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Toward a Genealogy of Americanist Expressionism

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In a 1910 lecture titled “The New Criticism,” Joel Spingarn announced that he had divined the master-concept that had made possible all significant literary criticism of the past century.

But with the Romantic Movement there developed the new idea which coördinates all Criticism in the nineteenth century. Very early in the century, Mme. de Staël and others formulated the idea that Literature is an “expression of society.” Victor Cousin founded the school of art for art’s sake, enunciating “the fundamental rule, that expression is the supreme law of art.” Later, Sainte-Beuve developed and illustrated his theory that Literature is an expression of personality. Still later, under the influence of natural science, Taine took a hint from Hegel and elaborated the idea that Literature is an expression of race, age, and environment. The extreme impressionists prefer to think of art as the exquisite expression of delicate and fluctuating sensations or impressions of life. But for all these critics and theorists, Literature is an expression of something, of experience or emotion, of the external or the internal, of the man himself or something outside the man; yet it is always conceived of as an art of expression.¹

Spingarn’s capsule history, a founding moment of the literary-critical school that would soon be called “expressionism,” imposes unity upon a century of literary and cultural study that had moved in numerous, often orthogonal theoretical directions. By bringing figures as diverse as

Staël, Taine, and Sainte-Beuve under the same methodological umbrella, Spingarn sought to cut through the tangled web of intellectual history by uncovering a developing consensus that literature is expression before it is anything else. And in this he was largely successful; as Gerald Graff recognizes in *Professing Literature*, Spingarn was a “disciplinary reformer” whose “desire to clean up the disorderly conceptual situation of criticism anticipated the project I. A. Richards would shortly initiate at Cambridge.”² Nor was Spingarn the first American literary scholar who found expression indispensable for formulating the discipline’s goals. In the first number of the *Transactions* of the brand new Modern Language Association (later renamed *PMLA*), Theodore Hunt sought to vindicate the still-emerging field of modern philology by insisting that “because of what the English is in itself as a language and literature . . . all that is English must have ‘ample room and verge enough’ to give it its proper expression in the national history.”³ A few years later, Thomas Price would speak in his inaugural address as President of the MLA of “an intense eagerness for personal expression in literature” and argue that the challenge facing English professors was to channel that natural desire into a properly disciplined receptivity to what he called “form.”⁴ These scholars might not have gone quite as far as Spingarn in insisting that the concept of expression was identical with criticism’s very object of study and thus a disciplinary sine qua non, but together with Spingarn’s “The New Criticism,” they demonstrate that expression was crucial to the way the young profession formulated its aims, justified itself to outsiders (including potential majors), and differentiated itself from other kinds of inquiry.

The prominence of expression in the metacritical talk of these early literary scholars, notwithstanding their influence during a decisive period of the discipline’s history, is apt to strike us today as strangely atavistic. This is because, for most of the twentieth century, the major trends in literary theory were almost all resolutely hostile to the identification of literature with expression. This anti-expressionism dates back to the backlash against Spingarn himself. Despite or perhaps because of the fact that his thesis (“Literature is an expression of *something* . . .”) was so open-ended, placing so much emphasis upon the historical particularities of utterance and so little upon objective standards of evaluation, scholars like Irving Babbitt accused him of propagating the notion that modern society was “a universe with the lid off,” a domain gripped by a “primitivism” in which man was condemned to an “indeterminate vagabondage of imagination and emotion.”⁵ A few decades later, the New Crit-

ics would renew Babbitt's anti-expressionism, updating his attack by proffering along with it an objective, scientific criticism of the kind pioneered by I. A. Richards. The philosophical rigor of the New Critics' anti-expressionism is easy to underestimate. "Back of the many varieties of expressionist theory lies the assumption of the common or the distinct essence," wrote Allen Tate in 1940, in an argument that anticipated the antisubjectivist critiques of expression that structuralist and poststructuralist scholars would begin to flesh out beginning in the 1960s.⁶ For all their differences, theorists like Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, and even Michel Foucault in his early work shared with Tate and other New Critics a worry that the concept of expression had for too long held the human and social sciences back from attaining a proper standard of conceptual rigor. Althusser, in what was perhaps the most spectacular document of twentieth-century anti-expressionism, referred to the "expressive totality" that Hegel had used to conceptualize the progress of history as a "religious complicity between Logos and Being," one of "those tacit pacts in which the men of a still fragile age secured themselves with magical alliances against the precariousness of history."⁷ In talking about expression in this way, Althusser didn't necessarily mean the same thing by the term as Tate and company, but he would have agreed with Babbitt himself that the currency of expression in mainstream critical discourse was proof that "society is plainly suffering from a lack rather than a superabundance of discipline and restraint."⁸

Americanist critics, over the period I've just been surveying and indeed up to the present, have distinguished themselves from other literary scholars by refusing to be bothered by the conceptual problems other theorists have raised with expression. Ludwig Lewisohn, one of the first specialists in American texts, was a devoted partisan of expression. Reviewing the Spingarn-Babbitt disputation in his monumental *Expression in America*, he would write that "both were pleading *pro domo* within the framework of America; the one was seeking to preserve the America of his fathers; the other was seeking to conquer America for his children."⁹ Lewisohn was surely wrong to think that Babbitt's anti-expressionism was a thing of the past, as the New Critics were already in the process of showing. But when his argument is read more narrowly as a statement about scholars of American literature working in the United States, Lewisohn was surely onto something, as the writings of F. O. Matthiessen—not least *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*—would most famously demonstrate. Like Lewisohn, Matthiessen thought his advocacy of

expression put him on the right side of his discipline's history. Although he tended to avoid polemics, no contemporary specialist would have missed the import of Matthiessen's approving citation in *American Renaissance* of Benedetto Croce, the Italian aesthetician whom the New Critics had blamed for having introduced the doctrine of expression onto the American scene, and whom Joel Spingarn had praised throughout his career for precisely the same reason. Just as confidently as the New Critics were insisting that expression had no place in the business of literary studies, Matthiessen resolved to keep it front and center.

In the years since *American Renaissance*, many have challenged Matthiessen, but no one has found reason to reproach his commitment to expression, or the expressionist point of view that he took over from Spingarn and Lewisohn. Even at the height of deconstruction, expression retained a degree of currency among Americanists whose sympathies otherwise aligned with this most quintessentially anti-expressionist movement. Writing in *Diacritics* in 1977, Kenneth Dauber synthesized expressionism and deconstruction, arguing of the canonical nineteenth-century texts D. H. Lawrence had called "classics" that "the work was not its author's. It could never express him, could never express anything but itself. And so he took his stand between works. He gave over the written for writing. Meaning became a function, no longer an idea to be located within the text, but an operation, the act of producing texts instead."¹⁰ In a gesture that would be repeated by the multiculturalist critics of the Canon Wars (to whom I will return later), Dauber rectified expressionism by bringing it up to date. About certain things, he shows, the tradition of Croce and Spingarn must have been wrong. Expressionism as those innovators imagined it was too idealist: the meaning of the world does not originate in the minds of subjects, and it's only by virtue of a particular "language game" that anyone ever thought that literature could represent such subjects' interiority. Nevertheless, expression as a "process" does not disappear. The text uncannily and ineluctably "expresses . . . itself" against the backdrop of the author's own expressive frustration, his "giving over" of the agency of signification to discourse itself. Expression—what ordinary readers sometimes misconceive as free self-disclosure—is really an unending "transaction" between a subject and circulating discourse: this was the compromise Dauber effected between deconstruction and Americanist criticism, a discipline that, at its best, had always been characterized by "a pre-theoretical recognition of the nonobjectivity of the text."¹¹ Purged of its folksy metaphysics of the subject, the study of expression survived the

rise of poststructuralism as a dramatics of subjectivity understood as a discursive strategy.

