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From Poe to Post-Postmodernism: *Symbiosis*, 1997–2018

I can't look at the English-American world or feel about them, any more, save as a big Anglo-Saxon total, destined to so much an amount of melting together that an insistence on their differences becomes more and more idle and pedantic; and that melting together will come the faster the more one takes it for granted and treats the life of the two countries as continuous or more or less convertible, or at any rate as simply different chapters of the same general subject. ... I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am at a given moment an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America (dealing as I do with both countries), and so far from being ashamed of such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized.

Henry James to William James, 29 October 1888 (James 1913: 143)

The Launch of *Symbiosis*

When, in 1995, Richard Gravil and I were preparing the first (1997) volume of *Symbiosis*, we wanted to insist upon certain key issues. First, we intended to publish innovative and theoretically informed essays that, while delivering complex and often challenging and unfamiliar readings of (generally) much-studied texts, were written in accessible fashion and free from what we perceived to be the jargon-laden material that formed

much of what was then being published in other journals. This was not because we were ‘anti-theory’ in the manner of much of the history of American Studies scholarship. Far from it: we sought essays that were informed by theory, but which articulated ideas in a way that encouraged academics and students to explore new alignments that challenged not only preconceptions about literary nationalism, but also the relationship between this and how literature was defined and understood within different cultures, moments and spaces.

One consequence of the creation of the journal – and one that seemed particularly apt, given the ideological imperative that underpinned the project – was that we quickly ‘discovered’, or, helped to define a Transatlantic community that had not previously been widely recognized as anything more than a group of like-minded individuals. As we approached potential contributors to the first volume, we realized that, far from being isolated voices, striving to be heard in academic cultures still dominated by narratives framed around national tropes, Susan Manning, Robert Weisbuch, Ian F. A. Bell, Robert D. Richardson, David Murray, Fiona Green and others were already producing a sizeable canon of Transatlantic research and that they were also considering how best to adapt teaching to accommodate their ideas. The first volume also demonstrated that interest in Anglo-American literary relations was not confined to a particular period: while my expectation had been that the overwhelming majority of submissions would be addressing Romanticism and Transcendentalism, or the long nineteenth century, it quickly became apparent that both earlier and later periods (including many studies of writing by women, members of ethnic minorities and other frequently marginalized groups) were generating substantial research and teaching interests and that, while a trans-historical narrative would miss the significance of cultural realignment, attempts to posit or define a historically limited account of literary connections would be equally unsuccessful.

In the editorial to the first issue, we suggested that *Symbiosis* should be a ‘forum in which specialists in Anglophone literature can explore the links and associations and influences and collaborations and competition between writers in English on both sides of the Atlantic,’ making the claim that ‘Few writers in the Americas or the British Isles have worked without an alert awareness of what was being done and

written on the other side of the water.’ We felt, however, that these connections had too often been overlooked because the ‘system of academic disciplines has resulted in the training of professional readers whose literary horizons frequently coincide with national boundaries’ (Gair and Gravil 1997: 2). This claim was based upon not only published work in literary studies, but also experience in the classroom, where American and English literatures were traditionally taught separately.

While I would not go so far as Henry James who, in the epigraph to this essay wrote to his brother William that he would treat the ‘life of the two countries as continuous or more or less convertible, or at any rate as simply different chapters of the same general subject’, and while I would categorically challenge James’s construction of ‘a big Anglo-Saxon total,’ the notion that ‘national’ literature has been problematized through the study of Transatlantic relations would now be taken as self-evident by most scholars. James’s assertion that, ‘I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am at a given moment an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America’ is both hyperbolic and inconsistent with his approach to the majority of his fiction (an inconsistency that, ironically, perhaps identifies his place in the line of American philosophical self-contradiction), yet it is also suggestive of more recent questions of literary voice. Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel, *The Namesake* (2003) has an American protagonist of Indian parents, who is named after a Russian novelist. Lahiri herself is of Bengali descent but was born in London and lives in the United States. While Lahiri may be an unusual example, she is far from alone in drawing upon a range of ethnic, geographic and cultural experiences in her writing, which challenges notions of what constitutes a national literature, or whether such a thing can be said to exist. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) is a more recent example of a text that complicates notions of national literature: Adichie is a Nigerian who has studied and taught extensively in the United States, while the novel’s events take place in Nigeria, the United Kingdom and America. The book explores questions of racial identity in the United States, but – rather than shaping its protagonist through a national history of slavery and racial oppression – adopts the strate-

gies of immigrant fiction to critique America in the early twenty-first century and as Barack Obama becomes President. More broadly, a case is often made for Canadian literature being significantly shaped by immigrant writers and recent anthologies of Canadian literature, such as *The Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories* (2007), edited by Jane Urquhart, and *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Canadian Women's Short Stories* (2009), edited by Lisa Moore, invariably stress the high percentage of material by non-native born Canadians within their pages.

