

Letters

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Postmodernism and the Concept of Culture

Postmodernism is a point of convergence for the disciplines, a philosophical or theoretical attitude toward history or culture which attempts to blur disciplinary lines and to disrupt academic territorial claims. Postmodernism can be divisive for these same reasons. Should postmodernism be understood as a description of our cultural condition, or as a peculiar and sometimes rarefied academic pursuit? This question, posed during the spring seminar "Postmodernism and the Concept of Culture" at the Center for the Humanities, guides the following discussion between Jay Clayton (Department of English), Mary-Kay Miller (Department of French and Italian), and David M. Steiner (Department of Political Science).

LETTERS: Concerning the title of the seminar, "Postmodernism and the Concept of Culture," why did you question the "concept" of culture as opposed to the simple conjunction of "Postmodernism and Culture?"

CLAYTON: It is characteristic of the culture of postmodernism that the distinct realms of theory and practice have become not just theoretically inadequate but practically ineffective. It's impossible now to separate the social, the political, the sexual, or the economic, from the cultural realm. Culture interpenetrates all of these realms, and this challenges various views of the autonomy of literature. For the previous two hundred years literature had marched under the banner of autonomous, high culture, but the changed nature as well as

function of culture in the postmodern era really levels that notion of a high, separate literary realm.

STEINER: There is no question that culture seen in broad terms has penetrated every aspect of professional life: medicine, law, literature, humanities, science. But there is an enormous difference between accepting that very obvious and important development and saying that therefore tomorrow morning all of us could do surgery, for example. It is one thing to say that culture shapes and creates an environment which inevitably has an impact on highly specialized studies, brings them into often jarring juxtaposition with other studies with which they are uncomfortably but perhaps productively placed. It's quite another to say that because the culture is democratic in style, one which is suspicious of the high, of the closed, of the esoteric, that it there-

fore has successfully redefined those activities as democratic in themselves. Where I differ with your approach is that I have tried to preserve a space, a modest space and not an imperious space, for those who do a certain kind of difficult work. I have no difficulty at all with a lack of interest in such work. Why should one, after all, be interested in certain kinds of difficult philosophical enterprises? It is not the same to go from that moment of disinterest, or indeed cultural or democratic suspicion of such activities for their difficulty, to announcing that because they don't share in the democratic accessibility that one wishes to celebrate that they are to be trampled over in the name of ascendent egalitarianism.

MILLER: I guess that I am really suspicious of preserving that space, for one of the things I find most compelling about postmodernism

is that it tends to open things up more. I agree that what I'm saying now is precisely what you're criticizing, but when I look at a lot of Derrida's work for instance, which I think is the kind of philosophical work that you're talking about, I see something that believes itself to be universal. But it is a universality that I would challenge quite strongly. I think it's very traditional, white, privileged, male. . . . I could go on. I think that what happens in postmodernist thought is that the space of privilege is challenged over and over again, and broken apart, and that is what leads to all these conflicting discourses that we find in postmodernism. I don't think that it's just a kind of bad faith move to simplify something.

CLAYTON: We had a lot of disciplinary diversity in the group from the literature departments—French, Spanish and Portuguese, English, and comparative literature—but also from history, political science, sociology, and art history. I think that this nexus of disciplines captures the broad use of the word "culture" that we're driving at. Many people in the seminar were interested in getting



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STEINER: I think if we were having this discussion around a table in Paris, Milan, Turin, Frankfurt, the “and” of the title immediately would have been seen to be ironic.

some clarification of this term that they had heard about and were perhaps intimidated by. So we did a fair amount of clarifying of the intellectual lineage of that term, how it has changed over the years from being a rather limited technical term in literary criticism to being a much broader label for a historical moment. We also were continually being challenged to question whether clarity is possible, whether these terms don't call themselves into question to such a degree that any kind of clarity becomes illusory.

STEINER: Criticism of literary and philosophical postmodernism or deconstruction is absolutely worth doing. It is interesting to take some of the most influential and difficult texts and to analyze them to show, for example, that in a concept like “trace” or “infrastructure” or “the Other,” there may be implicit certain presumptions which the authors themselves are unaware of, traces of certain political or gender identities. That has to be done from the inside, with all respect, and it's a difficult task. After all, to use my analogy, if one is going to review a difficult scientific treatise, one gives it to those whose competence is presumably beyond question, and criticisms that will be made will be in the language of the claims of that particular discipline. So I would like to see criticisms made from the inside as opposed to with a broad brush from the outside. At the broad brush moment I reserve this instinct that what is happening is not a piece of analysis that is sympathetic to the language but is a kind of external, political reaction. The question of whether one maintains a critical edge in such kinds of analysis is in my mind an open question.

