, by sharing their theoretical arguments with their students. The fact is that we actually did accomplish something of that sort at Minnesota during the 1950s. I remember telling students what I imagined Warren or Tate might have said, in contradistinction—misguided no doubt—to my views of some work under discussion. Debates between professors invariably are of interest—and exemplary value—to students. If those knowing, self-important characters can't agree, the student tells herself, why shouldn't I say what I think? On the other hand, these lofty philosophical-literary-critical conflicts served to mask other, deeper, less abstract and more consequential political divisions.

Many—perhaps most—adherents of the New Critical dispensation held conservative (not to say reactionary) political and—in many cases—explicitly theological views not unlike those of the Southern Agrarians. They were committed to an essentially hierarchical—or as the rebels of the 1960s would say—elitist (or patriarchal) concept of society and culture, with particularly retrograde, incipiently racist, as it seemed to me then and now, attitudes toward non-white people. By contrast, most of us in American studies held stock secular, left-liberal humanist values; we were committed to the labor movement, to "progressive"—in some cases explicitly socialist or Marxist—principles of social and economic justice. Hidden

beneath the seemingly pedantic text-versus-context quarrel was a deeper schism between fundamentally opposed attitudes toward the ideological legacy of the Enlightenment. This divide was so nearly unbridgeable that the two groups were complicit, less by design than kindly instinct, in ignoring its existence. Avoiding it was facilitated by the existence of a common enemy: McCarthyism and other hyper-nationalistic expressions of paranoid anti-communism. The two sides had no trouble joining forces in opposition to the fascistic know-nothing assault, during the 1950s, on intellectuals, academic freedom, and the universities generally.[1]

There is another lesson to be drawn from this chapter of academic history. When a generation of intellectuals corrects the views of its precursors—as each generation predictably does—it should bear in mind that the precursors also had precursors whose views they in turn hoped to correct. In the 1950s, for example, a feature of the New Criticism often derided nowadays—the close attention paid to texts and their presumed unity—was for many of us, even those committed to the contextualist method of American studies, a thrilling alternative to the aridity of an earlier pedagogy. In literature courses I took as an undergraduate, for instance, specific texts almost never were examined in any detail. In class my professors spent most of their time generalizing about the historical, societal, biographical, or philological matrix of literature.

It was exciting and liberating, therefore, when the New Critics came along, to witness an accomplished reader's way of getting at—examining and explicating *in detail*—the linguistic texture of a novel or poem. In the benighted 1950s literary works were still assumed to be, or at least to aspire to become, whole entities, and it was—perhaps still is—fascinating for students to hear a good reader explain how, and with what techniques, a writer has achieved a degree of conceptual and affective coherence. Having had the good fortune to study with gifted, imaginative readers like F.O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, and Henry Smith, the ostensible need to choose between studying the text or the context has always seemed preposterous. Those fine teachers assumed, sensibly enough, that to examine both the text *and* the reciprocal relations between it and its context necessarily is more illuminating than to examine only one or the other. "What we primarily teach in the humanities anyway," Henry Smith once said to me, "is how to become a good reader."

It is striking, nowadays, to note the number of vital issues in American studies to which we habitually are asked to give such misleading either/or answers: Do we think of American history as exceptional or typical? Is the United States a melting pot or a site of WASP supremacy? Is the United States a patriarchial or a multicultural—a democratic or a plutocratic—society? Is it possible to know the world exactly as it exists? If not, is it possible to know anything at all? Which method is reliable, that of the "myth and symbol" school, or that of "cultural criticism"?

To be sure, the title of this session—"From Myth and Symbol to Cultural Studies"—implies that the history of American studies is a record of significant, salutary methodological progress. And yet, oddly enough, if we look at the general tenor of 1950s scholarship in the humanities, the prevailing method of American studies—shamelessly uncodified and "untheorized" (as latter-day critical theorists would have it)—was the nearest existing approximation (and remarkably close at that!) of the method of what is now honorifically called "cultural studies."