Why should this be? Where does Americanists' "pre-theoretical recognition" of expression's significance come from, and what makes the concept of expression so effective as part of the technical repertoire of modern critical knowledge? A satisfying discussion of the topic is far beyond the scope of present essay, for whose purposes it will hopefully suffice to enumerate three overlapping factors. The first is that Americanist critics, part and parcel of their broader society, have tended to affirm expression as a norm, a pressure toward self-creation that guides the conduct of individual subjects. This norm is profoundly historical, as the philosopher Charles Taylor has done more than anyone else to demonstrate; and yet it is often spoken about as if it were a natural drive or impulse—as in Theodore Hunt's comment, cited above, about his student's quasi-libidinous "eagerness for personal expression in literature."¹² Today, the imaginary naturalness of expression's normativity frequently manifests itself in the assumption that expression is an intrinsic human right, freedom, or faculty that has always existed, even though our modern, secular society has only in the last few centuries gotten around to discovering it.

Expression also serves critics as a principle of selection, a way of defining and legitimating a field of collective inquiry. Consider the titles not just of Lewisohn's *Expression in America* or Matthiessen's treatise on *Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* but also of Arnold Krupat's *All That Remains: Varieties of Indigenous Expression* (2009), or of the 2014 conference "African American Expression in Print and Digital Culture" held at the University of Wisconsin. Such titles exemplify a protocol of canonization that confers critical meaning by abstracting the text christened "expressive" from its initial scene of utterance.¹³ To be sure, this principle of selection has become since Matthiessen's time increasingly ecumenical, encompassing an ever-expanding array of subjects, genres, and media of expression. But it is a principle of selection nonetheless. Americanists have not historically made it their business to silence the past.

Finally, the critical protocols and normative pressures that drive Americanist scholars to see the texts they study as expressive are reflexive, bearing on the activity of knowledge itself. They help scholars to identify objects of criticism but also to locate themselves as subjects that stand in a relation of solidarity to those objects. To speak of a text as "expressive" implies the existence of a mediated social space in which

authors and interpreters can discover a likeness in one another; as Sheldon Pollock has argued, “Creating or consuming literature meant for large worlds or small places is a declaration of affiliation with that world or place . . . The practices of literary culture . . . are practices of attachment.”¹⁴ The textually mediated attachments cultivated by Americanist criticism are not natural; they come into being alongside other forms of solidarity that literary belonging may or may not displace. To study (and teach) expression in the twenty-first century is to declare one’s affiliation to a large world in which solidarities circulate among strangers, a world in which subjectivity and textuality blur into one another at every turn.

For Americanists, the upshot of these overlapping societal and disciplinary understandings is that expression, plainly put, works: the term is part and parcel of modern Americanist criticism, tripping off the tongue in ways that would have been inconceivable even as recently as the nineteenth century. Consider, for instance, Hilary Wyss’s claim in *Writing Indians* that “those Natives who *did* write, no matter what they wrote, fundamentally altered the relationship between missionary culture and Native people through the simple act of self-expression.”¹⁵ None of the writers Wyss studies referred to what they wrote as “self-expression.” Many of them, in fact, would have repudiated the notion that their writings were part of a process of verbal self-creation, or, at least, they would have denied that this aspect of their writing was the thing that any audience ought to focus on. It requires a leap of critical imagination to say that a corpus of early Native writings largely made up of deeds, contracts, devotional exercises, and writing drills can be unified owing to their instantiation of “the simple act of self-expression.” Yet this is a leap Americanists have long been trained to make. It is a leap that Matthiessen himself made throughout *American Renaissance*, where he deliberately, painstakingly, and often counterintuitively assimilated his five great authors to an understanding of expression that they themselves would frequently have contested.

This discontinuity between past and present conceptions of creative speech—and, in the case of *American Renaissance*, between antebellum and twentieth-century understandings of “expression”—is constitutive of the configuration of critical knowledge that this essay will be referring to as “expressionism.” The discontinuity has frequently gone unremarked by historians of expression; yet this, in itself, is not the problem this essay seeks to address. Expressionism is not a prejudice veiling the truth of history but a form of truth-telling we’ve forgotten we

learned, what Foucault might have called a “buried” knowledge.¹⁶ What follows is the sketch of a genealogy of Americanist expressionism: an attempt to recover this knowledge and its constitutive discontinuities, to show how it came to be buried, and to suggest some of the ways in which the history of expression might inform an understanding of Americanist criticism’s recent past and unfolding present.

* * *

Expressionism, throughout the history of Americanist criticism, has been both a protocol of knowledge-making and a structure of forgetting. A clear example of this dual function is the title page of Ludwig Lewisohn’s *Expression in America* with its epigraph,

*All men live by truth, and stand in need of expression . . . The man is half himself, the other half is his expression. —EMERSON*¹⁷

Surely the fact that man is “half . . . his expression” matters greatly for Emerson, but so too, just as surely, does the fact that he is “half himself” even without expression. For Lewisohn, though (as for Matthiessen later), the expressive half of man was the whole story, and thus Emerson’s aphorism could be read as an unambivalent document of the epochal nineteenth-century shift in which “an old crack in that rigid shell which was supposed to represent the universe suddenly burst,” and expression made its long-overdue entrance onto the stage of world history.¹⁸ What’s forgotten in this reading is not only the half of Emerson’s “man” that is not his expression but also the fact that Emerson’s putative expressionism reflected twentieth-century critical priorities that claimed to be universal but were in fact highly selective. No one lived by these priorities more clearly than Matthiessen, for whom self-expression was both an aesthetic category and a principle of personal conduct; he admired Emerson not just as a writer but as the American whom he saw as having “made one of the most challenging quests for a form that would express his deepest convictions.”¹⁹ The force of Matthiessen’s reading of Emerson cannot be distinguished from the urgency with which he seeks to persuade his readers that expression was an indispensable concept and practice for the historical present. But in Emerson’s own time, expression was still a topic to be treated with carefully cultivated ambivalence.

For Emerson, the term “expression” was bound up with problems that were at once social and semiotic, problems that reflected Transcendentalism’s status as a social movement whose participants aspired to spiritual perfection outside the ritual frameworks of actually existing institutions. As Anne C. Rose wrote of Emerson in the period following his resignation of the pastorate at Boston’s Second Church, “He did not lose his faith . . . , but he had no adequate way to explain or express his religious feelings.”²⁰ The semiotic difficulty posed by Emerson’s self-imposed exile from Christian frameworks of verbal interaction (his loss of a “way to explain or express his religious feelings”) was compounded by the naturalistic regimen of nonverbal receptivity—of “observation,” “experience,” and “intuition”—that he cultivated in his dealings with Nature.