MILLER: I see what you're saying, and you would be absolutely right if you were to criticize an article for doing what we sat around and did in the seminar. I would take that as a very legitimate criticism. But I think that in that kind of group, given the diversity of people there, we could not have

done what you're talking about, taking apart texts from the inside. I'm not sure how that would work. I can see that is extremely important to do, but it doesn't seem to me to be compatible with the aims of the kind of seminar we had.

CLAYTON: I'm amused by this imagery of inside and outside from someone versed in postmodern theory. The notion that to be critical one must be “inside” is to beg the question of what the “outside” is, how one finds oneself or is put on the outside in the first place. Central to a notion of postmodernism as culture is the way that it has deconstructed some of these secure disciplinary boundaries. The notion that a “trained philosopher” is any more on the inside in relation to the texts of Kant than a political scientist, a literary theorist, or a scholar of French, is something that postmodernism not just questions intellectually but also undermines in institutional terms.

STEINER: I think that pinpoints our difference precisely. It is of course accurate to say that the binary oppositions that have made up Western thought, to use a cliché, from Plato to Nietzsche, have been undermined, attacked, displaced, by the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and others. Derrida's famous statement, “there is nothing outside the text,” is picked up by the wider community of which we are a part and can be used to good effect. But what Derrida means by there being no “outside” is not a point about the coming together of disciplines, political correctness, liberal democracy, or postmodern architecture. It is a point of enormous technical difficulty that emerges from an analysis of Husserlian phenomenology. Precisely what I'm objecting to is that a term which means

something important, or doesn't mean, or is the “other of meaning” within a difficult set of texts, is then transported and colonized in this kind of cultural milieu and indeed used for rhetorical effect. So that when I say that criticism should come from the inside, I was speaking in a very conventional way, and as Jay rightly pointed out, not in a technical way. But were I to speak of the “inside” of a text in a technical way, I would be very wary of transporting that term into a term of general rhetorical or political description.

MILLER: I'm concerned about closing down all the other possibilities of interpretation for things like Derrida's reading of “inside the text.” Why can't it be understood in other ways? I agree that understanding it in a very philosophical way is important. But it is not necessarily the only way to do it.

CLAYTON: In fact, there was a kind of authoritarian character to your statement, David. The idea that “Derrida meant this” and we are out of place in using his term in any way other than the way he meant it is a kind of master/slave rhetoric that is problematic. Further, it's ironic that you say that others have colonized this term when what we're really talking about is a kind of move to appropriate and steal the colonizers' language.

STEINER: I think that if you mean when you say “authoritarian” that you mean “with respect to an author,” I have no difficulty with being authoritarian. I do respect authors. When you translate everything into a particular interpretation of celebratory democracy, then it seems to me there is a dangerous colonization taking place. I think it's much more dangerous than an initial careful respect for

trying to work out a difficult text. As Hans Georg Gadamer once said, “if you read a text only once you're condemned to read the same text always.” I think in this move—which I do regard as colonial—which is to bring the difficult and the strange into the familiar and panoptic vision that is already to be celebrated, the democratic, one loses the spaces of thought.

MILLER: I think I have to object at this point to the way you are using “colonial,” because I feel that it's loaded with historical significance. Your point is well taken at one level, but I really don't think that Derrida is in any danger of being “colonized” in the historical sense of the term. You're talking about representatives of two privileged heritages, institutions, histories, and colonization is perhaps an ill-chosen metaphor.

CLAYTON: The fact that we are arguing fiercely over two fairly radical visions of what postmodernism can be is also ironic. What we don't have is a vision resistant to postmodernism, a questioning voice of the traditionalist who would prefer to return to, say, a modern rather than a postmodern moment, or even go further back than the modern to something even more traditional. What we're really debating is whether radical philosophical postmodernism is superior to radical sociological postmodernism.

LETTERS: You and Mary-Kay would be the “radical sociological postmodernists.”

CLAYTON: That is right, and David would be the “radical philosophical postmodernist.” And I think your readers are going to be immediately sensitive to that when they say “wait a minute, what about my question? You all haven't even gotten to the question whether or not postmodernism is a good thing or whether we ought to resist it as a degradation of value and human experience,” which are the questions that loom in many people's minds. It is in some ways a mark of the success of the seminar that there were many skeptics in the group about the value of postmodernism



David M. Steiner

MILLER:
 You seem to be implying that somehow that discussion is more valid than the discussion that is happening here, that somehow this is an inferior model.

and their voices weren't lost, but we were also able to get beyond the question "is it good? is it bad?" to some fairly knotty problems which really come down to problems of definition.

