

National Literary Histories: Imagined Communities or Imagined Societies?

Brook Thomas

If England was what England seems
And not the England of our dreams
If she was putty, brass and paint
'Ow quick we'd drop her . . . but she ain't.
—Rudyard Kipling

In the last decades of the twentieth century scholars interested in literary history frequently turned their attention to questions about what Clifford Geertz called “local knowledge.”¹ In the first decade of the twenty-first century more and more have aspired to “global knowledge.” Neither these trends nor the related effort to link the local to the global would seem to encourage attention to national literary histories. On the contrary, we are, according to many, in a postnational or transnational era, in which we are exhorted to consider “social, political, and cultural alternatives to the nation.”² Even so, numerous new national literary histories continue to be produced, and scholarly attention to past ones continues to reap rewards.

The essays in this issue grew out of a conference, “National Literary Histories,” held at the University of California, Irvine, in February 2002, and they retain the tone of conference presentations. There are four on England, one on New Zealand, and one on Germany. They make no effort to cover the field. There are far too many national literary histories for any set of essays to do that. Nonetheless, taken

¹ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic, 1983).

² John Carlos Rowe, *The New American Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxii. Rowe himself makes clear that his postnationalist project is an effort “to transcend, rather than abandon, the ‘nation-state as the unit of analysis’” (xxi).

together, these essays both confirm and complicate some standard notions about literature and the nation. This introduction briefly touches on some of those notions as they relate to people writing national literary histories today. It also places the concerns of the essays in conversation with the 1988 *Columbia Literary History of the United States*.

I choose the *Columbia Literary History* for three reasons. First, it adds an Americanist perspective that enriched exchanges at the conference. Indeed, two conference participants (Werner Sollors and Barbara Packer) contributed to it, and another (Emory Elliott) was its general editor. Second, in its effort to tell a new story about U.S. literature, it reveals unacknowledged continuities with the histories it would displace. Third, it complicates Benedict Anderson's influential argument about nations as "imagined communities."³ As my epigraph suggests, a nation is indeed always to an extent an imagined entity. But as my title suggests, it need not be imagined as a community.

One reason for the production of so many new national literary histories is that there are more officially recognized nations today than ever before. For instance, most of *The Cambridge History of English Literature* published between 1907 and 1916 is devoted to literature written in English in what is now Great Britain. Nonetheless, since according to the editors "the literature of the British Colonies and of the United States are, in the main, the literature of the mother-country, produced under other skies," they intend "to give, in their proper place, some account of those literatures also."⁴ Even so, while completing its history

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2d ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

⁴ *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, 15 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), 1:vii.

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of English literature, Cambridge University Press began work on the multivolume *Cambridge History of American Literature*, published between 1917 and 1921. Since that time most of the colonies of 1907 have become independent nations intent on producing their own literary histories. In addition, recent attention to Britain's internal, as well as to its external, colonialism has led to books such as *Devolving English Literature* and new histories of Scottish and Welsh literatures.⁵ Likewise, Ireland, having achieved independence soon after *The Cambridge History of English Literature* was completed, has long had an institutional space in the study of British literature.

But new nations and nationalist revivals do not account for all of the national literary histories produced today. Old ones are continually updated. For instance, both Oxford and Cambridge University Presses are working on new histories of English literature, while Cambridge competed with Columbia University Press by launching an important new literary history of the United States that is still in progress. These histories respond to a need expressed in the preface to Macmillan's 1948 *Literary History of the United States*: "Each generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms."⁶ This quotation, cited in the first sentence of the preface to the *Columbia Literary History* to justify its production,⁷ captures the spirit of Goethe's famous 1810 proclamation, cited by Hinrich C. Seeba in this issue, that "there is hardly any doubt in our time that world history has to be rewritten from time to time."

Guided by market considerations, major university presses seem particularly attuned to the need to update accounts of a nation's literary past. Whereas normally authors or editors seek a press to publish scholarly work, presses like Oxford, Cambridge, Columbia, and Harvard have solicited editors to oversee and have provided financial support for histories that they want to publish. The demands of the press and its target audience play an important role in shaping the final product. As Elliott puts it:

⁵ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

⁶ Robert E. Spiller et al., eds., *Literary History of the United States*, 3 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 1:vii.

