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GÜNTER LEYPOLDT

Introduction: Cultural Icons, Charismatic Heroes, Representative Lives

What do we mean when we speak of cultural icons? The most obvious sense in which we apply this term to, say, “George Washington,” the “Statue of Liberty,” the “Model T,” or “Madonna” is summed up by the Oxford English Dictionary’s recent definition of “icon” as a “person or thing” or an “institution, etc., considered worthy of admiration or respect” or “regarded as a representative symbol, esp. of a culture or movement” (OED 2009). This meaning, which relates iconicity to the production of collective memory and cultural authority, now dominates the vernacular and increasingly the academic usage of the concept, but it emerged rather late (the OED included it in a 2001 on-line “draft addition” that dates the earliest occurrence to 1952). There are a variety of older and more specialized connotations that complicate the use of the term.

The most basic connotations revolve around notions of visuality: Charles S. Peirce’s late-nineteenth-century definition of the icon as a sign that resembles or imitates its referent has been influential to academic discourse on the philosophy of language – today’s linguists consider iconicity largely in terms of an inquiry into the iconic potentialities of signs that seems less relevant to questions of cultural memory. But the concept of the iconic was also brought into play with an older debate within philosophy, literary criticism, and art history about the rela-

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1 See, for example, the emergence of popular guides such as Hilfiger’s Iconic America: A Roller-Coaster Ride through the Eye-Popping Panorama of American Pop Culture (2007) and McKechnie’s USA 101: A Guide to America’s Iconic Places, Events, and Festivals (2009). For the increasing academic interest, see the three-volumed American Icons: An Encyclopedia of the People, Places, and Things That Have Shaped Our Culture (Hall 2006), Leavy’s Iconic Events: Media, Politics, and Power in Retelling History (2007), and the American Icons series at Yale University Press (advertised on Yale UP’s website as “a series of short works” each intending to tell “a new and innovative story about American history and culture through the lens of a single iconic individual, event, object, or cultural phenomenon”).

2 In early modern English, “icon” was still synonymous with “picture” or “image” (in accord with its Greek roots: eikōn: “likeness,” “resemblance”) and could simply mean any kind of written or painted portrait or poetic or rhetorical simile. By the time Peirce appropriated the term in the 1880s (as a synonym of “likenesses,” as he had first labeled icon signs in 1867 [Peirce 1984]), the broader meanings had become obsolete, and the semantics of the term had narrowed to refer mainly to religious artifacts.

3 A rare exception is the recent semiotic approach to American cultural icons in Feldges 2008.
tionship between painterly and textual representation – a debate perhaps best known by the ancient *ut pictura poesis* thesis and the more recent proclamations of an “iconic” or “pictorial turn” in Western culture. To approach the study of cultural icons from a visuality-based viewpoint is to frame it as a kind of media study that engages with American icons primarily in terms of their functions as disseminated images or simulacra.

1. Icons as Cultural Heroes

There is of course another important – and for our purposes more relevant – connotation that revolves around the notion of sacred images, derived from the label for Eastern Christian paintings that portray holy figures and scenes and (in Byzantine theology) were themselves considered sacred. It is not hard to see how these religious undertones resonate with today’s notion of cultural iconicity: The concept of icons as representations of saints or sacred sites coheres well both with America’s civil religion and the contemporary global worship of celebrities. We should recall, however, that not too long ago it would have seemed inappropriately metaphoric to speak of Washington, Napoleon, or Shakespeare as sacred icons; they would have been labelled “great men,” in the sense implied by such nineteenth-century designations as “world-historical individuals” (Hegel), “heroes” (Carlyle), or “representative men” (Emerson). The current meaning of “cultural icon” has taken over the semantics of the now obsolete designations of representative individuals, while the religious connotations continue to ring as undertones.

The concept of the representative individual shapes the symbolic economy of cultural iconicity in important ways. What distinguishes iconic personhood from

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4 The insistence on a “turn” tends to suggest that visual meaning is a distinct form of knowledge that necessitates emerging academic disciplines such as “iconography” or “iconology” – an assumption often accompanied by weaker or stronger claims about a global cultural shift towards visual modes of communication displacing the textual logic of the Gutenberg era. See, for example, Mitchell 2005, Maar 2004, Boehm 2007, and Smith 2008. On Mitchell’s discussion of the pictorial, see the essays by Benesch and Snyder-Körber below. An interesting mid-twentieth-century precursor of the pictorial/textual conundrum is the new critical quest for the literary artifact as a “verbal icon” (Wimsatt 1954).

5 The Baudrillardian term “simulacrum” has itself become “iconic” of the narrative of cultural decline in which the visual turn spells loss of authentic experience (see Baudrillard 1981, 1-42). For an application of Baudrillard on the mediality of Indianness, see the essay by Stievermann below.

6 See Hegel’s influential history lectures of the 1820s, *The Philosophy of History* (first published in English in 1857), Thomas Carlyle’s 1840 lecture series *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s mid-1840s course of lectures that appeared in 1850 as *Representative Men: Seven Lectures*. Before the 1860s, Hegel’s concepts were disseminated through the popular *Introduction to the History of Philosophy* (1829; Boston, 1832) by the French philosopher Victor Cousin, which Emerson first read in the French original (on Cousin’s American influence, see Leyboldt 2009).
impersonal cultural icons (places, buildings, quotidian objects, brands, foods, social practices, institutions, or historical events)\(^7\) is that it combines abstract inscriptions of collective identity with concrete examples of living practice – with ethical, moral, political, and aesthetic case studies of how to live “the good life” in American terms. Impersonal “sites of memory”\(^8\) may symbolize distinct ethico-political truths, but only great individuals can embody them convincingly. Iconic people, in other words, provide a repertoire of stories that relate to impersonal sign systems like literary case studies to abstract precepts. They generate a force of conviction that seems to hinge on the authenticity effect of a life lived, as opposed to life stories marked as invented or allegorical. The exemplary power of iconic individuals of the past or present distinguishes them from avowedly fictional or mythical figures (Ulysses, Hamlet, Rip van Winkle) or cultural archetypes (the Hillbilly, the Gunman, the Cowboy\(^9\)). This collection of essays seeks to explore this phenomenon with a focus on living and historical figures of US public relevance both in the field of cultural production (section A: “Literary and Cultural Icons”) and the sphere of social action (section B: “Political Icons and Founder Figures”).