Native born American novelists now also routinely draw upon and re-imagine the formal features of English literature, in ways that seem to follow the trajectory initiated by Edgar Allan Poe in 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846). Poe – in an essay that combines an awareness of the economic obstacles to becoming a professional writer in the United States with a characteristically robust attack on the notion of specifically nationalistic definitions of authorship – uses what could be mistaken for a throwaway remark about Charles Dickens as the introduction to speculations on genre in which he cites *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as an example of an occasion when a novel can achieve the effects more commonly generated from the successful short story. Poe thus refers to an early (and pre-national, in the case of the United States) example of literary transnationalism that imagines a community of writers, to complement his identification with Dickens as literary doubles, rather than as transatlantic rivals. Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, discussed more fully later in this essay and throughout this special issue of *Symbiosis*, utilizes a quintessentially Dickensian structure of split narratives, disruption, character flaw and redemption, and structural resolution to represent contemporary American life, without feeling any need to signpost what seems taken for granted as a Transatlantic genealogy. While *The Namesake*, *Americanah* and *Freedom* may be relatively 'obvious' examples of (different kinds of) literary exchange, the degree to which each text manifests a 'surface' transnationalism allows them to serve as ideal introductions to readers who wish to probe the more deeply embodied relations and dislocations identifiable in works that have previously been catalogued within this or that national canon, especially where – as with Dickens or Hawthorne, for example – an identification of author and nation has become so deeply engrained.

Counter-intuitively, an introduction to the discussion of Anglo-American literary relations could begin with two studies that helped codify the national literary genealogies that became institutional orthodoxies for around half a century. F. R. Leavis commences *The Great Tradition* (1948) with the assertion that ‘The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad,’ a list that, of course, contains two women, one American of Irish ancestry and one Ukrainian-born Pole (Leavis [1948] 1986: 9). What may take slightly longer to answer is why James, who only became a British subject in 1915 (the year before his death), should be embraced by the creators of the English literary canon when he has habitually been seen as problematic, or excluded altogether, from the American counterpart. Likewise, the absence of any ‘genuine’ white English males from Leavis’s list, alongside the presence of Austen and Eliot, leads to consideration of the ways in which early canon-construction in the United States focussed almost entirely around white males and more or less systematically devised criteria for determining literary value that would exclude other groups. In *American Renaissance* (1941), F. O. Matthiessen is primarily concerned with literary value, and his understanding of what this entails is at the heart of his construction of American literature through a study of ‘our past masterpieces.’ Matthiessen makes clear from the outset that his study is of the ‘best books ... in accordance with the enduring requirements for great art’ (Matthiessen 1941: vii, xi). Again, it is not hard to pick up on the presumptions that Matthiessen brings to his work and the tensions that emerge. It is apparent that Matthiessen is at one with Hawthorne’s well-known condemnation, in a letter to William D. Ticknor, dated January 19, 1855, of the ‘d____d mob of scribbling women’ (Hawthorne 1987: 304), and he observes that ‘Such material still offers a fertile field for the sociologist and for the historian of our taste’ – but not for the student of great art (Matthiessen 1941: x–xi). Yet what is also apparent is the tension between an insistence on ‘our’ literature (that is, American literature) and the prevailing belief in a universal understanding of what constitutes ‘great’ art and what is beneath the gaze of the true literary critic. I cite Leavis and Matthiessen not because their works are ‘wrong’, but because they are masterpieces of their time. Scholars should continue to learn from each, even whilst we question some of their central premises. What is

more important, however – at least, if we want to think beyond national paradigms – is the degree to which establishing a dialogue between two foundational constructs of national literary genealogy can facilitate our own understanding of the trans-national circulation of ‘British’ and ‘American’ literature.

