

1994 MAASA Presidential Address

Something Else in Place of All That

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As we near the end of the century and, indeed, the end of a millennium, some academics in American Studies are running Going Out of Business advertisements in the journals and academic press. Historians among us will recall that the events of 1989 were to signal the end of history in general, and we have had one recent book entitled *The End of American History*.¹ In the industry of American literature as well, several scholars have lost their leases and requested Chapter 11 protection for the field. Not long ago, *College English* ran an article entitled “The End of American Literature”; its first sentence reads, “It is time to stop teaching ‘American’ literature.”² And my remarks here are occasioned by the most recent essay on the topic, a piece by Christopher Clausen in the January 1994 issue of *New Literary History* that begins, “The concept of ‘national literatures’ in English has outlived its usefulness and should be abandoned. . . .”³ We all know that the American jeremiad tends to flourish at the *fin de siècle*, but I think we should not dismiss this “death-of-American-literature” motif as mere turn-of-the-century rhetoric. We may be at the turning point of a paradigm shift. In any event, here in the congenial company of my fellow American Studies practitioners this modest version of the apocalyptic gives me an occasion for some reflections on the study of American literature and the writing of its history as those subjects have engaged me for a good many years. And I think I must begin with the new world/old world metaphor.

I

New World, Old World; Good Place, Bad Place

Before Europeans “discovered” America, or invaded it, they were busy inventing it, playing with definitions of what a “new world” would be in case they ever came across one. From the start, before Columbus made his big mistake and hit a large landmass instead of a passage to India, the metaphor of new world and old world has dominated attempts to imagine America, to invent it, to define it, to construct it. The metaphor of new and old worlds governs nearly every attempt to say what Americans are, or have been, or should be. Through America’s literature it doesn’t merely run, it gallops. In America’s historiography it is a recurring reference point. And in the explanatory paradigms constructed by the American Studies movement it has *always* been a constituent element. We seem compelled by an imperative to think that way, to make meaning according to this binary structure of new and old, and that imperative has generated some important results.

The task seems easy enough: America is the *NEW* world; every place else is the *OLD* world, although to us the old world that has seemed most important is old-world Europe.

Americans, moreover, have commonly imagined the old world as the Bad Place, so that we can define the new world as the Good Place. To be old, in this formulation, is to be dying, decayed, decrepit. The old world is decrepit because it is degenerate, morally as well as culturally, a wasted land, gnawed over, bankrupt of ideas and creativity, worthless, an empty shell of fraudulent claims about noble ideals. And it is just plain tired.

In the late seventeenth century, Cotton Mather opened his monumental history of the new world with this idea expressed in language recalling the first line of the old world’s most famous epic: “I write the *Wonders* of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION, flying from the Depravations of *Europe*, to the *American Strand*.”⁴ In Mather’s historical imagination, the American Strand becomes the Promised Land and William Bradford, the seventeenth-century governor of Plymouth Plantation, becomes the Moses of the Puritans leading them out of depravity. Two centuries later, in a commissary on a (fictional) family plantation in Mississippi, Isaac McCaslin, on his twenty-first birthday, the day he legally changes from boy to man, sits with his older cousin, McCaslin Edmonds, and reviews the history of humankind in similar terms of old-world depravation. God, says Isaac, disgusted with the men who “snarled” in “the old world’s worthless twilight over the old world’s gnawed bones,” had allowed Columbus to discover “a new world where a nation of people could be founded in humility and pity and sufferance and pride of one to another.” Even the wind that filled Columbus’s sails, says Isaac, was “the old world’s tainted wind.”⁵ The old world’s corrupt and worthless twilight, its depravations, its gnarled bones, its fouled winds, its ravished substance—these signs signify a world that has exhausted itself, a storehouse of bad things that ruin those who continue to live in it but nothing good to offer anymore.

From this conviction of old-world decay emerged two lines of thought. The first saw the new world as successor to the old, giving it another chance, an opportunity to salvage the best of old-world culture, reestablish it in the new world, improve it, and cultivate it for posterity. The second contended that history had dealt the new world no such hand to play: the new world was just that—new, separate, not simply the lengthened shadow of Europe; it did not resemble the old world in any substantial way, and it should not sully itself by trying to reinvigorate its vestiges.