2. Cultural Iconicity and the Concept of the Representative

Individual exemplars of public virtue have been extolled since ancient historiography and the *historia magistra vitae* tradition as it informs, for example, Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702). After 1800, however, the discourse of “great men” introduces an ambiguity to the concept that continues to be significant, a shifting between universalistic conceptions (where greatness is defined as access to transcendent values) and notions of culture-specific representativeness (where greatness is conceived as the power to realize the essence of one’s culture).\(^10\) The tendency towards cultural specificity can be seen in Hegel’s

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\(^{7}\) For example, places: the Mexican Border, Niagara Falls, Manhattan; buildings: the White House, the Pentagon, Golden Gate Bridge; quotidian objects: cell phone, Tupperware, Boy Scout knife; brands: Barbie doll, McDonald’s, Model T; foods: Hamburger, Jell-O, Bourbon; social practices: bachelor party, trick or treating, filibuster; institutions: trial by jury, presidency, Wall Street; historic events: Boston Tea Party, Gettysburg, 9/11. For a more comprehensive list, see Hall 2006.

\(^{8}\) See Grabbe 2008 and Hebel 2003.

\(^{9}\) See Harkins 2005 and Wachman 2010.

\(^{10}\) Many prominent nineteenth-century “great men” theories of history still hinge on transhistorical concepts of exemplarity: Carlyle’s “heroes” (Odin, Mahomet, Dante, Shakespeare, Luther, Knox, Johnson, Rousseau, Burns, Cromwell, Napoleon) and Emerson’s “representative men” (Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakspeare, Napoleon, Goethe) are presented as universal heroes of the spirit. This means that, though they may be marked by the “physiognomy” of their age, their significance as cultural heroes (or in most cases their partial failure) depends on how they connect to a timeless “real” (“God,” “nature,” “pure reason,” “world soul,” “the Divine Idea,” etc.). Only by resisting historical fashion do Carlyle’s and Emerson’s candidates emerge as the ethical and moral exemplars of their times.
history lectures of the 1820s, where “world-historical men,” “the Heroes of an epoch,” are portrayed as “agents” or “executors” of the “world spirit” (“Geschäftsführer des Weltgeistes”) because their thought and action already embodies the “nascent principle” of their collective identity that their less perceptive contemporaries can only vaguely intuit. The groundbreaking idea is that the greatest personalities are one with their culture, and that they are one with the most relevant part of their culture.

This commitment to cultural particularity links the idea of exemplary personhood with modern politics of recognition, and it furthers new claims of cultural authority that begin to assert themselves towards the second half of the nineteenth century. In the 1850s and 1860s, for example, the French literary historian Hippolyte Taine defines intellectual and literary greatness as a function of cultural rootedness and distinguishes between deeper and shallower modes of cultural representation. According to his “moral geology” (1868, 42), the most trivial cultural producers represent mere fashions; better ones might capture the essence of a school or whole generation; while only the greatest thinkers and artists manage to embody by their thought and action a whole historical period or even the essence of their “race.” In the American scene, this critical trope is best exemplified by Walt Whitman’s insistence that he is “one” with America and his poetic song “tallies” with the modern and the democratic. Cultural representativeness is often defined negatively, against the specter of artists and intellectuals deemed so detached from their original “soils” that they can only produce empty formalisms – like music that “puts on roots in mid air,” as Th.W. Adorno said of tonal composition in the modernist period – or artists and in-

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11 Hegel 1986, XII: 45-7; 1857, 29-31. In the terms of Hegel’s French disciple Victor Cousin, who popularized these notions in the Anglo-American discourse, “great men” “represent” the “spirit” of their nation “more clearly, and less confusedly” than their countrymen (1829, 296), and they “represent” a historically specific idea “at the precise time when that idea is worth representing” (304).

12 Taine’s “moral geology” divides into (1) superficial fashions of three or four years, (2) the character of shorter periods of around 40 years, (3) that of a whole age (the Middle Ages or the Renaissance), (4) certain national traits intrinsic to an ethnicity (the valor that unites ancient Gauls with modern French), and (5) certain racial traits that unite people of the same blood (Germans, Slavs, and Hindus in contrast to Semites or Chinese) (1868, 42-57).

13 See also Whitman’s metaphoric merging with the North American wilderness: He “incarnates” America’s “geography and natural life and rivers and lakes,” the nation’s greatest rivers “embouchure” into him, the vast great lakes are “tallied by him” (Whitman 2002, 618; see also Whitman 1996, 955-6, 1002-3).

intellectuals who are said to represent an inauthentic (belated, exhausted, or degenerate) part of their culture.\textsuperscript{15}

Today’s discourse of cultural iconicity, while it has shed the rhetoric of nineteenth-century historicism, remains concerned with cultural location and recognition. We still pose questions about how iconic individuals relate to “our” imaginary America: What do we recognize in Thomas Jefferson (democratic founder or slave-holder)? Which cultural groups may “inhabit” the sites of memory labeled “George Washington” or “Benjamin Franklin”? And what is the cultural location of iconic intellectuals, writers, artists, and musicians? (Does “black music” represent American culture? Are Jazz and Blues more authentically American than classical compositions? Can Eminem be called an icon of black music?). It will not do to reject these questions on theoretical grounds – by questioning, for example, the pertinence of authenticity models or identity politics – for the same reason that we cannot simply “disprove” collective historical memories by holding them up to putative historical realities (see Klein 2000).

