Contemporary critics continue to be intrigued by the idea that Walt Whitman’s “language experiment” embodies a radical politics—as a “lawless music,” in Whitman’s own terms, that emerges directly from the Democratic Muse. The musical trope is significant because it relates a “pure” aesthetic form to a political practice, implying therefore that Whitmanian poetry does not merely talk about democratic issues but transforms the essence of democracy into a stylistic embodiment that constitutes the founding moment of a genuine American aesthetics. What interests me here is not the truth value of such narratives but the reasons for their continued rhetorical seductiveness. What discursive constellations, I wonder, could have helped to convince not only Whitman himself but a generation of scholars that both the aesthetic power and the authentic Americanness of Leaves of Grass hinged mainly on the “invention” of a revolutionary style based on paratactic catalogues and free-verse scansion? (Precisely because the experiential richness of Whitman’s work remains beyond doubt, it seems odd that its complexities should be reduced to the “meaning” or the “politics” of his formal method.)

It seems that variants of the democratic-style theory of Leaves of Grass remain tempting for critics today, both within and outside of Whitman Studies, because they enable us to make claims about representative literariness that provide us with narratives of scholarly self-legitimation. Despite the dubious epistemological validity of such narratives, we find them hard to resist in the face of the sustained public skepticism about the function and legitimacy of academy-based literary criticism. The problem is not new, of course: Whitman’s centrality within a U.S. discourse of representative literariness emerged with the modernist assertion of a native literary tradition and was foundational to the American studies movement. As Sacvan Bercovitch has shown, F. O. Matthiessen’s American Renaissance (1941) drew its paradigm-building force from a double process of legitimation in which the aesthetic brilliance of Whitman’s
formal experiment and his cultural representativeness are connected, as it were, in a virtuous circle of mutual validation: the “historical designation ‘American’ gains substance by association with an aesthetic ‘renaissance’” while “Whitman’s art seems richer for its capacity to express ‘the age.’”

A number of critics have explained the American-Renaissance construction as a rhetorical response to mid-twentieth-century scholarly anxieties of marginality. According to Evan Carton and Gerald Graff, the first generation of American literary historians faced “a double burden” of having “to justify both the value of American literature” and the “disciplinary credentials” of university-based criticism. Matthiessen’s fusion of Americanism with formalism resonated especially well with English departments during the 1940s because it implied that “literature embodied the real America” (that therefore “the critics’ work was central to the life of the nation” and “criticism was not the poor relation it seemed to be to the more technical or practical occupations”). While Carton and Graff’s explanation seems convincing, I believe we can further illuminate the emergence and contemporary relevance of the idea of representative literariness if we contextualize it within two historical moments that precede the institutionalization of American studies. The first has to do with the early nineteenth-century revision of Kantian aesthetics. Matthiessen’s argument resonates with a rhetorical gesture—which I will call “post-Kantian”—that stages pure literary-aesthetic form as sociopolitical symptom. Matthiessen encountered this post-Kantian gesture in Whitman, but he also reconfigured it from an early-twentieth-century viewpoint. Hence the second context relevant to Whitman-centered notions of representative literariness, I believe, is the construction of Whitman as a representative American poet in the terms of literary-aesthetic modernism. My thesis is that both of these historical moments have influenced (even reinforced) one another in a way that continues to shape American studies today.

I. Representative Literariness and Post-Kantian Aesthetics

The enlightenment emergence of a “disinterested” sphere of “aesthetics” has been perceived as a mixed blessing. The trouble with the autonomy of beauty is that it can be construed as suggesting that professional artists and critics “merely” deal in aesthetics, while others (theologians, political pundits) do the more “serious,” socially significant work. Kantian aesthetics, in other words, recognizes the importance of literary intellectuals at the risk of demoting them to the private domain. Emerson’s complaint, in 1837, that American intellectuals are “addressed
as women” and thus “virtually disfranchised” by society’s “practical men,” indicates the anxieties of social irrelevance (and questioned masculinity) caused by the specter of artistic autonomy viewed as alienation. Such anxieties may explain the romantic taste for primitivist fantasies of a redemptive return to an undifferentiated social state—in 1836, Emerson’s fellow transcendentalist Orestes Brownson predicts an imminent American millennium in which the intellectual and practical social domains will be reunited (“our whole population will be philosophers, and all our philosophers will be practical men”).

But given the increasing professionalization of transatlantic culture, nineteenth-century intellectuals found it more and more difficult to legitimate themselves with primitivist gestures that disavowed artistic autonomy altogether. Instead, they often sought to cope with their anxieties of marginality by redescribing the aesthetic as “a vehicle of ontological vision.” This redescription looms large in the early reception of the Critique of Judgment: nineteenth-century transcendental idealists tend to agree with Kant that beauty depends on purely formal criteria—that the poetic rests on stylistic parameters distinct from sociopolitical realities—but they also turn away from him, reconceptualizing autonomous style as an externalization of an interior identity. In their post-Kantian account, autonomous beauty becomes a symptom of a socially relevant numinous presence, as in the symbolic representation of the Infinite (in Schelling’s System of Transcendental Idealism of 1800 and A. W. Schlegel’s Berlin lectures of 1801-3), the sensible manifestation of the “idea” (in Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics in the 1820s), the “primal warblings” of the universal being (in Emerson’s essays of the 1830s and 1840s), and the democratic “music” of “America” (in Whitman’s Leaves of Grass since 1855).