Consider again the claim from Emerson’s “The Poet,” cited in Lewisohn’s epigraph, that “all men . . . stand in need of expression.” Now, it’s true that this can be read, along Lewisohn’s or Matthiessen’s lines, as identifying expression as an innate drive whose fulfillment is a natural goal of human life. But this doesn’t do justice to the defamiliarizing oddity of the phrase, which casts man as a kind of standing reservoir, not unlike a cow that “stands in need of” milking. In the context of the broader essay, the image suggests that poetry is a kind of husbandry: the poet’s purpose is to “express” us—or, perhaps, to help us express ourselves. Emerson isn’t especially clear about which, but that’s not a problem for his argument, since it becomes clear over the course of the essay that the real topic of the essay is not expression but the prelinguistic receptivities that attune the poet to the natural world around him: “touch,” “impression,” and “intuition.” It’s that receptivity, Emerson wants us to see, that “man” has become really bad at; the function of the Poet’s expression, above all, is not to dazzle us with the wonders of his verbal performance but to make us aware of all the things we’ve missed. “The young man reveres men of genius,” Emerson writes, “because, to speak truly, they are more himself than he is. They receive of the soul as he also receives, but they more.”²¹ So what, given the primacy of receptivity in Emerson’s understanding of poetry, does “man”’s animalistic “need of expression” amount to? Not much, on its own, even for the poet himself, whom Emerson declares to be “representative,” thanks to the pureness of his intuition of Nature’s innate significance.

The questions facing such a person are the same ones Emerson faced as an out-of-work minister: how does one locate expression as a social practice? Upon what footing and in what context is the “man of genius”

to address the rest of society? Emerson toys with the idea that the Poet might fulfill the pastoral function that he himself had renounced when he resigned his post at Boston's Second Church: "I look in vain for the poet I describe," he writes, as if to suggest that a new leader might still be around the corner.²² But this fantasy runs afoul of his insistence that a man's worth comes not from what he says to others but from what he sees for himself. This, after all, was the point of Emerson's leaving the church in the first place; as he had written in the "Divinity School Address," "intuition . . . cannot be received at second hand."²³ His famous lament makes the poet seem responsible for failing to manifest himself, but it's really Emerson who has failed to imagine a place for him in his new social world.

In his early writings, Emerson dedicates himself to the philosophical problem of how the social-spiritual movement of Transcendentalism ought to harness man's inner propensity for speech, his "need of expression." His concern is with verbal tactics for the here-and-now, with furthering the transformation he sees at work in the nineteenth-century world by asking how men and women can help one another to experience that world at "first hand." By the end of his career, though, he has given up hope that modern society will yield up any one person who, by the simple act of expression, can lead the masses to the redemptive intuition they so desperately need. In *Representative Men*, "The Poet," Shakespeare, speaks from the past to the present through the deep time of Nature. There's something appealingly archaic about his "power of expression, of transferring the inmost truth of things into music and verse," a power that likens him to "some saint whose history is to be rendered into all languages, into verse and prose, into songs and pictures, and cut up into proverbs; so that the occasion which gave the saint's meaning the form . . . is immaterial, compared with the universality of its application."²⁴ It is irrelevant to Emerson what, historically or biographically speaking, occasioned Shakespeare's speech: "the occasion . . . is immaterial." Nor does Emerson ask whether Shakespeare "stood in need of expression" in the same way that "all men" seem to in the present day. For Emerson, what distinguishes the Poet of the past from the mere "Writer" of the present (Goethe) is that the past Poet never found himself in the predicament facing modern individuals, of "standing in need" of expression but not necessarily having an "occasion" to give "form" to "meaning." Such an occasion can only be provided by the apprehension of Nature's truth, Emerson insists in opposition to those modern men who assume that a desire for self-culture can serve as sufficient

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reason for expressing oneself. It's owing to modernity's constant production of this spuriously occasioned speech that Emerson is so ambivalent about Goethe. "If he can not rightly express himself to-day, the same things subsist and will open themselves to-morrow. There lies the burden on his mind—the burden of truth to be declared,—more or less understood."²⁵ The problem to which Goethe's work testifies is that the "truth" tends, in the present day, always to be "less understood." The truth, for Goethe (and other writers like him), is the mere truth of himself; and thus, Emerson writes, "Goethe can never be dear to men. His is not even the devotion to pure truth, but to truth for the sake of culture . . . The idea of absolute, eternal truth, without reference to my own enlargement by it, is higher. The surrender to the torrent of poetic inspiration is higher."²⁶

What redeems Goethe in Emerson's eyes—the reason he "find[s] a provision" for him "in the constitution of the world"—is not his "power of expression" but his power of being "provoking to the mind," of offering "so many unexpected glimpses into a higher sphere," and thus of providing the attentive reader with a cause ("pro-") for speech ("-vocation") that is ultimately more valuable for Emerson than the subject providing it.²⁷ Emerson's reading of Goethe as an agent of "provocation" can be understood as a facet of the "way of life by abandonment" that Sharon Cameron and Branka Arsic have shown to be Emerson's habitual way of dealing with the world, for, by declining to countenance Goethe's aspiration for "self-culture," Emerson is effectively abandoning him.²⁸ To observe that Emerson responds to Goethe's provocation by means of abandonment is to confront, once again, the impossibility of determining the social location of expression in Emerson's writings, an impossibility that arises here not just because of Emerson's refusal of the mode of modern solidarity Goethe's model of expressive self-culture entails but also because, as Emerson argues elsewhere, it is perfectly possible to provoke oneself in the absence of other people. The kind of self-forgetting that Emerson describes in "Circles," for instance, can itself be understood as a kind of provocation: one discovers an occasion for further speech (for "draw[ing] a new circle") by demystifying oneself of one's own personality. This provoking practice of self-renunciation is the opposite of what Matthiessen had in mind when he spoke of "expression."

We find a more concrete iteration of the Transcendentalists' ethics of provocation in the life of Henry David Thoreau. I say "life" and not

“works” because, as Pierre Hadot argued, Thoreau was not in the first instance a maker of philosophical arguments but rather the practitioner of a “spiritual discipline” whose goal was to regiment talk according to the demands of Nature: as Hadot writes, “The true problem was not to write, but to live in the woods, to be capable of supporting such an experience . . . this plunging into the heart of nature. In other words, the philosophical act transcends the literary work that expresses it; and this literary work cannot totally express what Thoreau has lived.”²⁹ It was this whole discipline—this experience of having “lived” in a way that subordinated expression to action—that Thoreau sought to communicate to his readers. And since this discipline is predicated fundamentally upon the regimentation of talk by that which is beyond talk, Thoreau finds himself drawn repeatedly to the language of paradox, as in his two-line poem in *A Week*:

My life has been the poem I would have writ
But I could not both live and utter it.³⁰

In *American Renaissance*, F. O. Matthiessen claimed Thoreau as an antecedent to expressionism by reading these lines as examples of the plain and direct style that resulted from their author’s “desire to break down all artificial divisions between art and living.”³¹ A more intuitive reading would be that the lines are the clearest case of the normative ambivalence of Thoreau’s talk, which he designs to reflect the volatile simultaneity of two domains, life and poetry, that he experiences as pulling him in opposite directions. On the one hand, the poem registers his profoundest ambition to become what none of his peers had had the audacity to be: a silent Transcendentalist, purified of any accountability to an audience. On the other, by mockingly vesting himself with the heroism of the heroic couplet, Thoreau communicates in a self-consciously conventional way the necessity of speaking, if he will speak at all, within the bounds of convention. For Thoreau, the notion of a direct poetics of expressive self-manifestation is an illusion that must be dispelled at every turn. Thoreau’s spiritual discipline requires that he situate himself upon the boundary between life and expression and, from that footing, demonstrate the urgency of crossing out of one domain and into another.