The first line of thought follows the very old tradition of *translatio studii*, a powerful explanation of history that continues to influence our thinking about America's place as a new world among the old. *Translatio studii* holds that culture and empire had begun in the Oriental East and, over time, had inexorably moved westward over Europe through Greece and Rome to England. The next stop was North America, which was assigned to run the anchor leg in the great circular relay race, carrying the cultural baton westward through a passage to India and back to the source of civilization in the Orient. In his New England accent, John Adams supplies a Yankee version of Ike McCaslin's starting point: "There is nothing . . . more ancient in my memory," he wrote, "than the observation that arts, sciences, and empire had traveled westward; and in conversation it was always added since I was a child, that their next leap would be over the Atlantic into America."⁶ And some European prophets agreed. "Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way," wrote Bishop Berkeley in 1726. Siding with Cotton Mather, he brought Britain the bad news that America would replace an exhausted Europe as the repository of culture:

There shall be sung another golden Age
The rise of Empire and of Arts,
The Good and Great inspiring epic Rage,
The wisest Heads and noblest Hearts.

Not such as *Europe* breeds in her decay;
Such as she *bred* when fresh and young,
When heav'nly Flame did animate her Clay,
By future Poets shall be sung.

And the time of the Americans was close to hand:

Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way,
The four first Acts already past,
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;
Time's noblest Offspring is the last.⁷

Late in the same century (1782), when Crèvecoeur defined the role of America in the world, he took *translatio studii* as axiomatic, as a given. We all

know Crèvecoeur's definition of the American as the new man, and we remember him for inventing the image of Americans melting into a new race, but we often read right over the next sentence in that paragraph, a forthright declaration of *translatio studii*: "What then is the American, this new man? . . . He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigor, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle."⁸

And in the nineteenth century, finishing the great circle preoccupied the lives of Thomas Hart Benton and William Gilpin, two great champions of manifest destiny who built their argument for western expansion upon the same historical axiom that had energized John Adams, Bishop Berkeley, and Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur. "The *untransacted* destiny of the American people," Gilpin announced, "is to subdue the continent—to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean . . . to confirm the destiny of the human race—to carry the career of mankind to its culminating point. . . to unite the world in one social family." In hindsight, we can see how conveniently *translatio studii* soothes any qualms about displacing Native American occupants of the land: history demands, with all the weight of the inevitable, that civilization proceed westward; we simply call ourselves the agents of higher historical forces, the runners in the race, striding away from decadence, revivifying, in our youth and health, the best of the civilized past which has been transferred to our care and sweeping aside the primitive if it blocks our path. The logic of *translatio studii* dictates that whatever we designate as savage or uncivilized must make way for the civilized, and the laws of history make the eventual triumph of our civilization a matter of manifest destiny.⁹

But Ike's assertion of the old world's worthless twilight can also lead to the second line of thought: the doctrine of American exceptionalism. In this separatist, radical formulation, America is not the latest in a long line of civilizations charged with preserving the cultural traditions of the past in order to close the great circle with the Orient; instead it signals a phenomenon utterly new, utterly different from the old worlds, Orient and Occident, and in no need of their outworn values and practices. For the inhabitants of the new world, the new race of people who have been directed by Providence to the American strand, the experience of the depravations of Europe could provide only a negative reference model, a bad example. The new world was to mark an exception to the rules governing the experience of the old. Why look back? Why seek advice at the throne of corruption? Why should a new world consider its own experience in light of old-world experience—except as an entanglement devoutly to be avoided? In this construction the old world plays by bad old rules and with dull old tools. The new world is the exception; it sets the new rules and provides the new tools.

From this premise, furthermore, arises the concept of the new world as innocent and righteous, the antidote to old-world corruption. If, after all, God

himself had vouchsafed the new world to His people—as Mather puts it, “His Divine Providence” had displayed “His Infinite Power, Wisdom, Goodness, and Faithfulness” in assisting Protestant Christians in their flight from depravation to the American Strand—then the American experience, being new, would be better.¹⁰ Isaac McCaslin says that God’s purpose in allowing Columbus his discovery was to bring him to a place where “a nation of people could be founded in humility and pity and sufferance and pride of one to another.” If we are new, we are fresh and unspoiled, uncorrupted, vigorous, and confident of being in the right. Even as Isaac painfully discovers that these noble qualities were subverted because of slavery, he does not surrender his belief in the redeeming purpose of the new world as against the decay of the old. It’s just that the errand was taking longer than had been predicted. The old world had insidiously sent along some infection to the new; purgation was a lengthy process, but time would eventually purify America and complete its separation from old-world values.

