



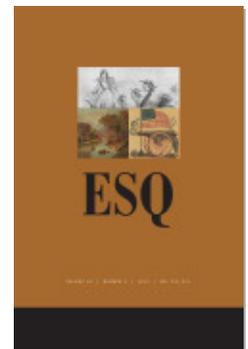
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Russ Castronovo

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*From Women: A Pictorial Archive from Nineteenth-Century Sources, selected by Jim Harter (New York: Dover, 1978), 113.*

## Death to the American Renaissance: History, Heidegger, Poe

RUSS CASTRONOVO

The essays gathered together here with the mission of “reexamining the American Renaissance” have their origins in spirited roundtables at the 2003 annual conventions of the American Literature Association and the Modern Language Association. For my contribution to this project, I want to alter that format slightly. What if we were to get rid of the roundtable and substitute a different sort of table, say the anatomist’s table? What possibilities are opened up by taking the idea of “reexamining the American Renaissance” as an invitation to conduct an autopsy of the literary history that has given this period pride of place in our monographs, journals, hiring practices, syllabi, and classrooms? In short, what happens when we dissect periodization, examining the pathology of assumptions that correlate literary meaning around rather stable renderings of history? The investigation of these issues reveals that the condition of literary history is far more serious than at first suspected: periodization, synchronicity, and other aspects of what Martin Heidegger called “historiological” thinking are dead.<sup>1</sup> Instead of grieving for this loss, critics and students of American literature should view the findings of this autopsy as an opportunity to amplify the significance of “American Renaissance” texts by emancipating them not only from dates but also from dated meanings.

It should be made clear from the outset that pronouncing the “American Renaissance” a dead heuristic does not mean

the category no longer exists as a system that organizes the horizon of our expectations. The "American Renaissance" will always be with us, but it may no longer animate and determine interpretation as thoroughly as it once did. The human corpse certainly exists, but the survivors relate to it differently than to a living form: the challenge of this essay, then, is to understand ourselves as survivors of the "American Renaissance" possessed of a distinct opportunity to engage authors and texts in a different manner, namely without respect to received notions of causality, periodization, or historical context. Indeed, this strategy treats literature *without respect* as an experiment in locating the text in "a register beyond empiricism." As Christopher Lane contends, even the seemingly innocuous act of tethering a novel to a date, as when we write "*Moby-Dick* (1851)" or "*Hope Leslie* (1827)," is a fetishistic projection that privileges the historically mimetic qualities of these novels over their imaginative, nonreferential, and even fantastic possibilities.<sup>2</sup> I will be among the first to confess a certain hermeneutic thrill in being able to record the date of publication parenthetically, as if to justify my investments in a particular novel by grounding any and all leaps of interpretation in the unquestionable surety of history. But while disputing publication dates makes little sense unless, of course, additional empirical evidence suggests otherwise, interrogating chronology per se and the often unreflexive turn to history it encourages as the necessary foundation and implicit limit of analysis is much more rewarding. Because situating a text in historical context is to *not* situate it in another context, no gesture is more political than this initial move common to so many contemporary acts of literary and cultural interpretation. In this regard, "periodization," as Russell Berman writes, "appears to be little more than a strategy to discipline temporal experience and to restrict the imagination to the historical present."<sup>3</sup> As critics pick up dates, chronologies, and still more sophisticated tools of historicism, such as the "hideous and intolerable allegory" that would position *Moby-Dick*, for instance, as counterdiscourse to the Compromise of 1850,<sup>4</sup> they risk overlooking the liabilities that accompany these efforts. Like all tools, those of historicism can become a crutch.