3. The “Reality” of Iconic Persons

The meaning of iconic individuals emerges in social rituals of inscription and reinscription, valuation and contestation by which competing groups seek to rewrite the symbolic content of cultural icons to make them “fit” their preferred self-image and suit their pragmatic purposes. Icons with high cultural relevance and complex histories (Pocahontas, Shakespeare, Washington, etc.) develop into veritable “palimpsests” of overdetermined and multilayered sociopolitical inscriptions.\textsuperscript{16} In this sense they can be compared to the group of thinkers that Foucault termed “founders of discursivity” (1984, 114) – authors such as Marx or Freud who became eponymous “fields” of discursive practice that transformed their works into sites of competing orthodoxies against which new generations of Marxists and Freudians seek to define themselves. By a similar logic we might say that the meaning of “Abraham Lincoln” detaches itself from the lived “realities” of the historical person although the cultural groups who appropriate the icon (“We run this community in the spirit of Lincoln”) are likely to present their orthodoxies as passively adopted “authentic” sets of values (a

\textsuperscript{15} See Whitman’s claim, for example, that Shakespeare and Tennyson, despite their admirable qualities, were so organically related to what he called “feudalism” that they could not become an integral part of modern American literary production without serious consequences for the nation’s cultural health (Whitman 1996, 1040-50; 1175-6). This argumentation recalls Hegel’s suggestion that modern societies cannot be combined with Catholic religion (an older “form of consciousness” incommensurable with democracy [Hegel 1991; 1986, vol. XII]) or express themselves in forms of “beauty” (an aesthetic practice commensurable with ancient Greece [Hegel 1993 and 1986, vol. XIII]).

\textsuperscript{16} On the palimpsest metaphor and its uses in literary and cultural theory, see Genette 1982 and Huysssen 2003, 7.
“pure” Lincolonian ethics or politics to which one merely “returns”). Not all cultural icons are that complex, to be sure. Yet since the symbolic content of iconic individuals is fundamentally a product of value-based appropriation, we can hardly validate it by holding it up against its historical or biographical origin (i.e. the works, concepts, or practices of the real individual). The search for the “real person” behind the iconic inscriptions is a figure of speech that is perhaps permissible for biographers but should be taken as metaphoric shorthand for the practical need to distinguish between better or worse stories about a person’s life – in the sense that all life stories fare better or worse in relation to the group-specific purposes that govern their construction or their making (poiesis).

4. Meaning and Charisma: The Dual Nature of Cultural Iconicity

The biographer’s search for the best biographical narrative seems at odds with our sense that the most important and fascinating cultural icons defy univocal interpretations. Perhaps we can compare iconic personhood with an Ezra Poundian “vortex”: a symbolic framework charged with meanings distinct enough to inspire multiple group-inscriptions but also open enough to resist ideational closure. In this sense, “Pocahontas” (or “Lincoln” or “James Dean”) might be said to function (in Pound’s well-known phrase) as “a radiant node or cluster […] from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing” (289). And we can take Pound’s adjective “radiant” as a metaphor for the persistence and seductiveness of the most complex cultural icons – the force with which they compel us to engage with their narratives, ideas, and concepts in a dynamic process of interaction that never arrives at hermeneutic closure (hence: “ideas constantly rushing”). But the “pull” we experience in the presence of iconic individuals is surely more than just a meaning constellation, or the allure of inexhaustible hermeneutic depth. Take for example the transfixed audience gazing at Horatio Greenough’s classicist statue of George Washington, in Frances Benjamin Johnston’s famous 1899 photograph (fig. 1).

The concentration of hermeneutic energies is almost palpable, and we can imagine the rush of ideas whirling around this scantily clad white marble figure as the viewers engage with its irresolvable symbolic inscriptions: Washington as Greek god (inspired by Phidias’ “Zeus”), philosopher-king, pater patriae, and Cincinnatus, the farmer general whose left hand returns the sword to the people (he is resolved to return to the plough) while his right hand points the index finger at the higher law (demonstrating the “ascendency of the civic and humane over the military virtues”). The viewers might also be seeing images of the “American Moses” who led his people into the “promised land” (Bellah 2006, 234), or the

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17 See the essay by Kurt Müller below on the symbolic range of Lincoln’s image.
18 David S. Reynolds describes the force of icons as a “ripple effect” (see his essay on Cromwell below).
19 As Alexander H. Everett’s puts it in 1844 (618). See also Wills 1984.
slave-holding Virginian aristocrat complicit in contemporary separate-but-equal ideology. But what holds these viewers' attention arguably transcends such hermeneutic conundrums: Greenough's “Enthroned Washington” may mean a number of things (the symbolisms blur into one another), but the intensity with which he fascinates both the children and their teachers has to do with what he “is,” “embodies,” or “performs,” as a 12-ton marble representation of cultural authority situated on the east lawn of the US Capitol. What makes the sculpture appear like “a radiant node” in the center of circulating ideas is that it puts its viewers directly in touch with something larger than themselves, a higher power in a power differential that affects their bodies and gives them a “practical sense” (rather than merely mental or conceptual knowledge) of their place within the social hierarchies of the US.

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20 See also the essay by Karsten Fitz below.
21 See Bourdieu on the concept of tacit practical knowledge: “Each agent has a practical, bodily knowledge of her present and potential position in the social space, a ‘sense of one’s place’ as Goffman puts it, converted into a sense of placement which governs the experi-

Fig. 1. African American school children facing the Horatio Greenough statue of George Washington on the east lawn of the U.S. Capitol (Frances Benjamin Johnston, 1899?). Photographic print: cyanotype. Frances Benjamin Johnston Collection (Library of Congress).
“George Washington” embodies a source of power in the same way that Eastern Christian icons (following the “iconophile” position in Byzantine theology) are not mere copies, at one remove from the sacred figures they depict, but can themselves be said to be sacred, because the act of representing partakes in the transcendent presence it represents. We can take this religious image as a reminder of the dual function of iconic representation: cultural icons are symbols with encoded socio-cultural “meanings” that contribute to the symbolic constructions of group-related cultural identity. But they also perform social rituals and cultic practices and thus partake in the “production of presence” inherent in socially consecrated space. Like idols or fetishes, icons are charged with a power of attraction that eludes a strictly hermeneutic-interpretive approach and is thus often described with terms that center around the semantics of the numinous: charisma, radiance, magic, charm, allure, enchantment, spell, glamour, sublimity, etc. We might recoil from such concepts for their imprecision – what do we mean by “aura”? – or their undertones of esoteric or foundationalist theological discourse. I would suggest, however, that we can use the terms “charisma,” “aura,” and “presence” in the spirit of social anthropology, as conceptual markers for the felt experiences (the reported “phenomenologies”) of collective forms of attraction that evidently emerge from certain consecrated social spaces and infuse or empower the individuals that occupy these spaces, turning them into functional equivalents of idols, saints, and “momentary deities” (Cassirer 1946, 17).