* * *

Four decades on from Leavis’ and Matthiessen’s foundational texts of English and American literary scholarship, in ‘The Novel and the Middle Class in America’ (1986), Myra Jehlen posited a reading of nineteenth-century American literature that characterises it through its difference from European realism. For Jehlen, ‘in quintessentially middle-class America the major authors ... seem not to have written novels at all.’ Rather, they ‘spun tales of extravagant individuals in flight to the wilderness and beyond’, in marked contrast to European counterparts that ‘explored the lives of ordinary people at home’ (Jehlen 1986: 125). Jehlen’s summary clearly points towards the hyper-canon of nineteenth-century literature, and to figures such as Ahab, Hester Prynne, Natty Bumppo and Huck Finn, but – while her account of the division between American Romance and European Novel sounds familiar – there is a note of caution, that questions the celebratory readings of the first great wave of American Studies scholarship published during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s:

however faraway into the wilderness American romances take us, ultimately they find it an impossible situation and, whether out of commitment or by default, lead us back to society. For the self-reliant individuals ... all fail in the end to create their private worlds, and their failure sounds dire warnings of the dangers of isolation and solipsism. (Jehlen 1986: 125)

This danger, for Jehlen, is identifiable in what may be most recognizable to literary scholars as an Emersonian belief in the ultimate unity between self and society, in which (as Jehlen summarizes) apparent contradictions are ‘dissolved in that single higher Reality which is already complete and will in its own time manifest itself’ (Jehlen 1986: 131). Accordingly, any effort to take flight from society will inevitably result in defeat, such as Ahab’s silent death or Hester and Huck’s re-

turns to civilization. In practical terms, for Jehlen, such an ideology can take hold because ‘America’ was built by the middle class in a way that they perceived ‘not only as desirable but natural’, with oppositional voices either appropriated into the hegemonic narrative or dismissed as residual traces of an old (European) order with no place in the New World (Jehlen 1986: 127).

In contrast, in Europe, the rise of the novel corresponds with the emergence of middle class hegemony and challenges to what had previously been seen as a natural order (shaped by church and monarchy), with the subsequent on-going conflicts and realignments resulting in both personal and societal histories being understood as in permanent states of flux and lacking stable moorings. By extension, ‘the protagonist of the European novel is born already an existential outsider No longer able to identify with their society, in short, men and women in a bourgeois society identified themselves in terms of their existential distance from it.’ Thus – and drawing on critics such as Raymond Williams and J. Hillis Miller – Jehlen asserts that the ‘basic factor’ in the European novel ‘is the absence of transcendent order or unifying purpose in the novelist’s bourgeois culture,’ that is in marked contrast to ‘a contrary sense of order so pervasive as to seem inescapable that generated the American romance’ (Jehlen 1986: 128–9).

I cite Jehlen – as I did, above, with Matthiessen and Leavis – not to suggest that her reading of the American Renaissance is necessarily ‘wrong’, or that it is an example of poor scholarship. Far from it: her essay and, more widely, *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, which Jehlen co-edited with Sacvan Bercovitch, are exemplary models of cutting-edge research of the time, which applied sophisticated theoretical models – often based, ironically enough, on European theory – to question the assumptions underpinning a previous generation of American Studies scholarship. Rather, I refer to this piece to indicate how, as late as the mid-1980s, the Atlantic was habitually used to identify difference, rather than continuity, national coherence, rather than either internal dislocation or transnational connection. For Jehlen, following many earlier critics, this point is a question of form, as well as content: the American writers she examines (in particular, Hawthorne and Melville) are marked not only by the ways in which their protagonists seek (unsuccessfully) to disengage from American society, but

also by the sense that their literary creations do not match the definitions of ‘the novel’ as it was understood in Europe in the nineteenth century. What is most striking now, re-reading the essay at a distance of more than three decades, is the extent to which an argument that appeared radically different at the time has come to bear striking resemblances to earlier criticism. While Jehlen’s thesis revolves around class, rather than myth and symbol, in terms of genre, Jehlen is happy to accept the distinction drawn up by Hawthorne in his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), between the (European) novel and (American) Romance, which was engrained in American Literary scholarship with Richard Chase’s *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957).¹ Ideologically, too, Jehlen’s essay – whilst offering a radically different perspective – maintains Chase’s separation of old and new worlds. For Chase, implicitly, this distinction is a matter of asserting the supremacy of American individualism at the height of the Cold War; for Jehlen, writing (as it transpired) near the end of the Cold War, it relates to the respective positions of the middle class in the United States and Europe, with the former depending, as outlined above, on an Emersonian ‘identity of interest’ between the individual and society and the latter ‘born of the recognition that the individual is inevitably separate from society’ (Jehlen 1986: 130–1).