While this essay's disrespect toward historicism generally and periodization in particular has much in common with the critiques of Lane and Berman, its methodology can better be described as Whitmanesque. Amid the sprawling lists of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes:

The malformed limbs are tied to the anatomist's  
table,  
What is removed drops horribly in a pail.<sup>5</sup>

As the poet inspects what gets excluded from the body, the remainders become more important than the body itself, since these castoffs throb with a phantom pain that commemorates what has to be torn away so that the body can be examined as a discrete object of study. For the body politic, this dismemberment reminds us of the rejected persons, repudiated ideals, and other exclusions that help organize the polity as a form, as a coherent political body, in the first place. "Democratic polities," writes Judith Butler, "are constituted through exclusions that return to haunt the polities predicated upon their absence."<sup>6</sup> What, then, about democratic literatures? What is dropped in the pail of political possibility when we use the designation "American Renaissance"? "American" has often functioned as a surgical saw, disavowing extraterritorial contexts, leaving them in the bucket unexamined—until Larry Reynolds and others made a case for "the substantial international influences upon American writers at midcentury."<sup>7</sup>

So, too, the temporal effects of "Renaissance" do damage to the past, present, and future of American literature, amputating what, from a rigidly historicist perspective that rests on periodization, seem like far-flung and nonempirical connections that span decades and even centuries. A period like the "American Renaissance," even when its borders are not patrolled by the timeframe of 1850–55 and are open to incorporating all sorts of adjacent texts, has no truck with this sort of "wild time" that sees in literature the "capacity . . . to reach beyond the limits of its age."<sup>8</sup> Strangely enough, though, the idea of "Renaissance" would seem to embrace this sort of un-disciplined temporality capable of leapfrogging back across

broad swaths of history. But back to where does the “American Renaissance” lead? As renaissances go, the American has always been an odd one since, technically speaking, this incredible outpouring of literary productivity was not a revival. Unlike the Italian example that could appeal to Rome and Greece as the source of cultural rebirth, the American example admits no similar prototype, the Shakespearean madness of Ahab notwithstanding. Despite the expansiveness implied by a “Renaissance” that connects modern and ancient eras, in the case of the “American Renaissance” this gesture to the past is both incomplete and empty. What appears to be an extended notion of chronology is actually a hermetic relation: this renaissance precludes, rather than invites, historical range. So while Nathaniel Hawthorne looks back to the Puritans and Melville turns to the walking wounded of the Revolution, the rubric of a renaissance seals these authors inside an epoch of literary history as though it were a tomb. As renaissances go—the Italian, the English, the Harlem—the “American Renaissance” is no doubt the shortest on record.

The conciliatory thing to do at this juncture would be to broaden this renaissance so that it becomes the “other” American renaissance that includes travel narratives, women’s domestic fiction, slave narratives, and so on. Yet this essay’s interpretive strategy of disrespect toward history hardly suggests itself as a candidate for conciliation. It instead asks the troubling question: as we experiment with revisionist notions of periodization that seek to modify, update, and ultimately make peace with our literary history, what liabilities and limitations do we inherit? For this reason I contend that, instead of expanding and making the “American Renaissance” more inclusive, we need to end it. If the “American Renaissance” is on the anatomist’s table, it is because it is already dead. An autopsy will not bring its subject back to life. But it can tell us why something died or, in the case of American literary history, why a conceptualization should be allowed to remain dead. Never are the dead without significance, however: Whitman, asserting that the departed “are palpable as the living are palpable,” underscores the productive aspects of mourning and loss that continue to shape meaning in the here and now.<sup>9</sup>

As an epochal idea, the "American Renaissance" functions in a contradictory manner to limit literary history to a fairly narrow temporal sliver. Bolstered by conventions within university curricula and academic publishing, this periodization remains ascendant, working falsely and synecdochally to stand in for the entire nineteenth century. The solution, however, is not to stretch literary history by ten or twenty years so that "American Renaissance" seems a more representative grouping. Adding James Fenimore Cooper's novels from the 1820s or Rebecca Harding Davis's post-Civil War work may draw out chronology, but such liberalist expansions do not fundamentally alter the governing precepts, which impose temporal boundaries that necessarily restrict what texts mean by limiting how far back—or forward—they can mean. Implicit in the "American Renaissance" is a methodological pathology that makes literary texts the symptom of their contextualization; it is a debility that allows texts to speak to other texts "only if they fall within the same slice of time."<sup>10</sup>