You have already thought of the other side of this story. From an old-world perspective, the proper way to view antiquity is with respect, not scorn. To be old is to be wise, rich in experience and the hard-earned lessons of life; it is to be complex, nuanced, and sophisticated. It is to have taken the time to build and develop, to experiment with styles and to create manners. The old world has constructed institutions suitable to the decent management of worldly affairs. It knows how to discriminate between the ugly and the beautiful. It recognizes mediocrity for what it is and values instead the best, the lasting, over the inferior and ephemeral. It has tradition. It is *not* the world of darkness and depravity depicted by Mather and McCaslin but, properly understood, a world of sweetness and light arising from eons of true Culture.

From this perspective the new world, however boastful of its freshness and youthful vigor, is actually raw and callow. When such a truly cultured European as Matthew Arnold, for example, compares the new world and the old, the Americans are pathetically inadequate. Entrusting the glories of the Renaissance and the triumphs of classical learning to their clumsy hands is a gesture almost too ghastly to contemplate. “Notwithstanding the mighty results of the Pilgrim Fathers’ voyage,” wrote Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*, “they and their standard of perfection are rightly judged when we figure to ourselves Shakspeare or Virgil,—souls in whom sweetness and light, and all that in human nature is most humane, were eminent,—accompanying them on their voyage, and think what intolerable company Shakspeare and Virgil would have found them!”¹¹ *Translatio studii*, indeed. America has produced no Shakespeares nor Virgils nor, despite her self-congratulatory prophecies, is she likely to do so very soon.

Seen from this perspective, new-world citizens are properly considered underprivileged children—or worse, adolescents raging with hormones but not mature judgment. Americans, truly the world’s innocents, are clumsy, overgrown youngsters under foot in the family of nations. The new world has not bred ladies or gentlemen. It has bred Fools inhabiting a Fool’s Paradise.¹²

And if those adult, old-worldly situations are a little dirty, a little shady—well, the wisdom of the ages reveals that such is the way of the world. Those are the rules, and nobody escapes them. A sinless literature is no literature at all; sinless people are not fully human. You *need* some disorder and early sorrow.¹³

II

New-World Writers and the Absent Items of American Life

A good many American writers have toyed with this problem. Robert Frost wryly sets out the situation in these words (from “New Hampshire”):

I don't know what to say about the people.
For art's sake one could almost wish them worse
Rather than better. How are we to write
The Russian novel in America
As long as life goes so unterribly?
There is the pinch from which our only outcry
In literature to date is heard to come.
We get what little misery we can
Out of not having cause for misery.
It makes the guild of novel writers sick
To be expected to be Dostoevskis
On nothing worse than too much luck and comfort.¹⁴

And consider Henry James's lament for his fellow American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne—that lineal descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers. James tell us to pity Hawthorne's predicament as an American: “one might enumerate the items of high civilisation, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left.” Then James enumerates them:

No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, no thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom or Ascot! Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent things in American life—especially in the American life of forty years ago, the effect of

which, upon an English or a French imagination, would probably, as a general thing, be appalling. The natural remark, in the almost lurid light of such an indictment, would be that if these things are left out, everything is left out.¹⁵

Closer to our own time, the young Wallace Stegner tells us that his youth on the Great Plains did not seem lucky and comfortable or go so unterribly. The most terrible misery of all was being too *much* a product of the new world, feeling the newness, the rawness, too keenly. When he discovered that the new world had not bred him a gentleman, he was nearly beyond consolation. In *Wolf Willow*, he says:

