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Racial Memory and Literary History

STEPHEN GREENBLATT

[I]

SEVERAL YEARS AGO AT HARVARD, A FRIEND INVITED ME TO dinner and asked if I would pick up two of his other guests, Nadine Gordimer and Carlos Fuentes. Thrilled, I readily agreed to do so. On the appointed evening, all dressed up and tingling with pleasant anticipation, I went first to get Nadine Gordimer, who immediately deflated me somewhat by getting into the backseat of my car. My feeble attempts at small talk went nowhere. When I picked up Carlos Fuentes a few minutes later, he turned out to know Gordimer—there was a flurry of kissing on both cheeks—and so naturally he too got into the backseat. As I headed off toward Newton, half amused and half annoyed, the conversation between my two distinguished passengers encapsulated the globalization of literature. A crescendo of names of internationally famous writers whom one or the other had recently seen or about whom each was eagerly inquiring began with South Africans and Mexicans but quickly expanded to other countries and other continents. I had the fantastic sense that the whole literary establishment possessed the social intimacy of the guests at a weekend house party described in Harold Nicholson's diaries and that a high percentage of the world's major writers must, like the bombers of the old Strategic Air Command, be kept tanked up and in the air at all times.

I thought I began to detect, in the words emanating from the backseat of my car, a certain element of competition as well as affection, the serves and volleys of celebrated names culminating in a friendly disagreement over the cultural sophistication of none other than the president of the United States. "I was in Washington recently for a party in honor of Nelson," Gordimer said, "and I was very disappointed by Bill Clinton. He

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seemed awfully shallow and uncultured.” “That’s strange,” replied Fuentes, “I had lunch on the Vineyard with Bill and Hillary just a few weeks ago, and I found him remarkably cultivated. He told me how much *The Sound and the Fury* had meant to him, and he seemed to recall the novel in amazing detail.” “Well,” Gordimer replied, “he probably read it when he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford.” At this point, I ventured to speak up from my place behind the steering wheel: “I doubt that Faulkner was part of the Oxford curriculum,” I said. “Clinton probably read it in Arkansas or perhaps at Georgetown.” From the backseat there was a terrible silence, of the kind with which patrons at a fancy restaurant greet an impudent waiter who tries to break into their conversation.

In the comical awkwardness of the remainder of the ride, I mused on why I had felt the urge to intervene. In part, of course, I was simply trying, at a stroke, to win what is called, in a different context, a social promotion; in part, I was attempting to make a small correction to cultural history. But since I did not know where Clinton had first encountered *The Sound and the Fury* and, to say the truth, I did not greatly care, my suggestion (though it still seems like a perfectly plausible one to me) was probably motivated less by a passion for scholarly accuracy than by an obscure sense that Faulkner was *ours*, not England’s. In other words, I was giving expression to the gravitational tug of the old national model of literary history, a model that has, despite significant weakening in recent decades, retained considerable power. All it took was a drop in my class status to make me start waving the flag.

Nationalism is a potent force, even on those who claim some distance from it, but it may not be the principal issue here. Not generally celebrated for their political acuity, literary critics have in fact been extraordinarily sensitive to the decline of the great-power nationalisms of the mid-twentieth century, and they have been equally sensitive to the decline, at first slow and then precipitous, of the Marxist ideology that

offered an alluring global alternative to the cultural belligerence of nation-states. Critics have instead forcefully insisted on what anthropologists call local knowledge. In this particular cultural story, it is Oxford, Mississippi, and not Oxford, England, that would count, highlighting the regional and ethnic affinity between Faulkner and a white southerner like Clinton.

More generally, the interest in local knowledge has usefully called attention to shared speech patterns, communal stories, and collective obsessions, often transmitted across generational and geographic boundaries. Moreover, it has had considerable success in recovering the creative achievements of groups that the professional study of literature had marginalized or ignored or simply absorbed into a larger, speciously undifferentiated unity: Philippine Americans, for example, or Chicanos or Ashkenazi Jews. But there are risks and paradoxes in the critical search for local knowledge, and it is to these that I turn.

[II]

I want to recall a memorable scene of reading in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. The reading is not private and silent but instead a performance in public, or at least in the semipublic familial sphere defined by the drawing room of an English country house. The shy, sensitive, morally upright heroine Fanny Price has been reading aloud to Lady Bertram, but she has put the book down on hearing approaching footsteps. Edmund Bertram enters in the company of Henry Crawford, the rakish gentleman whose proposal of marriage Fanny recently refused. Fanny dislikes Henry, whose corrupt morals were revealed, in her view, by his highly improper instigation, while the master of Mansfield Park was absent, of amateur theatricals. But though he has been rejected, Henry has not given up his suit, and in the scene in question he pursues it by taking up the book and continuing where Fanny broke off.

The book is an edition of Shakespeare. “She was in the middle of a very fine speech of that man’s—What’s his name, Fanny?” asks the characteristically lazy-minded Lady Bertram. We might perhaps anticipate from this remark that Fanny has been reading a love scene, from *As You Like It* or *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, so that the words Henry recites will continue his courtship, or alternatively from *Two Gentlemen of Verona* or *Cymbeline*, so that he will be further exposed as a vain seducer. But when Crawford opens the book and “by carefully giving way to the inclination of the leaves” finds the passage in question, he sees that the virtuous Fanny has been reading a speech of Cardinal Wolsey’s from *Henry VIII*.

