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Leonard Tennenhouse: The Importance of Feeling English

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DIASPORA AND EMPIRE

AT THE RISK of stating the obvious, let me begin by asserting that any discussion of American literature will at some point have to address the questions of how soon and in what respects British Americans began to think of themselves as American rather than British. Instead of assuming that different national governments mean different national literatures, I come to this problem from the contrary perspective: that the separation of American from British literatures is still at issue and was therefore nothing like the clean break that we tend to project backward onto the late eighteenth century.¹ I plan to look at a wide body of Anglophone literature from the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries for the purpose of discovering when it began to divide internally into recognizable British and American traditions. With this material, I move back and forth across the Atlantic, explaining how the American tradition defined itself in an ongoing and yet changing relation to the British. In this respect, my project participates in the growing body of scholarship concerned with transatlantic literary relations.²

My argument begins with the proposition that during the period from 1750–1850 American authors and readers were more interested in producing and consuming English literature than in creating, to borrow Elaine Showalter’s phrase, “a literature of their own.”³ The literary evidence indeed suggests that during this period, most writers and readers in America considered themselves to be members of the generic English culture that we generally mean by “British culture,” and they thought of their literature as products of such a culture. But this hardly means that anything written before political independence was British. Nor can we assume that a drive for cultural autonomy must have accompanied political independence. Such a view regards American literature as a coherent body of writing whose colonial-era production sounded themes that resonated with the writers of the American Renaissance. Hence the continuous search within a field constituted solely by American texts to find “profound continuities between early American literary expression and the classic literature of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.”⁴ An alternative view argued most forcefully by William Spengemann claims that literary history

should not be confused with the history of the national culture. Writing in the English language, particularly when writers in British America lacked political autonomy, should in his view be read as British since it is of a piece with other British writings.⁵ To my way of thinking, both views are only half true.

During the period leading up to the Revolutionary War, British America was indeed composed of British colonies. On the other hand, most colonists from the British Isles were all too aware of the fact that they no longer lived there. Even though, and perhaps because, they had to do so under conditions that differed sharply from those that fostered literature back in England, from captivity narratives through the earliest sentimental fiction produced on this side of the Atlantic, colonial authors generally wanted to write as Englishmen.⁶ In the face of the French threat during the Seven Years War, they indeed felt especially inspired to reaffirm their British identification. Benjamin Franklin confessed to Lord Kames in 1760 that “no one can rejoice more sincerely than I do, on the Reduction of Canada; and this not merely as I am a Colonist, but as I am a Briton.”⁷ In 1765 John Adams felt the need to ask, “Is there not something extremely fallacious in the common-place images of mother country and children colonies? Are we the children of Great Britain any more than the cities of London, Exeter, and Bath? Are we not brethren and fellow subjects with those in Britain, only under a somewhat different method of legislation, and a totally different method of taxation?”⁸ For a colonist in America to declare himself a Briton was evidently to make a reasonable claim to national identity. Although they were called “Americans,” that term did not in any way cancel out the more fundamental British identity that tied them to their nation of origin.⁹ Indeed, until the decade of the Revolution, each colony observed separate lines of economic and cultural ties to the metropolitan center. As a result, Michael Zuckerman notes, “Americans were still very far from being a people bonded by a shared sense of purpose and identity.” What self-awareness we see is that of people who, he contends, have “come to think of themselves as Pennsylvanians or Virginians rather than as Americans.”¹⁰

After the War of Independence, there is every reason to believe that citizens of the new United States knew—and felt keenly—that they were no longer subjects of Great Britain. But it does not necessarily follow from this that the colonists renounced their British identity in other respects simply because they rejected British government. Political separation did not in fact cancel out the importance of one’s having come to America from Great Britain. Indeed, the literary evidence indicates that the newly liberated colonists became if anything more intent on keeping the new homeland as much as possible like the old one in terms of its language, literature, and any number of cultural practices. To the degree that it sub-

jected Englishness to circumstances that could not be imagined back in England, literature written by, for, or about British America was never really British. But to the degree that those who authored and read such literature not only tried to maintain an English cultural identity but also sought to put the stamp of Englishness on the new nation, neither can that literature be called American in any pure and simple way. I take issue, in other words, with the critical practice that for a hundred years has used J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's "What is an American" (Letter III, *Letters From an American Farmer*) as the delineation of a new national culture. Despite the many helpful insights to be gained from recent attempts to compare the literature of the new republic to modern postcolonial literature written in South Asian, Caribbean, or African countries, there was no oppressed or colonized English-language culture of British North America waiting to emerge as soon as decolonization began.¹¹ Literature produced under the conditions I am describing requires an explanatory model that acknowledges a perplexed but continuing relationship between nation-state and national culture.¹² With some important adjustments, I propose, the cultural logic of diaspora offers such a model.