LETTERS: Is this just a problem of definition, though? On the one hand, "Postmodernism and the Concept of Culture" has been talked about as a way of saying that culture already is postmodern, like it or not. But then the inside/outside distinction resists something that is ineluctably the case. Aren't the grounds of the definition in question?

STEINER: I do see my own fascination with some of these texts as a point of resistance. I think that the authors of those texts are not misread in being read as moments of resistance to pan-Americanism, to the American democratic experiment as it is manifest in its multiple dimensions. That is why I think there is more at stake here than definitional disagreement. If those texts are co-opted, if they are turned into merely a reflection of the kind of movement that you've just described, a kind of juggernaut movement, then they are indeed silenced in their most vital aspect. I think if we were having this discussion around a table in Paris, Milan, Turin, Frankfurt, the "and" of the title immediately would have been seen to be ironic. I am suggesting that we are in a very unusual moment intellectually and academically if we want to argue that postmodernism is for everyone. We don't argue that AIDS research or fractal mathematics or classical philology is immediately accessible to everyone, but we celebrate in the academy the fact that it is getting done. I think much is at stake in the desire to appropriate

these texts, some of them, for that more general view of culture.

MILLER: I completely agree with you that this would be an extremely different discussion in Paris. Yet you seem to be implying that somehow that discussion is more valid than the discussion that is happening here, that somehow this is an inferior model. That is where I really resist. We need, perhaps, to be more aware of what may be going on in other places, and of different kinds of interpretations of this, but I don't see the need to privilege any one of them over the others. In fact, I think it's in that dialogue and in that discourse that you will find its true significance and complexity.

CLAYTON: Postmodernism is a name for a historical moment. We are, in advanced Western capitalist societies, in postmodernism. Some of the theorists whose names have been invoked, take Derrida as an exemplar, could be seen as the product of postmodernism, rather than the author of postmodernism. I think that is another thing that is at stake in debating whether postmodernism is a cultural moment or a theory of culture.

STEINER: I think I agree with both points. All I'm suggesting is that when you render certain ideas, texts, difficulties, as products of consumption, you so to speak neutralize a number of spaces from which that other thing, which Jay wants to call postmodernism, and which I simply want to call modern culture, or contemporary American academic culture, or elitist culture, you lose some difficult and interesting sources and spaces of resistance.

CLAYTON: By the way, it's interesting that this seminar, unlike many seminars on postmodern themes at the Center for the Hu-

manities, did not read any Derrida, even though he has come up over and over again. One of the things that Richard Brown and I had in mind when we organized the seminar was that it might be interesting to read some different people. So we initially took some French theorists, but not Derrida and Lacan and other post-structuralist theorists, as our point of departure. We read Baudrillard and Lyotard first, then went to Fredric Jameson and then read quite a few theorists from the United States—feminist, African American, and post-colonial theorists.

MILLER: And what was interesting about choosing Lyotard and Baudrillard was of course that in some ways they are American. They're French theorists, but both are American based.

LETTERS: Something that has been at issue here is the question of American democracy. David has been talking about democracy as a kind of rampant egalitarianism, and postmodernism as being in the service of that. Is David right?

CLAYTON: There were moments earlier in this conversation, David, when you said some anti-democratic things that seem troubling to me in some of their political implications. So I'm assuming that you're opposing democracy in favor of some even more free form of political arrangement and not some more oppressive or totalitarian form of political arrangements.

MILLER: In fact, this struck me earlier in the year when you talked about the essays we read by Judith Butler, on postmodernism and feminism, and Kwame Appiah, who writes on the relationship between postmodernism and post-colonialism. At the time, you did not talk about democracy. You did, at various

moments, talk about them as embracing a kind of liberal ideology, which I assume is closely related to what you're talking about here.

STEINER: I once made a reference in the seminar to Voltaire in which I suggested that Dr. Pangloss, the famous character who pronounces that this is the best of all possible worlds, was supposed to be seen as ironic, whereas Jay had taken him seriously. It's just that the character had lived too early, he wasn't living in 1993 America. When I speak of opening spaces or holding open spaces of theoretical resistance to a certain vision of democracy, I am neither speaking in political terms of a yet more radical democracy, nor am I speaking in political terms of a more authoritarian political ideology. Protagoras's dictum that man and, we would now say, woman are the measure of all things has been at the heart of my own thinking about democratic education. The paradox for Protagoras was that he had to suggest and justify a difficult education that could only be taught by those who have gone through a very demanding and perhaps even elitist education, elite

in a sense of intellectually difficult, believing that only a very difficult education could prepare the few to teach for the sake of democracy. That is, that a democracy may need certain spaces within which its own self critique is maintained and developed by those whose time and institutional support enables them to do so. I resist the sense

that we do live in the best of all possible worlds, that American democracy has ended the question of the good life. I resist this neither in the name of a conventional or more radical democracy, whatever that might mean, or an authoritarian democracy. Postmodernism as



Mary-Kay Miller



Jay Clayton

CLAYTON: Thinking of postmodernism as a cultural condition makes it a phase of advanced capitalism . . . pos[ing] urgent questions for study at Vanderbilt.