This late historical romance is not for us the most familiar or celebrated of Shakespeare’s plays, to put it mildly, but it had, in Jane Austen’s time, a reputation as a vehicle for great actors. Henry Crawford rises to the occasion, and his reading is brilliant: “The King, the Queen, Buckingham, Wolsey, Cromwell, all were given in turn; for with the happiest knack, the happiest power of jumping and guessing, he could always light, at will, on the best scene, or the best speeches of each; and whether it were dignity or pride, or tenderness or remorse, or whatever were to be expressed, he could do it with equal beauty.” Its effect on Fanny is, at a suitably reduced scale, a bit like the famous effect of the gladiatorial games on Augustine’s friend Alypius, who began with his eyes shut and his fingers in his ears and gradually became fascinated to the point of compulsion: Fanny’s studied indifference, her distaste for histrionics, her stern resolve not to pay attention break down, as the performance forces itself into her mind and sensibility: “Not a look, or an offer of help had Fanny given; not a syllable for or against. All her attention was for her work. She seemed determined to be interested by nothing else. But taste was too strong in her. She could not abstract her mind five minutes; she was forced to

listen; his reading was capital, and her pleasure in good reading extreme.”

After Crawford finishes, Edmund thanks him, expressing what he hopes are Fanny’s “secret feelings” too: “‘That play must be a favourite with you,’ said he; ‘You read as if you knew it well.’” Crawford replies that he has not had a volume of Shakespeare in his hand since he was fifteen and that he cannot remember if he ever saw *Henry VIII* performed. “But Shakespeare,” he continues, “one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is part of an Englishman’s constitution. His thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them every where, one is intimate with him by instinct.” Edmund concurs, but only to reiterate his praise of Crawford’s special gift:

No doubt, one is familiar with Shakespeare in a degree [. . .] from one’s earliest years. His celebrated passages are quoted by every body; they are in half the books we open, and we all talk Shakespeare, use his similes, and describe with his descriptions; but this is totally distinct from giving his sense as you gave it. To know him in bits and scraps, is common enough; to know him pretty thoroughly is, perhaps, not uncommon; but to read him well aloud, is no everyday talent. (336–38)

I will return to the question of performing Shakespeare, but I want to stay for the moment in the drawing room, that richly emblematic setting not only for Jane Austen’s particular social intrigues but also for an English cultural ethos, shaped by the hegemony of the landowning elite. I want to dwell on the “we” in “we all talk Shakespeare” and, still more, on Crawford’s claim that knowing Shakespeare “is part of an Englishman’s constitution.” *Constitution* here has a complex sense: Shakespeare’s works in effect stand in for the written constitution that England, unlike the United States and France, famously lacks; but they are also part of an Englishman’s inner being. Hence deep familiarity with Shakespeare is the

key to communal, consensual identification, to a subject's full participation in the life of a nation.

I use the term *subject* here, rather than *citizen*, to mark the difference between the participation invoked by Jane Austen's drawing room celebration of Shakespeare and the set of rights and obligations conferred by a founding political document. According to a widely disseminated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century view, the English have no need of a formal, written constitution; they have instead the works of their greatest playwright. That is, they can dispense with an articulation of the norms, values, and procedures by which freedom and order are established, maintained, and protected not only because their society acquired its shape gradually through the centuries following the Magna Carta but also because the English possess Shakespeare as a common bond, a supremely powerful expression of what is shared across all the potentially damaging divisions of class, caste, and interest, a symbol of what is most precious to the nation as a whole. If subjects in England do not have to be transformed by revolution into citizens, it is to a significant degree because of Shakespeare's crucial role in what Maurice Halbwachs called the "collective memory."

Shakespeare is part of an Englishman's constitution in another sense as well. "[O]ne is intimate with him by instinct," Henry says. The transmission and implantation, as it were, of Shakespeare do not result from a deliberate program; as Crawford's metaphor suggests, they happen naturally and imperceptibly, like a biological imperative. Of course, intimacy with his works is a social, not a biological, phenomenon, but in Jane Austen's profoundly social world, this intimacy has the force of a racial characteristic. Edmund gives it a less instinctual origin by noting the pervasiveness of Shakespeare's words in endless quotations, books, similes, descriptions encountered from one's earliest years. This ceaseless recycling of bits and scraps is not the same, Edmund observes, as the ability to read him well aloud—that is Henry's special

gift—but the novel makes clear that this performative dimension, however admirable, has an indefinable taint of moral corruption, of the inauthenticity, the hypocrisy, that is virtually synonymous with the actor's craft.

"To *good* reading," Austen writes, Fanny "had been long used; her uncle read well—her cousins all—Edmund very well; but in Mr. Crawford's reading there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with. [. . .] It was truly dramatic" (337). There is admiration here, but also a sense of uneasiness all the more eloquent for being unexpressed. "It was truly dramatic" is not an unequivocal compliment; there lingers lightly in it a moralized version of what Diderot called "the paradox of acting." To be "truly dramatic," to be capable of what someone in *Mansfield Park* calls "good hardened real acting" (124), is to be at a far remove from the true. Henry Crawford's histrionic "knack" for perfectly miming the characters of others is bound up with his own perfect lack of character. Fanny chooses not the glamorous Crawford but the stolid, solid, and sincere Edmund.

Mansfield Park is deeply concerned with moral discriminations, with the importance of detecting dangers in apparently attractive objects, with the necessity of painfully renouncing pleasure to secure what is proper. Fanny's rejection of a spectacular, seductive, histrionic suitor is in keeping with the puritanical sobriety of her character, but it is all the more striking that she has no moral reservations whatever about Shakespeare, whose intrinsic merit is acknowledged alike by the prudent and the rakish, the restrained and the wild. By 1814, the year *Mansfield Park* was published, Shakespeare was firmly established as the embodiment of the English national genius, and all subsequent literary histories that attempted to define the Englishness of English literature were built around him as their unquestioned and unquestionable core.