⁷ *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), xi.

The work is commissioned by a client who engages editors to design the basic structure and gather experts to complete assigned tasks. The editors and publisher cooperate to construct a book that will satisfy artistic and financial considerations and be acceptable to scholars and readers. The vast majority of the people who actually use the construct will judge it less by the criteria of its makers than by its usefulness and general appearance. Of a literary history, people demand that it have informative and interesting essays on the writers and works most likely to be inquired about or worthy of a reader's curiosity and attention, sensible chapter divisions, readable type, and a good index and that it be durable and physically convenient to use. (xiii)

The felt need for new national literary histories is not confined to the nation of the affected literature. For instance, in the United States the *New History of French Literature*, commissioned by Harvard University Press, won the Modern Language Association's 1989 Lowell Prize for best scholarly book. It self-consciously challenges the "commonly held idea that literary historians ought to belong to the same linguistic background as their object: literary history has to be written from within; one is entitled to write only the history of one's own literature."⁸ Encouraged by the success of this volume, Harvard is producing a similar one for German literature. Likewise, important new histories of English and American literatures have recently been published in Germany.⁹ The production of these and other "outside" accounts complicates the common assumption that the function of a national literary history is to provide ideological legitimation of the nation. Such legitimation can still occur, but it is not immediately obvious how a history of English literature written in France legitimates either England or France. Nonetheless, perhaps the most famous national literary history written in the age of heightened nationalism was Hippolyte Taine's *History of English Literature*.

Despite the complications posed by Taine's and other histories, the fact remains that before people interested in national literary histories can turn to the kinds of methodological questions that prompt David Perkins to ask generally, "Is literary history possible?" they have to con-

⁸ *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), xxi.

⁹ Hans Ulrich Seeber, ed., *Englische Literaturgeschichte*, 3d ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1999); Hubert Zapf, ed., *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997).

front the ideological baggage accompanying any project having to do with a nation.¹⁰ Indeed, as all of the essays below demonstrate in varying degrees, national literary histories often do serve a legitimating function for the nation. That function is particularly apparent in the essays by Seeba and Margit Sichert on nineteenth-century Germany and England, respectively, as well as in Herbert Grabes's account of how post–World War II histories in England relate to their cultural context.

But even though so many histories serve a legitimating function, their widespread existence complicates the opposition between civic (or contractual) nations and cultural nations assumed by many scholars working on the nation. A cultural nation is one like Germany that had a sense of national identity before it was unified as a sovereign state. As Seeba puts it, "It is an obvious historical fact that for centuries Germany has lacked a unified state as a kind of constitutional framework for developing an undisputed national identity." For instance, in 1854 Jacob Grimm asked, "What else do we have in common but our language and literature?" In contrast, a civic nation is one like the France that came into existence through the political institutions generated by the French Revolution. Cultural nations are frequently said to be based on pre-Enlightenment myths of cultural origin, whereas civic nations are said to be founded on a set of Enlightenment beliefs in universal principles inscribed in written constitutions.

But just as a founding myth of the Enlightenment is that it can do without myth, so a founding myth of civic nations is that they originated solely in a set of enlightened political principles.¹¹ In fact, even so-called civic nations, like France and the United States, need to cultivate a cultural sense of the nation. One way for them to do so is through a national literature. The slogan for such literatures could well be the often-quoted statement by the Scottish nationalist Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun: "I know a very wise man . . . [who] believed if a man were per-

¹⁰ David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

¹¹ Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985). See Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Bernard Yack, "The Myth of the Civic Nation," *Critical Review* 10 (1996): 193–211; and my "Civic Multiculturalism and the Myth of Liberal Consent," *New Centennial Review* 1 (2001): 1–35.