The opening of *Walking* clarifies why Thoreau thinks life and talk about life are necessarily at odds, such that one might find oneself

compelled to choose between them. "I wish to speak a word for Nature," he writes,

for absolute Freedom and Wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and Culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization; the minister, and the school-committee, and every one of you will take care of that.³²

To take part in Thoreau's naturalism, one must subject one's consciousness to a shift in perspective that allows one to view from the standpoint of "Nature" those phenomena that the "champions of Civilization" had claimed to master. This shift in perspective allows one to undertake a methodological reduction of Civilization to Nature. It is to this end *Walking* rehearses a natural history of humanity, beginning with Thoreau's observation of his irrepressible inclination to walk in a westerly direction. Inferring that this westering inclination is a general characteristic of the human species, he goes on to suggest that, in America, "there is perhaps one more chance for the race left before it arrives on the banks of the Styx; and that is in the Lethe of the Pacific."³³ In order to make the most of this chance, humans must learn to appreciate and preserve "wildness," for it is only by experiencing wildness that man can learn a truth about himself that the "champions of civilization" can never hope to teach—that man is "part and parcel of Nature"—even though they think they have a comprehensive understanding of Nature, which they call "science." From Thoreau's perspective, the kind of knowledge made possible by science is not wrong, but it is incorrectly expressed. As he writes in his journal,

If I am overflowing with life, am rich in experience for which I lack expression, then nature will be my language full of poetry—all nature will be fable, and every natural phenomenon be a myth. The man of science, who is not seeking for expression but for a fact to be expressed merely, studies nature as a dead language. I pray for such inward experience as will make nature significant.³⁴

Scientific knowledge, for Thoreau, is a kind of undisciplined talk: "the man of science" assumes that scientific language represents living na-

ture, but that representation, since it is sanctioned by Civilization, is “dead.” According to the expressive discipline that Thoreau models, man must accept that, owing to the sheer mass of impressions and intuitions that Nature constantly makes available, it is in the nature of “experience” for man to “lack expression.” To render one’s gratitude for nature’s “language full of poetry” as compensation for man’s “lack [of] expression” is to acknowledge that expression is “part and parcel” of a totality that cannot be communicated according to Civilized protocols. As a faculty of Nature, expression belongs outside of civilization, and man must face the fact that its powers exceed his potential to harness them.

Thoreau solves the Transcendentalist problem of expression’s social location by insisting that it has none, at least among the “civil.” This leaves open the possibility that expression might serve as a medium of communication among the “champions” of Nature; but he rejects this possibility as well. Even more vehemently than Emerson, Thoreau insists that one can only experience Nature alone. In the opening of *Walking*, Thoreau prepares to prove that he is “part and parcel of nature, rather than a member of society” by turning his back on all the “champions of civilization,” a collective that includes not just “the minister, and the school-committee” but also “every one of you.” Thoreau thus, paradoxically again, recruits us as followers of his Natural way of life by insisting that he must abandon us, and by making it incumbent upon us to abandon him in return, along with everyone else we know: “If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man—then you are ready for a walk.”³⁵ Thoreau does everything in his power to prepare us to take this step but insists that we take it by ourselves, since there’s no such thing as a collective agent of abandonment. The only fellowship enjoyed by the champions of Nature comes from the shared realization that they are outsiders to one another. “I desire to speak somewhere *without* bounds,” he writes in the conclusion of *Walden*, “like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression.”³⁶ To speak to someone in a “waking moment” is to speak with a voice that seems to come from nowhere—which must necessarily be where Natural man, in relation to his fellow men, finds himself. As a compensation for the impossibility of “true expression,” for direct communication with his fellow men, Thoreau settles for “*extra-vagant* . . . exaggeration,” for allowing himself to be merely overheard. For expression

itself to become communicative, the still-unredeemed Civilization of the Transcendentalists would have to be left behind for one that was a continuation of Nature, rather than a “second-hand” excrescence of it.

* * *

When Walt Whitman told Emerson (and everyone else) in the preface to the 1856 *Leaves of Grass* that “the work of my life is making poems,” he meant not just to echo Thoreau (“My life has been the poem I would have writ / But I could not both live and utter it.”) but to outdo him and Emerson both, to announce himself as having finally discovered a social location for expression.³⁷ After all, Whitman asked, why shouldn’t life and the poetry of life coincide with one another? One has only to understand the work of the poet’s life in the right way, as an activity of mediation undertaken on behalf of both Nature and Civilization. A life-long denizen of print shops, Whitman knew that the work of circulating poetry was a collective labor involving not just the publication and distribution of printed materials but also the uptake of utterance in the hands of readers: again, “the work of my life is making poems. I keep on till I make a hundred, and then several hundred—perhaps a thousand. The way is clear to me. A few years, and the average annual call for my Poems is ten or twenty thousand copies—more, quite likely.”³⁸ The fact that the masses were clamoring for his poetry (at least in his imagination) did not signify for Whitman a craven appetite for “second-hand” experience but rather the existence of thousands of future *cameradoes*. This is the key discontinuity between the Ages of Emerson and Whitman: self-expression, for Whitman, does not entail a loss of fidelity to Nature’s originary meaningfulness.

Like Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman saw expression as an activity that must be subjected to discipline in the service of social and spiritual progress; but for Whitman expression was not something that had to be economized out of life, as it had been for Thoreau especially. As Allen Grossman wrote of Whitman, “The bard distributes the value of personhood which is the value commuted in all other economic transactions.”³⁹ In Thoreau’s view, one has to make time for life first and foremost, which will never leave one enough time to write the poem of one’s life. But for Whitman there’s no need to minimize expression because (as Americans had learned of paper money during the financial crises of the 1830s) one can always print more. By 1855, the rules of the game have changed. The purpose of disciplining expression is not to focus on the other things one

could be doing but to extend one's discursive presence as broadly as possible. As Grossman and a long line of critics following him have recognized, the new kind of "presence" made possible by circulating discourse is Whitman's fundamental poetic discovery, one he deploys in his verse again and again. As he writes in "Song of the Open Road," "I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes, / We convince by our presence."⁴⁰ In "Song of Myself," Whitman demonstrates what's involved in such "convincing" by drawing attention to the ineluctable antecedence of voice ("I . . .") to diegesis (" . . . celebrate myself and sing myself."), and in the space of diegesis itself, by impressing upon his readers their complicity in the reproduction of the expressive presence he brings about:

My words itch at your ears till you understand them. . . .
 (It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you,
 Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd.)⁴¹

Presence, for Whitman, is by definition co-presence. It circulates between the poet and his reader in such a way as to create a new kind of subject, immanent to discourse. Whitman underscores the newness of this subject in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* where he urges his readers to consider his poems not as reproductions of himself ("What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition") but rather as the expressive manifestations of a new kind of collective self: "You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror at me," Whitman tells his readers, recruiting them into the transcendence of their own individuality.⁴²