The project of literary history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the particular place that Shakespeare occupied in it were

bound up with nationalism not only in England but in France, for example, where a rejection of Shakespeare played a role in the defining of national taste, and in Germany, where an emulation of Shakespeare shaped several of the greatest literary careers. The cultural model that emerged from national literary histories, with its celebration of continuity, consensus, authenticity, and authority, deeply influenced the literature departments that were established in modern universities in Europe and the United States and dominated the bulk of the research and teaching that were done within the framework of these departments through the 1960s. Indeed, the national model continues to have a powerful structural presence everywhere.

But in the last decade or so, its hegemony has been vigorously challenged in repeated attacks on the political assumptions underlying traditional literary histories and on the aesthetic ideology those histories seem to support. That ideology, it is argued, characteristically substitutes *taste* for *rights*, *subjects* for *citizens*, *nostalgia* for *progress*, and *essentialism* for *historical contingency*. Above all, as a range of interest groups including feminists, ethnic and racial minorities, and queer theorists have argued, the old literary histories routinely erased multiple differences, enshrining the triumph of the center over the margins, substituting a false vision of unity for a reality that was and is ever more multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural. English literature was always an unsteady amalgam of Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Cornish, and other voices of the vanquished, along with the voices of the dominant English regions, and the English language itself, so securely and apparently imperturbably at the center of the field, is revealed, under the pressure of examination, to be a mixed, impure, and constantly shifting medium.

This impurity is not in itself a recent discovery. In 1689, in the preface to the *Gazophylacium Anglicanum*, the first etymological dictionary in English, the author acknowledges the strangeness of his language: "I did imagine," he writes,

I could not spend [my time] more commendably, or profitably, than in searching into the Original of my Native Language: which is so strangely corrupted through Time, that when I look'd an hundred, or an hundred and fifty Years only behind me, I could scarce imagine it ever to have been the Language of my Ancestors, or even of the Country I was born in, 'tis so changed through Commerce, Correspondence, Travellers, and such like Accidents; Much more may you imagine it to be alter'd in a thousand, or two thousand Years, by Conquests, Invasions, Transmigrations of Government, &c. which have been very frequent over, and in this Isle, above others: So that though this my native Country might, at its first Settlement, have a Language peculiar to it self; yet, as is said before [. . .] it is brought to what we now find it, even a Composition of most, if not all the Languages of Europe; especially of the Belgick or Low-Dutch, Saxon, Teutonic or High-Dutch, Cambro-British or Welsh, French, Spanish, Italian, and Latin; and now and then of the Old and Modern Danish, and Ancient High-Dutch; also of the Greek, Hebrew, Arabick, Chaldee, Syriack, and Turcick. (Skinner A3v-A4r)

The etymologist is unhappy about this state of affairs and wants to sort out the "old British" roots. But if we abandon this dream of an original language, we get a glimpse of the remarkable medium out of which English literature has been made. And that medium is now in the midst of still more dramatic and drastic changes, in part because of the radically composite nature of American culture and in part because of the startling emergence of English as the world's principal medium of linguistic exchange.

In the culture wars of the 1980s, commentators on the right would routinely seize on an apparently minor change in the curriculum of an English department somewhere or other—one semester's requirement of Shakespeare rather than two, or the making optional of a course in Milton—and would thunder that the change signaled the imminent collapse of Western civilization. Stung by these charges, the Modern

Language Association conducted an elaborate survey and found that in fact there had been remarkably few changes in the core curriculum for almost fifty years and that Shakespeare's place in particular had been generally strengthened.

What has happened, it seems, is that the *national* conception of literary history, the conception by which English literature means the literature of England or at most of Great Britain, has begun to weaken significantly and that the traditional canonical figures are now being taught alongside a range of new figures—Salman Rushdie, for example, or Wole Soyinka, Toni Morrison, or Derek Walcott. The real news, in other words, is not that Shakespeare is being overlooked but rather that some of the most significant English novels, plays, and poems are being written in Delhi and Lagos, Atlanta and Antigua. The linguistic medium is no longer the King's English and, despite the power of the American mass media, has never been and can never be the president's English. English literary history, like so many other great collective enterprises in our century, has ceased to be principally about the fate of the nation; it is a global phenomenon.

This transformation of the field is manifestly the consequence of both ideology critique and global capitalism. We might conclude therefore that this mystic marriage of the left and the right signals the end of what I have called the national model of literary history. But in fact this model is not at all disappearing; rather, it has migrated from the center to what was once the periphery, where it now flourishes. Consider, for example, *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature* (1996). In the general preface to this ambitious set of volumes, the editors, Roberto González Echevarría and Enrique Pupo-Walker, note an increase in colonial studies, which they link to the fact that

modern Latin American authors have discovered in the works of the colonial Baroque, or in the chronicles of the discovery and conquest,

the starting point of the literary tradition to which they belong. [. . .] This return to the colonial past, highlighting its pertinence in the present, rounds out the Latin American literary tradition and endows it for the first time with a density of five centuries.¹

The editors genially acknowledge that this sense of continuity is a fiction. "It does not matter," they write, "that, if examined closely, this is nothing more than an enabling pretext, or a fable about origins. Literature creates its own historical fictions, its own history being one of them. Our *History*, while being as concrete and factual as possible, reflects the fullness and influence of that fiction" (xv). For writers like Carlos Fuentes or Gabriel García Márquez, this "fable about origins" serves as a rich source of imaginative power; for the professors who edit *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature* it is, they candidly declare, linked to "the academic legitimization of Latin American literature as an academic discipline," to "international symposia," to "sessions within established, periodical meetings, such as the yearly conventions of the Modern Language Association" (xiv).