Of course, such an argument depends on where you look for examples: while it is hard to disagree with Jehlen’s claims if we focus on the hyper-canon of American literature – Ishmael going to sea and returning to report on Ahab’s death, Huck fleeing downriver before being reunited with Tom Sawyer (even if he vows to light out again at the end of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) – the distinction is less clear in, for example, other writings by Melville and Twain. ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’ (1853) and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1893), to paraphrase Jehlen’s account of European realism, feature plots about ‘ordinary people’ (Bartleby in the lawyer’s office, Wilson rooted in his adopted home) in which the leading characters are either marked through a fatal estrangement from an economically-determined social order (Bartleby), or ensure that, in opposition to their avowed ideological beliefs, an oppressive and alienating social order based upon a system they despise is reinscribed (Wilson). Likewise, in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), an extraordinary protagonist settles into

comfortable married life only to re-emerge as the alienated progenitor of modern, technological genocide and victim of the quintessentially European conflict between old and new 'natural' orders. In a parallel challenge to the narrative proffered by Jehlen, an equally quintessential English protagonist, Martin Chuzzlewit, can only become an 'ordinary [person] at home' after he has experienced his own 'flight to the [American] wilderness and beyond,' an instance of symbiotic encounter that facilitates one form of 'national' identity through the enactment of another.

While it seems more than coincidental that the Transnational turn occurred soon after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the end of the Cold War (1991), it would be a mistake to think that no critics (let alone writers of fiction) had understood the symbiotic relationship between old and new worlds before then. Although much American literary scholarship tends to emphasise the manner in which American literature both depended upon and disguised its indebtedness to European ideas, constantly manifesting anxiety about perceived inferiority, there is a parallel history running from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries in which the hierarchy is challenged. While there is insufficient space for an extended reading of this current, I would like, briefly, to note one example central to the thinking behind the launch of *Symbiosis*.

This example comes from the middle of the twentieth century, at the very moment when Chase, R. W. B. Lewis, Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx and others were publishing the Myth/Symbol studies that effectively founded American Studies as an academic discipline. Although, at the time, he received scant attention (at least within the University sector), C. L. R. James was formulating a pioneering – and I use the word advisedly, if somewhat ironically – approach to the study of literature and culture that addressed the Atlantic and the nations either side of it as radically entwined. As a Trinidadian, who had moved to England in the early 1930s, lived in the United States for fifteen years from 1938, before being deported back to England, James was uniquely placed to develop such a methodology. In *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), he reflects on what he perceives to be his younger self's colonial subjectivity:

Me and my clippings and magazines on W. G. Grace, Victor

Trumper and Ranjitsinhji, and my Vanity Fair and my puritanical view of the world.... A British intellectual long before I was ten, already an alien in my own environment among my own people, even my own family. (James [1963] 1994: 18)

While James sees himself as a ‘British intellectual’, the interests and names he cites hardly place him as such at a moment long before popular culture became an acceptable subject of academic interest: the list of cricketers seems designed to call into question national stereotypes; Grace subverted the notion of the ‘gentleman’ amateur, taking centre stage in the transformation of cricket, and sport more generally, into popular culture, and making a fortune while he did so; Trumper was a famously dashing Australian, whose sportsmanship and panache were more akin to prevailing notions of the English gentleman; and Ranji was the Indian prince who became a sporting hero as a member of the England cricket eleven, appropriating and adapting the colonists’ game to assume a place at the high table of populist acclaim at the ‘heart’ of Empire (see Rae 1998; Haigh 2017; Ross 2012).

While James may not fully have recognized the significance of his early interests, the introduction to *Beyond a Boundary* demonstrates that, by the 1950s, he was theorizing the (Trans-)Atlantic in new ways. He recalls that, in 1952, he ‘planned a series of books. The first was ... a critical study of the writings of Herman Melville as a mirror of our age, and the second is this book on cricket’ (James [1963] 1994: 19). The key word here is ‘series’: *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: Herman Melville and the World we Live In* (1953) was written as James’s attempt to avoid deportation by demonstrating that his own values were more American than those of the men who would see him deported. And yet, James’s appeal to the Constitution seems uncannily close to an adherence to the laws of cricket, as internalised on the playing fields of his Trinidadian high school, itself based upon the English public school. In contrast, *Beyond a Boundary*, apparently a study of the quintessentially English game of the British Empire, at times rewrites Herman Melville – and, in particular, his band of transnational ‘mariners, renegades and castaways’ – as a way of understanding the hierarchies inherent to cricket and the English class system.²

Myra Jehlen’s reconstruction of ‘classic’ American literature was part of what, with hindsight, seems like a late effort – following