5. Social Locations of Iconic Charisma

The “charisma,” “aura,” or “presence” of icons is difficult to grasp (it is, after all, a group-specific reported experience), but we can describe the more tangible social constellations in which it tends to appear. For example, consecrated space

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22. As “windows to eternity,” religious icons bring the spatio-temporal realm of finite humanity in contact with the sacred (Barth 1993, 26).
24. On the similarities of idols and fetishes in relation to a socially produced aura, see Böhme 2006. On charisma, see Lieb 2009.
25. Implied, for example, in Rudolf Otto’s influential definition of the “numinous” as an expression of the Holy (Otto 1917).
can be recognized by its relation to economic production: Max Weber has pointed out (in the 1910s) that charismatic leadership is drawn towards an “extra-economic” position (“Wirtschaftsentheobenheit”) that seeks symbolic rather than material profit (Weber 1985, 141). This withdrawal from commercial markets parallels religious practices: Charisma seems to wither in the face of excessive commercialization, just as the sacredness of religious objects depends on their unavailability for public use – “to consecrate’ (sacrare),” Giorgio Agamben reminds us, “was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law.” Following Weber’s “disenchantment” thesis one might assume that the thorough extension of capitalism into all spheres of life has rendered charismatic presence an abnormality in modernized Western societies. But of course the opposite is the case. Late modernity’s accelerated cycles of production and consumption did not eradicate consecrated social space but reshaped and intensified it in more ramified forms. There has been a dissemination or displacement of the sacred from religious and political authorities to professionalizing cultural “markets.” Commercialization converts cultural products (artworks, literary artifacts, religious symbols) into profane commodities with ever-shortening shelf-lives, but it also creates newauratic spaces of market extraterritoriality that emerge from within the more accelerated cycles of commodity exchange. The rise of the museum in the 1800s serves as a significant case study of modern “re-enchantment.” As much contemporary cultural theory has pointed out, museums resacralize objects by removing them from the commodity cycle, thus turning them into performative symbols of transcendent values – they then become “priceless” in that their felt significance pertains to a sphere external to economic markets. By the same logic we can say that the charisma of cultural icons depends on how they refer to imaginary spaces outside quotidian economies – as when gentleman presidents begin to embody civil religious ideals (Washington, Jefferson), professional politicians an “American Camelot” (JFK); or commercially successful entertainers “black resilience” (Josephine Baker) or “existentialist non-conformism” (James Dean).

The social production of charisma is complicated, moreover, by apparent continuities between economic extraterritoriality and cultural authority. The “extraeconomic” spaces that emerge within accelerated commodity cycles attribute the highest prestige (the most symbolic capital) to cultural artifacts with the lowest commercial value. This “reversal of the economic world” (Bourdieu 1995, 114) turns museums into sites of charismatic attraction as well as sites of social distinction. Commercialized cultural markets can thus be said to transfer (partly

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26 And: “Religion can be defined as that which removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere. Not only is there no religion without separation, but every separation also contains or preserves within itself a genuinely religious core” (Agamben 2007, 73-4).


28 See the essays by Fitz, Fluck, and Hurm below.
at least) the social charisma that was previously “monopolized” by political and religious leaders, to cultural avant-gardes (consecrated artists, men of letters, and intellectuals) who occupy the same functional position as the museum in the sense that their authority rests upon market-generated symbolic prestige. This means that the Washington statue in Johnston’s 1899 photograph (fig. 1 above) still puts its viewers in touch with something larger than themselves (i.e. a social power differential that may be imaged as “America,” “God,” “universal reason,” etc.), but the iconic “Washington” shares the symbolic weight of this “something” with a widening canon of cultural momentary deities that entered the pantheon of the social imaginary through the cultural market – the “invented traditions” of its museums (Daniel Boone, Pocahontas, Squanto) and the “representative men” of its cultural avant-gardes (for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow).

Perhaps the most spectacular manifestation of this development – the conferal of social charisma on cultural avant-gardes – was the inauguration of the colossal “Scott Monument” in the heart of the city of Edinburgh in 1844 (fig. 2). Its neogothic 61 meter steeple towers above a white marble statue of Sir Walter Scott (with his favorite dog) and carries effigies of numerous characters from Scott’s novels, and the names of sixteen Scottish men of letters. The massive scale of Scott’s apotheosis shows how the embodiment of social power differentials (in this case, imaged in terms of a Scottish civil religion) can be performed by a “representative” man of letters.

Scott’s iconicity shows the tenuousness of market-generated consecration and the difficulty of sustaining charismatic attraction in the face of popular success. Scott belonged to the few nineteenth-century men of letters who enjoyed both large book sales and elite recognition: The Waverley novels were hugely popular commodities but nonetheless prestigious enough to become the first novels to be included in British reading societies and university libraries at a time when the genre was still largely considered unworthy of higher learning (St Clair 2004, 236, 254, 640). Scott’s spectacular downfall began when he lost the re-

29 On the modern invention of culture, see Ralph Bauer’s discussion of Squanto and the emergence of Thanksgiving below.
30 On Emerson and Frederick Douglass as emerging icons, see the essays by Schulz and Levine below.
32 Scott’s status as a novelist was shaped by his standing as a poet (in 1813 he was offered and declined the position of poet laureate). Before he became “the author of Waverley” in 1814, his ballads reached large audiences (he vastly outsold the formally more difficult work of his today more canonical romantic peers, including Wordsworth and Coleridge), but they were also considered cutting-edge for their Ossian-inspired expression of Scottish nation-
cognition of the cultural elites and became, not a former hero who might now seem arcane (as the romantics came to regard, say, Alexander Pope), but worse, a merely popular writer whose literary quality was associated with the unprofessional sphere of women and children. Scott’s later re-entry in the pantheon of

Fig. 2. Scott Monument, Edinburgh (1840-4), Illustrated London News (1871). Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

hood. Scott first published his novels anonymously (lest they might tarnish his reputation as a poet), but his authorship was soon an open secret, although he waited until 1827 to acknowledge it officially.