mitted to make the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of the nation.”¹² Indeed, in an 1834 speech called “The Importance of Illustrating New-England History by a Series of Romances like the Waverley Novels,” which argued that works of literature “must do something, along with more powerful agents, towards moulding and fixing that final, grand, complex result—the national character,” the lawyer Rufus Choate quoted Fletcher.¹³

The impossibility of holding a country together solely through political institutions is illustrated in a complicated way by England. Firmly committed to the political principle of liberty within the rule of law, England has no written constitution. What it has instead is a myth of national origin that is linked to resistance to the Norman yoke, the organic development of common law, and the Magna Carta. That myth goes hand in hand with a myth about a national literature. Stephen Greenblatt, for instance, refers to a passage in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* in which a character claims that Shakespeare “is part of an Englishman’s constitution.” “*Constitution*,” Greenblatt glosses, “has a complex sense: Shakespeare’s works in effect stand in for the written constitution that England, unlike the United States and France, famously lacks; but they are also part of an Englishman’s inner being. Hence deep familiarity with Shakespeare is the key to communal consensual identification, to a subject’s full participation in the life of a nation.”¹⁴

As important as Shakespeare is, his works are not alone in serving this function. For example, in the 1948 *Literary History of England* published in the United States, Kemp Malone dates the “beginnings of English national (as distinct from tribal) feeling” to the moment when Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) called the Germanic inhabitants of Britain, irrespective of tribe, “Angl(i)i.” For Malone, this national sentiment solidified into a nation with the ascendancy of Alfred in the ninth century. “England,” he remarks, “with its national King (descen-

¹² *Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun: Selected Political Writings*, ed. David Daiches (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic, 1979), 108.

¹³ “The Importance of Illustrating New-England History by a Series of Romances like the Waverley Novels,” in *The Works of Rufus Choate with a Memoir of His Life*, ed. Samuel Gilman Brown, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1862), 1:344.

¹⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, “Racial Memory and Literary History,” *PMLA* 116 (2001): 50–51.

dants of Alfred, the national hero), its national Church (founded by the papal mission and in communion with Rome), its national speech (the King's English), and its old and rich national literature, stood unique in Europe of the year 1000. No other modern European state reached full nationhood so early." Malone's version of English exceptionalism grants a distinct role to its early national literature. When the English lost the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and succumbed to two hundred years of French rule, "the only weapon left to [them] was the strong nationalism handed down to them from the golden days of the past," a nationalism that "owed much of its strength, of course, to the rich literary culture of the centuries before Hastings, a culture marked from the beginning by free use of the mother tongue (alongside Latin) as a medium of expression."¹⁵

We can easily recognize the ideological function that this account of England's national origin had for an American audience soon after England had served the cause of liberty by resisting an attempted invasion across the English Channel. Indeed, Malone's account conforms to the kind of national literary history described by Linda Hutcheon as a "teleological narrative of continual and organic evolution" whose appeal comes from the "potent combination of the nostalgic impact of origins (the founding moment) and linear utopian projection (into the future)" that creates a "sense of continuity between past and present, usually with an eye to promoting ideological consensus."¹⁶ It is not only fashionable—at least in literary and cultural studies, if not in the world at large—but important to question such narratives of mythical origin and continuity, and many recent national literary histories self-consciously set out to do so. For instance, *A New History of French Literature* is made up of chronologically arranged essays that focus on a particular date, usually signaling a literary "event" but sometimes a social or political one. This formal principle is intended to "question our assumption of the historical continuum" (Hollier et al., xix). As interesting as this experiment may be, it is, Greenblatt notes, limited in its

¹⁵ Kemp Malone, "The Old English Period," in *A Literary History of England*, ed. Albert C. Baugh (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948), 4–5.

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon, "Interventionist Literary Histories: Nostalgic, Pragmatic, or Utopian?" *MLQ* 59 (1998): 404, 406, 403.

“capacity to capture long-term strategies of transformation, evasion, negotiation, and exchange” (60). Something, it seems, is lost as well as gained by employing a fragmentary structure to challenge a sense of continuity. In fact, as the *Columbia Literary History*’s attempt to provide an alternative to the structure of the 1948 *Literary History of the United States* indicates, despite self-conscious proclamations of rupture, continuities persist.