both the Myth/Symbol approaches of the 1950s and 1960s and the multiculturalism that interrogated it increasingly from the 1970s – to insist upon categorization by nation, whether through genre, class, race or other typology. As I have noted above, it was a key text in the overthrow of foundational American Studies narratives that still held considerable currency in the 1980s, despite challenges from multiculturalism, women’s studies and other revisionist accounts of the United States and its literature that had proliferated in the 1970s. One of the reasons for this enduring legacy would seem to be a longstanding suspicion of ‘theory’, that marked disciplinary American Studies as very different from, for example, English Literature departments of the time. While a full understanding of this suspicion would require a separate and very different essay, I would suggest that the explanation may largely be seen through an extension of the Emersonian legacy of (individual and national) self-reliance from nineteenth century literature into the Cold War era studies of that literature. My own interests at the time (determined, perhaps, by a first degree in English Literature and postgraduate work in American Studies) were persuading me to question and challenge these structures in ways that led directly to an investigation of the Transatlantic and ultimately to Symbiosis. A Master’s dissertation on Jack Kerouac was the first stage in what has become a lengthy (if occasional) engagement with the paradoxical question of how a writer so quintessentially ‘American’ – in terms, for example, of Myth/Symbol focus on landscape, the individual and the quest – could simultaneously articulate ideas that not only stemmed, for him, from his French-Canadian heritage (and a concomitant sense of alienation from United States culture), but also resonated so closely when adapted to other cultural and historical circumstances, for example, by Lefteris Poullos and other Greek poets writing during the dictatorship of 1967–74 (see Gair and Georganta 2012: 219–29). The transnational turn moves the understanding of “Beat” away from familiar accounts of a small group of friends and associates, toward an appreciation of how Beat practice and aesthetics belonged within much wider and longer cultural and genealogical narratives. Recent studies, like Nancy M. Grace and Jennie Skerl’s edited collection, *The Transnational Beat Generation* (2012), Jimmy Fazzino’s *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature* (2016), Hassan Melehy’s *Kerouac: Language,*

Poetics, and Territory (2016), and Sheila Murnaghan and Ralph M. Rosen's edited collection, *Hip Sublime: Beat Writers and the Classical Tradition* (2018) have all contributed to the development of this recognition, using what Fazzino calls the 'language of worlding' to scrutinise the Beats within 'current discourses on transnationalism' (Fazzino 2016: 7; italics in original).

In some ways, such questions mirror and extend the work of Amy Kaplan in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002) and Paul Giles in *Virtual Americas* (2002): for Kaplan, 'domestic metaphors of national identity are intimately intertwined with renderings of the foreign and the alien' and – while Kaplan is more concerned with the relationships between nation and empire – her analysis of, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois's account of the 1917 East St. Louis race riots examines the 'shared racial identity' that took shape through 'the parallel experience of violent dislocations and exploited labor' at home and abroad and demonstrates how the riots are manifestations not only of Southern history, but also 'part of the world history of a global economic system' (Kaplan 2002: 4, 202).

Applying a more specifically Transatlantic gaze, Giles, following Jean Baudrillard, argues that, 'American studies should be seen as involving not just domestic agendas, but also the points of intersection and crossover where the United States interfaces with the wider world' (Giles 2002: 283).³ Although Giles does not discuss him, Kerouac serves as a perfect example of such crossover: while early Kerouac scholars tended to emphasize the significance of the American genealogies of Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville and Thomas Wolfe, or of Bebop and Charlie Parker, Kerouac did nothing to disguise the fact that Proust and Joyce were of equal importance in the development of his spontaneous prose. The publication of *La vie est d'hommage* (2016), a collection of Kerouac's French-language writings, further extends this point, demonstrating how integral Kerouac's bi-lingualism and sense of his French Canadian ancestry was to the discovery of his characteristic 'spontaneous prose' in the early 1950s. Indeed, Kerouac's work seems, in many ways, to exemplify Giles's claim that 'a virtual American studies should be organised around a more general idiom of dislocation and estrangement, serving to interrogate not only the boundaries of the nation-state, but also the particular values associ-

ated explicitly or implicitly with it' (Giles 2002: 284).

Likewise, my Doctoral thesis on Naturalism and Jack London led me to question both the manner in which genre was theorized and, via London, how national literary genealogies were imagined. Examinations of Naturalism in the 1980s typified the efforts to categorize or catalogue that I highlighted above, as well as the problems inherent to such efforts: among others, June Howard, Walter Benn Michaels and Lee Clark Mitchell produced important studies that read the genre through market relations and the culture of consumption, through class, and through its stress on determinism (see Howard 1985; Michaels 1987; and Mitchell 1989). While it is unsurprising that Naturalism should have received such attention at a time when Thatcherism and Reaganomics were fostering displays of extreme wealth and forms of class conflict and inequality reminiscent of Naturalism's zenith in the 1890s, the fact that none of the studies could construct models where discontinuity and disjunction did not seep through the cracks seemed to highlight the need to look at these instances of dislocation, rather than insist upon coherence.