What would it mean if we put literary history to rest altogether? Inspired by Wai Chee Dimock's call to shift the historical axis of literary study from synchronic regularity to diachronic convergence,<sup>11</sup> I contend that the "American Renaissance" spells death to literary texts themselves by stemming conversations that literary works can have with other texts across different temporal locations. While it may appear that the venerable tradition of source and influence studies has extended these conversations, such efforts often remain hemmed in by the more-or-less straight lines of synchronicity. As Dimock argues, a synchronic approach to literary history grounds a text *in* a temporal moment, but it does so at the expense of establishing any claim for the text's relevance beyond its own periodization. "Why should a text not be interpreted in relation to events outside its temporal vicinity?" she asks. "Is it not possible to think of historicity as a relation less discretely periodized, one that emerges over time between any text and subsequent generations of readers?"<sup>12</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, it seems, has such questions in mind when he observes that "American Renaissance" writers can be grouped together not only because they struggled to fuse form and content at more

or less the same historical moment but also because they were all concerned with "the possibilities of democracy."<sup>13</sup> It is worthwhile to dwell on this word, "possibility," which, in gesturing to that which has not yet died or even lived, implies an alternative to present conditions. Temporal irreverence is the condition of possibility. And when coupled with "democracy," possibility does more than intimate that equality has rarely been a present condition within the U.S. So while a critique of democracy's slippage between promise and reality is not especially new, what is perhaps more startling is the proposal that literary history, by virtue of its obsession with narratives of finitude and completion, plays a role in closing down the sense of "possibility" so important to democracy. Literary history, in short, may not be the best place to look for democracy. If literature is a "democratic institution," as Dimock claims, then what threatens to make it undemocratic is the periodization of literary history.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike a sense of "possibility" that prefers unpredictable configurations and open-ended dialogues between texts, the "American Renaissance" as a period of literary history both circumscribes in advance the range of texts that can enter the dialogue and frames the questions that can be posed about such texts. Can an "American Renaissance" text—I will later experiment with "William Wilson" by Edgar Allan Poe, an author who did not make it into Matthiessen's original pantheon—provide a commentary on mass culture, especially if the antebellum moment, even generously construed, had not reached the stage of technological modernization or capitalist reproduction associated with mass culture? Asking such noncausal, diachronic questions is all but impossible from within the synchronicities of literary history. For this reason, Berman argues that periodization acts in cahoots with "the hegemony of any given present" by "establishing contemporaneity as the defining principle of the social condition"—in effect, valuing texts insofar as they conform to the expectations of an already instituted narrative of literary development. The result is that periodizations "regulate reading," setting limits to what texts mean.<sup>15</sup>

Too often this concern with the meaning of texts remains a

presentist concern that does not respect the full and future horizon of cultural interpretation. History restricts not only what texts mean now but also what they can mean at later possible times. This feeling of limitation accounts for Heidegger's impatience with "historiological" thinking. While Heidegger has much headier fish to fry than those swimming in the pool of the "American Renaissance" (the white whale notwithstanding), his commentary on an early Greek fragment from the seventh or sixth century BCE suggests how American literature from the nineteenth century can open up into new and radically alternative forms; these possibilities—what Heidegger refers to as the "dawn of an altogether different age"—are foreclosed by the preconditions and assumptions that accompany any act of historical thinking. The problem with history is not how it represents the past or characterizes the present. Instead, its particular liability is that it "systematically destroys the future and our historic relation to the advent of destiny."<sup>16</sup> What Heidegger means is that we moderns (and postmoderns) tend to position ourselves at the ultimate moment of historical unfolding, that is, at the end of history. But "are we the latecomers we are?" The translation's emphasis here no doubt references Heidegger's concern with Being, but I think this question can serve us even if we invest it with less grandly metaphysical implications. Are we ever standing wholly outside the temporal arc of the furthest reaches of the "American Renaissance?" If we never shed the "American Renaissance," the interpretations we expect in the future will be nothing more than the ones we already expect. In other words, the horizon of literary interpretation is "primordially fated" not by the issues of the "American Renaissance"—such as slavery, women's rights, national crisis, self-culture—but by the thinking that occurs *within* and as a function of this literary historical system.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, when critics situate texts *in* historical contexts, they often locate themselves as outside that period. This temporal gesture has several reassuring uses, not least of which establishes the critic's standing in the present while construing that present as the latest development (socially, politically, humanistically) in the progressive unfolding of civilization. But this sort of thinking about the present entails a heavy mortgage