According to Elliott, the *Columbia Literary History*, “in contrast to the 1948 volume,” makes

no attempt to tell a “single, unified story” with a “coherent narrative” by making changes to the essays. That is, the editors have not revised the beginning and endings of essays to create the appearance of one continuous narrative. No longer is it possible, or desirable, to formulate the image of continuity when diversity of literary materials and a wide variety of critical voices are, in fact, the distinctive features of national literature. (xxi)¹⁷

Even so, the *Columbia Literary History* is not completely successful in disrupting continuity, and not simply because on the next page Elliott admits that it does after all try “to suggest certain continuities” (xxii) or because earlier he draws on a standard feature of teleological narratives in describing his history as “an examination of the *emergence* of a national literature” (xv; my emphasis). There is, for instance, its treatment of origins.

Arguing that this history differs from earlier ones because of its emphasis on the “varied voices within one nation,” Elliott claims:

For example, rather than provide only one beginning to this narrative, which invariably creates the impression that culture originated in a common experience and has developed along a single “mainstream,” this work has four parallel departure points in order to stress that from the very start there has always been diversity. The cultures of the Native Americans, the Anglicans in England, the explorers of the Southwest, and the Puritans in New England were markedly different and competing fiercely in seventeenth-century America. Yet each played a formative role in the creation of our literary culture. (xxii)

¹⁷ Elliott also describes the project of his history in “The Politics of Literary History,” *American Literature* 59 (1987): 268–82.

Use of these four departure points challenges the idea of a single origin, but it does not escape a myth of origins. It simply replaces a myth of singular origin with one of multiple origins. If the myth of singular origin legitimated a vision of a common national culture, the myth of multiple origins legitimates a vision of a diverse national culture. Indeed, the four points of departure selected to create a sense of diverse beginnings depend on the editorial decision to define the “literature of the United States” as “all written and oral literary works produced in that part of the world that has become the United States of America” (xix), a decision that in turn assumes a teleological narrative, since clearly none of the four groups described had any sense in the seventeenth century that it would later be incorporated into U.S. history.

Also revealing is Elliott’s use of architectural metaphors. The 1948 *Literary History of the United States*, he claims, “reflects the culture that produced a style that many critics of architecture have labeled ‘modern’: streamlined, uniform, and confident in its aim of useful service. By contrast, the present volume is modestly postmodern: it acknowledges diversity, complexity, and contradiction by making them structural principles, and it forgoes closure as well as consensus” (xiii). But in arguing that “the construction of a literary history may be thought of in terms of architecture and building” (xiii), Elliott himself relies on that staple of literary modernism, the idea of spatial form for verbal constructs.

The architectural metaphor is revealing in another way. Elliott evokes it after noting that many reviewers had called the 1948 *History* a “monument.” In their effort to supplant it, both the *Columbia Literary History* and the latest *Cambridge History* aspire themselves to monumentality, just as the 1948 volume competed with the monumentality of the 1917–21 *Cambridge History*.¹⁸ Indeed, whereas numerous histories of major literatures have been written, the field is dominated by a few recognized monuments. Such histories do more than help establish

¹⁸ Lawrence Buell refers to the three of these histories that are finished as “monuments” and regrets the “unjust” neglect of *The Literature of the American People*, ed. Arthur Hobbs Quinn (New York: Appleton, 1951). See Buell, “Literary History As a Hybrid Genre,” in *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 217, 229.

canons; they themselves participate in a mode of canon formation closely resembling Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence." Using previous monuments as models at the same time that they try to supplant them, new national literary histories have to claim to present a new understanding of the past. Thus no matter how comprehensive a past history may be, it has to be faulted for repressing that part of the national literary past that the new history claims to recover. This diachronic process of competition and emulation helps explain why, as Seeba, Sichert, and Grabes all note, different nations develop different traditions to write national literary histories.