See Bautz 2007 and Pittock 2006. The critical basis of Scott’s loss of peer recognition is exemplified in E.M. Forster’s Aspects of the Novel (1927) and F.R. Leavis’ The Great Tradition (1948). The notion of Scott as a bad ideological influence (as in Mark Twain’s asser-
iconic nineteenth-century authors began through a secondary process of consecration that transformed him from an exhausted commodity associated with non-literary audiences to a site of national memory based on his historic achievements as the “inventor” of a national mythology and the historical novel.

The “American Scott” James Fenimore Cooper suffered a comparable pattern of iconic prominence, decline, and historical revival (though on a smaller scale and presumably for different reasons: see Alliston and Schirmeister’s essay below). But the most baffling exemplar of the rise and decline of iconic intellectuals in US literary history is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who between the 1850s and the 1920s ranked as the most important nineteenth-century American poet and loomed larger in the transatlantic collective memory (fig. 3 and 4) than any of his now more canonical contemporaries (in 1884 he became the first American to be given a memorial bust in the Poets’ Corner at Westminster Abbey).

The breakdown of Longfellow’s iconic charisma has a great deal to do with twentieth-century levels of cultural professionalism that made it harder for poets to gain symbolic recognition with poetry that is neither experimental nor philosophically challenging. His descent from representative poet to minor heritage figure therefore results from the same print-market-related changes in the rites of literary consecration that conferred iconic prominence on modernist intellectuals with small readerships as well as the historical revisionism that has turned

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34 Like Scott and Cooper, Longfellow increasingly became known as a popular writer (a “schoolroom poet” for uneducated or “genteel” audiences). Although by 1900 his national mythologies (in Evangeline, Miles Standish, or Hiawatha) were as influential as Cooper’s, they have not caught on well enough with recent popular imaginations to make him a significant site of memory. Nor has his work inspired the sort of academic consecration that post-1960s American Studies extended to many nineteenth-century domestic novelists for their “cultural work” (Tompkins 1985), after they had virtually disappeared from collective memory (as mere commercial bestsellers). On the specifics of Longfellow’s rise and fall, see Irmscher 2006, Gioia 1993, and Calhoun 2004.
the more exclusive nineteenth-century writers (for example, Wordsworth, Keats, Baudelaire, Emerson, and Whitman) into the iconic literary heroes that now seem most representative of “their age.”

Fig. 4. The dedication of William Couper’s Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Statue at the Dupont Circle in Washington, DC, in May 1909. Harris & Ewing Collection Library of Congress.

The “economic loser wins” rule that regulates the museum and twentieth-century literary canonicity may seem less pertinent in today’s celebrity culture, where iconic prominence often extends to well-paid Hollywood stars with glamorous media presence. Still, the role of symbolic consecration in the creation of charismatic iconicity would explain why the cultural attraction and centrality even of celebrity icons is not simply linear to their overall popularity and commercial success – the mass-cultural popularity of many contemporary celebrities (from Paris Hilton to David Beckham) might well contribute to their delegitimization as sources of cultural identity, while many national “heroes” more closely positioned to the space of the museum or cultural avant-gardes (Shakespeare, Emerson, Whitman, Pound) remain charismatic despite their relatively low circulation among mainstream audiences. The increasing differentiation of contemporary popular culture can be seen in the double coding of pop celebrities such as Madonna Ciccone, who over time adapted her earlier “material girl” persona towards a more ambitious performance practice that aligns her with the symbolic prestige of artists such as Cindy Sherman, in an attempt to combine the mass appeal of the sex symbol and record-selling multi-millionaire with the cultural authority of the avant-garde (see Nadja Gernalzick’s essay below).

35 On the contemporary reception (or public non-reception) of Wordsworth and the Cockney poets, see St Clair 2004.

36 The complexity of popular forms of consecration is apparent in some of the most iconic post-war music legends (Elvis, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson, or Ma-
6. Affective and Conceptual Levels of Iconicity

If the charisma of icons emerges from their performance of or participation in social consecration, how does it relate to their symbolic “meaning”? We might analyze cultural icons into two heuristically separable levels and differentiate between their charisma as an affective-emotional force of attraction and their symbolic meaning as a conceptual-hermeneutic set of stories, ideologies, morals, truths, etc. Charisma and meaning may then be said to interact with one another in ways that resemble the relationship between religious cult and religious belief: the former is an experiential reality (however socially produced) that cannot simply be disavowed (or pronounced inauthentic) by the skeptical questioning of the latter. Charisma and meaning might reinforce one another, but need not be in a dialectical or causal relationship. Often enough they seem all but discontinuous: the cultural centrality of many celebrity icons (Elvis or Marilyn Monroe) derives mostly from an intensity of attraction that recalls religious idols (or civil religious “Washington” statues) in their performance of social power, while from the viewpoint of a cultural hermeneutics, the ideological or conceptual meanings inscribed in them are often limited to vague scripts about “lifestyle.” The cultural authority of “Michael Jackson” or “Jack Nicholson,” in other words, hardly hinges on the intricacy of the socio-political precepts or exemplary lessons that can be derived from them. It rather draws from the degree to which they put us in touch with whatever powerful social whole we intuit as the most important “source” of our self (“America,” “the good life,” “pure reason,” “eco-
nomic prosperity,” “world peace,” etc.). By the same logic, many iconic individuals that appear to draw their cultural centrality mainly from their intellectually complex and ideologically suggestive materials (Ralph Waldo Emerson, say, or Langston Hughes, or Paul de Man) participate in rites of social consecration that determine their cultural relevance in a way that seems detached from (or at least need not be in a dialectical relationship with) the political, moral, ethical, or aesthetic inscriptions generally applied to them.38 These tensions between charismatic and hermeneutic aspects of iconicity are no less pertinent if we move from literary to political figures of iconic identification (Washington, JFK, Obama, Martin Luther King) whose value systems and worldviews are charged with varying degrees of charismatic power.