The intricacies of the (late) romantic adaptation of aesthetic formalism have been well analyzed, but I would like to draw attention to how the post-Kantian gesture in criticism has developed a near transhistorical force that reaches beyond nineteenth-century discourse, especially as it provides mid-twentieth-century literary intellectuals like Matthiessen with rhetorical tools to assert themselves within the institutionalization of American studies. There are indeed significant similarities between the early nineteenth-century emergence of Kantian aesthetics and the twentieth-century academization of literary scholarship: in the 1930s and 1940s, the Kantian separation of the aesthetic from cognitive, moral, or ideological concerns is reiterated by the formalist trends we now associate with the New Critics and structuralists, who demanded the establishment of “sciences” of literature distinct from other departments within the humanities. The nineteenth-century fear of feminization typical of the Emersonian man of letters reemerges in the polemics against
twentieth-century ivory-towerism (that is, the formalist “prisonhouse” of language). Like the post-Kantian romantics, Matthiessen was both intrigued and repelled by the idea of aesthetic autonomy. On the one hand, he had no interest in a return to an external subordination of the literary field; his rejection of Vernon Louis Parrington’s history of ideas can be seen in his insistence that American Renaissance is “preoccupied with form.” But Matthiessen also felt uneasy with the privatization of criticism implied in the more radical versions of the new formalism. While his New Critical tendencies led him to reject Parrington’s anti-aesthetic bias, he remained Parringtonian enough to tone down New Critical notions of radical autonomy. The Kantian Matthiessen accepted T. S. Eliot’s aesthetic criteria and he referred to timeless representatives of the tradition (Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, and so on), which he then linked to his American objects of study, canonizing them, as it were, by association. But the post-Kantian Matthiessen staged aesthetic excellence as a mark of cultural expressiveness, implying that the art of America’s Whitmans “illuminates” its cultural essence better than the conventional writing of her Longfellows (that is, representatives of a second-order literature that merely “reflects” [x] contingent cultural surfaces).

II. The Dialectical Construction of Whitman as a Modern Icon

The construction of an iconic Whitman provides early-twentieth-century Americanists with post-Kantian narratives suitable for the invention of a national literature. The rhetorical brilliance of Matthiessen’s American Renaissance consists in the persuasiveness with which it conceals its revisionist force and stages Whitman’s canonization as a passive act of rediscovery (in the sense of Waldo Frank’s programmatic 1929 proclamation of a much needed Re-Discovery of America as a return to values the genteel nineteenth century supposedly had lost). However, the conversion of Whitman into a modernist icon was less a recovery than a process of dialectical transfer between nineteenth- and twentieth-century concepts. Matthiessen’s generation of critics were shaped by Whitman’s late romantic program as much as they reconfigured it in their modernist terms. From one angle, Whitman can be seen as the key influence behind the American-Renaissance construction, mainly because his fusion of post-Kantian poetics with cultural nationalism proved immensely useful in the modernist quest for a national canon (more so than the more cosmopolitan frameworks of otherwise more likely candidates such as
Emerson or Thoreau). But seen from another perspective there is also a considerable “reverse influence”: as Whitman was refracted through his modernist readers, some of his complexities were smoothed over, and the elements of post-Kantian nationalism in his work were highlighted and rendered more seamless than they would have appeared to his own generation of readers.

III. The “Music of Democracy”

Whitman’s part in the dialectic is ambiguous, for the post-Kantian elements in his poetics are better described as intermittent “moods” rather than consistent principles. In his more Rousseauist moments, Whitman often sounds pre-Kantian, for instance when he likes to portray his free-verse stylistics as a renunciation of style, an evasion of the “rhyme” and “conceits” of “foreign poets” that makes his “song” as natural an emanation of the American scene as the “odor” that rises from North American “forests” (in contrast to the artificial “perfume of foreign court or indoor library”). Still, when Whitman seems more responsive to the pressures of professionalism in an increasingly differentiated mid-century field of cultural production, his primitivist self-image gives way to the post-Kantian persona of the aesthetic expert who does not so much renounce poetic style as revolutionize it with feats of formal virtuosity. In these moods, Whitman presents himself as a serious literary intellectual specializing in complex language experiments aimed at furthering the quest for a poetic music sophisticated enough to “tally” or accord with America.  