Sichert and Grabes are well equipped to recognize particular qualities of English national literary histories, because they see them from a German perspective as participants in a research group at Justus Liebig University in Gießen that studies the function of national cultures. In contrast, Richard Helgerson applies to the past a contemporary perspective, that of postcolonial criticism, to show how national traditions develop by emulating and competing with other national traditions. As Helgerson points out in this issue, English writers in the late sixteenth century did not share our post-Romantic assumption that a national literature is defined by its uniqueness and its difference from other literatures. Instead, the goal was emulation of foreign models. England as well as early modern Spain and France faced the dilemma of forging a national identity while caught in an imitative relation to Latin or Roman models. As unique as that early modern situation may seem, Helgerson argues that in fact it is similar to the dilemma faced by today's postcolonial nations in relation to European powers. That similarity prompts him to conclude that all national literary histories may be "built on a theoretical frame supplied by some foreign other, and usually by a foreign other that once enjoyed a large measure of political or cultural overlordship."

Helgerson's thesis certainly holds for the United States, which despite numerous proclamations of cultural independence continued to look to England for models and verification.¹⁹ Whereas it is commonplace to see the new Columbia and Cambridge histories as attempt-

¹⁹ See Elisa Tamarkin, "American Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and National Culture, 1820–1865" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2001).

ing to supplant the 1948 *Literary History of the United States*, which in turn attempted to supplant the 1917–21 *Cambridge History of American Literature*, we need to remember that the model for this history, in terms of organization, structure, and types of coverage, was the 1907–16 *Cambridge History of English Literature*.

If Helgerson alerts us to the need to examine interactions among national traditions and the ways in which all “participate, at least to some degree, in the condition of mimicry, hybridity, and postcoloniality,” he also qualifies his argument by noting an “enormous difference” between sixteenth-century heirs to “Renaissance humanist notions of imitation and classical rebirth” and postcolonial “heirs to ideas of originality and Romantic nationalism.” Not surprisingly, the Romantics’ view of originality has also affected our notion of origins. As Roberts observes, many post-Romantic narratives do more than posit a myth of national origin. They also respond “to some sense that the ‘authentic’ identity of the nation has been threatened and that the work of literature is to recover that identity.” It is that sense of an “authentic” national identity that Roberts, a student of Romanticism and a native of New Zealand, questions by looking at the 1945 *Book of New Zealand Verse: 1923–45*. Edited by the poet Allen Curnow, this anthology is often credited with establishing a national literary tradition worthy of documentation. Nonetheless, it “founders,” according to Roberts, because a “national literary history, in its post-Romantic formulation, is an incoherently conceived practice” that seeks an authentic national identity when none exists. Curnow’s effort may founder, but so too, Roberts implies, do recent efforts to imagine a national literature for New Zealand that conform to “the standard comic plot of Bhabha-inspired postcolonial history: the overcoming of the psychic wound of colonialism in the discovery of the authenticity of inauthenticity; the exciting hybridity that lurks in apparently crippling colonial mimicry.”

Roberts’s claim that the post-Romantic narrative of the nation posits some “initial psychic or cultural wound” from which to recover is borne out by Seeba’s look at nineteenth-century German literary histories. Indeed, in Germany the narrative became even more powerful by adding a “rhetoric of mourning and consolation, focusing on the word *Trost* [solace],” about “the loss of something soon to be replaced with a new master narrative.” Seeba documents how *Trostgründe* has a partic-

ular German manifestation. Nonetheless, the general concept helps us see how, despite the acknowledged and unacknowledged continuities with the past that I have pointed out, the *Columbia Literary History's* claim to newness does have some legitimacy.²⁰

For instance, if it does not offer the grand narrative of a national "cultural wound," it does include narratives of groups of minorities and women with their own wounds to recover from.²¹ These narratives often adopt teleological narratives similar to those that structured earlier national literary histories. Many of the new literary histories associated with issues of identity politics, such as "class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality," model themselves on national literary histories as a way of conferring "cultural authority on the groups in question as surely as earlier national ones ever did" (Hutcheon, 403). On their own, such narratives are open to the charge that they subscribe to the same cultural essentialism found in racist nationalisms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²² But placed together in one history, along with essays suggesting interaction among them, they have a different effect. Elliott, for instance, insists that the "relations among the various essays are important" and encourages readers to "consult the index to see the different places in which a particular writer is treated" (xx).