Jack London became, for me, the pivotal figure in this investigation: like Kerouac, London has been slotted neatly into Myth/Symbol accounts of American Literary history, with his tales of men (and dogs) in the Klondike or at sea being used to exemplify the on-going relevance of the Frontier in American history, after Frederick Jackson Turner had famously declared it 'closed' (see Labor 1974; Reesman 1999). In such readings, new Frontiers continue to serve as spaces where a particular form of individualistic American masculinity can be constructed. Equally, however, London sought an ideology drawn from Friedrich Nietzsche and Herbert Spencer on the one hand, and Karl Marx on the other, a fusion of superman and international socialism that used European philosophy and sociology to imagine a new world (rather than national) order. While London's proclivity for self-contradiction – like Henry James's – could be seen as the legacy of Emerson and Whitman, it also positioned London as a writer with a disdain for the regional or the national, a descendant of Poe who challenged political, generic and spatial boundaries determined by Atlantic division.⁴ London's moments of radical dislocation of plot, such as the apparently arbitrary loss of a sledge and its men in *A Daughter of the Snows*

(1902), or an encounter with a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean seem in *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), in this regard, to be entirely logical instances of the sorts of rupture and discontinuity that were frequently overlooked by critics and may help to explain why, despite the ‘American-ness’ of much of his writing, he was so often written out of literary histories and anthologies attempting to instil what Giles concisely summarises as the ‘mythic integrity and interdisciplinary coherence that gave [American Studies] its methodological rationale during its nationalist heyday of the 1950s and 1960s’ (Giles 2002: 7).

* * *

Thematically, Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* is about as American as they come: from Walter Berglund’s engagements with the natural world, through Patty Berglund’s early adult experiences as a collegiate basketball star, to Richard Katz’s musical life – first, in the New Wave band, The Traumatiks, and later the almost painfully Americana-inflected Walnut Surprise – and, in the next generation, to Joey Burglund’s amoral engagement with the U. S. military, all of the major characters manifest actions, beliefs and anxieties that seem quintessentially American.

Framed by the irony of its title, *Freedom* presents an appropriately circumspect meditation upon the mantra of American liberty. The economic freedoms of neoliberalism, which middle-class liberals such as Patty, Walter and Richard fail to reconcile in the context of their own lives, inform the novel’s thematically and rhetorically postmodern terrain. As a novel of nation, *Freedom* ponders the contradictory logic of American sovereignty, the cultural and constitutional privileges of the individual on the one hand, aggressive corporate imperialism on the other. To truncate the issue somewhat, Patty, Walter and Richard can be read as the victims, beneficiaries and intermediaries of a nation’s journey from Emerson to Milton Friedman.

Formally however, the novel displays an explicit debt to older European models of realism, rejecting the structure of American lone agents – Jehlen’s self-reliant individuals – for the dynamics of enmeshed lives and intersubjective feeling. In conformity to earlier European models of bourgeois realism, it is the private sphere of the

family that provides the primary impetus and *sin qua non* to *Freedom's* plot and characterisation. The novel records its protagonists' attempts at what one might deem a particularly American mode of postmodern self-realisation, but arguably it is the bourgeoisie edifice of the family, rather than say Chicago School economics or imperialism after 9/11, that ultimately accounts for these 'flights' and their resolutions. Patty, Walter and Richard's common failures in this regard insinuate a trans-historical and distinctly anti-Emersonian view of the self and society, their inability to transcend the influences of family or to fully identify with their hard-won symbols of social success (children, big houses, fame), implying a fundamental indeterminacy subtending the anchors of bourgeoisie experience.

In this respect, it is no surprise that the novel concludes in quintessentially Dickensian fashion, with the reassuring genre-specific, yet otherwise improbable, reconciliation of Walter and Patty Berglund. After Walter's failed effort to recreate a wilderness already desecrated by corporate and individual greed, his six years of solitary retreat to the space outside (but not beyond) Canterbridge Estates, and following the equally doomed relationships with Lalitha (Walter) and Katz (Patty) – and noting how the former, 'exotic' female is habitually referred to by her first name, while the white male American is known by his surname – the novel concludes around Christmas and New Year with the kind of tidy resolution familiar from *The Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Bleak House* (1853). In this resolution, 'the void in which the sum of everything they'd ever said or done, every pain they'd inflicted, every joy they'd shared, would weigh less than the smallest feather', with the rest of the world shut out by Patty's "'It's me... Just me'" and Walter's "'I know'", followed by a kiss (Franzen 2010: 559).