To reconsider this ostensible progression from "myth and symbol" to "cultural studies," let's put it in historical context. I believe that American studies, from its inchoate beginnings—going back to 18th- and 19th-century precursors such as Crevecoeur, Tocqueville, Dickens, the Trollopes, and Lord Bryce—has been an essentially holistic, universalistic project. Its chief aim, to paraphrase Henry Smith's often-quoted definition, was to identify—and to assess—the distinctive features of American society and culture, past and present, *as a whole*. Observers flocked to the new republic from all over the world (as they would to the Soviet Union during the 1920s) to satisfy their curiosity about a new, different—perhaps unique—kind of society. The nation's distinctiveness was a defining premise of American studies from the outset. It assumed the importance of such singular political innovations as a written constitution; the rule of law; federalism; a commitment to the idea that government rests on the consent of the governed, and the notion (as Lincoln put it at Gettysburg), that the United States is a nation defined neither by its location nor its ethnic composition, but rather by a "*proposition*"—a cosmopolitan, multicultural, potentially universalizable set of principles. We all know, of course, about the nation's failure, to act on those principles, but this discouraging fact does not cancel out the extent to which the avowal of those principles (and the not entirely unsuccessful effort to realize them) distinguishes the United States from many other nations. Explaining, understanding, and criticizing American society and culture, past and present, has been the tacit purpose of academic American studies since its emergence on the eve of World War II.

Since it was institutionalized in the late 1940s, American studies has had a strikingly broken-backed history. It quickly developed a professional organization, formal degree-granting departments in most of the great universities, an official journal, quasi-official State Department connections, and a number of international operations and affiliations, but its mission was radically altered as a result of the 1968-75 rebellion against established institutions. After the Vietnam upheaval, the most serious crisis of national legitimacy (save for the Civil War) in American history, American studies was wholly transformed. That university faculties and student bodies were pivotal in the rebellion helps to account for its particularly strong

impact on the academy in general and on American studies in particular. More important, though, is that the 1960s crisis effected a radical change of attitude toward the nation as such. The original holistic agenda of American studies was largely discredited and replaced. The initial focus on binding commonalities was supplanted by an intense interest in the salient differences dividing groups of Americans, especially differences of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

In what follows, I will briefly review the history of the academic American studies movement, with a view to assessing its current condition. It originated, significantly enough, outside the academy in the work of independent, unaffiliated writers and intellectuals like Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, W.E.B. Du Bois, Lewis Mumford, and Constance Rourke. They exemplified the vocation of the non-professional, unaffiliated, unspecialized "scholar" whose defining traits Emerson had described in his "American Scholar" lecture simply as "man thinking." (Had he written it in the 1920s, he might well have called it "The American Intellectual.") The work of these scholars would help to form a morally committed discourse situated somewhere in the borderland between Bohemia, Grub Street, and the outer reaches of Academia—a discourse favored by a proud cohort of public intellectuals like Aldo Leopold, Randolph Bourne, Jane Addams, Walter Lippmann, Edmund Wilson, Rachel Carson, and Betty Freidan. These typically American "scholars" made no pretense to academic dispassion. Indeed, they and their kind have been responsible for a prominent strain in American studies scholarship that abjures claims to social scientific, context-free detachment, and proudly asserts the merits of responsible, historically informed, unspecialized, politically committed writing.

In 1937, the year I entered college with the class of 1941, Harvard admitted the first candidates—Daniel Aaron and Henry Nash Smith—for its new doctorate in the "History of American Civilization." To my knowledge, it was the first program of its kind in the nation. My undergraduate major, history and literature (I concentrated in the American sub-field), an older interdisciplinary program reserved for undergraduates, had been initiated under the leadership of Barrett Wendell in 1900. Two salient features of these programs were, first, their inter-disciplinarity, and second, the assumption that their purview was defined by the United States and its colonial prehistory. (The nation was unjudgmentally regarded, in the idiom of today's multiculturalists, as an offshoot of the white-male-dominated colonizing societies of Europe.)

The Harvard programs encouraged students to make connections across the traditional disciplinary boundaries separating history and literature. Both shamelessly tended to ignore Mexican, Canadian, and other (Central and South) American locales of "American" experience. They

exclusively focussed their attention on the culture and society of the United States, along with its European and colonial antecedents. A more accurate name for this field of inquiry and teaching would of course have been "United States Studies," but using that name would have entailed a far more candid acknowledgement of a nationalistic bias. The bias surely existed, but denying it was not the only—or even the chief—reason for the failure of the Americanists to acknowledge it. In the era of "multiculturalism," in fact, we have seen many proposals for overcoming this seemingly narrow, chauvinistic conception of American Studies by expanding the field to encompass, say, Canada, Mexico, Central and even South America; but my impression is that these ineffectual efforts and rhetorical gestures (i.e., Janice Radway's contentious 1998 American Studies Association presidential address) merely underscore the common sense plausibility of treating the territorial boundaries of the United States as the demarcation of a single distinctive polity, economy, and culture—whatever its inner contradictions and conflicts, its flaws and fearful excesses. The successful initiation of new Afro-American, Hispanic, and Women's Studies programs further underscores the point. Like it or not, the United States, as contrasted with the rest of the American hemisphere, is a subject of special interest to its own citizens and, indeed, to people around the world.