The complexity of the interplay between the charismatic and hermeneutic levels of cultural icons is also apparent in the tenuousness of iconic value, as it is evidenced, for example, by how quickly prominent individuals can turn from cultural saints or savior figures to demonic villains or Girardian “scapegoats.”39 Charismatic attraction can thus oscillate between positive and negative affects, or produce the sort of ambivalence that has been attributed to the religious taboo and the aesthetic category of the sublime.40 We might take the felt ambiva-

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38 For example, it is instructive and important to follow the shifting meanings that interpretive communities have projected on the icon “Henry David Thoreau” in the past hundred-and-fifty years up to his recent refiguration as foundational “ecocritic.” But Thoreau’s status as an environmental saint goes beyond the rediscovery of the less “anthropocentric” nature writing in his journals: It draws from the social and institutional rites of consecration that have helped to transport him from the eccentric space of the “huckleberry-party” (in Emerson’s disparaging remark [1903, 10: 456]) to the sanctified realm of literary classics. Thoreau’s present prominence as founding father of modern environmentalism has a basis in the meanings attributed to his texts, but it also depends on the institutionally produced aura that gives “American-Renaissance” writers an authority relatively independent of the hermeneutic intricacies of their work. The upshot is that we can ignore neither the charismatic nor the conceptual functions of cultural icons without impoverishing our understanding of their cultural relevance. Perhaps we can take cultural icons as symbols that tend both to “mean” and “be”: Their “meaning” consists in the values and virtues through which they figure in symbolic constructions of cultural identity; their “being” derives from the social charisma without which their “meaning” lacks cultural authority. Recalling Archibald MacLeish’s slogan on the difference between poetic and discursive texts (“A poem should not mean / But be” [1976, 106-7]) serves to remind us that the distinction between charisma and hermeneutic meaning rephrases a problem central to Western philosophies of art, which revolves around the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual forms of knowledge (often phrased with oppositions such as “form/content,” “experience/idea,” “beauty/truth,” “wonder/resonance,” etc.).

39 See René Girard’s thoughts about how societies may turn on “the marginal insider, the rich and powerful” in a way that fulfills the rituals of purgation associated with the Biblical scapegoats (1982, 18-9).

40 See Durkheim’s suggestion that holy things can shift unexpectedly from the pure to the impure (1994, 551), or Freud’s similar description of the taboo (1999, 26). The parallel ambivalence of sublime and mystical experience already belonged to the repertoire of aesthetic and theological theory when Edmund Burke established his affective dualisms (pleasure/
lence of charismatic power as symptomatic of the pragmatic instabilities of the space in which representative individuals emerge, a liminal space removed from quotidian experience – in accord with Weber’s notion of the “extraordinary” position of charisma (its “Außeralltäglichkeit” [1985, 140]). As performers of an obscure but nonetheless visceral social power, cultural icons serve as planes of projection for contradictory cultural affects and fantasies.

7. The Essays in this Volume

Literary and Cultural Icons

The section on icons as cultural producers opens with Clemens Spahr’s “Fashioned Saints: Anne Bradstreet’s Literary Genealogy,” which explores the iconic history of the first major American poetess. Spahr shows how Anne Bradstreet’s symbolic construction was already quite complex during her lifetime, before her inclusion in Cotton Mather’s Magnalia Christi Americana (1702). There is an interplay between the cultural politics of Anne Bradstreet’s male seventeenth-century editors, who shaped her image with prefatory poems to the 1650 and 1678 editions of her works, and the forms of self-fashioning that she inscribed in her own poems. The ambiguity of Anne Bradstreet’s iconic inscriptions emerge in the push and pull between her images as “American Muse” and as humble heir to old-world genealogies (Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Guillaume Du Bartas), between moments of female subversion and piety. Spahr also examines how Bradstreet locates herself in various imagined traditions and genealogies (literary and political). Bernd Engler’s “American Literary Nationalism and the Cultural Politics of ‘De-Nationalizing’ Shakespeare” discusses William Shakespeare’s iconicity in relation to nineteenth-century notions of cultural independence. Shakespeare at first seemed to transcend the anti-British cultural bias of post-1812 cultural nationalism, when it was more common to take him as a universal rather than an exclusively English author. Engler traces the gradual decline of the early nineteenth-century Shakespeare idolatry through the various stages in which American writers such as Washington Irving, Jones Very, and Ralph Waldo Emerson kept refashioning the English Bard according to the changing cultural political premises of the new nation.

April Alliston’s and Pamela Schirmeister’s “From the Popular to the Exemplary: James Fenimore Cooper’s Reception at Home and Abroad” shows the culture-specificity of Cooper’s exemplarity and explores how his reception has from the start been shaped by the differing imaginative and ideological needs of European and American audiences. Cooper’s “Americanness” in particular appears to be a transnational (rather than American) construct that can be traced