But, of course, a title such as '*Freedom*' cannot not be read in the most American of terms naming as it does not only the very cornerstone to American philosophical and constitutional identity, but also what Kasia Boddy describes as a 'conscious signalling' of the work's rightful lineage in the corpus of Great American Novels [Boddy, 2019: 319]. Like Philip Roth's *America Pastoral* (1997) or Ethan Canin's *America, America* (2008), Franzen's title is shorthand for his work's preferred metier amongst the pantheon of literary greats; as an act of

both individual and national monument-building, this kind of meritocratic and nationalistic advertisement works to enshrine the very unity of self and society that a reading founded in indeterminacy and the universal constraints of the family contests. After all it is only in the American context (as opposed to the European) that a grand nationalistic abstraction such as ‘freedom’ (ironically intended or not) could ever serve as a sincere, albeit latently administered, signpost to authorial greatness. Transposed to a postcolonial British context, the same gesture could only ever be satirical of that quality. And so, read from this ‘American’ vantage, the pervasive feelings of exclusion and marginalisation in *Freedom* are only historical symptoms of the disjunctive and deregulated society they inhabit; features of circumstance rather than any existential relation along European lines.

The question of Franzen’s European-ness or his American-ness would perhaps be of limited import did it not invoke a wider set of critical ambiguities and anxieties regarding his novels, particularly in the years following his canonization to the rank of ‘Great American Novelist’ on the August 23, 2010 cover of *Time* magazine, and, by extension, a larger set of questions pertaining to the contemporary novel. Franzen’s relation to popular culture is of course notoriously strained; his feud with Oprah Winfrey regarding the calibre of her Book Club reading selections is now as much a part of his public persona as his love of birdwatching or the themes of his novels. For all his critical pronouncements upon accessibility and the gratifications of so-called ‘contract’ fiction, Franzen is clearly anxious to be regarded as Literature, to be accessible in the manner of Dickens or Zola, which is to say enjoyable and widely comprehensible, yet still worthy of serious critical appraisal in seminar rooms and highbrow reviews. These anxieties of pedigree, detectable in critical (self-) appraisals such as ‘Mr Difficult’ (2002), are clearly reminiscent of those much older national insecurities of perceived cultural inferiority. But Franzen’s appeal to European culture does more than signal a highbrow lineage, it also consolidates Harold Bloom’s patrilineal thesis of an anxiety of influence; as an act of deferential disaffiliation from the Fathers of American post-modernism. It is a conscious act of severance, therefore, intended to demarcate innovation and the kind of serious attention to form expected of canonical literature.

It is in this context that Franzen's commercial success and critical pronouncements render him something of a litmus for contemporary literature and culture more generally. For Franzen's celebrity and the autobiographically intertwined nature of his critiques make it singularly difficult to study his texts and their cultural import in isolation. This biographical entanglement is complicated and further compounded by the character of the late postmodern culture he sets out to describe. As Franzen himself depicts it, this is a culture in many ways defined by its rejection of critical distancing, by its deposition of cultural authority figures for totems of empathic individualism. In life, Franzen seems to tarry between both masks, contradictorily and not entirely happily, courting populism the one minute and disdaining it the next. Analogously, there lingers a persistent uncertainty over the formal and socio-critical status of his fiction, a hesitation as to whether his literature is sufficiently critical of the postmodern culture it claims to expose, or whether alternatively, the easy gratifications of his form unwittingly abet that same culture; a case of uncritically mimetic literature rather than critically realist Literature.

Answering this question is not simple or straightforward. It invokes large questions regarding periodisation, the end of postmodernism and what critics such as Susan Stanford Friedman might regard as the ongoing ideology of modernism (Friedman 2018). More than anything, it probably requires the grace and distance of hindsight. On the face of it, Franzen's commitment to a nineteenth-century model of realism may look regressive, tied as it so often is to a liberal-humanist agenda that the mid-to-late twentieth century found lacking. In the broadest of terms, postmodernism was a disavowal of humanism's pieties, and irony and self-reflexivity were its formal literary analogues. In *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008), one of the first extended scholarly studies of Franzen's work, Stephen Burn rejects the claim of a retrograde return to an earlier and simpler form however, demonstrating Franzen's structural debt to his postmodernist forebears. But still this important portrayal does not answer the question of Franzen's socio-critical technique or his place in the canon to come. For one of the signal features of the milieu Franzen sets out to critique is a foreclosure of critical distancing, encapsulated by the corporate world's appropriation of those once radical literary gestures

of critique and subversion. Accordingly, Franzen's latent debt to postmodernism can read as an unreflective continuation of the lifeworld's appropriation, or – in an entirely hypothetical way since there could be no true way of telling (and this is a signal issue with form, culture and critique after postmodernism) – as an innovation in mimesis that works to *enact* those appropriative and foreclosing energies, thereby signalling the collapse of what Linda Hutcheon once termed the intrinsic 'edge' (Hutcheon 2005), or what we might alternatively call the critical purchase of aesthetic postmodernism. The imponderable or purely theoretical nature of the question would seem to render it otiose, although significantly it also works to foreground Stanford Friedman's thesis of a continuing cultural modernity; one in which formal innovation or at least visible formalism is a preeminent criterion of 'authentic' or high-brow literature. So Franzen's embedded structures of postmodernism may be deemed covertly critical or, as James Annesley once read them, as rather less thoughtfully mimetic (Annesley 2006).