on the future. So as important as it may be to connect *Moby-Dick* (1851) to antebellum debates over ethnology, specifically J. C. Nott and George Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* (1855), what future uses of Melville's novel are left unthought in the wake of this argument? The parentheses here graphically mark the critic's assurance in standing outside the historical frame of reference he or she has roped off with a series of dates. For the critic who makes this sort of historicist argument,<sup>18</sup> the present is the end, specifically, a point of closure and successful resolution to a long and shameful history of pseudoscientific racism. Don't get me wrong—deconstructing the bogus nature of such authoritative pseudoscientific claims as Nott and Gliddon's is undoubtedly a good thing, but the question remains: does embedding Melville's novel in its era undercut its ability to connect to other epistemological structures that lie well outside that periodization? It is not just that *Moby-Dick* can conceivably comment on other historical configurations; clearly, the great range of interpretations, even New Historicist ones, of this novel supplies ample proof of its temporal unboundness. More to the point, though, the issue is not whether a particular historicist reading has a specific content but how thoroughly systems of historicism in themselves predict and determine the range of possible readings.

How might we read, if not historically? Musing on this question invites thinking about *other* possibilities for reading texts—in ways that are as open-ended and unpredictable as democracy itself. Fredric Jameson interprets Heidegger's essay as an attempt to "imagine the temporality of such radical otherness" that treats "the mind as being free enough to range among the possibilities and . . . choose to think a form radically excluded by the dominant system."<sup>19</sup> Jameson's attention to the recessive mutations that challenge chronologically patterned thinking and self-assured knowledge shows that the questions raised by Whitman's autopsy continue to haunt: what meanings and methodologies are cut off by the dominant system that is the designation "American Renaissance"? This nomenclature both predisposes and commits readers to a range of conclusions already implicit within—and thus allowed and legitimated by—forms of historicism and periodization. If read-

ers depart from the temporal schema that lie within the system of the "American Renaissance," however, the possibility exists that new and as-yet-unimagined interpretations will appear on the horizon. It is a possibility that novels, poems, letters, and autobiographies will not have to filter their multiple meanings exclusively through the lens of historiography.

Admittedly, though, the negativity of this appeal ("will not have to filter") leaves a lot to be desired. And to speak of unimagined prospects does little in the way of securing satisfaction for readers and critics who want some idea of what lies beyond our range of view in this new methodological future. One might argue that uncertainty and unpredictability are politically useful to efforts to liberate planning, reading, and thinking from dominant systems of conceptualization. But resting upon the laurels of open-endedness at this juncture seems a dodge that confuses democratic practice with hesitation and inaction. Along these lines, then, I want to spend a few moments experimenting with an interpretation that is *other* to historicism. I doubt very much that my use of "William Wilson" fulfills the conditions of Jameson's category of "radical otherness." Certain it is, too, that this provisional sketch does not aim to invalidate historicist interpretations of American literature but rather to offer alternatives to the already delimited range of interpretative choices embedded within the system of the "American Renaissance." What I propose is to read Poe's tale as a theory of mass culture, a shift that attempts to emancipate narrative from being a reflection or an effect of, or even a counterdiscourse to, history (for even a counterdiscourse preserves the system it opposes). In short, by accepting the findings of an autopsy that declares literary history dead, American literature receives new life.