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We can get a better purchase on the subsequent evolution of American studies by recalling the chief motives that led to its initiation as a university field of inquiry and teaching. I will discuss four—two originating within the academy, and two in the larger society. Common to them all was the desire to break down, or circumvent long-standing barriers to the study of the society and culture of the United States as a discrete entity: a more or less definable whole.

The first motive was to circumvent obstacles to the introduction of distinctively American subject matter in the study of history, literature, philosophy, art—the humanities generally. This is familiar ground. Before World War II, for example, there still was overt resistance, in English departments in American universities, to the study and teaching of American texts. (I assume that many of the conditions I ascribe to English departments had their counterparts in most other humanities departments.) We should recall that when the movement for American studies began, the study of "modern"—i.e., post-Victorian—English literature was a relatively recent, even radical innovation. Most American professors who had earned doctorates as students of the received English literary canon felt that writers like Walt Whitman and Mark Twain typified the crudity of a belated, colonial, unschooled, vernacular literature—a theme eloquently expounded

by George Santayana in his 1911 lecture on "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy." Before World War II, English departments in American universities, staffed in many cases by Oxbridge-educated gentlemen of independent means, proudly advertised their Anglophilic, class-conscious ("elitist") literary standards. As for the unglamorous, mundane raw material of American history (wasn't it all about building railroads?), it too was condescendingly dismissed as insignificant and uninteresting. The American studies movement helped to rid our universities of snobbish Anglophilia, and it literally created new posts for young scholars interested in the distinctive history—the art and expression—of the American people.

The second academic motive was a desire to circumvent barriers to interdisciplinarity itself. Until the mid-1950s, "interdisciplinary" was the mantra of serious curricular reformers. Their aim was to legitimize the combined use of scholarly methods (and materials) that hitherto had been monopolized by disciplinary specialists. Hitherto, to be sure, historians had made passing allusions to literary works, but largely for illustrative purposes. Citing a novel or poem could provide color and a modicum of aesthetic embellishment—and even a degree of intelligent confirmation—to an historical argument. But it seldom if ever occured to guild historians that fiction or poetry might be a source of unique historical insight. Similarly, literary scholars often inserted condensed, second-hand summaries of concurrent events—"potted history" as our British cousins say—as a real-world backdrop for literary history or criticism. But they rarely delved into the complex interactions between the realm of socio-economic institutions and that of collective mentalities, art, and expression. Before the 1960s they did not have, nor did they evince much interest in formulating, a theoretical basis for analyzing those relationships. Although the American studies project remained largely "untheorized," it helped, by the very nature of its complex aspirations, to intensify the need for a more ample theory of cultural studies.[2]

Of the two motives that originated outside the academy, one was essentially ideological: a desire to recover, reaffirm, and redefine the foundational ideals of a democratic republic. We need to remember that the birth of American studies belonged to the moment of the Great Depression and the New Deal. At the time the capitalist economy looked to be on the verge of irremediable collapse. It may seem odd that a dire economic crisis should have called forth strong patriotic impulses, but many American intellectuals who supported the left-liberal wing of the New Deal—including most of the initial proponents of American studies programs—responded with a renewed commitment to the country's bedrock ideals. They measured the shortcomings of the capitalist system by holding it up to Jeffersonian and Lincolnian standards of economic and social justice. In their view the true nature of American society was most effectively revealed by the bonus marchers, the jobless, the displaced Oakies, the Negro

sharecroppers, the inhabitants of Indian reservations, the organizers and sitdown strikers of the C.I.O., and thousands of apple-selling street people.

I do not recall any scholars whom I knew to have been instrumental in organizing the early (pre-World War II) programs in American studies with which I was associated—at Harvard, Minnesota, and Amherst College—whose political allegiance was *not* on the side of—or well to the left of—Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal.[3] The affinity between liberal-left ideas and the early American studies movement was manifested by, among other things, a widely expressed scholarly interest in the 1930s vogue of cultural democracy in America. This commitment—indeed the very assumption that commitment is consonant with scholarly integrity—was a prominent aspect of the original American studies mindset.