I understand it asks questions that belong neither to the left nor the right, but come from the Other, to use a technical term. In an era in which the great utopian visions, Marxism and others, have apparently been laid to rest, perhaps rightly, still it is from such moments of the Other that we may be able to find the next source of intelligent autocritique.

MILLER: I too find the idea of the Other a compelling one, and I don't think that we should shut it off or shut it down. I'll go back to "liberal" since that was my way of approaching this to start with. It did seem to me that David found a moment where Judith Butler was using war imagery and decided that she was basically embracing a liberal ideology because she seemed to express concern with human suffering. Now, of course "human suffering" can become a liberal construct that works against a post-structuralist approach because of the whole question of the subject. However, what I'm personally interested in doing in my work is finding another space for this subject that neither holds it up as an immutable, essential entity, nor

dispenses with it totally. The reason I'm interested in this is because this notion of deconstructing the subject, dispensing with the subject, negating the subject, is extremely problematic. It's fine when we all sit around and play with it, but it is extremely problematic when you're talking, for example, about the literature of colonized peoples, or feminist literature. And so when you use the term liberal to talk about Butler's approach or Appiah's approach, it seems to me to diffuse all of the power of their argument, to deflate what it is that they're doing, and I'm wondering if that is your intention.

STEINER: The volume entitled *Feminism as Critic* edited by Drucilla Cornell and Seyla Benhabib contains an article by Cornell and Adam Thurschwell. In it there is an extraordinary paragraph in which they say in slightly more formal terms what you just said. They say "look, we don't want to essentialize the subject, especially not the subject of 'woman' when the whole 'feminine' has been a gesture towards the Other. At the same time, we don't want to lose the subject completely as the subject of suffer-

ing." And so the question is from where that ground or non-ground or other-of-ground is going to come. This challenge seems to me at the core of postmodernist feminism in which the problem of the subject is inescapable. I didn't mean and don't mean to deflate what they said. I was struck only by the fact that when it came to this extremely difficult problem of finding a space that can't be a space, it embraced a fairly straightforward kind of liberalism. So not to deflate the acuity of the analysis, but just to say that in my view this real problem remains very much at the initial stages of its discovery.

CLAYTON: I've been thinking about your metaphor of intellectual space and trying to juxtapose it with the accusation that I'm Pangloss. Though I by no means believe that postmodernism is the best of all possible worlds, you've correctly captured a difference in our goals. My concern always has been fundamentally evaluative. One reason to think of postmodernism as a cultural condition is that one can do a history of cultural moments and position oneself, take a stance toward those things, and

try and come to some kind of terms about one's own place in the world and one's own evaluation of that place. Democracy was never a question for me. I *did* assume democracy as a positive value. My question was one about capitalism and whether it was possible to sustain not optimism about the course of capitalism, but hope. My evaluative stance wasn't confident enough to be optimistic, much less Panglossian, about postmodernism, but I did at times make room for a kind of hope. We have to couch our discussion in terms of a wider intellectual debate, one shaped by Marxists on the one hand, who want to see capitalism as inevitably degrading to individuals and destructive to large classes of peoples, and on the other hand rightist ideologues who don't want anything but celebration of what they think of as *laissez-faire* capitalism. Thinking of postmodernism as a cultural condition makes it a phase of advanced capitalism. It is a phase which presents us with extraordinary promises and poses urgent questions for study at Vanderbilt.

1993/94 Center Programs

The Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities is sponsoring a wide variety of programs for the academic year. As this issue of *Letters* goes to press, the following programs are either in place or are in the planning stages. *More detailed information regarding meeting dates and times will be distributed separately.*

Seminars

Faculty Luncheon Group. On Mondays at noon, faculty members are invited to meet at the Humanities Center for work-in-progress presentations. Seminar coordinator: BEVERLY ASBURY, University Chaplain.

Freud on Sublimation. A discussion seminar featuring the recently published book by Professor VOLNEY GAY.

The Influence of Afrocentrism in Academia. Currently in the planning stages.

Postmodernism and the Concept of Culture. This seminar will continue the discussions begun last spring on the concept of culture in postmodern thought. Seminar coordinator: JAY CLAYTON, Department of English.