"William Wilson" throws itself outside the brackets of the "American Renaissance" to engender a proleptic commentary on democracy and reproduction. In this story of doubling and revenge, Poe provides a theory of mechanical reproduction that echoes *avant la lettre* the conclusions Walter Benjamin advances in his famous artwork essay. Can the psychodrama of "William Wilson" echo insights that come after its composition? Yes, if historical hang-ups with causality do not abbreviate the possi-

bilities of reading.

Poe's protagonist finds his uniqueness and individuality, that is, his "aura," sapped when he encounters an exact replica of himself, another William Wilson who bears his name, dress, actions, manner, and voice. This second self is so "perfect an imitation" that his presence occasions an existential crisis of political dimension for the smug boarding school brat who prides himself on an aristocratic identity, and whose superiority depends upon its rarity.<sup>20</sup> Presumably, no one else sports this identity, and its uniqueness signals its value, both real and symbolic. But with the falseness of this presumption revealed, the bottom drops out of the narrator's identity, seriously devaluing its worth as a warrant for what he sees as his "ascendancy over all" (431). Democratic leveling, when aimed at the socioeconomic markers of individuality, assaults human uniqueness.

As Benjamin describes this process, such perfect imitation "substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence." The object—or subject—copied no longer resides in a singular, protected social stratum but instead appears across a range of contexts. Reproduction thus eventuates in "a tremendous shattering of tradition" that, on the one hand, emancipates identity from archaic elitism and privilege and, on the other, leaves the self abandoned and faceless.<sup>21</sup> In Poe's tale, the copying of Wilson punctures both the narrator's obnoxious sense of aristocratic entitlement and, in a final vertiginous scene of self-annihilation, the narrator himself. This ambivalence corresponds with mass dynamics: the energies of the multitude that work democratically to shatter notions of public culture as a private enclosure for the few are also the same energies that destroy notions of public discourse except those that conform to a single unyielding position. The mass reproduction of culture performs an anti-elitist critique even as it signals a perilous disregard for the inimitable nature of human existence.

There is, of course, no mechanical reproduction in "William Wilson." One response to this nonalignment has been a compensatory return to the past. Terence Whalen's exemplary work in situating Poe within antebellum mass culture makes a significant contribution to literary history by detailing "an in-

tricate web of circumstances" that tie nineteenth-century authorship to the problems of representation and exchange engendered by print culture.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as with all contributions to literary history, we need to be wary lest we get exactly what we wish for. Although historicist desires can never be fully satisfied, and although the "link between specific texts and specific social conditions," as Whalen rightly notes, will always require "further investigation,"<sup>23</sup> the project of arguing for connections between texts and historical contexts necessarily remands Poe to the past, denying his meanings the power to outstrip the specific social conditions that created them. A different response to this nonalignment sees the space between "William Wilson" and mechanical reproduction not as a gap to be filled by history but as a zone of possibility that speaks to the future conditions of mass culture within democracy. If "William Wilson" were merely prophetic and the overlap between Poe and Benjamin complete, there would be nothing left to say. As it is, the lack of a perfect echo suggests that texts that were once part of the system of the "American Renaissance" need not flow into readings that eventuate in what we already know about the present.