Whitman’s post-Kantian voice begins to dominate during the 1850s, when he formulates his cultural nationalism in conceptual metaphors drawn from a romantic metaphysics of music. Previously, during his so-called “apprentice” days as a New York journalist in the 1840s, Whitman followed the primitivist musical nationalism of the Young America movement, endorsing homegrown folk traditions and denouncing the formal intricacies of imported operatic and orchestral conventions as effete aestheticism representative of old world decadence. In an editorial for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle in 1846, he rejects the “anti-republican spirit” of French and Italian works, arguing that the “music and songs of the Old World” are not as “good and fitting to our nation” as the more accessible tunes of popular singing groups (such as the Hutchinson family, whose “music of feeling” displays an “[e]legant simplicity in manner” and offers “[s]ongs whose words you can hear” as against the “unintelligible” librettos of opera). This attitude changed when Whitman became receptive to the music religion that had fascinated Boston
transcendentalists like Margaret Fuller and John Sullivan Dwight since the 1830s. The post-Kantian gesture of this romantic musical discourse lies in the hope to demonstrate the social relevance of self-contained artworks. This hope is epitomized in the conviction, for instance, that while Beethoven’s symphonies cannot be reduced to conceptual interpretation, they are not ornamental arabesques without content (as Eduard Hanslick’s radical Kantianism would imply), but embody larger values—the language of religion (Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder), the Infinite (E. T. A. Hoffmann), the “Will” (Arthur Schopenhauer), Democracy (Franz Brendel), or a millenarian social utopia (Dwight, Fuller). Whitman had no interest in the European Beethoven cult or its Boston branches, but his experiences with Italian opera convinced him that musical complexity was a prerequisite for the expression of metaphysical truth. Consequently his music columns during the 1850s began to assert “the supremacy of Italian music,” and to caution his readers that if they were used to popular music (“the church choir, or the songs and playing on the piano or the nigger songs”) they were in need of aesthetic “development.”

Whitman’s conversion to classical music went hand in hand with his preference for a more professionalist self-image. In an anonymous self-review for the New York Saturday Press in 1860, he urges inexperienced readers to mistrust their spontaneous response to “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (then called “A Child’s Reminiscence”), arguing that if they mistake the poem’s author for a primitive iconoclast (“plainly a sort of naked and hairy savage, come among us with yelps and howls, disregarding all our lovely metrical laws”), they should think again, for they will then have missed the intricacies of the work’s sophisticated musicality: “Walt Whitman’s method in the construction of his songs is strictly the method of the Italian Opera, which, when heard, confounds the new person” who “is only accustomed to tunes, piano-noises and the performances of the negro bands.” Whitman concludes his self-review with a plea to the American public to read him with care: “bold American! in the ardor of youth, commit not yourself, too irretrievably, that there is nothing in the Italian composers, and nothing in the Mocking-Bird’s chants. But pursue them awhile—listen—yield yourself—persevere.” He legitimates his demand for readerly exactitude with the post-Kantian claim that his free-verse poetics (“the “free strains” of “the Mocking-Bird’s chants”)—precisely because it is a “song” that evades facile conceptual vocabularies—expresses a deep metaphysical presence crucial to America’s spiritual rejuvenation (it will “give to these United States . . . the especial nourishments which . . . have hardly yet begun to be provided for them”).

Whitman stages himself as an Emersonian cultural healer who discerns the musical language of Being with an “ear sufficiently fine”
to transcribe and “to write down the notes without diluting or depraving them.”

But Whitman’s importance for Matthiessen’s generation lies in his suggestion that the musical cadences in *Leaves of Grass* might embody a spiritual presence more distinctly American than Emerson’s transnational language of Being. It is partly because Whitman’s modernist canonizers foregrounded his nationalist moments so influentially that we now tend to overlook the strong cosmopolitan elements that he shares with Emerson and Fuller. This cosmopolitan strain lets him suggest, in his self-review of “Out of the Cradle,” that his “chants” will rejuvenate American culture with the methods of Italian opera—Margaret Fuller makes a similar point when she argues, in 1845, that Beethoven “expresses, in full tones, the thoughts that lie at the heart of our own [that is, American] existence, though we have not found means to stammer them as yet.”

Why did Whitman’s millenarian quest for a “music” of democratic America lend itself better to the revisionist ends of modernist literary nationalism than Emerson’s or Fuller’s positions? An obvious (if banal) reason is perhaps that Whitman participated more directly than the Boston transcendentalists in the climate of mid-century post-idealism, in which the metaphysical foundations of cultural interiority were reinterpreted in more concrete sociopolitical terms. Consequently poetic manifestos increasingly defined style as the “physiognomy,” not simply of “spirit” as an abstract Platonic entity, but of the “spirit of the age,” the “nation,” the “race,” and finally politico-economic systems such as capitalism, feudalism, and democracy (a tendency towards the concrete that is already implicit in Hegel’s suggestion that there is no spirit outside practice).