Once, in a self-pitying frame of mind, I was comparing my background with that of an English novelist friend. Where he had been brought up in London, taken from the age of four onward to the Tate and the National Gallery, sent traveling on the Continent in every school holiday, taught French and German and Italian, given access to bookstores, libraries, and British Museums, made familiar from infancy on with the conversation of the eloquent and the great, I had grown up in this dung-heeled sagebrush town on the disappearing edge of nowhere, utterly without painting, without sculpture, without architecture, almost without music or theatre, without conversation or languages or travel or stimulating instruction, without libraries or museums or bookstores, almost without books. I was charged with getting in a single lifetime, from scratch, what some people inherit as naturally as they breathe air. . . . How, I asked this Englishman, could anyone from so deprived a background ever catch up? How was one expected to compete, as a cultivated man, with people like himself? He looked at me and said dryly, "Perhaps you got something else in place of all that."¹⁶

What a comical new-world/old-world scene Stegner has constructed for us here. It's an enrollment exercise, an admissions interview. Earnestly insisting—too earnestly, his narrative voice implies—on his new-world unfamiliarity with the cultivated life, he nonetheless displays to his old-world counterpart how much he really has learned about it, trotting out a scenario of the cultivated life, from childhood to adulthood, complete with names of museums, itineraries for holiday travel and grand tours, and the proper course of study. He follows this with a list of things absent from his Great Plains boyhood that could be a direct parody of James's; his menu of what he didn't have demonstrates to his British friend that here is one new worlder with a proper old-world sense of the deficiencies of America. He has shaken the dung from his heels. This is no hick after all: he has

studied the old-world code; he has done the drill; he knows exactly which marks distinguish the cultivated gentleman. And then the question, “How could anyone from so deprived a background ever catch up?” Isn’t the expected answer, “Why, old man, you obviously *have* done it; it’s evident that you *have* caught up; you *have* learned what it takes—and in a single lifetime, at that. I salute you as a cultivated man. Bully for you! Only in America!”

That is not the reply. There is no acknowledgement that Stegner has qualified. There is no right hand of fellowship from one cultivated gentleman to the other. There is, instead, that look—and the laconic, mysterious remark, “Perhaps you got something else in place of all that.” What a worldly, indeed old-worldly, rejoinder. The parade of civilized accouterments is waved away as not so significant—just “all that.” Once again old-world wisdom triumphs over new-world eagerness. *Perhaps*, if Stegner had been a lucky child in the new world he got “something else” in place of all that. *Perhaps*, if he hasn’t drowned it in self-pity and *translatio studii* and eagerness to learn and live the old-world code, he still has it. If he doesn’t still have it, then he’s lost something that no amount of imitating old-world novelists will restore to him.

I didn’t quite play fair with Henry James a moment ago. After that catalogue—“if these things are left out, everything is left out”—James adds another sentence. “The American,” James continues, “knows that a good deal remains; what it is that remains—that is his secret, his joke, as one may say.” James knows that if Americans are lucky they get something else in place of all that. It probably isn’t rectitude and innate goodness, but neither can it be dismissed as adolescent foolishness.

Now I submit that the real goal of the American Studies movement for the past forty-five years has been to make sense of that dry remark of Stegner’s English friend: “Perhaps you got something else in place of all that.” The scholars and historians who established American Studies as a subject worthy of university research wanted to identify precisely what *distinguished* the new world from the old. Even those, like F. O. Matthiessen, who doubted new-world claims of inherent virtue and dispensation from the rules, and who were excruciatingly aware of the absent things of American life, suspected nonetheless that perhaps something in American life and the way American writers express it replaces those deficiencies, something indigenous and distinctive after all the new-world boasting and old-world posturing had been set aside.¹⁷ This conviction—the search for something else in place of all that—led to the Battle of the English department. The issue got joined in American university English departments not many years before I entered the profession. And the issue is alive again today.

III

Writing in English without Writing English, or the Battle of the English Department

Until the 1930s, American literature was usually treated in college English departments like the crazy relative in Gothic novels who gets kept in the basement: one would be very cruel to neglect it completely, but one was hardly proud of it, and one hardly displayed it to the neighbors. After World War II, however, American literature forced its way out of the basement of the department and brashly proclaimed itself a full-fledged member of the literary family. Its emergence was certified in 1948 with the publication of the first comprehensive history of the subject, the *Literary History of the United States* in three handsome, sweeping, voluminous volumes.¹⁸ *LHUS* was subsequently accepted as definitive. But, as Emerson once wrote, there are always two parties, the Establishment and the Movement, and they change places with one another.¹⁹ *LHUS*, formerly the manifesto of the Americanist movement, has now become firmly established. Now it is time for the new movement to set it aside.