The link between American studies and ideological commitment was brought home to me by a conversation I had with Richard Hoggart in 1957. At the time I was in England on a Fulbright lectureship. I previously had been impressed by *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart's splendid study of British working-class culture. When he discovered my affiliation with American studies, he said that he recently had had an illuminating encounter with a young professorial member of our tribe. The fellow had described American studies as a radically innovative venture, but when Hoggart asked him what made it unique he became inarticulate. He could not come up with any of its truly distinctive attributes. All those he mentioned struck Hoggart as old hat. Combining the study of history and literature? We've been doing that for generations, said Hoggart. Studying the culture as a whole? Nothing very new about that either, said Hoggart. After many attempts, in a fit of exasperation, Hoggart's eager but frustrated American interlocutor exclaimed: "But you don't understand, I *believe* in America."

"That was it!" Hoggart said to me, "that's the difference! That's what makes you Americans seem so odd." It was unimaginable to him that an Englishman ever would be heard to say "I *believe* in England." England is a place, not something one "believes in." He had a point, though to the founders of American studies it would have seemed too obvious to mention. In those days, after all, everyone was familiar with that hackneyed concept of America's uniqueness. Hadn't Abraham Lincoln famously expounded it? The United States, alone among modern nations, had been committed from the moment of its 1776 inception to a "*proposition*"—a set of moral and political principles in which its citizens might genuinely believe.

Hoggart's remark goes to my conviction, unpopular nowadays, that the distinctive character of American nationhood is an ineluctable premise of American studies.[4] It takes us back to the discomfitting notion, mentioned earlier, that a more accurate name for our field would be "United States

Studies." It is not Canada or Mexico or the other American nations whose military power and corporate power now dominate the world; or whose popular films, music, and videos have a global audience. People everywhere recognize these cultural facts and artifacts, for better or worse, as emanating from a particular national polity and culture.

The second of the extra-curricular motives for creating American studies had to do with the application of democratic standards of multicultural equity in recruiting faculty members. The aim was to satisfy the intellectual and vocational aspirations of applicants—chiefly white males—who belonged to hitherto excluded ethnic minorities. It is a revealing measure of the progress we have made in this area that the inclusion of women and people of color was not an issue at that time. Indeed, it was not until after the upheaval of the late-1960s that a significantly larger fraction of women, blacks, and Hispanics joined the ranks of academic Americanists. Before imputing an intractable racist bias to the founding generation, however, we should recall that as late as the 1950s professsorships in prestigious American universities still were almost exclusively restricted to white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) males. Males. In the late 1930s, American studies, by virtue of its newness and its democratic standards of equality, helped to open the doors of the sacred patriarchal grove to candidates of Jewish, Irish, German, Polish, and other non-WASP white males. (The turn of women and non-white people was still ahead.) The hyphenated status of the new male recruits (e.g., Jewish-American) helps to explain their distinctive take on the subject of Americanness. Not only did they seize the opportunity to join an academy from which they had been barred, but they brought to it a special concern with issues of American identity and a willingness to open the gates of the profession to blacks, women, and other people of color.

So much for the motives leading to the founding of American studies just before and after World War II. In the triumphant post-World War II era, the field enjoyed the popularity created by a surge of overheated nationalism. Both the American triumph in World War II and the mobilization of nationalistic feelings at the onset of the cold war, contributed to the boom in American studies. Now all four of the motives that had led to the creation of American studies began to be fulfilled. Resistance to the teaching of American topics now was replaced by an excessive, chauvinistic emphasis on ideas and things American. To some degree the initiating motives backfired. The American studies movement now lost much of its critical, oppositional bite. Its newly acquired institutional respectability probably accounts for the diminished scope—and the waning imaginative commitment—in the work of American studies scholars after the mid-1970s.

By that time, however, the disillusioning effects of the Civil Rights movement, the Kennedy and King assassinations, the Vietnam War, and

the criminality of the Nixon administration were becoming manifest. As the nation changed, so did American studies. The crisis of legitimacy that developed in 1968-75 coincided with the disappearance of the Old Left, the first stage in the coming break-up of the monolithic Soviet state, and the emergence of multinational (globalized) corporate capitalism. By the mid-1970s the activist political radicalism of the academy was supplanted by the merely conceptual radicalism characteristic of post-structural critical theory, social constructivism, and their variants.