A Culturalist View of Diaspora

It is common to think of diasporic communities as made up of a homogeneous people who have fled war, hunger, religious persecution, or economic hardships in the mother country and so exist as distinct minorities in an adopted homeland. For many years, the term diaspora was applied to four great dispersions of this kind: Jewish, Greek, Armenian, and African. Recently, as many as eighty other groups have either taken on the term to describe their status or have been classified as a diaspora by social scientists. In addition to the dispersion itself, members of a diaspora share some collective memory of the motherland as the diasporic group is scattered across more than one geographical location. This memory affords the motive and basis for maintaining a relationship to the nation of origin, and its consciousness of that relationship becomes central to the identity of the diasporic group. We might think of Franklin's claim that he is a Briton as an example of just this kind of identification. There are several other points on which most scholars of diaspora agree: despite their various dislocations, members of a diaspora maintain cultural ties to their nation of origin and believe someday they will return there. Members of one diasporic group may also maintain ties to other such groups, provided they share the same attachment to their nation of origin. When this double tie breaks down, we can say that the group ceases to be a diaspora and becomes a subculture of the host nation.¹³

The prevailing critical tendency, as I see it, has been to understand diaspora as something on the order of a refusal to assimilate that preserves the ways of the mother country in defiance of the host culture. I want to extend the concept to the situation in British North America, where the culture of one diasporic group—namely the British—assumed hegemony over several others. We have every reason to think that many of the British men and women in North America held onto the idea that they could return to Great Britain. At the very least, they imagined that they were sufficiently English to fit in among their kinsmen back in England. Certainly throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the pattern of immigration and emigration had its ebbs and flows. As political conditions changed, some immigrants to New England did in fact return home—as happened, most notably, during King Philip’s War. In other cases, sermons and writings imagined New England as a haven for the reformers of the church who would return to England either in person or as an example to continue the reformation of the church in England. Cotton Mather predicted as much, when he compared “the English Christians” cast in “the Dark Regions of America” to “the *Light*, which from the midst of this *Outer Darkeness*, is now to be Darted over unto the other side of the *Atlantick Ocean*.”¹⁴ Even those destined never to return to England, many of whom wrote in America, first published their sermons and their poetry in England and for an English readership. As Michael Warner observes, “Virtually every colonial writer looks both homeward to the seat of imperial culture and outward to the localities that would remain for them subordinate.”¹⁵ The other side of the same cultural coin was the colonists’ fear of going native in the wilderness of America and so losing the cultural alternatives that made one recognizably English. The possibility of permanent separation from the English community is especially evident in captivity narratives that portray death as far preferable to either assimilating to Indian ways or undergoing conversion to Catholicism should the captive be turned over to the French.¹⁶

It may seem a stretch to equate colonial Americans with such classic diasporic groups as Jews or Armenians, not to mention Africans violently ripped from their natal lands and shipped to the Americas in chains. It is more common to assume that once the colonists achieved political and economic independence from England, they became a nation in their own right and were no longer concerned with returning to the nation of their origin. Were I actually committed to the classic definition of “diaspora,” I would have to agree that the term does not apply to British Americans. To understand how the cultural logic of diaspora might indeed hold true for the colonists in America, especially in the years leading up to and immediately following the War for Independence, one must develop a somewhat looser concept. This second notion of “diaspora” neither depends on the

dispersed group's direct memory of a single place of origin nor does it require members to remain intent on returning there. Quite the contrary, in order for this second model of diaspora to prove useful, the homeland has to disappear as a geopolitical site to which the diasporic group can entertain the possibility of actually returning.