At the 1984 convention of the Modern Language Association of America, the plenary American literature sessions announced that in the 1980s not one, but *two* new literary histories of the United States were to be published, one by Cambridge University Press and one by Columbia University Press. These new histories were to be written by scholars trained and seasoned during the days of “the Movement” of the late 1960s and 1970s. As the editor of the Cambridge history, Sacvan Bercovitch, pronounced, “I’m picking as contributors only people between tenure and forty-five.” These are the scholars who would bring to our understanding of American literary history the insights of the political, social, sexual, and cultural changes of the past twenty years. Incorporating the approaches of American Studies, minority studies, feminism, and European critical theory, they would see the subject anew and see it whole, correcting the defective vision and judgment of which their honored, but outmoded, forefathers were guilty.

What do the revisionists consider faulty in the now traditional view of American literary history, the proposition that we got something else in place of all that? To put it briefly, I must oversimplify, but let me outline the situation as I see it. To win the Battle of the English Department, the earlier scholars needed to show that Americans wrote in English without writing English, to demonstrate that although it shares the English language with British literature American literature is not British. That might seem self-evident, but for a long time literary historians, in this country as well as in Great Britain, considered American writing a curious, inferior subset of British literature, imitating the same traditions, genres, and styles that have governed the literature of England since Chaucer. Until the 1940s, Americanists battled to establish the premise that in North America, at least as early as the nineteenth century and possibly as early as the

seventeenth, literature in English took a different path, producing a distinctive literature worthy of serious study as a subject in itself.

There are two major differences: subject matter and genre. The British and the Americans, so the argument goes, write about different topics and write different kinds of books. The great subject matter of British literature, particularly its fiction, is the examination of community. The classic British novels are political and social texts exploring, in close detail, the workings of the British social order. Thus, Trollope can begin *Barchester Towers* with a chapter entitled “Who Will Be the New Bishop?” and spend the next five hundred pages answering the question.²⁰ To everyone in Barchester, that question is important: without a proper bishop the social machine sputters and coughs, and Trollope shows us life going poorly for each member of the citizenry. The novel and the long play, moreover, provide perfect vehicles for closely examining the inner workings of society, and the British are at their best as novelists and dramatists. The British novelist or dramatist can start with the death of the bishop (or the king, the queen, the prince, the headmaster, the vicar, and so forth) and construct a work of fiction by lovingly observing the human family trying to set its communal house in order by getting a new leader into place. Throughout there is the assumption that of course good old British common sense will triumph, sanity will prevail, proper order will be established, and the community *will* gain equilibrium. A British writer who does *not* allow this to happen will have to write tragedy, for the loss of the social order is a tragic loss, calculated to arouse pity and terror in the English soul.

The Americans, on the other hand, value the individual more than the well ordered community. It is unthinkable to begin an American novel by asking, “Who Will Be the New Bishop?” Who cares? The Pilgrims sailed to New England to get away from bishops, and they have been running from them—or their substitutes, the Aunt Pollys and Miss Watsons of the world who want to civilize them—ever since. To Mark Twain, American small towns are not Barchesters, cozy repositories of moral and social well being. Deep down, Tom Sawyer wants to believe they are, but do you imagine that Huckleberry Finn yearns to be mayor of St. Petersburg or gives a damn about who will be the new bishop? He got something else in place of all that. In the antinomian world of American writing, every man is his own priest, every man his own bishop, and their stories, like Huck’s, necessarily define American literature because theirs is the inevitable consequence of the special mixture of radical Protestantism, newness, virgin wilderness, and racial diversity found here but not found in the European experience, whether in Berlin or Barchester. In this formulation, true American values reside not in the home, school, neighborhood, village, parish, government—institutions of the civilized world that Americans identify as “old world,” and thus as corrupt and bankrupt—but “out there” in unspoiled Nature—far from civilization. We cheer Huck when he escapes society and lights out for the territory. Hence, Americans don’t write novels of social realism. To do so is to be British, to be “the other” and not authentically “American.”

Instead, Americans write the ancient form of the “romance”—wild, allegorical, extreme, disordered, picaresque, crazy stories—long and short—about such orphaned heroes as Huck, Ahab, Hester Prynne, Isaac McCaslin, Invisible Man, Nick Adams, McMurphy, Roy Hobbs, and Jay Gatsby—who rebel and go it alone, chasing whales, bears, rivers, rainbows, fantasies, gonfalons, dreams.