The most important factor contributing to the lasting influence of Whitmanian notions of representative literariness, I believe, is that Whitman offered a precise definition of a “democratic method,” and his main candidates for stylistic democracy—free-verse scansion and structural de-hierarchization—proved quite persuasive. Young-American or Emersonian theories of cultural independence failed to suggest how to overcome the courtly muses of Europe, other than by a focus on homegrown themes. The Boston transcendentalists were aware that European music critics debated the political meaning of form during the revolutionary troubles of 1848. When an important left-leaning German music journal suggested that Beethoven was a “republican” composer (as against the “aristocratic” Mozart), the conservative camp asked provocatively to be shown “four aristocratic and four democratic bars” (“surely,” they said, “if there are aristocratic and democratic pieces of music, one should think that there must also exist singular aristocratic and democratic musical thoughts”). Few critics believed, of course, that
democratic sounds could be identified by stylistic analysis, as there was a consensus in mid-century theory, on both sides of the Atlantic, that the essence of great symphonies was universal. Even the most fervent musical nationalists among Whitman’s contemporaries (such as William Henry Fry, 1813-65) were conceptual Americanists, nationalist on the level of operatic theme but Italianate in their compositions—they considered their works to be manifestations of an American spirit, but did not defend their Americanness with reference to musical forms. This changed during the 1890s, when Dvořák’s arrival in New York rendered the idea of racially or nationally inflected musical languages more plausible, and early modernist critics began to scan American compositions for native tonal structures and debate whether Jazz rhythms or Indian chants could be an adequate foundation for an American symphonic tradition. At around the same period, when Whitman became the “Good Gray Poet” and wrote his later manifestos (such as “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads” of 1888), the idea of his invention of a democratic style intrigued modernist culture critics: in 1916, the music critic Paul Rosenfeld demanded that American composition “must go on where Whitman led,” “blazing the path for the song of democracy.”

These shifts in sensibility may explain the cultural work of Whitman’s post-Kantian elements, and thus the tremendous influence of today’s truism that while the genteel sonnet resonates with a hierarchical aristocratic England, the paratactical catalogue rhetoric of the *Leaves objectifies a radically democratic ethos. The implication is that the perceptive consciousness of *Leaves of Grass ranges freely over America’s natural and social spaces, transcending hierarchy and selective order, each item being linked to the next by a formal parallelism symbolic of *e pluribus unum. And indeed, the idea that we might like Whitman because he translates cultural pluralism into beautiful song (rather than just because he sings beautifully, or speaks about cultural pluralism, or both) is powerful in itself and may partly account for the excitement and pleasure with which we read him. But Whitman’s method “emerges” as democratic only because he provides the necessary interpretation, the discursive “program,” as it were, to his chants. It hardly needs to be pointed out that except at a very high level of abstraction, there is no ontological connection between, say, parallelistic catalogues and the idea of cultural inclusiveness (the catalogues in Hebrew poetry or the Bible rarely strike us as symbolic of democracy). If it now seems natural to associate stylistic de-hierarchization with political freedom it is partly because we have already accepted Whitman’s program before we listen to his song. The persuasiveness of this program, moreover, can be better understood if we consider how Whitman’s modernist canonizers
democracy’s “lawless music”

magnified the post-Kantian and nationalist elements of his work and de-emphasized his more cosmopolitan views.

IV. Whitman’s Retrospective Construction

The American-Renaissance construction entailed a number of important revisions: for one thing, it encouraged modernist literary historians to reinterpret Whitman’s historical location, retrospectively nationalizing, as it were, mid-nineteenth-century key concepts. When the Dublin-based Shakespeare scholar Edward Dowden published the first major assessment of Whitman’s “Poetry of Democracy” in 1871, he praised him for what he considered a cogent poetic formulation of Tocqueville’s vision of political modernity and Hippolyte Taine’s concepts of culture. After Whitman’s canonizers had done their cultural work (successfully marketing their “useable past”), the Tocquevilles and Taines of mid-nineteenth-century culture (along with the Francis Jeffreys and Thomas Carlyles of an earlier generation) had been relegated to the background of what now seemed “The Age of Emerson and Whitman” (as Matthiessen subtitled his study). Whitman would have been surprised, of course, by these reconfigurations. He never claimed to have invented the political and cultural theories that defined his work. On the contrary, he often authorized his poetry by referencing it with contemporary cultural theorists. In Democratic Vistas he speaks characteristically of the need for poets to be “consistent with the Hegelian formulas,” and in his 1882 obituary for Carlyle, he argues that Hegel’s and Carlyle’s “principal works” should be “collected and bound up under the conspicuous title ‘Speculations for the use of North America, and Democracy there, with the relations of the same to Metaphysics, including Lessons and Warnings (encouragements too, and of the vastest,) from the Old World to the New.’” Indeed, Whitman’s relationship to Carlyle reveals well how his modernist canonization has obscured his participation in a transnational intellectual field. For example, when Whitman wrote the two Galaxy essays that became Democratic Vistas in response to Carlyle’s antidemocratic polemic “Shooting Niagara,” he was offering a self-consciously modest intervention in what contemporaries would have perceived as a prominent debate between Carlyle and John Stuart Mill. It is due to the revisionist work of the generation preceding Matthiessen that the crucial role of Mill’s On Liberty in the U.S. has retreated into the background, while Whitman’s frequently anthologized essay now appears as a distinctly American rejoinder to a distinctly British feudalism.
This retrospective foregrounding of nationality might also explain the Americanization of Whitman’s project of attaining poetic democracy. When he published his famous 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, the search for a more natural diction (beyond the “chains” of conventional prosody) already had a long tradition stretching back to Hugh Blair’s advocacy of Ossian—indeed a number of contemporary reviewers of the *Leaves* were reminded of James Macpherson’s style. Moreover, contemporary audiences were familiar with the idea that democratic times could lead to democratic literature: as early as 1825, William Hazlitt censured Wordsworth for his poetic “principle of equality,” while in the same year William Cullen Bryant praised Sir Walter Scott as a democratic leveler of social hierarchy. During the 1830s and 1840s, the Young American Democratic Review treated Bryant as an “American Wordsworth” and considered even Longfellow as a literary democrat. By the 1850s, transatlantic poets liked to place themselves within an Anglo-Saxon democratic tradition reaching back to Milton’s justification of blank verse.