What makes this collective self-manifestation worthwhile? Like Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman knew that poetry required a provocation. For Whitman, that provocation was provided by life's struggle against limitations. It was "in an attempt to exceed or 'go beyond' the modes of representing human embodiment in the discourse of his age," as Michael Moon has argued, that "Whitman set himself the problem of attempting to project actual physical presence in a literary text."⁴³ According to Moon, Whitman's experience of these limitations—be they political, sexual, or literary—was an effect of society's enforcement of a regime of "bodilessness" and shame. But it's also possible to read Whitman as suggesting that such limitations are not simply a matter of society forcing itself upon life, with the individual subject vested with the responsibility of resistance, but also, and in the first instance, of life's capacity to constrain itself and thereby to force upon subjects the

responsibility for overcoming its own self-generated barriers. It's this responsibility that Whitman asserts in the climactic stanza of "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life":

O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth,
 Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,
 Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me
 I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,
 But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet
 untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd, . . .
 Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart
 upon me and sting me,
 Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all.⁴⁴

Whitman here dramatizes a process of becoming "oppress'd with myself" that is occasioned by expression itself—by "my arrogant poems," which are felt to enforce their own mode of self-repression. That the poems assume this aspect is an effect of the passage of time. As we have already seen, Whitman is concerned to avoid a poetics of self-representation since, like Emerson, he refuses to see the self as a stable referent. This is why, looking back on his past writings, he can't help but be appalled by their recrudescence and representational stability. In the present moment, those very poems that had once "convince[d] by our presence" now bring about the very self-alienation they had once overcome ("before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd"). Realizing that any single poem is incapable of permanently forestalling this temporal de-presencing on its own terms, Whitman nevertheless finds meaning in his own belatedness by figuring poetry as a process of self-following, a reappropriation of life's cast-off materials: "I gather for myself and for this phantom looking down where we lead, and following me and mine." It's possible to interpret this self-gathering as a compensatory fantasy, a concealment of the speaker's inability to reconcile external psychosocial pressures.⁴⁵ But such a reading, ultimately, fails to confront what is perhaps the most difficult question Whitman's poetry raises, which is whether repression is always an effect of heteronomy, whether it isn't generated out of the same natural process that gives rise to expression itself. "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" can thus be read as dramatizing not just the self-"oppression" Whitman experiences as a consequence of his past utterances but also his refusal to see himself as internalizing a preexisting symbolic order, since any

such order can always be seen as retrospectively constituted from the perspective of the “following” present. Expression has become the semiotic modality of life’s progressive reconstitution of itself.

The presentness of Whitman’s expressive “gathering” can helpfully be contrasted to the temporal scheme of intuition and expression that characterizes the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. In the conclusion to *Walden*, Thoreau had written,

I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression. Who that has heard a strain of music feared then lest he should speak extravagantly any more forever? In view of the future or possible, we should live quite laxly and undefined in front, our outlines dim and misty on that side; as our shadows reveal an insensible perspiration toward the sun. The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement.⁴⁶

Truth, for Thoreau, “betrays” the impossibility of “true expression” because it antecedes expression, both logically and temporally; it is closer to Nature, the permanent source of all meaning. It is in tribute to that antecedent source, Thoreau thinks, that “we should live quite laxly and undefined in front, our outlines dim and misty on that side.” For Whitman, by contrast, our experience of the world is always less “defined” than the expression that gathers it into discourse. In “As I Ebb’d With the Ocean of Life,” the defining power of poetic expression is the means through which the self overcomes the failure of self-understanding that its own prior utterances had occasioned, thereby reconstituting for itself an open future. Later, in *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman would anticipate that the third and culminating stage of progress in the United States, “rising out of the previous ones, to make them and all illustrious,” would begin with the “announcing [of] a native expression-spirit.”⁴⁷ He found that he could apply his conception of expression as a future-oriented process of self-gathering to social experience on every possible scale.

* * *

Whitman’s theorization of expression as an agency of social mediation was a development that Emerson and Thoreau could scarcely have imagined. Yet it was precisely this understanding of expression that would gain ground over the second half of the nineteenth century, not just among

poets like Whitman but in a wide variety of speech genres including, by the end of the century, the disciplinary discourses of the human sciences.⁴⁸ The literary-historical gesture, for instance, through which Joel Spingarn read the intellectual history of the nineteenth century as a unified affirmation of expression itself (“For all these critics, literature is the expression of *something* . . .”) can now be seen as an eminently Whitmanian one. For Spingarn, as for Whitman, expression was a reflexive practice of solidarity that ushered in a new era of interpretation: as he argued in “The New Criticism,” “Criticism at last can free itself of its age-long self-contempt, now that it may realize that aesthetic judgment and artistic creation are instinct with the same vital life.” Spingarn called the sort of scholarship made possible by this realization “creative criticism” and, like Whitman, theorized reading as a mode of discursive co-presence that created a bond of solidarity between writer and reader. As he put it, in the terminology of his day, “Taste must reproduce the work of art within itself in order to understand and judge it; and at that moment aesthetic judgment becomes nothing more nor less than creative art itself.”⁴⁹ Whitman’s provocation, “And what I assume, you shall assume,” was now a protocol of disciplinary knowledge.⁵⁰

Whitman’s continuity with Spingarn marks his discontinuity with the Transcendentalists: there was no unified “Art . . . [of] Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman.” Still, the case of Spingarn can help us understand why Matthiessen thought there was. Matthiessen’s compendium of expression in *American Renaissance* is not, after all, that different from Spingarn’s intellectual history of the nineteenth century, which forged often irreconcilable views into a univocal consensus. Nor did Matthiessen’s history of expression restrict itself to the period and authors covered in *American Renaissance*. In *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (1935), Matthiessen assimilated Eliot himself to the tradition of expressionism that he would only later trace back to the antebellum United States. This text has been widely misunderstood as evidence of Matthiessen’s “formalism” or “modernism.” In “Nationalizing the New Criticism” (1996) Evan Carton and Gerald Graff interpreted Matthiessen’s enthusiasm for Eliot as a methodological endorsement of the New Critics, for whom Eliot was also a seminal figure: all these thinkers were part of the same “modernist and New Critical generation.”⁵¹ Graff and Carton’s history reflected a widespread consensus among Americanists since the 1980s that Eliot, Matthiessen, and the New Critics all sought to prioritize form at the expense of history. The way to arrive at a more faithful understanding of the nineteenth century, it was argued during and

after the Canon Wars, was to ignore the distorting filters imposed by Matthiessen and other literary modernists during the first half of the twentieth.

One outcome of revisionists' conflation of Matthiessen and the New Critics was the forgetting of a highly consequential debate that took place between them on the topic of expression in T. S. Eliot's theory of poetry. In fact, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* was a thinly veiled attack on the New Critics' anti-expressionist reading of Eliot, which pointed literary criticism down a path Matthiessen was determined not to follow. Matthiessen's expressionist reading of Eliot was an effort to seize him away from the New Critics, and in so doing to vindicate an expressionist way of reading that was avowedly modern but not at all "Modernist" in the ahistorical sense of the term that later Americanists would associate with the "generation" of the New Criticism. On the contrary, according to Matthiessen's reading of Eliot, expression, and the reflexive history of expression, were ways of coping with the specific historical problems modernity posed. *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* is a critical text for a genealogy of expressionism, then, for two reasons: first, it shows that Matthiessen was not a New Critic and thus prepares us to see how, by misrecognizing him as such, later revisionists would let his expressionism (which they frequently shared) pass as perfectly natural; and second, it clarifies the historical understanding of expression that would motivate Matthiessen's later reinvention of himself as a champion of American democracy in *American Renaissance*.