We might imagine that the frank admission that this literary history is a fable changes the status of the history's truth claims, but fables have a way of hardening instantly into alleged realities. Having conceded that the notion of the colonial past as origin is a fiction, the editors then startlingly go on virtually immediately to invoke that past as the crucial mark differentiating their literary specialization from "Third World" literature: "if by Third World one refers to countries that emerged from the debacle of nineteenth-century colonialism, then Latin America, being the product of a much older and different colonialism, had to have a very different literary tradition. The literatures of the Third World emerged, for the most part, in our own century, whereas those of Latin America reach back really to, at least, the sixteenth" (xv–xvi).

Have the editors simply forgotten by page xvi what they wrote on xv? Not exactly. What

we are witnessing is the pragmatic, strategic appropriation of the national model of literary history—with its teleological, developmental narrative of progress—in order to confer authority on an emergent group. This appropriation permits the group’s leading figures to make political and institutional, as well as cultural, claims: in this case, signaled not only by the overt references to international symposia and professional conventions but also by the immediate impulse to patrol the boundaries, here the difference between Latin American literature and “Third World literature” (presumably, a reference principally to Africa). “Third World literature,” the editors claim, has virtually no roots, while Latin American literature is the ripe fruit of a long, complex process, “a density of five centuries.” It is the tendency of the national model to reach further and further back for the origins and uniqueness of the spirit of the folk. Hence the fascination of the Middle Ages for German Romantic nationalists and their counterparts in England and France. And hence the editors of the *Cambridge History*, not content merely to reify the sixteenth-century origins they at first conceded were fictive, push their colonial past ever further into what Shakespeare called the dark backward and abysm of time: “Latin American colonial culture,” they write, “in many ways medieval, is so distant from that of North America, or countries of the Third World, that gross distortions and misreadings are bound to occur in comparing them” (xvi). Out of such means is produced an ineffable sense of belonging and uniqueness.

[III]

In a keynote address at the International Shakespeare Association meeting in Los Angeles in 1996, the South African actress Janet Suzman eloquently described an extraordinary production of *Othello* that she conceived and directed at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in the

mid-1970s. Interracial marriage was in direct violation of South Africa’s so-called Immorality Act, at the core of the country’s vicious racial laws. The representation of such a marriage or even a simple kiss between a black man and a white woman onstage, though not illegal, was a risky political provocation. But the regime, with an eye to its international image and to the special status of Shakespeare among its English-speaking population, was reluctant to block the performance, even though the rehearsals were taking place in the midst of bloody riots in Soweto. Suzman cast as Othello John Kani, a young black actor who had been born in Soweto and lived there still. Each day, to reach the theater for rehearsals, he had to cross a nightmarish landscape of oppression and bloodshed and submit to humiliating questions and searches. By the time he arrived at the theater, Kani was understandably seething with anger. His anger, in the director’s view, not only damaged the rehearsals in general; it inhibited in particular the actor’s ability to pronounce the big, open *O*s that are sounded so hauntingly through the play. For hour after hour Suzman struggled with Kani, she recalled, over pronunciation, for it seemed scarcely possible to perform the part successfully without that vowel in all its expressive power: “Othello’s occupation’s gone” (3.3.362). Or again, “But yet the pity of it, Iago. O, Iago, the pity of it, Iago!” (4.1.186–87). Or again, when Othello finally begins to grasp that he has been duped and that the beautiful wife he murdered was innocent, the painfully simple line “O, O, O!” (5.2.204). Merely telling John Kani again and again to pronounce the vowel more openly had no effect; indeed, it seemed to make him angrier. At last Janet Suzman understood and was able to convey what had to be done. For the angry urban black actor to break away from his clenched-jaw, Afrikaans-inflected articulation and reach the expansive, expressive *O* of Othello’s desire and grief, Suzman told the Shakespeare association, he had to awaken in

himself his racial memories of nights in the kraal under the starry African sky.

Several hours after this talk, I happened to run into Suzman in the book exhibition hall. I introduced myself and told her how much I had been moved by her talk and by her brave anti-apartheid use of Shakespeare's tragedy. But at the same time, I said, I had been deeply disturbed by her invocation of racial memories. What could such a phrase mean, fraught with the ugliest historical associations for the past and the present? Did she think, I asked with some annoyance, that I could access racial memories somewhere inside me of the smoky Lithuanian nights in the shtetl near Vilna, the place my grandparents had the wit or good fortune to leave in the 1890s? If you were an actor, she replied cagily, you could; you would have to.

Suzman's answer was cagey because it left open the possibility—the only one I could find remotely acceptable—that her notion of racial memory was simply and entirely a theatrical performance, a fictive construction, a strategically deployed piece of poetry. It was cagey too—indeed, it was prophetic—in implying that a nonactor like me might lack the histrionic power to deploy racial memory. As it happens, I went to Vilna—Vilnius, as it is now called—some months after my conversation with Suzman, and, I can testify, I miserably failed to conjure up even the stage-play illusion of anamnesis. To be sure, I found the Lithuanian capital striking, but its wonderful medieval and baroque churches had no imaginative resonance for me, having never figured in the old-world accounts of my grandparents or any of their friends. Did they even *see* these churches, I wonder? That is, did they register them as anything but undifferentiated symbols of oppression? As for Jewish Vilna—for Vilna, long one of the great centers of Talmudic learning and Yiddish culture, was almost forty percent Jewish in the early part of the twentieth century—it is virtually gone, buildings, libraries, culture, language destroyed along

with the people who were murdered by the Fascists and then erased, even as a memory, by the Soviets. There were 129 synagogues in Vilna in 1939; there is one now. I went to this synagogue on a Friday night and found that, since I cannot speak Yiddish or Lithuanian, I could communicate with the handful of old people who made up the congregation only in German, the language spoken by the murderers.