plain, terror/delight). See, for example, Rudolf Otto’s phenomenological comparison between the dual characters of sublimity and the “numinous” as similarly structured expressions of the Holy (Otto 1917). For a trenchant critique, see Agamben 1998, 75-80.
to nineteenth-century European readers of his work (for example, Balzac and Goethe). Robert S. Levine’s “Frederick Douglass’s Iconic ‘Little Book’” follows the surprising career of Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), from its beginnings as an acclaimed Garrisonian anti-slavery publication that put its author on the literary map, to its virtual disappearance from cultural memory in the 1850s and its post-1960 hypercanonization as Douglass’ most important text and the most iconic nineteenth-century slave narrative. Levine raises important questions about Douglass’ own role in shaping his reception (his neglect of the *Narrative* in favor of his more analytic treatments of slavery, for example) and the shifts in political beliefs and aesthetic tastes that reconfigured not only Douglass’ own role as a literary intellectual but also the *Narrative’s* symbolic value in relation to the more comprehensive later autobiographies (My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, 1881, rev. 1892). Klaus Benesch’s “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For? Thoreau’s Spatial Iconicity” illustrates how Thoreau’s image as representative American writer revolves around generic notions of spatial origin that are drawn from symbolic concretions of Thoreau’s experiment at Walden Pond and his “sauntering” through the imagined landscapes of an ideal America. Benesch demonstrates the presence of a Thoreauvian iconicity of place in the American consciousness by looking at three literary examples, Joshua Slocum’s maritime autobiography *Sailing Around the World* (1900), Don DeLillo’s debut novel *Americana* (1971), and T.C. Boyle’s tale about 1970s Hippie counterculture, *Drop City* (2003). In “Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Infidel as National Saint,” Dieter Schulz explores the stylistic, performative and ideological strategies that can be said to have encouraged Emerson’s emergence as one of the most important representatives of the American intellectual. Schulz traces the widespread appropriation of Emerson, even in conservative circles that would appear to be unlikely Emersonian strongholds, and he relates them both to the strategies of self-effacement that mark many of Emerson’s intellectual and stylistic achievements and to the adaptability of Emerson’s meliorist and individualist beliefs. Walter Grünzweig’s “The Iconic Whitman: Americanness and the Global Culture” outlines Whitman’s extraordinary position within the transnational construction of American identity. Referring to contemporary photographs of Whitman in light of their various appropriations, Grünzweig shows how Whitman’s iconicity shifts between a surprisingly large set of stock images (the “proletarian rough,” “revolutionary poet,” “democratic poet,” “Good Gray Poet,” “persecuted and failed poet,” “messiah,” “wound dresser and nurse,” “American national poet,” “poet of the marginal and repressed,” “gay poet,” “inclusive poet,” and “global poet”) and how the symbolic content of these differing Whitman icons emerges from transnational discourses and their local uses.

MaryAnn Snyder-Körber’s “Sexual/Textual Iconicity: From Henry James to Master, Queer, and Other Jameses” explores the vast field of iconic appropriations that has characterized Henry James’ twentieth-century reception since the author’s own attempt to shape his literary self with the New York Edition of his
works. Snyder-Körber examines the purposes of distinction (or oedipal self-assertion) that the various “Jameses” have served, focusing on T.S. Eliot’s modernist construction of James as a model American novelist, and Alan Hollinghurst’s treatment of the “Queering” of James in his recent novel *The Line of Beauty* (2004). Isabell Klaiber’s “Making Black Icons: Pauline E. Hopkins’ ‘Famous Men of the Negro Race’” deals with Pauline Hopkins’ attempt at establishing a canon of African American icons in order to revise the white-dominated cultural and intellectual histories of the late nineteenth century. Drawing from Emersonian models of self-reliance, Hopkins seeks to inspire self-esteem and create an incentive for self-help in the readership of the *Colored American Magazine* to achieve the “racial uplift” of African Americans that white-dominated identity models have helped to prevent. Klaiber shows the rhetorical strategies with which Hopkins celebrates successful and heroic black individuals and supplies them with suitable historical and political narratives.

Gerd Hurm’s “Acting Authentic: James Dean, Rebellion, and Post-War Negotiations of an American Icon” explores the multiple iconic images of James Dean and their baffling adaptability to heterogeneous political and (counter)cultural camps (the spectrum of people who claimed Dean as a role model runs from Ronald Reagan to John Lennon). Hurm inquires into the strong sense of authenticity that people draw from Dean, examining both the role of Dean’s own self-fashioning in the creation of his image and how the icon “James Dean” can be said to serve as a dynamic plane of projection for the key concerns of the 1950s cultural imaginary. Nadja Gernalzick’s “‘Iconizing’ – Madonna Ciccone and Performance Art” charts the ambivalences of Madonna’s image as a pop icon that combines mainstream ideas about fame, money, and sex with the countercultural appeal that can be associated with the feminist and avant-garde attitudes attributed to her play with fluid identities. Gernalzick shows how Madonna’s iconicity is indeed that of a “meta-icon” in the sense that the self-reflexive imitation of celebrity poses has now become a trademark aspect of her iconic personae: her use of Marilyn Monroe, for example, is both a sumptuously celebratory masquerade and an exposure of celebrity images as cultural constructions (Gernalzick calls this strategy “iconizing,” in analogy to the concept of “vogueing”). The essay also inquires into the blend of biography and performativity that can be said to underlie Madonna’s “iconizing” in relation to the performance artists Cindy Sherman and Orlan. Sebastian Duda’s “Andy Warhol – Sequences of an Icon” discusses how Warhol’s increasing “disappearance” as an artist figure solidified his iconic status, how he – paradoxically – became an icon seemingly despite himself, by avoiding “confessional” self-expression and self-promotion. Duda makes this case with reference to Warhol’s painterly practice of depersonalization and his anti-establishment attitude (such as his often comic subversion of avant-gardist notions of personality in his interviews), and shows how Warhol literally stages his disappearance in a series of 1980s self-portraits. Philipp Löffler’s “The Trouble with Ethnicity: Iconizing the ‘Negro’ Artist Miles Davis” brings out the conceptual difficulties that the construction of cultural icons has
inherited from the romantic identity models underlying the notion of representativeness. Löffler examines the problematic notions of blackness that emerged in the creation of the icon “Miles Davis” in the context of the African American liberation movement – with its Harlem-Renaissance-informed notions of black music – and the Beat generation’s fascination with concepts of jazz poetry and the idea of the “white negro.” Löffler also showcases how the marketing of blackness (or Africanness) defines Miles Davis’ work of the late 1960s and later.