Matthiessen and the New Critics could agree to disagree about T. S. Eliot because Eliot's own writings on the topic of expression were deeply ambivalent and sometimes mutually contradictory. The anti-expressionist side of Eliot's writings is perhaps best encapsulated in the thesis from "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that "poetry is . . . not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."⁵² For Eliot, the identification of poetry with the "expression of personality" mistakenly assumes that persons are capable of referring to their thoughts and emotions. In opposition to this naive view, Eliot holds that our most intense emotions are unrepresentable because they themselves have no determinable referent. "The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object" simply cannot be represented as a feature of an individual's personality; as Eliot famously puts it, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when

the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”⁵³ Fortunately, Eliot thinks, we have a way of recognizing which of our emotions can be “evoked” in this way and which of them cannot; we have something modeled after what Irving Babbitt (one of Eliot’s professors in graduate school) had called an “inner check or principle of vital control,” a way of distinguishing which aspects of our experience are communicable.⁵⁴ Eliot argues in “Hamlet and his Problems” that Shakespeare, in writing that play, failed to exercise such an inner check; therefore his play is a failure and its author’s intentions forever unclear: “under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know.”⁵⁵ Those critics who search in poetry for an “expression of personality,” when personality is defined in this way, are doomed to failure.

The pro-expressionist influence on Eliot is equally discernible, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in the same passage from which I cited above. “Poetry . . . is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course,” Eliot goes on, “only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.”⁵⁶ The qualification is just as important as the slogan that precedes it, for this “want[ing] to escape” ourselves is itself a fact about ourselves; poetry can therefore not be understood except as the manifestation of an inner tension arising within a collective subject, “those who want to escape.” Eliot’s version of the poet’s “inner check” militates against the straightforward representation of personality, but the technique of verbal “escape” peculiar to the poetic subject is nevertheless an effect of those very same inescapable emotional experiences. As Eliot’s famous metaphor of poet-as-catalyst makes clear, poetic representation retains nothing of the internal contents of the “personality” that produces it; but this absence of correspondence, in and of itself, does not distinguish Eliot in any obvious way from a poet like Whitman, who had insisted as early as 1855 that “what I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition.” What distinguishes Eliot from Whitman is the former’s insistence that personality needs to be ontologically transfigured, as it were, to realize itself in poetic discourse; this conviction has its roots in Eliot’s re-importation into poetics of the theological notion that personality is a compromised mode of existence, always in need of redemption. Eliot’s conviction in the necessity of this transfiguration, and not his anti-expressionism, is what really distinguishes his theory of tradition and the “historical sense” undergirding it—“a perception,” he writes, “not only of the pastness of the

past, but of its presence”—from Whitman and Spingarn’s understanding of poetic (and critical) expression as a kind of speech that gathers the past into the present and thereby reconstitutes it.

Most importantly, Eliot and the expressionists agree that the resolution of the conflicted self’s “wants” must happen symbolically, in discourse: “for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality.” Spingarn, who did not believe that poetry was a kind of transfiguration, would have found no use for the distinction between the self and its mediation. But for this very reason he might have agreed with Eliot’s Whitmanian claim that poetry cannot be seen as the representation of an antecedent subject. For Eliot, as for Spingarn, it’s the instantaneousness—the presence—of poetic utterance that’s key; it’s this emphasis that marks his departure, finally, from his teacher Babbitt’s theory of the “inner check,” which had been grounded cognitively in “the perception on the part of the individual, of a something in himself that he possesses in common with other men.”⁵⁷ Eliot, for his part, refuses to believe that what’s collective in a society is available to any individual’s introspection, let alone academic study. The sorts of experience that constitute poetry, and by extension the tradition, come to us only through discourse—through reading and writing. One does not need to engage in these textual activities in order to have a “personality”; they are a compensatory superaddition to human experience and, as such, seem at times to take on an institutional and conceptual autonomy in Eliot’s criticism as agents of their own reproduction. This may explain why, in an unguarded moment in “A Brief Treatise on the Criticism of Poetry,” Eliot finds himself assimilating criticism itself to the domain of poetic creativity: “Every form of genuine criticism is directed toward creation. The historical or the philosophical critic of poetry is criticising poetry in order to create a history or a philosophy; the poetic critic is criticising poetry in order to create poetry.”⁵⁸ Eliot’s criticism, in this moment, unambiguously announces its imbrication in the reflexive practice of “creative criticism” that Spingarn had introduced into American literary studies. Criticism and poetry alike become modalities of an expressive discourse that brings a collective literary subject into being.

In “The Perfect Critic,” Eliot would walk back his endorsement of creative criticism, insisting on the fundamental unlikeness of critical subjectivity or “intelligence” to criticism’s object of study: “It is fatuous,” he concludes, “to say that criticism is for the sake of ‘creation’ or creation for the sake of criticism.” “Fatuous,” perhaps, but not necessarily wrong.

The fact is that Eliot's early criticism never decisively answers the fundamental question that animates it: does poetry's power consist in transfiguring the personal into a referential object stripped of any indexical relation to an existing subject, or is poetry one among many "media to express," a vector of a historical self-realization capable of fostering solidarity, across genres and media, among a collective subject of "escape"? This is the question that subsequent critics would fight to resolve. For the New Critics, Eliot's recantation of creative criticism would have meant that he was on his way to a properly objective or "ontological," as opposed to merely "historical," criticism, to use the typology developed in John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* (1941). In hindsight, Eliot's dalliance with Spingarnian notions was a transgression that could be forgiven. The general attitude of the New Critics is captured by Cleanth Brooks and William Wimsatt in their *Literary Criticism: A Short History*: Eliot's thesis that poetry "is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality" marks a new era in the history of criticism, "but Eliot, in the way in which he argues it, manages to involve himself in the language of expressionism."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, declaring their defiance of those critics who would suggest continuities between Eliot and other expressionists, Wimsatt and Brooks propose that Eliot's "language of expressionism" can be subjected to what they call a conceptual "pruning operation" and thus overlooked as a product of a backward age.⁶⁰ What could be kept, and was essential for the New Critics, was the reformed Eliot's insistence on the mutual irrelevance of critic-as-subject and poem-as-object, a premise that Eliot had inherited from Babbitt and had, in his earlier criticism, sought to qualify in his famous account of the poet's expressive transfiguration. The New Critics thus appropriated Eliot by turning him into a neo-Babbitt. In the reformed discipline they envisioned, recognizing the various "fallacies" brought about by attempting to relate to poems as the utterances of subjects was a new way of exercising an "inner check," a way of teaching the self to discriminate between what in one's encounter with literature was merely subjective, and what was truly universal.