I tried to awaken at least a resonant historical memory, linked to the old stories about the celebrated rabbinical genius of Vilna, the Vilna Gaon, but I could not find so much as a trace—no commemorative memorial, no simple marker—of the great seventeenth-century synagogue that once stood near the city center. The synagogue, one of the most important monuments of Jewish ecclesiastical architecture in Europe, was severely damaged by the Germans during the war but only dismantled and razed in the 1950s. In its place, there are an elementary school and nearby one of the dozens of new monuments in Vilnius celebrating Lithuanian national identity.

This celebration is now the principal cultural project in Lithuania, as it is in many of the former Soviet states: statues of Lithuanian generals, poets, statesmen, folk heroes, and intellectuals are springing up everywhere, material emblems of what Linda Hutcheon, in an important essay entitled “Interventionist Literary Histories: Nostalgic, Pragmatic, or Utopian?” calls the “teleological narrative of continual and organic evolution” with which literary and cultural histories “create a sense of continuity between past and present, usually with an eye to promoting ideological consensus” (404, 403).²

Hutcheon, who is a past president of the Modern Language Association and one of the principal figures in a major international initiative to rethink comparative literary history, is writing not about statues, of course, but about recent attempts from a wide range of positions within current identity politics—“class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and a host of other

categories with which people self-identify”—to forge a usable past. These attempts, Hutcheon acknowledges, are closely related to the great national literary histories created in the nineteenth century and to the romantic nationalism that these histories served. “Interestingly,” she observes, “the newer literary histories often adopt precisely the same developmental, teleological narrative model used earlier by nations” (403). Hence the link to the statues that so struck me in Vilnius, such as the recent memorial to Zemaitė, an impoverished noblewoman who in the late nineteenth century turned away from the dominant Polish culture, learned Lithuanian by playing with her peasant neighbors’ children, and wrote in the spirit of the nascent Lithuanian nationalism.

In the Baltic republic, as in those literary histories Hutcheon cautiously praises, the move cannot be understood as nostalgic, for there is no authentic home, no *nostos*, to conjure up. Vilna’s actual past was Polish, Jewish, and White Russian, as much as or even more than it was Lithuanian. The monuments—and the literary histories that are being written in the spirit of those monuments—are strategic; they are about occupying a place, laying claim to authority over it, and tracing or inventing the roots that confer legitimacy on this claim. And they are therefore, as Hutcheon notes in passing, as much about forgetting as remembering.

This is the model that Hutcheon asks us to endorse, if not ringingly then at least with two cheers. I have invoked *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature* and Suzman’s *Othello* because I want to acknowledge the possible tactical efficacy of such artificial memories and fabricated histories. Still more, I want to acknowledge that the strategy is by no means necessarily reactionary, that it may serve progressive ends. The acknowledgment is not without cost, for me at least, because when I hear words like *racial memory* or *volk*, my blood runs cold. These words, and the whole process Hutcheon describes, seem alarmingly kin to the new ethnic

histories being adopted, according to a report in the *New York Times*, by schools in Bosnia (Hedges). Whereas students in Sarajevo were formerly taught out of a single textbook, no doubt full of Titoist lies, they are now asked to declare whether they are Serb, Muslim, or Croat and are then divided into separate ethnic classes, each of which is taught a radically distinct version of history out of a different textbook. There are no provisions, according to the *Times* dispatch, for children from mixed marriages and no attempts to represent the culture of the region in more complex, integrated terms.

I respond to such stories with distaste and something like horror, but I can remind myself through Suzman’s *Othello* that in certain circumstances the construction, along traditional, nationalist, or ethnic lines, of a particular cultural narrative, the story of a group’s struggle to take control of its destiny, to find its voice, to honor its forbears, to transmit its heritage, and even to access its racial memories, may be an aesthetic achievement and seem to some an ethical act. Yet this reminder does not ultimately induce me to share Hutcheon’s endorsement, cautious though it is, of the appropriation of these old models. This appropriation, however useful strategically, seems to me a serious mistake for the following three linked reasons.

1. *The Risk of Cynical Opportunism*

The critiques leveled for at least a generation now, by deconstruction, new historicism, and feminism, among others, at the old national literary histories were not merely tactical. These critiques mounted a serious, sustained intellectual challenge to a set of connected assumptions that have not been successfully defended and rehabilitated even by those, like David Perkins, who eloquently lament their passing. None of the terms that Hutcheon invokes to describe the traditional model of historical narrative—*teleological*, *evolutionary*, *continuous*, or *organic*—is sustainable.

Those whom Hutcheon calls “interventionist literary historians” grasp, she says, the force of the critiques of this traditional model, yet “in full awareness of its ideological limits (and indeed its serious dangers), they may still want to tell that once powerful story of progress for the record” (406). How is it possible to keep this defense from becoming an apology for the most corrosive and ultimately self-defeating cynicism? It is one thing to celebrate powerful literary achievements and to understand how new work can build on the work of the past; it is quite another thing to endorse a theory of evolutionary progress or steady, organic development that one knows is bankrupt.

Literary history, like any other form of history, has to commit itself to a vision of truth, however provisional, nuanced, and epistemologically modest. If the assumptions of an originary or primordial culture or of a stable linguistic identity progressively unfolding through time or of an ethnic, racial, or sexual essence are misguided, then they must not be embraced, even with a sly wink and a whispered assurance that the embrace is only ironic and performative.