Arguably, the continued sense, in recent scholarship, that Whitman was the only serious nineteenth-century poet of democracy is a consequence of the post-Victorian revision of antebellum culture, which began tentatively with the devaluation of romantic discourse by realist manifestos during the 1870s and 1880s. Dowden’s 1871 review is an early example: it introduces to Whitman’s reception the idea that the democratic voices of New England Brahmins are not democratic in style (an argument that became commonplace to twentieth-century Whitman studies, while Whitman hardly ever used it himself). According to Dowden, Longfellow’s verse has “a sweet and characteristic note,” but is of an eminently old-world cast (*Evangeline* is a “European idyl of American life, Hermann and Dorothea having emigrated to Acadie,” *Hiawatha* could have been “dreamed in Kensington by a London man of letters”). Washington Irving “might have walked arm-in-arm with Addison,” and “if he betrays his origin at all, betrays it somewhat in the same way as Longfellow,” “by his quiet delight in the implicit tradition of English civility.” In Bryant, “prairie and immemorial forest occupy the broad spaces of his canvas”; but he portrays the splendors of American nature with a sense that “he is not native to their influences” (35). James Russell Lowell may possess “a conception of the democratic type of manhood,” but “taken as a whole” his works “do not mirror the life, the thoughts, and passions of the nation” (36).

A key factor in this refiguration of accepted literary democrats into stylistic feudalists, I believe, is a modernist shift in what it means to be an aesthetic radical. Early twentieth-century critics retrospectively projected on Whitman’s poetics the modernist belief that literary subversiveness mainly concerns a work’s formal or stylistic aspects—an idea that
would have surprised nineteenth-century audiences. Whitman’s implied readers did not separate form and content as neatly as twentieth-century formalists and therefore frequently located poetic radicalism in the treatment of theme. Hence for many of his contemporaries, Whitman’s most radical aspect was not his poetic form but his sexual explicitness—which tended to be considered a sign of popular literature rather than the literary avant-garde. Thus within the late-Victorian literary field Whitman appeared less experimental than today, while Tennyson and Browning were perceived as more thought-provoking than their retrospective classification as genteel poets allows (George Santayana himself acknowledges this when in 1900 he attributes poetic “barbarism” to both Whitman and Browning).

Indeed, the now commonplace division between Whitman on the one hand and the poets of gentility on the other is a good example of the dialectical emergence of Whitman-centered concepts of representative literariness. Whitman provided some cues when he spoke of the feminized culture of parlor poetry as a symptom of cultural illness. But his meditations on the influence of British feudalism never accrued to the full-fledged theory of gentility Santayana formulated to much greater acclaim in “The Poetry of Barbarism” (1900) and “The Genteel Tradition” (1911). The success of the Whitman/gentility binary clearly profited from the contemporary dominance of “dissociation of sensibility” theories. Santayana’s and Van Wyck Brooks’s highbrow-lowbrow divide almost completely discredited the nineteenth-century American literary canon—Brooks’s definition of the highbrow alone dismissed most of the New England tradition (not only Longfellow, Lowell, and Holmes, but also Poe, Hawthorne, and especially Emerson). The breakthrough of the Whitman/gentility binary arrived half a generation before Matthiessen’s intervention and became a critical orthodoxy with the help of the writers and intellectuals of the so-called Seven Arts group (after the short-lived eponymous New York journal), who elevated Whitman to a near-messianic figure of American cultural self-assertion. The extent of Whitman’s iconization during the 1920s and 1930s can be seen by the widespread use of Whitmanian labels to authorize modernist aesthetic practices—such as the choreography of Isadora Duncan, the architecture of Louis H. Sullivan, the music of Leo Ornstein and Charles Ives, the painting of John Marin and Georgia O’Keeffe, the photography of Alfred Stieglitz, and the literature of Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, and William Carlos Williams. In these contexts, the epithet “Whitmanian” signals the artist’s rediscovery of a more authentic America embodied in the artwork’s aesthetic brilliance (as opposed to the genteel America objectivized in second-rate artistic conventions). Thus in the first issue of the *The Seven Arts*, the French Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland urges
American writers and artists to follow “your Homer: Walt Whitman” in creating a national aesthetics that transposes the “rich foundation” of America’s essential diversity (the “unconscious and spontaneous and discordant voices” of the “free moving personalities within your States”) into a vibrant “Symphony.”