In Poe's story, the narrator's confession is propelled forward by psychodynamics of individualism brought under pressure by the copying, imitation, and reproduction of autonomy—it is hard to imagine a more insidious paradox—that is the promise of mass democracy. Without literary history, we are free to read "William Wilson" as twenty-first-century cultural theory. We can understand literature not as that which needs to be explained but as that which explains. And what does Poe explain? The absence of any sort of mechanical apparatus in Poe implies how the "fascist" or, at least, imperious tendencies of democratic selfhood that manifest themselves as Wilson's claim upon "unqualified despotism" (431) are not external to democracy in the form of technology but are instead intrinsic to the hard-wiring of our political ideals. Sure, technological modernization as a symptom of our own lateness can be cited as the cause of democracy's undoing. But if interpretation is not fortified by notions of causality that are included in every box of literary history, we are led to experiment with a reading

that is other to historicism. This course, which runs counter to the inevitable unfolding of history that confirms our present and prefigures the future, asks us to think more deeply about the philosophy of democracy itself. To return to Heidegger's question: are we the latecomers that we think we are? Certainly not—unless we tell ourselves that the threat to democracy represents only a specific social condition of late modernity rather than a fundamentally constitutive aspect of public life.

As a tale in which privilege stands as a mirror copy of egalitarian leveling, "William Wilson" enables a political suspicion of democracy that refuses to obey the limits of critique set by chronology or causality. In this way, the final horror of using Poe to call for the death of the "American Renaissance" does not threaten to make any of our texts obsolete. Rather, the result is that a concern with the unlikely and the possible—what we might construe as the temporal uncanny—may invest these texts with new relevance.

*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

#### NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, "The Anaximander Fragment," in *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 17.
2. Christopher Lane, "The Poverty of Context: Historicism and Non-mimetic Fiction," *PMLA* 118 (2003): 454.
3. Russell A. Berman, "Politics: Divide and Rule," in "Periodization: Cutting Up the Past," special issue, *MLQ* 62 (2001): 323.
4. See Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, vol. 6 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and The Newberry Library, 1988), 205.
5. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855; repr., New York: Eakins Press, 1966), 21.
6. Judith Butler, "Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism," in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London:

- Verso, 2000), II.
7. Larry J. Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988), xii. And the extraterritorial contexts seemingly sloughed off by notions of Americanism have a decidedly imperial cast even when they are stationed on the home front; see Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70 (1998): 581–606.
  8. Berman, "Politics," 330.
  9. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 65.
  10. Wai Chee Dimock, "Non-Newtonian Time: Robert Lowell, Roman History, Vietnam War," *American Literature* 74 (2002): 912.
  11. See Dimock, "Non-Newtonian Time," 915.
  12. Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance" *PMLA* 112 (1997): 1061.
  13. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), ix.
  14. Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," 1060.
  15. Berman, "Politics," 317, 327.
  16. Heidegger, "Anaximander Fragment," 17. Berman is also concerned with the future, specifically the way in which the presentist thrust of periodization curtails an ability to "envision a future." It is at this point that his argument offers canonicity as an alternative to periodization: "Canonicity maintains, cultivates, and develops community over time and across generations; periodization breaks up that identity and suppresses the historical continuities through a strategy of temporal separation" ("Politics," 327). But canonicity also presumes criteria of wholeness and coherence that in the prospect of a transhistorical dialogue provide a seat at the table only for certain master texts that meet these conditions. In light of these criteria, it is significant that Heidegger takes as his text a fragment from Anaximander, a form that can never be more than partial and incomplete.
  17. See Heidegger, "Anaximander Fragment," 17; emphasis in original.
  18. See Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1995), 80–91.
  19. Fredric Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter," in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's "Specters of Marx,"* ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), 41–42. At this point, Jameson sounds an important caution, reminding us that the "attempt to impose that alternative system" can take the form of "fiat and violence," which, for Hei-

- degger, seemed realized by the "Nazi 'revolution'" (42).
20. Edgar Allan Poe, "William Wilson," in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press, 1978), 2:434; hereafter cited parenthetically. Jonathan Elmer has also discerned Poe's theoretical ability to comment on the crisis of self under mass culture. For Elmer, both the autonomous subject and the sovereign people reside at a site of internal division in which uniqueness and originality are the property of the mass [*Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), 63].
  21. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 221.
  22. Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), 3.
  23. Whalen, *Poe and the Masses*, 20.