2. *The Risk of Enforced Performativity*

Janet Suzman’s invocation of fictive racial memories may work for the stage, but theatrical roles performed outside the theater have a dangerous tendency to harden into compulsions. The problem is less for the “interventionists” themselves, who have for strategic purposes self-consciously elected to appropriate intellectually suspect teleological and developmental narratives, than it is for those who come in their wake. For the latter the role may be one that they are subtly and not so subtly required to play. I am thinking of the increasing and, to my way of thinking, disturbing tendency in literature departments to expect that graduate students with Hispanic surnames will work on Hispanic subjects, that gay and lesbian students will naturally be directly engaged with queer

theory, that Asian Americans will inevitably write dissertations on Asian American literature. I was astonished recently when a young, well-meaning German cultural historian, not Jewish but (as we might say) “Jewish-identified,” asked me in an interview why I had chosen to work on a period of English literature, the sixteenth century, that was, as she put it, *Judenrein*. Even apart from the horrible associations of that ghastly term, the notion that I had made such a choice or that something needed to be explained seemed to me deeply misguided.

In the 1960s no one expected me to work on Jewish themes in English literature and still less to concentrate on English literature written by Jews. No doubt my experience reflected a weakening of ethnic and religious identity through assimilation, and I do not forget that the position of Jews in the generation of my teachers was still extremely tenuous. But once the pattern of discrimination had been broken, there were distinct advantages, I think, to the absence of sharply reified collective identities. Indeed, if there is, as Hutcheon claims, a utopian strain in current literary history, it lies, I think, not in the resurgence of *volkisch* ideology but in the residual faith in great, ballooning categories such as English or Italian. These categories encode a dream of containing differences—multiple voices across vast expanses of time and space—within a single capacious embrace or even, as in the identical cities envisaged by Thomas More’s *Utopia*, of dissolving these differences altogether. There is something liberating about this utopian dream of unification, an escape from jealously guarded ethnic particularities and provincial rivalries into a realm where anyone can in principle fulfill any role, but there is also a high cost—a drastic marginalization or even erasure of those things that do not serve the greater glory of the putative whole—which is why the massive national literary histories have fallen into disrepute. More’s *Utopia*, let us remind ourselves, is built on a half-hidden bedrock of shaming, coercion, and enslavement.

3. *The Risk of Repetition*

Formerly disenfranchised groups, Hutcheon observes, may feel that they can have their claims validated as political claims only by invoking the model of these national histories, and to reach their goal of full institutional recognition, they may need to pass through the stage of ideological consolidation that the established and hegemonic groups already concluded. For the groups comfortably settled in positions of power, it is a pleasant luxury to kick away the ladder by which they ascended, but this is a luxury that others less well established cannot afford.

But this argument seems to assume, like the old Marxist anthropology, that there is only one immutable narrative of emergence, a fixed series of stages through which every group has inevitably to pass. Never mind if what Rob Nixon terms “the idiom of antiquity, tradition, cultural authenticity, linguistic uniqueness” and so on is largely mythic; if at some point it served English and French nationalist identity politics, so now it will serve, say, Canadians (85).

But why must the potent ideological distortions generated in late-nineteenth-century Oxford or Paris be repeated now in Toronto or Montreal? Why should we accept the hypothesis of a single, endlessly reiterated fable of identity? And why should we expect, even from a strictly tactical point of view, that the strategy that worked for dominant class fractions in the early part of the twentieth century will continue to work in a new century for hitherto marginalized groups, except as a mode of absorption and containment? Such groups may believe that they are appropriating traditional forms, but it may well be the forms that are appropriating them. There must be something reassuring to the existing structure of things if emergent groups wish to recapitulate the hoariest myths of origin, but why should we endorse such reassurance? Why should we welcome the renewed imposition, now perhaps lightly seasoned with irony or cynicism, of an ideology that we have just begun to dismantle?

Literary critics seem to imagine that there is something inherently progressive in the group identities they study and celebrate, something that makes these cultural formations ethically superior to those of the nation-state. The narratives that characterized national literary histories were subjected to withering critiques by feminism, deconstruction, and new historicism. These critiques are suspended, however, when the narratives are put in the service of an identity politics presumed to be worthy of admiration and support. But no coherent arguments are made to justify this presumption or to account for the suspension of skeptical analysis or to explain why claims of racial memory or ethnic solidarity that are anything but progressive in the real-world politics of, say, Serbia, Rwanda, or Sri Lanka, not to mention Israel, the Sudan, Ireland, or South Africa, should somehow be transformed when they are set in verse or canonized in literary history. An uncritical academic celebration of local knowledge runs the risk of repetition compulsion and political naïveté or, alternatively, of cynical opportunism and enforced parochialism.

[IV]

Where should literary history go from here, and what are the parameters of cultural performativity? With few exceptions, in matters of culture the local has always been irradiated, as it were, by the global. The point is not only that Bill Clinton may, for all I know, actually have encountered *The Sound and the Fury* at Oxford University but also that Faulkner, though he sometimes liked to represent himself as a country bumpkin with the narrowest of horizons, enlisted during World War I in the British Royal Air Force and, far more important, read widely, if unsystematically, in world literature. The Shakespearean allusion in the title of the novel in question is a tiny trace of that reading, and if the familiarity of “Anglo-American” literary culture tempts us to treat the link between twentieth-century Mississippi and

early-seventeenth-century England as a local matter, a moment's reflection should suffice to unsettle this domestic illusion.

Written letters are virtually inevitably the agents of globalization. Shakespeare may never have left England, yet his work is already global in its representational range. "Sure these are but imaginary wiles," says Antipholus of Syracuse in *The Comedy of Errors*, baffled by his encounters in Ephesus, "[a]nd Lapland sorcerers inhabit here" (4.3.10–11). A Plautine character from a Sicilian city, finding himself in the market square of a city in Asia Minor, invokes Arctic shamanism—and all this had to make sense to a mixed audience in a commercial theater in London. Literary critics, busily making claims for cultural authenticity, have been far too prone to ignore the overwhelming evidence of cultural *métissage*, a global circulation, mutual influence, and cross-breeding deriving from the very substance of the objects we study.