Southern Studies Seminar. Faculty members interested in developing a program in southern studies at Vanderbilt are invited to attend this seminar. Seminar coordinators: LARRY J. GRIFFIN, Department of Sociology and DON H. DOYLE, Department of History.

Women Scholars and Ivory Towers. Cosponsored by the Women's Faculty Organization, this seminar will meet monthly at the Humanities Center. Presentations will be made by faculty mem-

bers at 4 p.m. on the following dates: September 22, October 20, November 17, and December 15.

Special Program

The Humanities Center will sponsor two public lectures on the topic of AIDS and its impact on society and ideas about health, sickness, and mortality. The lectures will be co-sponsored by Project Dialogue and the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies.

The first speaker, Professor CINDY PATTON, will speak on campus during the first week of November. Professor Patton, Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Communication at Temple University, is the author of several books on AIDS policy and AIDS activism. Her recent publications include *The Last Severed: Women's Health and the HIV Pandemic* (1992) and *Inventing AIDS* (1990).

She is currently working on post-war U.S. social movements centered on racial, gendered, and sexuality-based identities.

On January 25, Professor ALLAN M. BRANDT will give a public lecture related to his work on the topic. Professor Brandt is the Amalie Moses Kass Professor of the History of Medicine at Harvard Medical School's department of social medicine and professor of the history of science at Harvard University. He served on the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Monitoring the Social Impact of AIDS. Professor Brandt is the author of *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880*. His work focused on the relationship of behavior, risk, and disease in the twentieth-century United States.

Reclaiming the Humanities

Charles E. Scott

When George Steiner spoke at the Center in April he said that the humanities—a uniquely Western disciplinary area—have undergone a double trauma. The rise in the social value of scientific disciplines, or more specifically, of technological and quantitative knowledges, and a deep transition within the humanities provide this double shock. The hope for recovery, he said, is found in the work of small groups of people who relearn the arts of reading, thinking, and interpreting. Such work constitutes a recovery of values that have been lost in disciplines that require deciphering more than reading, careful calculation more than thought, and prediction and control more than interpreting. And in this recovery a transition in the humanities toward relatively easy criticism, loss of fluency in several foreign languages, and loss of intimacy with culture-forming texts can be redirected.

It is a difficult redirection to follow. So far has the word *humanities* slipped that when the Center was founded I heard concern that people would think that it is a center for leftist politics and radical ethics. I have found in raising funds for the Center that many people have no idea what the word “stands for.”

And in my discipline and, I suspect, in many of your disciplines, fast reading and writing are often considered virtues. Speed of critical judgment is sometimes encouraged, while *profound* is associated with *unclear*, and reading is assumed to be a skill taught in elementary school.

When the Center was defined in 1986, Professor Steiner’s remarks were several years into the future. But its conception was not far removed from the values that he noted. It is designed to provide encouragement and space for relatively small groups of faculty members—and on occasion, stu-

dents—to work intensely on topics, texts, and questions that have primary importance for the participants’ scholarship. The intention of the Center’s existence is to bring together people with common interests so that they can work out of these interests on a specific issue or text. They explore relatively new material or go more deeply into territory that is already familiar.



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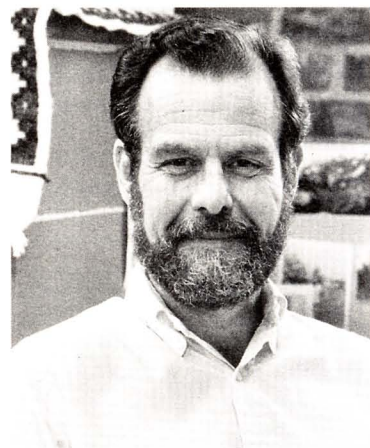
Different passages of access arise when the participants are educated in different disciplines. Different values and perspectives are tested. The seminar table is there to hold books and notes, to take occasional pounding, to serve as a gathering point, and to occasion the work of scholars in diverse areas who feel the importance of what they do as well as know how to go about processes of discovery, elaboration, and articulation. It also marks a time for common thought, reading, and interpreting—arts that make novices of us all.

I believe that there is also a suspicion that is built into this inten-

tion. It is a suspicion of what is journalistic, easily grasped, easily applied, easily disseminated. This is not a positive evaluation of what is hard for the sake of its difficulty. It is a suspicion based on the experience that creative scholarship is very hard to carry out. Imaginative questioning, recognition and elaboration of powerful, yet obscure values, knowledge of words and syntax, the formation of an idea or image, and the cultivation of a style appropriate to a given possibility or state of affairs: in a word, the art of discernment comes hard if it comes at all. Hence the Center’s emphasis on seminars and small conferences rather than on large events and broad coverage of popular themes and controversies.