To be sure, in many of the individual narratives the nation participates in inflicting the wound that needs to heal. To incorporate those narratives into a national literary history is, therefore, to risk implying the continued subordination of the groups they represent to the nation. But the *Columbia Literary History's* distrust of unity suggests a different possibility. Although it does not claim to do so, its various narratives generate a sense of the nation as an imagined society, not as an imagined community.

There are numerous excellent books on the concept of the nation. Nonetheless, Anderson's *Imagined Communities* has dominated the think-

²⁰ I owe my sense of legitimacy of the new to Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

²¹ So too does the new *Cambridge History*. Sacvan Bercovitch, its editor, reports that its contributors share the conviction that "race, class, and gender are formal principles of art and therefore integral to textual analysis." See the preface to *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), viii.

²² See Greenblatt, 54–58; and my related discussion in *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 24–50.

ing of those in literary and cultural studies, in part because of its captivating title and in part because of the emphasis it places on the novel and on print culture. Indeed, it offers a compelling explanation as to why nationalism became such a potent force in the nineteenth century. Many people at that time were threatened by a move from the familiarity of face-to-face communities to what they considered a fragmented and alienated modern society. In response, to imagine the nation as an extended community was to give it great ideological power. National literary histories with teleological narratives of continual evolution clearly served those ideological purposes, since their organic sense of the nation reinforced the perception of it as a *Gemeinschaft*, not a *Gesellschaft*.²³ In refusing that organic model, the narrative structure of the *Columbia Literary History* gives us a different sense of the nation.

The difference between the nation as imagined community and the nation as imagined society has similarities with Roland Barthes's famous distinction between work and text. The nation as imagined community is like Barthes's "work," which is an organicism that grows by "vital expansion, by 'development.'" In contrast, the nation as imagined society is like his "text," which is a network, "the result of a combinatory systematic."²⁴ Refusing the sense of the nation as an imagined organic community, the overall narrative of the *Columbia Literary History* is incompatible with the organic principle of incorporation. Not imagined as incorporated or assimilated into the whole, various groups relate to the nation by a logic of addition or supplementation. To be sure, individual narratives about those groups frequently imply the existence of organic communities, but not at the level of the nation.

The sense of alienation so strongly felt in the nineteenth century has not disappeared. There is as much nostalgia for communal relations today as one hundred years ago. Indeed, for people on both the left and the right, the idea of a national community remains attractive. In the United States many share Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s worry about "the disuniting of America."²⁵ But others have learned that to imagine

²³ The distinction is Ferdinand Tönnies's.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 161.

²⁵ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (Knoxville, Tenn.: Whittle, 1991).

the nation as a community is to allow it to assume the kind of power over individuals and groups described by Alan Trachtenberg as “the incorporation of America.”²⁶ The loss of autonomy associated with the doctrine of incorporation means that for more and more people community retains its attraction only if it is imagined on a scale smaller than the nation. To imagine the nation as a society is to grant the possibility that it can foster different, but related, communities without subordinating them to the unifying logic of what Schlesinger once championed as “the vital center.”²⁷

The unacknowledged trend toward producing national literary histories as imagined societies is not confined to histories of the United States. For instance, Denis Hollier’s essay “On Writing Literary History,” in *A New History of French Literature*, clearly tries to establish that volume as a text more than as a work, one that uses literature to decenter the idea of the nation. In a very different register, the British medievalist Lesley Johnson, while nominally evoking the notion of an imagined community as a way of enlisting Anderson’s authority, criticizes a catalog for a recent exhibition called *The Making of England* that proclaims “the Anglo-Saxons . . . the true ancestors of the English today.” According to Johnson, “this brief statement” indulges in “a myth of common ethnic descent” to endow “a political community of the present (as represented by the English people) with legitimacy (their ‘true ancestors’) and cohesion.” With an eye to a multicultural England, Johnson notes, these “credentials of Englishness” are not available to all those who identify themselves as English today.²⁸

English medievalists have always found a complicated world of contact between many peoples. Recent interpretations, however, do not support the idea of an original homogeneous national community. Especially important are accounts of the development of the English language itself. English, Malone tells us, developed through “fellow-

²⁶ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

²⁷ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949).