Although Matthiessen's *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* has often been read as a formalist or New Critical text, we are now in a position to see that the opposite is in fact the case, that Matthiessen in fact draws out the same expressionist strain of Eliot's thinking that Ransom, Brooks, and Wimsatt were determined to suppress. To be sure, Matthiessen's point of departure was similar to that of the New Critics: in his preface, he observes that "the most widespread error in contemporary criticism is to neglect form and to concern itself entirely with content" and declares

it his aim to work against “the increasing tendency to treat poetry as a social document and to forget that it is an art.”⁶¹ But it soon becomes apparent that these appeals to critical disciplinarity are made from an entirely different conceptual standpoint from that of the New Critics. Whereas the latter were concerned, in their readings of Eliot and elsewhere, to overcome the fallacies of critical subjectivity by grounding criticism’s scientificity in the ontological specificity of its object of study, Matthiessen sets out to show that Eliot’s project is the expression of a collective historical subject that is historical and distinctively “modern.” In his first chapter he reads “Tradition and the Individual Talent” alongside Eliot’s 1930 essay on Baudelaire in order to show that, for Eliot, “the thing of highest importance for the poet is to ‘express with individual differences the general state of mind, not as a *duty*, but simply because’—if he possesses that rare, unyielding honesty which alone will give his work depth—he cannot help participating in it.”⁶² Matthiessen’s citation, it must be said, bears only a tangential relation to “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which has nothing at all to say about the “general state of mind” in any single historical moment, but it helps clarify what Matthiessen might have had in mind when he spoke in his preface as an advocate of “form” and opponent of “document[ary]” criticism: “form” is not an object but an event in the history of a subject, an event whose carrying-off depends on an ethical attitude of “honesty.” For Matthiessen, “honesty” describes the kind of expression that is most at a premium in an age when “modern educated man possesses a knowledge of the past to a degree hardly glimpsed a century ago” and thus finds himself tormented by a paralyzing “self-consciousness.”⁶³ In his effort to demonstrate how “keenly aware” Eliot is of “our contemporary historical consciousness, and of the problems it creates,” Matthiessen finds himself drawn to Eliot’s “tragic” poems, in which the bleakness of modern life becomes salient not because of the way it provides raw material for social “documentation” but because it provides an occasion for the poet to prove his capacity for speaking with honesty, for undertaking “the unflinching, if agonized, expression of what he knows to be true”:

Through the completeness of his portrayal of the almost insupportable conditions of human existence, he frees his audience from the oppression of fear; and stirring them to new heart by his presentation of a heroic struggle against odds, he also enables them to conceive anew the means of sustaining and improving their own lives.⁶⁴

It's here, more than anywhere else in his writings, that Matthiessen identifies himself as a follower of the expressionist turn that his predecessors Whitman and Spingarn had helped bring into the literary disciplines. Setting aside those aspects of Eliot's literary theory that would militate against understanding poetry as a mode of collective self-becoming, Matthiessen identifies expression as a "presentation of a heroic struggle against odds," a medium for the collective overcoming of the limitations emergent within historical experience.

For Matthiessen, this conceptual renovation of expression had implications that were at once scholarly and political. In scholarly terms, it helped ensure literary criticism's disciplinary specificity by identifying literary form with the "completeness of the portrayal" of the quandaries of history. The gathering of modernity's contradictions into a "unified" utterance establishes the co-presence of writer and reader by conveying what Matthiessen calls "the actual sensation of life": "literature," as he puts it, "must certainly end with giving a sense of life."⁶⁵ Whereas Wimsatt and Beardsley would argue in "The Affective Fallacy" that "though cultures have changed and will change, poems remain and explain," Matthiessen finds in Eliot the makings of a historical understanding of criticism's object of study and of its discipline of reading, both of which are specific to the collective subject called "modern educated man."⁶⁶

Literature's political potential lies in its capacity to bring about the progressive self-realization of this same collective subject; here, the relevant phrase in the passage cited above is "free[ing] them from the oppression of fear," a phrase that marks a clear departure from Eliot's insistence that poetry undoes itself when it strives to "express the inexpressibly horrible." For Eliot, man's original fallibilities were simply too constraining for poetry to be anything other than an "escape from personality"; he could not redeem himself spiritually through his own worldly activities, in poetry or in politics. Yet Matthiessen—who, like Whitman, believes that self-expression is its own kind of progress—sees Eliot's work as proving the opposite point, that "the mature artists finds his strength partly by coming to recognize and reckon with his limitations."⁶⁷ The task of modern man is coping with his own limitations, by himself. Matthiessen would make this somewhat more concrete in the preface to the second edition of the Eliot book (1947): "My growing divergence from [Eliot's] view of life," he writes, "is that I believe that it is possible to accept the 'radical imperfection' of man, and yet to be a political radical as well, to be aware that no human society can be perfect, and yet to

hold that the proposition ‘all men are created equal’ demands dynamic adherence from a Christian no less than a democrat.”⁶⁸ No reader of *American Renaissance* will be surprised to find Matthiessen, in such a passage, recalibrating his own relation to postwar geopolitics. And yet it’s worth keeping in mind that it’s only in 1947, twelve years following his book’s first appearance, that Matthiessen finds it necessary to read Eliot’s work in light of the markedly American doctrine that “all men are created equal.” *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* thus assimilated itself to the disciplinary history of American Studies, but only contingently: it documents the gradual process through which expressionism and American Studies found that they were a perfect match for each other. The match was mutually beneficial. In the discourse of expressionism, those who (like Matthiessen, ultimately) would advocate for the historical singularity of the American nation found a way of doing so in a disciplinary way that—however prejudiced it may have been in favor of white northern males—avoided the essentialist supposition of a fixed American character. And at the same time, the disciplinary subject of expressionism, increasingly beleaguered by the assaults of “scientific” criticism, found in American Studies a durable institutional location within which it could operate in relative insulation from anti-expressionist polemics.

Matthiessen’s effort to constitute a critical Americanist subject has troubled readers as frequently as it has inspired them, but it set the terms for the future of the discipline. In his turn and return to Eliot and in *American Renaissance*, we can witness the beginning of the still-ongoing process through which the disciplinary subject of Americanist expressionism—the critical “we”—has set itself to the task of reimagining its political affiliations. This process of reimagination has outlasted Matthiessen’s national and sociocultural prejudices, allowing Americanist scholars to recognize and also to experiment with modes of expressive subjectivity that only occasionally identify themselves as American and indeed frequently oppose the very idea of a national literature. The expressive subjects who are both the agents and objects of Americanist criticism, in other words, have from the very beginning been subject to reconstitution.

The best evidence of the resiliency of Matthiessen’s expressionism comes from his most hostile critics. Time and again, skeptics have insisted that Matthiessen studied the wrong authors and cultivated the wrong kind of critical discipline, but without questioning his central assumption that criticism ought to be a reflexive history of expression. Jane Tompkins, for example, concluded her *Sensational Designs* by proposing

that her book and Matthiessen's were "competing attempts to constitute American literature"; this reconstitution was necessary because "Matthiessen's modernist critical principles had set at a discount" certain key works of nineteenth-century literature. And yet, though Tompkins had a great deal to say about Matthiessen's "modernist" theories of art and aesthetics, she deployed expression throughout her study in much the same way that Matthiessen himself had: her "notion of literary texts as doing work, expressing and shaping the social context that produced them," extends but in no way refutes Matthiessen's thesis that the "concentrated moment of expression" upon which he had focused was, in the last instance, relevant because it was a fulfillment of the "possibilities of democracy."⁶⁹ Matthiessen's expressionism flies under the radar of critique even more strikingly in Jonathan Arac's "F. O. Matthiessen: Authorizing an American Renaissance." Arac proposes early on in his essay "to explore in some detail Matthiessen's title" and proceeds to devote whole paragraphs to the words "American," "Renaissance," "Art," "Age," and "Emerson and Whitman"—but he has nothing at all about to say about what Matthiessen might have meant by the term "expression," or about whether his usage of that term confirms Arac's general thesis that *American Renaissance* is a self-contradicting work.⁷⁰ This omission reveals a contradiction in Arac's own argument that "to create the centrally authoritative critical identity of *American Renaissance*, much had to be displaced or scattered or disavowed," especially since the "modern critical practice" Arac ascribes to Matthiessen had supposedly "required abandoning the modes of 'impressionist' reading, the orientation that M. H. Abrams has called 'expressive.'"⁷¹ We are thus confronted with a paradox that Arac leaves unresolved: on the one hand, Matthiessen is said to subscribe to a modernist "discipline of letters" that requires him to leave the expressive theory of poetry behind; on the other, he is shown to introduce into that same discipline a concept—expression—that is strangely unsusceptible to metacritical interrogation. Despite Arac and Tompkins's best efforts to negate the "discipline of letters" they thought Matthiessen had imposed upon American literary studies, they themselves could not say no to expressionism. All they could do was drive it underground, obscuring the disciplinary continuity that linked their own critical moment to the age of Spingarn, Lewisohn, and Matthiessen himself. Inadvertently, then, the "New Americanist" misidentification of Matthiessen as a "Modernist" effected the reconstitution of the old Americanist discipline of expressionism, which has perdured down to

