

Foreword

Redefining American Literature



In the fall of 1896, William Lyon Phelps was an assistant professor at Harvard, and he introduced the concept of an American literature in the United States for the very first time. He chose Poe and Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson. In the ensuing semester he was told to stop teaching, and I'm quoting, that "so-called American literature." He was threatened with dismissal. Phelps went on, of course, as we already know, to agitate for the inclusion of American literature in American colleges and universities. That "so-called literature" phrase may sound familiar when one thinks of Américo Paredes, for one, who established the Center for Mexican-American Studies at the University of Texas, Austin, and of the men and women at other institutions who established Chicano Studies programs in the late sixties.

Now, as for Phelps, I doubt very much if it entered his head to include, say, African-American literature or to wonder if there were any other American literatures except his New England variety. However, his stance is understandable. American literature, though, even the New England variety, was by no means widely accepted in the United States, or rather in university curricula, despite the later presence of Crane, Twain, Dean Howells, Dreiser, and so on. I should like to add two additional facts. The first is that the first Ph.D. in American literature is a twentieth-century phenomenon. The second is that it wasn't until after World War II that a degree in that literature was added to the curriculum in America's heartland, Kansas and Missouri.

American literature professors of the time faced the same problems, headaches, and opposition to its offerings as did the professors of Hispanic-American literature in the Romance language departments in this country for the first fifty years of this century. It wasn't until after 1957 that

Hispanic-Americanists began to carve out their own territory in Romance language departments. The National Defense Education Act was largely responsible for the widening of Hispanic-American literature. The newness of Hispanic-American literature offerings in departments of Spanish and Portuguese may be appreciated when one learns that Luis Leal, one of the contributors to this volume, produced over fifty Ph.D. theses while at the University of Illinois (he's still very much alive and kicking at the University of California, Santa Barbara) and that the first thesis on Carlos Fuentes was not published until the sixties under his guidance.

The offerings in the Hispanic-American literature were augmented by waves of Central and South American literary scholars who migrated to the United States and taught in U.S. universities. The opposition by Peninsularists is a well-known recorded and unalterable fact. Their opposition does not differ much from that of the British literature specialists vis-à-vis Americanists. I don't pretend to know the entire history in this regard, but in the mid-fifties, when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Texas, the Romance language department offered two survey courses: a third-year junior course and a fourth-year senior and graduate course, both in Peninsular literature. The Hispanic-American literature courses were the following: the novel, including *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*), *La vorágine* (*The Vortex*), *Don Segundo Sombra*, and *Doña Bárbara*; two courses in the short story, both taught by Ms. Nina Weisinger, an adjunct professor who'd been an adjunct for forty years; and a senior graduate course, Mexican Literature, taught by Dorothy Schons. I also took *El Periquillo Sarniento* (*The Itching Parrot*) as a seminar, but that was the extent of the offerings of Hispanic-American literature in that Romance language department of so many years ago.

I'm offering this bit of archaeology to remind us that entering into the curriculum has never been easy for anyone. With the admission of a few courses in American literature at a few United States universities, one may be quite right in inferring that African-American literature was not offered at the time. Personally, I also doubt if anyone thought of it as an offering. I've not studied some of the offerings at Howard or Bishop College or at some of the other black institutions, but I think it would be instructive for all of us to do so—to see what it was that they were offering at the time.

Certain historical processes were going on in this country in the decade of the sixties. While the processes addressed the increase of enrollment of Americans of Mexican descent in U.S. colleges and universities, an adjunct to this was a demand for the hiring of Chicano professors and the teaching of college courses with reference and with relevance to our historical presence in our native land, the United States. The opposition to these demands

was not long in coming; for a decade or so, well into the seventies, the demands were met at times, forgotten and fought, resisted, addressed repeatedly, admitted, rejected, and so on. None of this is over, yet. But the modest increase of students was, and is, a visible piece of evidence. Not so is the increase of professors, but time may take care of this.

As for the course offerings, these are placed mostly in the college of liberal arts and within the colleges in departments, in centers, and in programs. The opposition to the inclusion of Mexican American literature was understandable, if one accepts the opposition on academic grounds. That is, is there such an American literature? Who are its contributors? Is there a body of criticism? And so on. The answer to the last question was “no”—there was no body of criticism. But the answer was “yes” to the first two questions—the literature existed and exists, and people were contributing and had contributed to it. The next question: “Is it any good?” was also brought up. Well, none of us knew the answer to that, nor did William Lyon Phelps back in 1896. He had, of course, touched on William Bradford and Edward Taylor and Jonathan Edwards, William Cullen Bryant, and James Fenimore Cooper. But he had focused on Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson.