In such an undertaking the Center goes against a strong pressure that I believe all colleges and universities feel, the pressure to appear relevant to the need of the hour, to make an immediate difference for society, and to be able to solve problems by developing new techniques and quick knowledge. Speed, efficiency, and constantly changing relevance have their importance. But another kind of importance is found when highly trained people who teach other people work for months or years to hear what a text says, what a body of knowledge has forgotten, or how poetry and empirical, historical research are connected beyond the expectation of most poets and historians.

The Center is affiliated with the patience of scholars as well as with their passions. It is intended to encourage both. It embodies the assumption that reading, thinking, and interpreting—with their multiple evaluations—are arts that are easily compromised or lost in the pursuit of knowledge. It is both the friend and critic of established learning in the intensity and compass to which it is dedicated.



Professor of Philosophy Charles E. Scott has served as director of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities since the program’s inception in 1987. Under Professor Scott’s leadership, the Center has become an integral part of University life. In the fall semester, Professor Scott will step down from the position of director. He will be succeeded by Paul H. Freedman of the Department of History.

Placing Poe

Teresa A. Goddu

"The problem of Poe, fascinating as it is, lies quite outside the main current of American thought."

—Vernon Parrington

In a recent episode of the "Simpsons," an odd reference to Poe occurs. Homer Simpson is caught in traffic behind a large truck towing the house of Poe. On the house is a sign that states: "birthplace of Edgar Allan Poe." I bring up this moment of television trivia not only to underscore Poe's location in popular culture, but, more importantly, to mark his lack of place. His is a home in constant transit—a haunted house on wheels if you will. Indeed, if you desire to visit the house of Poe (as I did on his birthday one year for the special candlelight tour), you can do so in many places: Philadelphia, New York, Richmond, Baltimore. Poe it would seem exists at once everywhere and nowhere. He is both, as Louis Rubin says, "a citizen of the world" and, as Joseph Krutch claims, an "outcast in any society." Born in Boston, raised in Richmond, later working in New York and Philadelphia, Poe is difficult to locate, both in terms of regional and national identity. If Poe lies outside the mainstream of American thought, he certainly does not fit comfortably within the parameters of Southern identity. However, despite his orphan status, both the American and Southern literary establishments have felt it necessary to adopt him in some fashion into their traditions. It is Poe's problematic position, both as a Southerner and as an American, that I wish briefly to explore here.

Edgar Allan Poe has always presented a problem to critics eager to

codify a canon of American literature. Five months after his death, *The Southern Literary Messenger*, which he once edited, captured the problem of Poe when they memorialized him as follows: "Edgar Allan Poe . . . the true head of American literature—it is the verdict of other nations and after times that we speak here—died of drink, friendless and alone, in the common wards of a Baltimore hospital" (March 1850). Poe's position in the corpus of American literature—let alone his status as its head—has, from the beginning, been problematized by the my-

ture, F. O. Matthiessen buries Poe in a footnote. He explains Poe's exclusion from his "group" as follows: "The reason is more fundamental than that his work fell mainly in the decade of 1835–45; for it relates at very few points to the main assumptions about literature that were held by any of my group. Poe was bitterly hostile to democracy, and in that respect could serve as a *revelatory contrast*" (emphasis added). As the exception to the rule—the embodiment of everything American literature was *not*—Poe reveals the parameters of a more "authentic" American

American literary tradition recognizes but refuses to claim. For instance, through Poe, popular literature can enter the canon without threatening the hard won highbrow status of "our classic" American literature. As Harold Bloom argues, "Poe's survival raises perpetually the issue as to whether literary merit and canonical status necessarily go together." Through Poe, as well, a darker, more gothic vision of America comes into view. In reading Poe's gothic tales as the projections of Poe's own peculiar psychology instead of as a comment on his wider culture, critics



Edgar Allan Poe's New York dwelling is known as "The Edgar Allan Poe Cottage." Photograph courtesy of the Bronx County Historical Society, New York City.

thography of his own drunken corpse and by the diseased bodies and living dead that haunt his stories. In both his life and his work, Poe would seem to lie far outside the American mainstream. If he represents anything at all, it is not American literature's head, but its irrational bodily impulses. The "after times" have judged Poe harshly; he remains relegated to the "common wards" and alienated from the community of American literature's founding fathers: Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman. In *The American Renaissance* (1941), a book which placed these authors at the center of a newly conceived American litera-

ture. Acting as an absent presence who haunts the American literary canon, Poe becomes a necessary—and useful—evil. Harold Bloom sums up Poe's paradoxical position when he writes, "I can think of no American writer, down to this moment, at once so inevitable and so dubious."