It is in this sense that Franzen the celebrity-critic, with his anxieties of pedigree and influence, combined with his fiction, constitutes a litmus for contemporary literature and culture. Whilst the essays in this edition do not claim to answer this wider question of culture, they do seek to address the issue of Franzen's form comparatively. For Buchberger, the inarticulacy and ritual of Patty and Perowne signals a wider dissonance and inarticulacy at the heart of the Western social imaginary. Franzen's naturalistic register in *Freedom* is by this light its own critical statement upon the spiritual inarticulacy of an aggressively loud and competitive culture; a naturalistic and thence necessarily quiet innovation of register.

Contrastingly for Vlacos, Franzen's construction of the Patty narrative constitutes a problematically gendered devolution of Eliot's technically innovative characterisations of wrong-doing in *Middlemarch*. According to Fredric Jameson in *The Antinomies of Realism*, *mauvaise foi* was Eliot's solution to the excesses of melodrama and her own moralism (Jameson 2013: 131). Jameson's thorough-going dialecticism there, as in all his work, is in marked contrast to the static model of realism inferred from Patty's characterisation in this essay.

The dialectical nature of Franzen's writing is also central to Whittle's 'Embracing the Slings and Arrows', in which he offers a

comprehensive and long-overdue survey of the critical receptions surrounding *The Corrections*. Drawing on these receptions and on the intertextual resonances of *Brave New World* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Whittle refutes the influentially opposed readings of Susanne Rohr and James Annesley, for whom *The Corrections* was a new form of ‘crack-pot realism’ (Rohr 2004: 92) or a familiarly defeatist mode of ‘monologic’ realism (Annesley 2006: 125). In distinction to these readings, Whittle perceives a more vital and critical mode of social dialectics in the novel’s fantastical and allegorical subtexts.

Whilst the essays in this volume clearly enjoin earlier debates regarding Franzen’s fictive mode of critique, they also aim to move the critical conversation on from an earlier, predominantly American and postmodernist frame of reference, and in doing so, to enrich the perspective of that yet-to-come long view on Franzen and the post-post-modern.

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Notes

Where ‘I’ appears in this essay, it refers to Gair. An earlier version of part of this essay appeared as Christopher Gair, ‘Rewriting the Atlantic: *Symbiosis*, 1997–2013’, in Linda Hughes and Sarah Robins (eds), *Teaching Transatlanticism: Resources for Teaching Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Print Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

1. Hawthorne, in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) seems to anticipate much of the American Studies scholarship of a century later in explaining the reasons for calling his longer works ‘romances’ rather than ‘novels’. In drawing the distinction, Hawthorne argues that the dominant European form of storytelling – the realist novel – is unsuitable to American needs. While Dickensian realism, for example, depended upon the complex and multi-layered class relations, urban geography, and political and legal intrigue stemming from hundreds of years of history, the relatively new and egalitarian nation, which lacked such self-evident complexities, demanded a different form. Hawthorne explains that the writer of a Romance should ‘claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material’ not available to the novelist. To discover the truths of the ‘new’ nation, Hawthorne felt it necessary to look beneath the surface, and to apply the powers of the imagination to the bare bones of historical detail. Unlike in the old world, where exteriors presented the realities of individual and social identity, Hawthorne argued that in the United States the potential of the nation – the self-reliance that he called the ‘truth of the human heart’ – could only be presented ‘under circumstances...of the writer’s own choosing or creation,’ through the use of symbolism and allegory. (Hawthorne [1851] 1965: 1).

2. For detailed examinations of James as proto-Transnational subject, see Gair 2002: 159–77; Featherstone et al 2018: 1–31; 51–71; 223–39.

3. *Virtual Americas* is the second of Giles’s three interconnected studies of Transatlantic literary relations, which remain the most sustained single-author attempt to theorize the literary Atlantic. Also see *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730–1860*. 2001. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press) and *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature*. 2006. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

4. Of course, I do not wish to suggest that London always sought to dissolve such boundaries. At times, his fictions insist upon Anglo-Saxon supremacy, or undermine it; they contain moments of chest-thumping

American nationalism and instances of collective, working class resistance to national typing.

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