The biggest dream. At the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway has it right: the human capacity for wonder is so stupendous that nothing less than an entirely new world can satisfy it. And it happened once: long ago, but it happened. Looking out towards the Atlantic late on his last night in New York, “the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.”²¹

It lasted only a moment, but in that moment the old-world sailors got more than enough “in place of all that.” Alas, the flowers, the green breast of the island, the trees have now vanished from Manhattan, but perhaps somewhere, deep in the heart of the country, out in Kansas or Minnesota, out there in the Territory, there are still whispering trees that pander to our need for “something else in place of all that.” And if the new man, the American, has the self-reliance, the audacity, to strike boldly, courageously, after them. . . .

It is a wonderful story, a compelling story, and it has been narrated winningly by our literary historians and critics. What objections can the new generation of Americanists raise to this fable without appearing to return the game to the Brits?

IV The End of American Literature?

One important line of criticism runs this way: the story I have just outlined presumes that to be “American” American literature must reveal a concern with national identity. American literature is about being the American, the new man.²² Who says so? The earlier generation of scholars says so, and they *had* to say so in order to win the Battle of the English Department. Thus a narrow narrative has governed American literary history. In their eagerness to qualify American literature as “distinctive,” historians of the past generation made the distinctions too sharp. Thus *one* of the American stories, a powerful one to be sure, became identified as *the* American story. *One* of the forms, the romance, became identified as *the* American form. One character type became identified as the authentic American type. But that major premise is arguable. Who decreed that to be truly American one must be a white, young, solitary, single, radically

independent, Anglo-Saxon Protestant male Lover of Nature who runs away from family and adult women to commune with trees, rivers, and horses? If that is a proper definition of “American,” then we leave out a lot of folks. If that is the only American story, we leave out too many stories, counting as insufficiently American (and therefore insufficiently distinct from old-world writing) the adventures of citizens we consider at best Americans-in-training and whose imaginative writing we necessarily call derivative and freakish.

Well, what do you expect? ask the critics. The operative definition was put forward by White Anglo-Saxon Male Protestant English Professors at eastern schools who used American literature to indulge their fantasy lives and promulgate the ideal of escape from precisely the “sivilized” Ivy League life they were leading into some imagined Territory that, in historical fact, had been officially closed since 1890. Literature is what gets taught. *They* decided what American literature was, what the American character should be, what the American story is, what books are to be read and taught in American schools—books fitting the prescribed definition. Attempting to preserve “our” national new-world identity from subsumption under “their” old-world categories, they downplayed the stories of women, racial minorities, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, the trapped, enslaved, and dependent. They missed the fact of dialogue among them. They excluded domestic, political, and social fictions. They ignored regionalization in favor of a putative, but illusory, nationalism.

But America itself has forced a new generation of teachers of American literature into a new working definition of the nation, one stressing change, instability, conflict, diversity, multiplicity, and pluralism. Despite Ronald Reagan’s brilliant maneuver in 1980, when he cast himself as Natty Bumppo, spectacularly seizing the old image-symbol-and-myth script from a defunct American Studies and embodying it to persuade millions of Americans that the familiar new-world mythology is still alive and kicking, in academic circles exceptionalism is dead, consensus is dead, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Yankee Male model of the national character is dead. Diversity and cultural pluralism are the watchwords. Race, gender, ethnicity, and class are ritually recited in a group as if they were the names of the Minnesota Twins infielders. We are looking for our imagery not to the melting pot but to the salad bowl, the soup-bowl, or the rainbow, or at least for the pluralistic goal the new-world errand ought to be undertaking. Maybe there are many types of American, many dimensions to the national character, or perhaps there is no national character at all. In 1980, Carl Degler used his presidential address to the Organization of American Historians to tell them that the term *American* in American history now must mean “all the people who have lived and are today living within the borders of the country.”²³ And many literary historians second the motion. William Spengemann has made an enormous splash recently by challenging the label we put on what we study and teach. We pretend to teach American literature, he says, when we actually teach “U. S. literary classics in English.” Henceforth, however, the term *American literature*

must signify “everything having to do with civilization in the new world since the European discovery” and “every written document that will respond to literary analysis.” Thus defined, American literature “is nearly five hundred years old. It is written in many languages, and it comes from many places scattered throughout a world whose size, shape, and meaning have changed continually since 1500 because America was discovered.”²⁴