A vital aspect of the crisis of legitimacy, from the standpoint of American studies, was that for a time it lifted the heavy lid of cultural repression that had effectively silenced many groups in American society. Then, suddenly, in the Vietnam era, when the core of national legitimacy had been weakened, women, blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, gays and lesbians, environmentalists—all hitherto relatively quiescent—were able to vent their outrage. The new social movements gave many groups a significant political presence for the first time. The new militancy of the minorities had a profound effect on Americanists, who helped give voice to these minority groups. Nothing I am about to say is intended to diminish my sense that this shift in the focus of American studies—a shift from an emphasis on the distinctiveness of American life as a whole to an emphasis on the differences in the experience of particular groups—was anything but necessary and fruitful.

Still, this turnabout had unfortunate consequences. In our new concern with small-scale particularities, we tended to approach our work as if the nation as a whole—with its powerful macrocosmic institutions, its partly shared beliefs and values—no longer mattered. As if, indeed, it no longer existed. This change of scholarly viewpoint was accompanied by a marked change in our feelings about the nation itself. For me the change is typified by the contrast between my youthful view of American society and that of my children. Take, for example, my attitude toward military service in World War II (for me it was an odious but necessary war against fascism) and my children's attitudes toward service in Vietnam (an obscene example of American ignorance and imperial arrogance). The fact that I sympathized with their unwillingness to serve in that war merely underscores the extent of the change that occured in the interval between generations.

My point is that the shift in scholarly assumptions and methods that followed the crisis of the Vietnam era entailed a reconception of the chief subject of American studies: the United States itself—its role in the world, its moral and political standing. Today many of us, like Richard Hoggart, would find it difficult if not impossible to say that we "believe" in America. Surely this change of heart is an important aspect of the reorientation of American studies in recent years. Yet there is a deceptive el-

ement of self-protection in this turn away from the unpleasant macroscopic developments in American life today—for example, the increasingly plutocratic concentration of wealth and power—and toward such relatively heartening microscopic developments as the struggle of a particular minority for equal rights. It is as if Americanists had sought out new smaller scale topics which invite the kind of affirmative commitment formerly elicited by the study of the United States as a whole.

This is not to deny the importance of the subjects addressed in recent years under the aegis of multiculturalism. They obviously deserve attention. But I suspect that the concern with them is in part self-serving, that it enables Americanists to avoid the discouragement now elicited by topics on the original American studies agenda. If that is the case, then we are neglecting our scholarly responsibility to scrutinize and assess the salient features, however unpleasant or reprehensible, of American institutions as a whole. Indeed, I believe we have a special obligation to put the knowledge gained in recent decades from the many enlightening studies of minority experience—the role of difference in American life—together with a renewed examination of our primary topic: the United States and its current metamorphosis.

Today this imperial nation, with its unmatched military, political, and material wealth; its giant multinational corporations; its increasing domination of the world's popular culture; its critical and in many ways adverse effect upon the Earth's ecosystems, would be largely unrecognizable to the founding generation of American studies. Surely this is not the time to look away from American culture and society as a putative whole. We need to submit America as a nation to the closest possible scrutiny, and with some of the critical bite and commitment that marked our best work.

Notes

*Text of a presentation at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of American Studies at the University of Minnesota, October 21, 1994

1. For a somewhat more extended discussion of this situation, see my remarks, "Text versus Context," on the occasion of the awarding of the 1993 Hubbell Medal, reprinted in the *Annual Report of the American Literature Section of the Modern Language Association*, ed., Paul Sorrentino, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 9-13.

2. Brian Attebery has written an essay about theoretical issues that figure in my correspondence with Henry Nash Smith: "American Studies: A Not So Unscientific Method," *American Quarterly* 48 (1996), 316-343.

3. In particular, I am thinking of F.O. Matthiessen, Frederick Merk, Perry Miller, Kenneth Murdock, and Arthur Schlesinger Sr. at Harvard; Tremaine McDowell and Mary Turpie at Minnesota; and Edwin Rozwenc, George Rogers Taylor, Colston Warne, and George Whicher at Amherst College.

4. I deliberately avoid the term "exceptionalism," because it recently has been so confusingly diluted. My impression is that it originated with adherents of Marxism, including Karl Marx himself, who saw reason to suppose that, due to certain distinctive, even systemic, American social and economic conditions, the nation might not follow the same general course of development followed by the prototypical industrial capitalist societies of Europe.

The United States seemed to be such a society, yet it uniquely lacked a self-conscious, organized proletariat; a left-wing, revolutionary political party, or a cadre of committed socialist intellectuals. Lately, however, the term "exceptionalism" has been used so loosely as to apply to any national culture, all of which exhibit similarly miscellaneous and superficial singularities.