In the South Indian city of Cochin, a few years ago, I met a Malayali poet, Balachandran Chullikkad, who seemed to me the epitome of the communal centrality of which poets sometimes dream: rickshaw wallahs and boatmen recognized him and wanted to shake his hand, seminary priests shyly edged toward him and had their friends take photographs, vendors in the spice markets called out to him and offered to buy him drinks. "Who is the greatest influence on you?" I asked him. "Walt Whitman," he answered instantly, explaining that he felt a deep, almost mystical affinity between his own voice and that of the American. "Whitman," he told me, "is a Malayali poet." Seamus Heaney, who spent the last several years translating *Beowulf*, has said that he feels a link between the most intimate resources of his own poetic craft and the rhythms, language, and inner vision of the Old English epic. A great Irish poet who writes in English undertakes to translate a Germanic poem about a Scandinavian hero that has, for philological reasons, been canonized as one of the orinary, master texts of English litera-

ture: his brilliant translation, which appears in the seventh edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, takes its place in a body of literature that long ago ceased to be confined to England, or the islands of Great Britain, or even the former overseas possessions of the defunct empire. In his introduction to the *Beowulf* translation, Heaney echoes Osip Mandelstam in speaking with a certain wry wistfulness about "nostalgia for world culture" (xxvi). That culture is in fact our home, our *nostos*, from which we have long wandered, and it is time to return to it.

The globalization of literary studies is not principally a phenomenon of the Internet or Apex fares or the spread of English on the wings of international capitalism. These are, to be sure, significant factors in enabling us to return to world culture, for the digitization of literary resources, the ease with which we can access newspapers and reviews from every continent, the rise of international discussion groups in multiple languages all pull us away from national and ethnic exclusivity. It is easy enough to confuse globalization with American triumphalism and an insurgent English-language parochialism. But world culture does not depend on recent events or on the current strength of the English language. A vital global cultural discourse is ancient; only the increasingly settled and bureaucratized nature of academic institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conjoined with a nasty intensification of ethnocentrism, racism, and nationalism, produced the temporary illusion of sedentary, indigenous literary cultures making sporadic and half-hearted ventures toward the margins. The reality, for most of the past as once again for the present, is more about nomads than natives. As Walter Burkert has observed in his superb study of Near Eastern influence on Greek culture in the Early Archaic Age, the adoption of Phoenician script by the Greeks and its skillful adaptation to Greek phonetics, sometime around the eighth century BCE, encouraged an unprecedented intellectual, religious, and literary

mobility (26–40). This cultural mobility, facilitated by traders, craftsmen, and troops of mercenaries, was obviously uneven and at certain times and places was sharply restricted. But once launched, it proved unstoppable and has determined the shape of scholarship as well as poetry.

Mobility studies, as we might term the enterprise of tracking the restless and often unpredictable movements, is still in its early stages. In his marvelous book *In an Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh gives us a glimpse of what mobility studies might mean for literary scholarship, as he tracks his own movements in the attempt to track the movements of his subject, the medieval Jewish merchant-scholar-poet Abraham Ben Yiju, from Tunisia to Egypt to India. But Ghosh is writing as a social anthropologist; characteristically, at present many of the most exciting models for what our own enterprise could be come from outside our profession. We have more a sense of glorious fragments than a set of coherent histories: Latin grammar arose when a Greek diplomat, Crates of Mallos, broke his leg in a sewer hole in Rome and whiled away the time of his recuperation by giving lectures on language; Judah Abravanel fled from Spain into Italy in the wake of the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, encountered Florentine neo-Platonism, itself a recent Greek import, and was inspired to write his great dialogues on love; Montaigne conversed, through an annoyingly stupid interpreter, with one of three Brazilian Indians who had been brought to Rouen; Giordano Bruno lectured at Oxford, where he almost certainly encountered and influenced Philip Sidney, before returning to Italy and meeting his end at the pyre in the Campo dei Fiori.

Such fragments may lead us to conclude that mobility studies is essentially about what medieval theologians called *contingentia*, the sense that the world as we know it is not necessary: the point is not only that the world will pass away but also that *it could all have been otherwise*. This ancient sense of contingency and the still more ancient sense of mobility lead

us to two provisional conclusions, very much of our own time and place.

1. *The Negotiation of Multiple Identities*

We must develop a literary history that does not inevitably betray the aleatory, accidental, contingent, random dimensions of literary creativity. The task is difficult, but it is not impossible. One model that gets at some of the spirit of slipperiness and rupture and calls into question any organic account of the nation and even of smaller units within the nation is *A New History of French Literature*, edited by Denis Hollier, with its fragmentary succession of dates linked to events that are for the most part detached from one another. Many of the brief essays in the volume were written by those, like me, who are decidedly not natives and who speak French less in the accents of Paris than, as Chaucer wrote of his Prioress, “after the schole of Stratford atte Bowe.” The focus of this radically new literary history, Hollier writes, “has shifted from the assertion of borders through literature and the presentation of a literature within borders, to a questioning that results in the proliferation of these borders.” A proliferation of borders may initially seem odd and undesirable—should not a postmodern project work toward their elimination?—but it is in fact a powerful way of focusing critical attention on the complex, constant renegotiation of the boundary between the literary and whatever lies outside it. Literary history, as Hollier envisages it, “both constitutes and undoes literature” (xxv).