V. Conclusion: After the American Renaissance

During the 1960s and 1970s, the American-Renaissance construction lost a great deal of its credibility, but its underlying notion of representative literariness has retained at least some of its rhetorical appeal. It seems that the post-Kantian Whitmanian moment is most adaptable to contemporary U.S. studies when it is phrased in terms of negativity, disruption, and “thirdness.” Whitman’s image of American poetry as a “lawless music” already implies the figure of the sublime, as a reference to a real America that in contrast to the genteel America is always in process and thus eludes conceptual definition (hence the necessity of voicing it in the preconceptual language of a poetic “song” that embodies democratic practices by formal parallelism). Whitman’s trope of aesthetic revolution as a means of negative mimesis reappears in the post-1960s idea that authentic America expresses itself in the “exploded form” of the literary post- or late-modern avant-garde. Accordingly, Brian McHale sees the cultural relevance of “postmodernist fiction” in the fact that it “turns out to be mimetic after all,” as an “imitation of reality” that takes place “not so much at the level of its content, which is often manifestly un- or anti-realistic, as at the level of form.” This idea of a desirable stylistic correspondence between high art and radical democracy is also crucial to the discourse of experimental poetics since the 1960s. Lyn Hejinian’s foundational essay on “The Rejection of Closure” (1983) presents the recovery of poetic authenticity as a commitment to the method of the “open” text, which she deems both truer and more democratic and hence more worthy of the aesthetic demands of an academy-based literary avant-garde. The Whitmanian impulse of language-centered poetics can be seen (at least on a manifesto level) in its suggestion of parataxis as the main candidate for adequately democratic stylistic openness, and also in its dismissal of seemingly more traditional writing (such as confessional or so-called “academic” poetry) as latter-day versions of the genteel. Thus the authors of an important 1988 manifesto for Social Text argue that “the widespread contemporary reception of poetry as nice but irrelevant” is caused by the predominance of “sentimental” and “banal” moments in contemporary writing, resulting from the “pseudo-intimacy of an overarching authorial
‘voice’” that “falls far short of Whitman’s openness of self (which strikes us as much closer to a real self and its processes).” This assessment may be convincing enough, but it arguably draws its rhetorical force and its assumptions about good poetry from a key premise of the Whitmanian moment: that the difference between the genteel and the real lies on a stylistic level, that therefore a true poetics of democracy “necessitate[s] more radical idioms” in response to “the distortions of contemporary ‘unreal speech’” prevalent in America’s public sphere.30

In the more recent postnationalist critical movements that define themselves against what they consider the literary elitism, political naïveté, and monoculturalism of Matthiessen’s generation, the trope of representative literariness survives in the terms of a transcultural sublime. Gloria Anzaldúa’s celebration of her protean borderland identity, for instance, locates America’s lawless music in the spaces of alterity she stages as generic to radically pluralistic societies characterized by a culture of difference: “The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity.” Thus she “learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned.”51 Like Whitman, in other words, the “new mestiza” claims to contain multitudes. The brilliance of her “pluralistic” chant legitimates the culture of the borderland, which in turn attests to the “truth” (read: representative literariness) of her song.32

How can we explain the persistence of such post-Kantian claims today, when their explanatory power and epistemological validity seem rather tenuous? Arguably the rhetoric of representative literariness will be difficult to evade as long as we are drawn to view the literary in terms of the musical metaphors that have dominated the field of aesthetics since the late eighteenth century. Musical tropes encourage a dualist view of literature that locates its essence (its “literariness”) in an “other” elusive to rational understanding. There is nothing wrong per se with inventing aesthetic “others” to language—with attributing to Whitman a poetic je ne sais quoi as shorthand for whatever aspects of his undeniable literary power we cannot explain (where we will need an “erotics of art” rather than “a hermeneutics,” as Susan Sontag phrased it).53 But the problems begin when invented nondiscursive “others” (the mocking bird’s “chants”) are presented as being in a dialectical relationship with political entities (“democracy,” “liberalism,” “America”) that purportedly provide, to the sensitive critic, a discursive understanding of these nondiscursive “others.” Thus aural definitions of the literary imagination invite us to separate the essentially poetic from the essentially social, but then tempt us to reverse this separation by a post-Kantian sleight of hand that presents a culture’s disembodied “music” as its most profound social symptom.
It might help us to move beyond such post-Kantian reductionism if we view literary production as the sort of imaginary world-making that cuts across rigid world-art oppositions (that is, stylistic artistry and sociopolitical expressiveness). The world-making trope acknowledges that while form is always political, its political content (hence its “representativeness”) depends on the propositions with which it is connected in specific social practices (the readerly and writerly contexts from which it cannot be removed). This also serves to reconnect Whitman with his Emersonian roots from which the modernist canonization had distanced him. Emerson indeed rarely used the label “poet” to distinguish between the poetic in a strictly literary sense and other intellectual pursuits. Instead he applied it as an evaluative term referring to depth and validity of vision. On the basis of such a definition, we may still read Whitman as a radical democrat, even one, perhaps, who provides us with an important vision of the democratic utopia of an “achieved America,” as Richard Rorty suggests. But to make this case, we have to be prepared to engage with Whitman’s political or ethical vocabularies, rather than practice a concealed formalism that diagnoses Whitmanian “song” as the most refined location of his politics or ethics.

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NOTES

1 F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), 518. The phrase is adopted from Whitman’s unpublished notebooks, where he refers to his work as “only a language experiment.”