Now, as to its worth and the widening of this American literature, this lies with time, and that’s the only answer that anyone can actually say and admit because time is the great leveler, and it usually decides what will live and what will not. It so happens, however, that universities are repositories of learning and that our time in the academy is different from the time of those outside the university. It takes us a longer time to admit or to reject ideas or theories. We’re not a shopping mall with bright lights and colors and soft music to persuade us toward one item or another. We’re deliberate, and we debate, and we study, we argue, and we assess. Time is on our side, and long after the popular mind has dismissed or has forgotten that which is transitory, the academy investigates and meets, and it tables or acts upon it. We’re often accused of talking something to death, and we may be found guilty of that, too. But we also have higher responsibilities, we are a university. We’re not a supermarket where the customer is always right. The inclusion of any course or program brings curiosity and questions. It may also bring blind opposition. But then our universities are populated by all manner of colleagues who also possess all manner of ideas and opinions. Some, of course, are also paranoid, but we live with them, too.

The proposal to adopt African-American literature and literature of the Native American and the Asian-American and so on came in the sixties. The opposition on academic grounds was wanting, but the opposition on the basis of racism was something else. There was some of both; there was

also some paranoia on both sides. But worse than paranoia, there was arrant racial prejudice and, as always in life, there was irony. Opposition came also from some Americanists who were teaching American literature—American literature in its narrowest sense, of course. For if one thinks that New England literature looked kindly upon Southern White literature, one would be mistaken, and let me remind us that it is not until the fifties that systematic studies in American literature began to appear in public institutions. Regarding Southern literature, at the time of Faulkner's winning of the Nobel Prize almost all of his books were out of print. The year was 1949, and American literature became a growing concern in the fifties.

The greater demand for American literature, the New England and the Southern variety, coincided with the increased enrollment in U.S. institutions after 1957. The enrollment, too, was selective, but I'm going to let that pass for a more important consideration: academic amnesia. Those who inherited ready-made degree programs in American literature opposed the widening of American literature. Since this is a young field, we have every right to suspect that many of these colleagues had not yet won their own spurs and here they were unwilling to read, let alone teach, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, the younger Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Tomás Rivera, Lucy Topahanso, Denise Chávez, Jenny Chin, Wendy Rose, and so on. One of the chief reasons was that American literature was still insecure as to its own place and standing in the curriculum, and because of this, it covered its own flanks and retrenched. While William Lyon Phelps had ample reason for his ignorance and for his narrow selection, our contemporary colleagues did not. They chose instead to retrench, to reject out of hand, and mistakenly, they went on to the other side of our other colleagues in British literature.

But let us see what happened. In 1968 the Modern Language Association was headed by Henry Nash Smith, that's a brief twenty-three years ago. In the late seventies Smith, along with Bill Schaefer, began to widen MLA representation and representative curriculum. Many of us know that Henry Nash Smith died not too long ago and those of us who knew him mourn his passing. Because it was he who, as a very strong force in the MLA, oversaw the changes in this country's curriculum in higher education. It would be an exaggeration to claim that Smith caused the changes, and he would not have made the claim, anyway; but as a leader, he recognized that the changes had to be made, and he facilitated those changes which paved the way for wider participation by women in the profession and the likewise important participation by other members of the MLA, who heretofore had not been included in any participatory capacity. Those other members of MLA included us—the Mexicans, that is Americans of Mexican descent—as

well as native African-Americans, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, all members of the MLA.

Along with this decision came the inclusion of other American literatures which had been ignored and fought and derided and insulted. But time brought changes. Because in time younger and not so young Americanists widened American literature. I've heard it said, quite mistakenly, that it was the swing of the pendulum. I have to say that there's no such thing. I don't believe in cosmic changes. It isn't, and it wasn't, a pendulum. It was an effective breach which was widened to include the whole of the United States literature, irrespective of language.

Nevertheless, changes are constant, and it is the widening of the curriculum that has produced a vibrancy, once again, to American literature. The vibrancy has produced a breach in some of the old ideologies and in some of the old intramuralism and has served to introduce other voices.

I've no idea where it will end, but the ideas of 1967 regarding American literature are not those of 1991. This is the way it should be, since literature is meant to reflect values held and decisions taken by men and women and not by caricatures of them.

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Criticism in the Borderlands