²⁸ Lesley Johnson, “Imagining Communities: Medieval and Modern,” in *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Simon Forde, Lesley Johnson, and Alan V. Murray (Leeds: Leeds University Press, 1995), 1–2.

ship” with other languages: Latin, Danish, and French. Few today would describe this linguistic mixing, which often accompanied wars of conquest, as “fellowship.” The English language that developed is for many no longer a “mother-tongue” but the language of a conquering people. Thus in the medieval period we find critics wrestling with the same sorts of questions about linguistic and literary politics that occupy people studying the contemporary scene in England, itself a zone of contact between various peoples, many from former colonies, who are participating in an ongoing transformation of the country’s language and literature.

The question of language brings me to a final way in which recent work implies a sense of the nation as an imagined society more than of an imagined community. The phrases *a history of English literature*, *a history of French literature*, and *a history of German literature* are ambiguous in a way that *literary history of the United States* is not, for they refer both to a nation and to a language. The 1907–16 *Cambridge History of English Literature*, like many other such works, avoided calling attention to that ambiguity by evoking the metaphors of “mother-country” and “mother-tongue” to imply that the history of literature written in English was organically linked to the national history of literature written in England. The situation is not the same today. Although I have implied that *A New History of French Literature* is a national literary history, in fact it has essays about literature produced in Quebec and in Africa. Not confined to literature written in Germany, Harvard’s planned history of German literature will include a section by Sollors (also a conference participant) on literature written in German in the United States; Sollors, along with Marc Shell, is also at work on a massive project to rethink the literary history of the United States by recovering non-English works composed here.²⁹ The idea of a national community linked together by a common language is clearly not the operative model for national literary histories today. Indeed, if we now have *The Oxford History of English Literature*, the history-in-progress is called *The Oxford English Literary History* as part

²⁹ See Werner Sollors, ed., *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). See also the Web site for Shell and Sollors’s Longfellow Institute at www.fas.harvard.edu/~lowinus.

of a self-conscious effort to make room for more kinds of Englishness than the designation *English literature* allows.

Once again, what seem to be trends dictated by the present world of globalization have some of their best applications in the medieval period. As we have seen, in Malone's version of English literary history, England survived two hundred years of French rule after the Norman Conquest only through a nationalism fostered by a rich literary tradition centuries before Hastings, "a culture marked from the beginning by free use of the mother tongue (alongside Latin) as a medium of expression" (5). The result of such narratives is that the twelfth century under Norman rule is almost always left out of accounts of English literary history. But in the first essay of this issue Linda Georgianna shows what happens if we pay attention to Malone's parenthetical "alongside Latin." As Georgianna notes, past students of English literary history have almost completely ignored the numerous Latin works written by educated clerics who had a national consciousness, although their sense of community, fostered by the belief in a transnational religious body, was often the abbey, not the nation.³⁰ If Georgianna's essay is any indication, those working on new national literary histories can be as attuned as advocates of postnationalism to the importance of alternative forms of organization to the nation. Indeed, it may be that, rather than necessarily opposing the nation, those alternative forms existed and continue to exist in a complicated relation to it: sometimes fostering its growth, sometimes questioning its legitimacy, sometimes competing with it, and sometimes imitating it. The nation, as these essays demonstrate, is a historically changing concept, flexible enough to remain an important, if not exclusive, way of organizing the study of literature.

³⁰ See also Jeffrey Knapp's related but somewhat different argument that in Renaissance England the theater, long associated with a secular, nationalist project, in fact spawned its own sense of community held together by an ecumenical supranationalism best expressed in the religious beliefs of a Christian humanist like Erasmus (*Shakespeare's Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theater in Renaissance England* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002]).