2 Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 583. Stephen John Mack’s recent study on the “pragmatic” Whitman, for instance, phrases this idea in only slightly more modern terms when he approvingly identifies “one of the great truisms of Whitman criticism that his revolutionary language style and his revolutionary politics are inextricably linked [and] connected symbiotically.” *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy* (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2002), 5. This understanding of Whitman also defines the recent *Cambridge History of America Literature*, vol. 4 (2004).


7 On the differentiation of cultural production and the emergence of intellectual fields, see Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), and *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford, CA: Stanford
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8 For all of their fascination with “common” experience, philosophies of art after 1800 adapted to the vicissitudes of professionalism inasmuch as they acknowledged the need for aesthetic specialization and stylistic difficulty. This would explain why, for example, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman—the great nineteenth-century celebrators of the quotidian and the common—produced highly complex literary artifacts that demanded specialist readers. An early theoretical formulation of the romantic embrace of professionalism can be seen in Friedrich Schiller’s Letters On the Aesthetic Education of Man (1793-95). Schiller’s catalogue of social mechanization, in his sixth letter, is a famous document of the primitivist critique of social differentiation. Yet Schiller’s position differs from Rousseau’s in that it presents modernization as a cultural necessity. Differentiation may turn intellectuals into graceless specialists obsessively chasing half-truths, but this is a worthwhile sacrifice, as it leads the “species towards the truth.” Friedrich Schiller, Werke und Briefe, ed. Otto Dann et al. (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992) 8:576. The romantic embrace of professionalism, moreover, can also be seen in Schiller’s perception of popular audiences. In his twenty-seventh letter, he warns of the naïve reader’s “raw taste” that “seizes upon” what is “new and surprising, colorful, adventurous and bizarre, violent and savage,” and mistakes for beauty merely that which “excites” at the level of “theme” [“Stoff”]. Werke und Briefe, 8:671. A similar argumentation can be seen in Wordsworth’s 1800 Preface. Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992), 746-47. For an overview of this “anxiety of reception” in British romantic letters, see Lucy Newlyn, Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000). On Wordsworth’s demand for specialist readers, see William Christie, “A Recent History of Poetic Difficulty,” ELH 67 (2000): 539-64.


10 See, most recently, Manfred Frank, The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanti-

11 The terminological and interpretive difficulty evidenced by the New Critics of the 1940s has consequently been seen as a defensive gesture, to dispel doubts of questioned masculinity and social marginality. According to Carton and Graff, the literary scientists had to present “the literary text as a complex symbolic entity” yielding special forms of national wisdom that warrant “the sustained attention of serious men who otherwise might have turned to more immediate public or commercial concerns.” Thus they felt they had to imply paradoxically that “the disengagement and alienation of criticism and art” are “keys to their cultural centrality,” and that intellectuals could “win cultural authority through their professional offices” (314). For a similar argument regarding the critical practice of F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot, see Richard Poirier, The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), 4-7.

12 Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), xi. Matthiessen’s methodology resembles that of the New Critics (as in John Crowe Ransom’s “Criticism Inc” of 1937) insofar as it reads like a rescue operation bent on reclaiming a few precious aesthetic objects from the rubble of middle-brow mediocrity. Matthiessen evokes this with a poignant contrast between Thoreau heroically stacking his own library with four-fifths of the first edition of his Week on the Concord and Merrimack and the resounding economic success of what he presents as an aesthetically indifferent literary mainstream, mere “material” that at best “offers a fertile field for the sociologist and for the historian of our taste” (xi).

14 In Matthiessen’s words, the “artist’s use of language is the most sensitive index to cultural history.” Matthiessen, American, xv. Aesthetic excellence thus marks the difference between dabblers in the idiosyncratic whose ideas bear little cultural centrality, and Representative Men (to use the romantic designation) whose aesthetic objects contain the essence of their times. Matthiessen’s vision of an American Renaissance is indebted to a nineteenth-century concept of representative expression that was shaped, in varying terms, by Hegel’s Philosophy of History (1822-30), Victor Cousin’s History of Modern Philosophy (1828-29), Carlyle’s On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (1840), Emerson’s Representative Men (1850), and Taine’s History of English Literature (1864). This concept also figures prominently in Whitman’s Democratic Vistas, where a nation’s representative intellectual is described as its “true author, poet, historian, lecturer, and perhaps even priest and philosoph,” who assures that the nation’s “spirit” and “form” “are one.” Whitman, Poetry and Prose, 1002-3.

15 Waldo Frank, The Re-Discovery of America (New York: Scribner’s, 1929).


17 Whitman, Poetry and Prose, 1015, and passim. See also Whitman’s meditation on “verbal melody” in “Poetry To-Day in America—Shakespeare—the Future” (Poetry and Prose, 1040) and on prosody in “Ventures, on an old Theme” (Poetry and Prose, 1080-81). The idea of poetry as an American music already underlies his thoughts on ornament in his 1855 preface to Leaves of Grass.


22 Emerson, Works 3:25. Emerson’s musical term for the language of Being to be transcribed by the Poet is “primal warblings” (8). In the same essay, he speaks of “pre-cantations” that “pre-exist, or super-exist” behind sensible phenomena and embody their “soul” (25).