The model of *A New History of French Literature* is exciting, but I think that the extra-territoriality and deliberate fragmentariness that enable it to break with the traditional enterprise of literary history also limit its capacity to capture long-term strategies of transformation, evasion, negotiation, and exchange. Such strategies are precisely what the groups marginalized by the hegemonic cultures of the ruling elites had most brilliantly mastered, for the ability to be at

once inside and outside was the condition of their cultural existence. And this leads me to an alternative vision of literary history, one more hinted at than achieved. In an essay responding to charges by nationalist literary historians that his writing was insufficiently “gauchesque,” Jorge Luis Borges observes wryly that the cult of “differential Argentine traits and Argentine local color” is “a recent European cult which the nationalists ought to reject as foreign” (“Argentine Writer” 178). Instead, he likens Argentine writers like himself to the Jews, who achieved, according to a theory of Thorstein Veblen’s that Borges endorses, a preeminent place in Western culture because “they act within that culture and, at the same time, do not feel tied to it by any special devotion.”³ Borges goes on to cite the preeminence in English culture of Irish writers—he mentions Shaw, Berkeley, and Swift—whose innovative power obviously cannot be traced to any Celtic blood (for these writers were all of English ancestry) but may be linked to a similar historical position of engagement and detachment.

I am made uneasy by such accounts, for they carry with them just a trace of the nativist nostalgia they profess to abjure. But Borges makes clear that what he is invoking has nothing to do with racial memory. It has to do rather with a feeling of difference—“el hecho de sentirse [. . .] distintos”—that gives these groups a creative, liberated access not to a particular, organic, autochthonous culture but to a vaster field: “nuestro patrimonio es el universo” (“El escritor” 222–23). Such access is not a mere return to the fantasy of featureless universality, not an erasure of difference, but a consequence of difference and the agent of a vital, ongoing creation of a particular literary identity. “Anything we Argentine writers can do successfully,” Borges concludes, “will become part of our Argentine tradition, in the same way that the treatment of Italian themes belongs to the tradition of England through the efforts of Chaucer and Shakespeare” (“Argentine Writer” 178–79).

From this perspective, the acceptance, even if it feels clever and tactically enabling, of the traditional model of literary history, with its concern to purify the dialect of the tribe, robs the hitherto marginalized groups of their revolutionary potential: a potential that lies in the impurity of languages and ethnicities, in tangled lines of access and blockage, in the flesh-and-blood intensity of loss, assimilation, and invention, and in the daring intersection of multiple identities. The new literary histories that these groups are poised to write should do more than put them on the map; they should transform the act of mapmaking.

2. *The Need for Rupture*

The history of the late twentieth century, with the precipitous collapse of regimes that had officially embraced a powerful metanarrative of historical inevitability, should be a sufficient reminder that radical transformation, drastic renegotiation, and sudden rupture are at least as essential to cultural history as continuity and progress. Solar myths and Danish chronicles, French novellas and Elizabethan revenge plays recounted each a similar tale of adultery and murder, but who before 1601 could have predicted Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and what literary history grounded in a belief in continual and organic development could do anything but conceal or betray the play’s astonishing originality? The scholarly Horatio, staring at the corpses littering the stage, attempts to explain “how these things came about.” Horatio’s account has often been faulted, and justly so, for its failure to comprehend Hamlet’s inwardness, but it sketches a model of literary history that could at least begin to comprehend the weird eruption of such a tragedy onto the Elizabethan stage:

So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause;

And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads. (5.2.324–29)

To write literary history, we need more a sharp awareness of accidental judgments than a theory of the organic; more an account of purposes mistook than a narrative of gradual emergence; more a chronicle of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts than a story of inevitable progress from traceable origins. We need to understand colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unexpected consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness, for it is these disruptive forces, not a rooted sense of cultural legitimacy, that principally shape the history and diffusion of languages. Language is the slipperiest of human creations; like its speakers, it does not respect borders, and, like the imagination, it cannot ultimately be predicted or controlled.

NOTES

¹ See, similarly, *Chicano Literature: A Reference Guide*, edited by Julia Martínez and Francisco Lomelí. Some critics treat Chicano literature as a relatively recent phenomenon, “coeval with the Chicano movement, the civil rights struggle that began in the mid-1960s,” but the editors define it rather as “the literary output of Mexican Americans since 1848, with backgrounds and traditions as far back as the sixteenth century.” The 1960s, in this account, are not a revolutionary departure but “the spiritual rebirth or renewal of a literary tradition” (xi). For a different, and in my view subtler, account of the issues here, see Pérez-Torres.

² My current essay originated in a response to an earlier version of Hutcheon's paper, delivered at the Modern Language Association Annual Convention in 1997. I am grateful to Hutcheon for giving me this stimulating opportunity and for subsequent gracious and lively exchanges.

³ Borges is paraphrasing the argument in “The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe” (1919). Veblen asks in this essay why Jews have made a disproportionate contribution to the intellectual life of modern Europe. The answer, he argues, cannot be strictly racial, for “the Jewish people are a nation of hybrids” (222). Moreover, when they have remained within their community, Jews have made, Veblen argues, no very significant contributions to science or scholarship. It is only when a Jew “falls into the alien lines

of gentile inquiry and becomes a naturalised, though hyphenate, citizen in the gentile republic of learning, that he comes into his own as a creative leader in the world's intellectual enterprise. It is by a loss of allegiance, or at the best by force of a divided allegiance to the people of his origin, that he finds himself in the vanguard of modern inquiry.” The Jew's situation, in Veblen's account, is deeply uncomfortable. He is alienated from his tradition, but “the most amiable share in the gentile community's life that is likely to fall to his lot is that of being interned.” Still, this position endows him with a “skeptical frame of mind”—the prerequisite for scientific advancement—and a “requisite immunity from the inhibitions of intellectual quietism” (226–27).

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