Poe's dubiousness is the very reason for his inevitability. For, it is through Poe that a number of "dubious" aspects of American literature get demonized and then exorcised from the mainstream American literary canon. As an easily excused aberration, Poe becomes the representative for a number of "problems" that the

easily contain his disturbing vision of American society. Even when Poe's diseased vision is read as a symptom of a larger cultural malaise, it remains quarantined from "mainstream" America since it comes to be identified with another "problem"—the South. Richard Gray, for instance, historicizes Poe's horrifying hauntings specifically in terms of the South's racial problems: "[w]hen Poe tries to describe his vision of evil, the darkness at the heart of things . . . it is noticeable that he sometimes *adopts the familiar Southern strategy* of associating

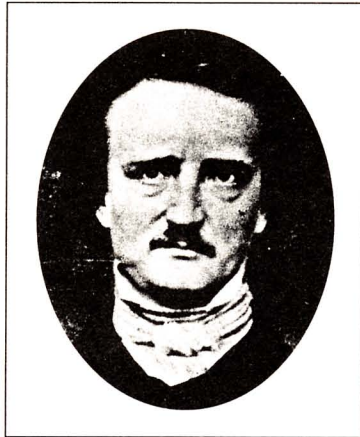
that vision with black people" (emphasis added). Through Poe, the terms "Southern" and "gothic" become solidified. If the South, as C. Vann Woodward writes, opposes the national ideal ("The South's preoccupation was with guilt not innocence, with the reality of evil, not with the dream of perfection"), then Poe serves as its perfect spokesperson. Moreover, once Poe is securely located in the South, he can no longer infect the nation.

If Poe is easily adopted into the American literary canon as the aberrant Southern writer, his case poses a more difficult problem for those eager to define a tradition of Southern literature. While Poe is

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canonized as a Southerner in virtually all of the major Southern anthologies, his lack of specifiable regional identification is constantly remarked upon. In *The Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash calls Poe "only half a Southerner;" Barrett Wendall claims that he is "Southern only by courtesy;" and Allen Tate states that while he is "a Gentleman and a Southerner, he [is] not quite, perhaps, a Southern gentleman." In a literary tradition that claims distinctiveness based on its unique social conditions, Poe, who spent much of his life outside of the South and who set few of his stories in a Southern locale, never quite fits the bill of the Southern writer. As Montrose Moses's chapter heading in *The Literature of the South* (1910) points out—"A Southern Mystery: An Author With and Without a Country—Poe"—Poe's Southernness remains a mystery.

However, despite his suspicious Southern roots, Poe becomes the necessary cornerstone of a Southern literary tradition due to his national status. Poe's status as "one of the chief glories of the literature of our nation and our race" makes him the "greatest ornament of Southern literature" (*Library of*



EDGAR ALLAN POE
1809–1849

Photograph by Matthew Brady,
courtesy of the National Archives

Southern Literature). Louis Rubin explains Poe's paradoxical position as follows: "We confront the obvious fact that of all the antebellum Southern authors it is Poe whose writings are *least* grounded in the particularities, settings and issues of the place he grew up in, and equally *most* lastingly a part of world literature" (emphasis added). Needing Poe's national and international cachet, the Southern literary establishment

discovered that if they could not Southernize him through history (Rubin, for instance, insists "Poe wrote almost *nothing* about the South, or about living there, or about Southern history and Southern society, or for that matter about any kind of history whatever") they could through form. As Ellen Glasgow argues in *A Certain Measure*, Poe's literary techniques are identifiably Southern: "Poe is, to a large extent, a distillation of the Southerner," she writes. "The formalism of his tone, the classical element in his poetry and in many of his stories, the drift toward rhetoric, the aloof and elusive intensity,—all these qualities are Southern." Poe could also be saved through his criticism, much of which was published in an identifiable locale, the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Edwin Mims and Bruce Payne, for instance, state in their *Southern Prose and Poetry for Schools* that "[i]t is in his critical writing that Poe's Southern bent of mind was most notably evinced." Moreover, Poe's gothic form could make him a forerunner to the Southern Renaissance (Faulkner, O'Connor, etc.), and, hence, make him the ancestor of Southern literature's "true" flowering. It is the ahistori-

cal, symbolist Poe, then, who is adopted into the Southern literary tradition. However, even as such, Poe is adopted only as a cousin, never a favorite son. Poe then poses a problem for both the South and the nation. From the national perspective, the problem of Poe can be solved by defining him in oppositional terms and identifying him with the South; from the Southern perspective, Poe's peculiar place can be addressed by claiming his art for Southern literature while disowning him from Southern history. Instead of trying to solve the problem of Poe or to locate him any single place, I would argue that it is precisely in Poe's (dis)location that he becomes significant. As the spectre who haunts the highways of America's literary landscape, Poe is never exorcised, but constantly on the move.