Remember the Columbia and Cambridge literary histories? In 1988 Columbia won the race; in fact, the Cambridge history didn’t appear until this year—and only in Volume I. On the very first page of the 1263 page *Columbia History*, the editors tell us the following: “This work does not . . . constitute a new consensus about the history of the literature of the United States. For many reasons . . . concurrence remains impossible at this time. There is today no unifying vision of a national identity like that shared by many scholars at the closings of the two World wars.” The editors of the new Cambridge history echo their Columbia counterparts: “For this generation of critics and scholars, American literary history is no longer the history of a certain, agreed-upon group of American masterworks. Nor is it any longer based upon a certain, agreed-upon historical perspective on American writing. The quests for certainty and agreement continue, as they must, but they proceed now within a climate of decentralization—of controversy, competition, and, at best, dialogue among different voices, different frames of explanation.”²⁵

Even the label *American literature*, which could never be relinquished in the Battle of the English Department, is no longer sacrosanct. Spengemann’s call, and the call of the new histories, for a broader, richer concept of the nation and its literature, fresh as it is, still supposes the validity, however, of something called a national literature. The article by Christopher Clausen, with which I began these remarks, denies that validity, however, and declares the Battle of the English Department concluded. The victor is the English language. “The concept of ‘national literatures’ in English,” he writes, “has outlived its usefulness and should be abandoned . . .” (61-72). “Insofar as literary nationalism . . . once served a useful purpose—making room first for literary works in English whose authors were not British, then at a later stage for works from cultures that were neither British nor American—that purpose,” Clausen asserts, “has been achieved.” Because of the collapse of colonialism, “English is more profitably conceived as a variegated whole than subdivided along national lines” (62). “. . . Writers in English . . . use what is recognizably the same language, with local variations—whether in England, America, India, or Africa . . .” (63). Moreover, “holding onto the model in which a national literature serves as a badge of independence now actually defeats the original purpose by excessively identifying each writer with his or her own local ‘tradition,’ whether that tradition has its headquarters in London or Nairobi, Sydney or New York” (70). It seems that the old world has outlasted us after all and we are once again back in the linguistic empire, happily reunited with Mother England through the Mother Tongue. Except for negligible

“local variations,” English as a literary language is essentially the same in Lawrence or London, Sydney or St. Louis, New York or Nairobi.

All this has a kind of compelling logic to it, perhaps a pleasing symmetry, to which I find myself nodding assent. And yet, and yet, for all their logical elegance something in these sentences doesn't quite ring true to me. In my reading experience there is a sense of Americanness, and I don't really find it in a common myth, even in the master narrative of the solitary male hero's quest for self-fulfillment through nature; nor does it reside in the form of the gothic or historical romance, or in the psychoses of either Ahab or Edna Pontellier, or even in the vision of the fresh green breast of the new world that flowered once here for Dutch sailors' eyes. I recognize an American book by something else, as much for what is not there as for what is. I happened not long ago to read Wallace Stegner's last book, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*. One chapter is a “Letter, Much too Late,” to his dead mother, and there I encountered this sentence about his parents: “While you lived your way deeper into the remote and limited place where my father's enthusiasms had brought you, he felt more and more trapped in what he called ‘this dirty little dung-heeled sagebrush town.’”²⁶ The sentence stopped me short. Here was that phrase, “this dirty little dung-heeled sagebrush town,” leaping up at me thirty years after I had first read it in *Wolf Willow*. In that book it had been the young Stegner's phrase, used to contrast his life with that of his English novelist friend; in this one the octogenarian writer attributes it to his father.