24 Whitman, Poetry and Prose, 1058.

29 Hence we laugh about Barrett Wendell’s once influential suggestion that Whitman’s catalogues resemble not American liberty but European-style anarchy (“hexameters . . . trying to bubble through sewage,” as he put it in his Literary History of America), not because Wendell’s interpretation of the catalogue is more absurd than others, but because we have come to accept Whitman’s rather than Wendell’s political vision. Wendell, Literary History of America (New York: Scribner’s, 1900), 467.
31 Whitman, Poetry and Prose, 1012. It is unclear whether Whitman had in-depth knowledge of Hegel’s work, which was not available in full translation until the second half of the nineteenth century (the Philosophy of History in 1857, the Logic in 1873, and the Aesthetics in 1878), although there were numerous excerpts. Whitman’s major sources were Frederick Henry Hedge’s The Prose Writers of Germany (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847), and Joseph Gostwick’s Outlines of German Literature (Philadelphia, 1854). Whitman’s references to Hegel appear mostly towards the end of his career, after the canonizing work of the St. Louis Hegelians, with whom Whitman was acquainted, after the Civil War.
32 Whitman, Poetry and Prose, 914.
34 William Hazlitt, “Wordsworth,” The Spirit of the Age in Complete Works, ed. P. P. Howe (London: Dent, 1930), 11:87. Hazlitt is impressed, to an extent, by Wordsworth’s democratic principle, but he finds that his “leveling” of tradition leaves out a great deal that is worth keeping. As a result, Hazlitt finds that “the current” of Wordsworth’s “feelings is deep, but narrow” (94), and he treats him as a representative of a democratic culture whose achievements are useful but not very far removed from mediocrity. See also Hazlitt’s discussion of aristocratic versus democratic mental faculties in “Coriolanus,” Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays in Complete Works, 4:214.
35 William Cullen Bryant, “[Review of Sedgwick’s] Redwood,” North American Review 20, no. 47 (April 1825): 248. According to Bryant, the democratic novelist “reduces” his socially varied characters “to the same great level where distinctions of rank are nothing, and differences of character are everything.”
38 See David S. Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988). Whitman himself often enough defined the difference between feudal and democratic literature in terms of its political content rather than form, even if he uses metaphors that today seem intrinsically formalist. For instance, when he argues (in “Poetry To-Day in America—Shakespeare—The Future”) that Walter Scott, Alfred Tennyson, and Shakespeare “exhale that principle of caste which we have come on earth to destroy,” the olfactory metaphor “exhale” refers to the literary representation of feudalism rather than its stylistic embodiment. For with refer-
ence to Scott, Whitman explains that what makes the Waverley novels pernicious is their undemocratic ideology and their un-American topics: they “turn’d and condens’d brilliant but entirely false lights and glamours over the lords, ladies, and aristocratic institutes of Europe,” leaving “the bulk of the suffering, down-trodden people contemptuously in the shade.” Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 1040.

39 In an early self-review, Whitman applies the anti-British stance generic to the Young Americans to the work of “Tennyson and his British and American eleves,” whom he characterizes with a personification of “Poetry” as a “gentlemen to the first degree, boating, fishing, and shooting genteely [sic] through nature.” Whitman proposes *Leaves of Grass* as a more manly American alternative. Whitman, “An English and American Poet,” American Phrenological Journal 22, no. 4 (October 1855): 90-91.


41 Its major figures include the editors of *The Seven Arts* (Van Wyck Brooks, James Oppenheim, and Waldo Frank), its most influential cultural critics (Randolph Bourne, Paul Rosenfeld, Lewis Mumford), and such important modernist literary contributors as Robert Frost, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, and John Dos Passos. See Waldo Frank, “A Note on American Cultural Criticism since 1909,” *The Re-Discovery of America* (New York: Scribner’s, 1929), 318.

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48 According to Hejinian, the open text may be less “soothing” than the traditional stylistics of closure but truer to reality (it “acknowledges the vastness of the world”) and to the ideal of radical democracy, as it “rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies.” Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” Writing/Talks, ed. Bob Perelman (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1985), 270-72. Like Whitman, Hejinian implies that while the text can never “match the world” (285), correspondence can be reached in negativity.
49 Compare Bob Perelman’s suggestion that “Whitman’s paratactic catalogs seemed bizarre and discontinuous to most of his contemporaries, yet for this century’s readers they are more likely to suggest connection and a totalizing embrace of society.” Perelman, The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 77.
52 For a genealogy of this idea, see Carrie Tirado Bramen’s The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000).
54 The world-making trope is consistent with a number of recent approaches that consider the literary (or the aesthetic) as a creative act that transcends formalist definitions without having to reject aesthetics as a whole (as a putatively irrelevant domain outside the political). Wolfgang Iser’s and Winfried Fluck’s versions of literary anthropology envisage the aesthetic activity as the enunciation of a fictive world (in mediation of “imaginary” and “real” gestalts). This performative process of symbolic transfer and self-empowerment can apply to any kind of discourse, not only the traditionally “fictional” literary genres. See, for