■ Teresa A. Goddu, Assistant Professor of English at Vanderbilt University, was a participant in the 1992/93 Humanities Center Fellows Program, which examined the topic "The South as an American Problem." Her work on Poe will be published in a collection of essays written by members of the 1992/93 Fellows Program.

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Established under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Science in 1987 and renamed the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1989, the Center promotes interdisciplinary research and study in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Members of the Vanderbilt community representing a wide variety of specializations take part in the Center's programs, which are designed to intensify and increase interdisciplinary discussion of academic, social, and cultural issues.

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1993/94 Humanities Center Fellows

The 1993/94 Fellows Program will examine the topic "American Studies: Its Past, Present, and Future." The program will provide the opportunity for a sustained evaluation of classic works on American society and culture as well as recent multicultural redefinitions of the American Studies movement. The following professors have been selected through a campus-wide application process for participation in the 1993/94 Fellows Program.

VICTOR ANDERSON, Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics, specializes in American pragmatism, African American politics and intellectual history, and theology and ethics in America. The author of *Utopia, Pragmatism, and Theology: The Crisis of Theology in American Intellectual Culture*, Professor Anderson is currently working on African American political theological rhetoric.

DON H. DOYLE, Professor of History, author of *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860–1910*, is currently engaged in an interpretation of the history of Lafayette County, Mississippi, the historical basis for Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha sagas. Professor Doyle recently directed an NEH Summer Seminar for College Teachers on Southern history and Faulkner's fiction.

PHYLLIS FRUS, Assistant Professor of English, is the author of *News and Novels: Twentieth-Century American Journalism and Fiction*. Professor Frus has a longstanding interdisciplinary interest in American literature and thought, including the study of popular culture, women's studies, and film and video. Her seminars combine women's studies and cultural studies to focus on a particular period or theme in American history.

VIVIEN GREEN FRYD, Associate Professor of Fine Arts, is beginning a book-length study of Edward Hopper's images of women and of how his constructions of gender contributed to societal gender roles before and after the Second World War. She is author of *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815–1860*.

TERESA A. GODDU, Assistant Professor of English, specializes in an interdisciplinary approach to American and African American literature. She is now involved in a study of the gothic in American literature, "Haunted by History: The American Gothic, 1780–1865," which focuses on its cultural context and narrative form. Her next project will address the concept of authenticity and will explore literature, legal studies, art history, and politics.

LARRY J. GRIFFIN, Professor of Sociology and Political Science, teaches graduate and undergradu-

ate courses in American Studies and in the sociology of the South. His forthcoming article in the *American Journal of Sociology* uses a lynching case in Mississippi to discuss ways to merge social scientific and historical reasoning about social phenomena.

JOHN LACHS, Centennial Professor of Philosophy, is pursuing a broadly interdisciplinary approach to the understanding of some current social problems from the perspective of American philosophy. Professor Lachs teaches frequently in American philosophy and pragmatism and is working on a book, "Human Natures," which attempts to provide the systematic conceptual underpinnings of a pluralistic society.

JANE GILMER LANDERS, Assistant Professor of History, focuses on historical studies of the Spanish frontiers in North America, working closely with anthropologists, archivists, museum specialists, and K–12 teachers in an effort to make traditional historical interpretations more inclusive. Professor Landers, whose forthcoming book is entitled "African American Life in Colonial Spanish Florida," is currently concerned with the roles of African and Native American women in Spanish societies.

WILLIAM LUIS, Associate Professor of Spanish, author of *Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative*, is particularly interested in

Hispanic writers born or raised in the United States who respond to isolation within a dominant culture which has denied them access. These writers, according to Professor Luis, are at the vanguard of a new literary movement which brings together Hispanic and North American literatures and cultures.

LEWIS C. PERRY, Andrew Jackson Professor of History, is the director of the American Studies program at Vanderbilt and frequently teaches seminars in the subject. He has recently developed a course on theater and theatricality in American life and is working on a study of the tradition of civil disobedience from the 1840s to the present. Professor Perry's most recent book is *Boats Against the Current: American Culture Between Revolution and Modernity*. He will direct the 1993/94 Fellows Program.

CECELIA TICHI, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of English, served as president of the American Studies Association in 1992/93 and is the author of *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture*. Her interdisciplinary scholarship centers around the reflection on and theorizing of the concept of American Studies. Her most current research concerns the American culture of country music.