The sentence in which Stegner embeds this phrase, it seems to me, splendidly captures the main concerns of his fiction during the past half-century, perhaps even the main concerns of the American literary tradition: the tension between the father's impulse to follow one's “boomer, gambler, rainbow-chasing, tumbleweed, footloose” enthusiasms and the mother's impulse to “live one's way deeper into a remote and limited place,” the impulse of Bruce Mason in *Big Rock Candy Mountain* and the impulse of Ruth and Joe Allston in *All the Little Live Things*.²⁷ The first impulse fits neatly into our familiar, but now disreputable, master narrative of the questing, rainbow-chasing man; the second into the domestic, placed, deep and sensitive tradition whose claims we are now beginning to recognize and honor in our literature. But what struck me even more as particularly American about this rich, evocative sentence was “dirty little dung-heeled sagebrush town.” It's the language. Sure, it's the *English* language, but it is the written form of the American spoken language, and it registers on the ear as well as on the eye. It is the vulgar, the vulgate, and the vernacular, rendered eloquent. Vulgar because coarse; vulgate because the common speech of the people, not their *uncommon* speech—legal, ecclesiastical, or educational; vernacular because native to the place, the locality, and true to it. Eloquent because honest and precise, without affectation or apology for its lowness. Naturally, not every writer has the gift to make the vulgar artful, to render the vernacular as simultaneously local and universal. But I know it when I find it, at once seeing it on the page and hearing it register on my American eardrum, picking up its tone

and recognizing it by what is absent as well as by what is there. When I find it, whether in the language of a South Dakota farmer-writer or a Harlem rapper, I know what Stegner got “in place of all that,” and I think I believe that America has a literature after all.

Notes

1 . David W. Noble, *The End of American History: Democracy, Capitalism, and the Metaphor of Two Worlds in Anglo-American Historical Writing* (Minneapolis, 1985).

2 . Gregory S. Jay, “The End of ‘American’ Literature: Toward a Multicultural Practice,” *College English* 53.3 (1991), 264.

3 . Christopher Clausen, “‘National Literatures’ in English: Toward a New Paradigm,” *New Literary History* 25 (1994), 61. Hereafter, references to this essay will be cited in the text.

4 . Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* Books I and II, ed. Kenneth B. Murdock, with the assistance of Elizabeth W. Miller (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977), 89.

5 . William Faulkner, “The Bear,” from *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories* (New York, 1942), 258-59.

6 . *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams Vol. IX (Boston, 1852-4), 600.

7 . “Verses by the Author on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America,” *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop Vol. VII (London, 1955), 373.

8 . J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782; New York, 1908), 55.

9 . Gilpin quoted in Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1950), 37. Of the several scattered treatments of the *translatio studii* motif, I have found most useful those of Smith and of Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1987).

10 . Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 89.

11 . *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super Vol. 5 (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1965), 102.

12 . For a discussion of the theme of the Fool’s Paradise, see J. Martin Evans: *America: The View from Europe*. (New York, 1975), 21-41.

13 . Thomas Mann, “Disorder and Early Sorrow,” in *Children & Fools*, trans. Herman George Scheffauer (New York, 1928), 3-68.

14 . Robert Frost, *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes* (New York, 1923), 12.

15 . Henry James, Jr., *Hawthorne* (New York and London, 1879), 42-3.

16 . Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, A Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*. (New York, 1962), 24-25.

17 . See Günter H. Lenz, “American Studies and the Radical Tradition: From the 1930s to the 1960s,” *Prospects: An Annual of American Culture Studies* 12 (1987), 21-58, for an acute account of the founders of the movement.

18 . *The Literary History of the United States*, ed. Robert H. Spiller, Willard Thorpe, Thomas H. Johnson, Henry Seidel Canby. 3 Vols. (New York, 1948). Usually abbreviated *LHUS*.

19 . Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England.” In Perry Miller, ed., *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1950), 494.

20 . Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers* (London, 1925), 1.

21 . F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York, 1925), 182.

22 . An important feminist discussion of this position can be found in Nina Baym, “Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors,” *American Quarterly* 33 (1981), 123-39; rpt. *Feminism and American Literary History: Essays* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1992), 3-18.

23 . Carl Degler, “Remaking American History,” *The Journal of American History* 67.1 (1980), 9.

24 . William Spengemann, *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature* (Hanover, New Hampshire, and London, 1989) 24.

25 . Emory Elliot, et al., eds., *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York, 1988), xi-xii; Sacvan Bercovitch et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of American Literature Vol I* (Cambridge and New York, 1994), 2.

26 . Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York, 1992), 32.

27 . *Big Rock Candy Mountain* (New York, 1938); *All the Little Live Things* (New York, 1967).