Political Icons and Founder Figures

The section on “Political Icons and Founder Figures” begins with Ralph Bauer’s essay on “Squanto: The Indian Orphan and the Mythology of American Beginnings,” which deals with the iconization of the Patuxet Indian who joined the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth in 1621 and helped them through their initial difficulties. Bauer surveys the stories about New-World inhabitants that shaped the colonists’ perception of Squanto from the start (the “noble savage” and “black legend” narratives), and traces the colonial projections in the relevant documents (by, among others, William Bradford, Ferdinando Gorges, and Edward Winslow). Bauer places the Squanto legend within the context of a national mythography that emerges with such nineteenth-century inventions of tradition as the post-bellum establishment of Thanksgiving, in whose iconography Squanto plays a major part and which introduces seminal changes to the Squanto narratives. Bauer also follows the fate of the Squanto figures in more recent popular culture (juvenile literature, radio drama, and film). Jan Stievermann’s “Lavish Images of Victimry: Terrence Malick’s *The New World* and the Pocahontas Iconography” discusses the national mythography of Pocahontas with reference to Terrence Malick’s 2005 film adaptation. Stievermann places Malick’s use of the Pocahontas image within a framework he calls the “Pocahontas Iconography,” the palimpsest of inscriptions and reinscriptions that begins with John Smith’s account of Pocahontas and accumulates over four centuries a repertoire of set-pieces and iconic events (the “rescue,” “abduction,” “baptism,” “marriage,” “death”) that provides a flexible narrative grammar for the cultural-ideological needs of differing generations and groups. Stievermann outlines the various registers and the historical genealogy of this grammar in order to elucidate Malick’s narrative choices. Stievermann’s critique of Malick’s film draws from Gerald Vizenor’s Baudrillardian rejection of “victimry” as a form of discursive exploitation.

Karsten Fitz’ essay on “The Personification of the Minuteman: George Washington and Israel Putnam as Iconic Yeoman Farmers/Minutemen in the Antebellum U.S.” examines the most important templates of inscriptions that shaped the iconization of American Revolutionary heroes in the course of the nineteenth century. Fitz shows how a combination of agrarian and republican narratives mediated through the ideological needs of the antebellum period coalesced into an iconography of George Washington and General Israel Putnam that centered around ideas of the minuteman and the yeoman farmer. This iconography devel-
oped a complex set of narrative and pictorial elements that were adapted to suit the sectional political backgrounds of the antebellum period. Frank Obenland’s “Napoleon in America: Political Iconicity in the Early Republic” shows the level of complexity inherent in Napoleon’s iconization immediately after his first successful campaigns, and before the better known late romantic appropriations by Walter Scott, Carlyle and Emerson. Focusing on American responses to Napoleon in the early 1800s, Obenland examines essays and poems by Charles Brockden Brown, Joel Barlow, Philip Freneau and the young William Cullen Bryant, who use the conceptual language of transatlantic republicanism to make the French general a plane of projection for the hopes and anxieties during the nation’s initial period of Western expansion and political consolidation. Oliver Scheiding’s “The Indian Chief as a Federalist Icon: Washington Irving’s Refiguration of Philip of Pokanoket” explores how the Wampanoag leader Metacom or “King Philip” became an important part of the symbolic repertoire of “literary federalism.” Scheiding focuses on Washington Irving’s appropriation of Philip as a Federalist icon that began with two 1814 essays for the *Analectic Magazine* (“Traits of the Indian Character” and “Philip of Pokanoket”) and evolved into a more romantic reading of Philip when Irving revised these essays for publication in his *Sketchbook* (1819).

Kurt Müller’s “Abraham Lincoln: The Emergence, Appropriation and Contestation of an American Icon” elucidates how the iconic Lincoln developed against the background of the symbolic repertoire of the American Civil Religion that had already converted Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, and Jackson into figures of sainthood deeply connected to the nation’s sacred sites and scriptures. Müller shows how Lincoln’s murder turns him into a consecrated site of memory and leads to a rewriting of his life and works from the viewpoint of America’s civil religion. Astrid Franke’s “The Janus-Faced Iconography of Billy the Kid” inquires into the relationship between the social conditions of violence and the inscriptions in such iconic outlaw figures as Billy the Kid. Franke revises the myth-and-symbol-school approaches to this topic by using the sociological vocabularies of Norbert Elias and Loïc Wacquant (on how modernizing societies strive towards the “monopolization” of violence with varying success) to examine the shifting borders between outlawry and legal authority in the 1870s New Mexican “Lincoln County War” from which Billy the Kid draws his fame. Franke then explores how Billy’s iconization emerges in three texts with differing purposes and cultural backgrounds: Pat Garrett’s *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid* (1882), Walter Noble Burns’ *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (1925), and Miguel Antonio Otero’s *The Real Billy the Kid* (1936).

David S. Reynolds’ “Oliver Cromwell as an American Cultural Icon: Transcendentalism, John Brown, and the Civil War” explores the significance of Oliver Cromwell with relation to the public reactions to John Brown in the antebellum period and through the Civil War. Reynolds traces the amazing career of Cromwell’s iconicity from his seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rejection as a symbol of iniquity and political deceit to his romantic revaluation as a hero of
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the spirit and principled democratization that came to dominate the 1840s Anglo-American discourse and shaped Brown’s own self-fashioning and the transcendentalist intellectuals who came to his defense. Reynolds shows how Oliver Cromwell became a “floating signifier” that abolitionist and pro-slavery factions inscribed according to their political purposes, and how the shifting of Brown’s iconicity from Cromwellian hero to villain fired Northern and Southern passions before and during the Civil War. Melanie Fritsch’s “Of Martyrs, Meteors, and the Millennium: John Brown’s Iconicity in Nineteenth-Century America” examines the rhetorical construction of Brown as an iconic martyr in the wake of the Harpers Ferry raid with the help of iconographic templates from religious and secular narratives central to New England literary culture. Fritsch shows how transcendentalist intellectuals turned Brown into a Christ-figure that served as iconographic justification of anti-slavery violence and ultimately shaped Northern attitudes to the Civil War.

Winfried Fluck’s “The Fallen Hero: John F. Kennedy in Cultural Perspective” analyzes how the “Kennedy myth” draws from stories about youth,英雄ism, and authenticity that are mediated through the cultural imaginary of the Kennedy era. Fluck traces the narrative ingredients of the myth and examines their role in the public perception of the Kennedy administration: the young and courageous adventurer, the gallant knight (Camelot), the servant of the public good (“ask not what your country can do for you…”), the defender of democracy and peace (“Ich bin ein Berliner”), and finally the tragic martyr. Fluck outlines how these elements shaped Kennedy’s image during his administration, and even continue to do so (as Barack Obama’s recent image as Kennedy’s “classlessly classy” heir attests), despite the public currency of less flattering facts about Kennedy’s many illnesses, his extramarital affairs, and his more aggressive political moves (Vietnam, Cuba).

Works Cited


Günter Leypoldt