our own time—"buried," but nevertheless profoundly imbricated with the reproduction of critical knowledge.

Americanists in the twenty-first century may have forgotten about expressionism, but they continue to live with it, and its problems. Today as much as ever, scholars risk falling back on the paralogism that has beset expressionist criticism since the days of Lewisohn: the notion that expression is the telos of all utterance, rather than a historically specific technique of self-mediation. Nevertheless, a genealogy of expressionism is one way in which Americanist criticism can tell a true history of itself, a history that makes sense of the disciplinary past in a way that can orient criticism to the scholarly and political struggles of the present. Above all, at a time of widespread methodological dissensus, the genealogy of expression raises fundamental questions of disciplinary identity: should interpretation aspire to reflexivity, to offer an account of its object of study that is also an account of itself? In what ways can we imagine criticism affirming its status as a practice of mediated solidarity, what Sheldon Pollock calls a "practice of attachment?" How can students trained in what has historically been a nationally organized field of knowledge understand their research as relevant to the study of modernity in general? In the past, expressionism has shown that it has answers to these questions, answers that can be redeployed in the present to justify and explain a range of critical activities, some of which Americanists are already undertaking, and some of which might not yet exist. If such re-imaginings seem desirable, it may be time to recommit to expression as an object of study and scholarly ethic. Or perhaps it is time to start talking about something else.

Notes

1. Spingarn, *The New Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911), 11.
2. *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 127.
3. "The Place of English in the College Curriculum," in Michael Warner and Gerald Graff, *Origins of Literary Studies in America: A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 42.
4. "The New Function of Modern Language Teaching," *PMLA* 16, no. 1 (1901): 77–91, 89.
5. Cited in Marshall Van Deusen, *J. E. Spingarn* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), 100.
6. "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer," in *On the Limits of Poetry: Selected Essays, 1928–1948* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1948), 54.
7. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 2009), 17.
8. Cited in Ludwig Lewisohn, *Expression in America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), 419.
9. *Ibid.*, 422.
10. Dauber, "Criticism of American Literature," *Diacritics* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 56. The subject of Dauber's essay is not expressionism per se but rather "impressionism"; still, he is speaking about a critical problematic that originated in Spingarn's intellectual milieu (see Spingarn's

reference to the “radical impressionists,” above). Indeed, Spingarn himself was sometimes referred to as an “impressionist.”

11. *Ibid.*, 57.

12. See, for example, Taylor’s chapter “The Expressivist Turn” in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 368–91.

13. In this respect, the protocols of expressionism resemble those of lyricization as described by Virginia Jackson in *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

14. Pollock, “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 594.

15. *English Letters and Indian Literacies: Reading, Writing, and New England Missionary Schools, 1750–1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 7.

16. See, for example, Foucault’s discussion of the genealogy of “subjugated knowledges” in “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (New York: Picador, 2003), 6–9.

17. Lewisohn, *Expression in America*, i.

18. *Ibid.*, ix.

19. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 5. The best evidence of how an ideal of expression guided Matthiessen’s conduct in scholarly and nonscholarly contexts is Lewis Hyde’s *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978).

20. Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830–1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 67.

21. Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 448. All citations of Emerson are to this edition.

22. *Ibid.*, 464.

23. *Ibid.*, 69.

24. *Ibid.*, 721.

25. *Ibid.*, 746. My reading of Emerson’s interpretation of Goethe is informed by David M. Robinson’s comments on the same passages in *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 108–111.

26. *Ibid.*, 758.

27. *Ibid.*, 745, 746.

28. See Cameron, “The Way of Life by Abandonment: Emerson’s Impersonal,” in *Impersonality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 79–107; and Arsic, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

29. Hadot, “There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but Not Philosophers,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (2005): 229–37, 234.

30. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; Walden, Or, Life in the Woods; The Maine Woods; Cape Cod* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 279. Cited hereafter as *Week*.

31. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 155.

32. Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems* (New York: Library of America, 2001), 225.

33. *Ibid.*, 235.

34. Cited in Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 154–55.

35. Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 226.

36. Thoreau, *Week*, 580.

37. In *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. Michael Warner (New York: Penguin, 2004), 353.

38. *Ibid.*

39. “Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln,” in Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pease, *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 192.

40. *Portable Whitman*, 162.

41. *Ibid.*, 3, 92.

42. *Ibid.*, 339.

43. Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 5.

44. *Portable Whitman*, 185.

45. Moon, in his psychoanalytic reading, finds these pressures indexed in the characters of the father and mother. *Disseminating Whitman*, 145–47.

46. Thoreau, *Week*, 580.
47. *Portable Whitman*, 365.
48. See, for example, Robert Gooding-Williams's discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois's "political expressivism" in *In The Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) and, for a discussion of the significance of the concept of expression in late-nineteenth-century American anthropology, Ryan Carr, "Expressive Enlightenment: Subjectivity and Solidarity in Daniel Brinton, Franz Boas, and Carlos Montezuma," in *Indigenous Visions*, ed. Ned Blackhawk and Isaiah Wilner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, forthcoming).
49. Spingarn, *The New Criticism*, 34–35.
50. *Portable Whitman*, 3.
51. In *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 8, *Poetry and Criticism, 1940–1995* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 322
52. In T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 21.
53. *Ibid.*, 145.
54. Babbitt, "The Modern Spirit and Doctor Spingarn," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* 11, no. 8 (April 9, 1914): 215–18, 216.
55. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 146.
56. *Ibid.*, 21.
57. Babbitt, "Modern Spirit," 216.
58. In Eliot, Aldous Huxley, and F. S. Flint, *Three Critical Essays on Modern English Poetry* (London: Poetry Bookshop, 1920), 3.
59. Brooks and Wimsatt, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Knopf, 1957), 668.
60. *Ibid.*, 669, 668.
61. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (1935; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), vii.
62. *Ibid.*, 19.
63. *Ibid.*, 34–35.
64. *Ibid.*, 35, 130.
65. *Ibid.*, 12, 45.
66. "The Affective Fallacy," *Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 (Winter 1949): 31–55, 55.
67. Matthiessen, *Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, 41–42.
68. *Ibid.*, ix.
69. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 200; Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, ix.
70. In Pease and Michaels, *American Renaissance Reconsidered*, 93–94.
71. *Ibid.*, 92.