There are several reasons why a site of national origin might vanish. It could be displaced several times over by the migrations of the dispersed groups. As the Jews were removed from ancient Israel to Babylon, Assyria, then Persia, the Roman Empire, and, later, to the Abbasid and Ottoman Empires, they developed centers of learning dedicated to remembering the homeland. Jonathan and Daniel Boyarim remind us that the place remembered as Zion underwent significant revision as it was reimagined and reproduced through ritual practices over time and in different places throughout the world.¹⁷ The same principle holds true, even moreso perhaps, for the African diaspora. Dispersed by the international commerce in slaves during the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Africans had little opportunity to develop commemorative institutions over four centuries and a series of removals. With successive generations, the memory of Africa was displaced by cultural practices designed perhaps at first to commemorate the place of origin but soon enough to recall subsequent displacements—Brazil, the Caribbean, the rural American South, northern urban ghettos, and so forth.

As the actual memory of the motherland undergoes successive displacements, the members of the diaspora pursue a narrative trajectory that is less a departure and return and more of an extended detour. That is to say, the members of the diaspora move farther from the homeland with each attempt to return or recapture it. Moreover no two branches of a given diaspora undergo precisely the same sequence of displacements or detours; each hangs onto some features of the mother culture and abandons others as these features succeed or fail to accommodate to the new cultural milieu. Over the course of time, the various acts of commemoration that make each group cohere and give it a distinctive identity within a host culture produce a purely imaginary construct that replaces the sense of home grounded on experience and perpetuated by actual memory. In many instances the place of origin no longer exists as a geopolitical reality. Thus, for example, the notion of Zion serves as a kind of placeholder for the original homeland for many Jews with quite different points of origins. So, too, a generic pan-Africa represents the place of origin for many African Americans.

Let us assume there is an implicit cultural limit to the centrifugal dynamic whereby a diasporic culture develops internal differences through the process of dispersal. If the diaspora is going to maintain its foreignness rather than turn into one of so many subcultures within a host nation,

horizontal affiliations must develop among its various branches; this happens as together various groups exchange commemorative practices and generalize the homeland, performing acts of community held in common by all Jews or Africans, even at the expense of local practices that serve as relics of actual memory. As various groups of a particular diaspora produce such a purely cultural common ground, a kind of centripetal cultural force begins to counter their geopolitical dispersal. The centripetal force, I must hasten to add, pulls the dispersed groups not back to the place of origin but toward an imagined cultural source that has in fact displaced that origin. This centripetal force is generated by the production of a generic homeland and results in a new sense of collectivity. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy develops a model along precisely these lines to explain how “Africa” became an imaginary homeland for many groups belonging to the African diaspora.¹⁸ His model offers what I regard as the best way to date to understand most modern diasporas, because it bases a group’s ability to maintain a semblance of autonomy and collective identity over time on its cultural practices, not on its ability to trace its genealogy back to some point of origin.

Instead of formulating a continuous tradition that aims at retrieving a lost past, an intellectual process Gilroy identifies with the chronotope of the road, he prefers to think within the chronotope of the crossroad. Let me offer one especially telling example of this alternative notion of cultural transmission that reveals the importance of detours, disruptions, circularity, and exchanges in keeping a diaspora alive and vital even under the conditions of globalization. Gilroy retells the story of musician James Brown’s visit to West Africa in the 1960s. The American failed to find what he went there looking for or indeed anything that could be called “authentic” African music. Instead, Brown encountered African musicians who had listened to his African American band and began imitating his music. He was particularly impressed with Fela Ransome Kuti, whom he describes as “kind of like the African James Brown” (199). While Kuti and his band evidently felt they were discovering their Africanness in James Brown, Brown’s own band was picking up material from the Nigerian musicians. “Some of the ideas my band was getting from that band had come from me in the first place,” he reports, “but that was okay with me. It made the music that much stronger” (199). One can read diasporic cultural materials for the continuities that connect African American music and literature to an “authentic” origin in Africa. Rather than perform an imaginary return, one can look at points of exchange where the groups meet and agree on common ground. What these musicians shared was not the purity of some African origin, but something created in and through cultural exchanges across historical time and geographical space. Both African and African American obviously discovered their Africanness in the other’s performance. Gilroy claims that such an exchange “explodes the dualistic

structure which puts Africa, authenticity, purity, and origin in crude opposition to the Americas, hybridity, creolisation, and rootlessness" (199).

I want to draw a direct parallel between the relationship of modern and antimodern African diasporic cultural traditions, as Gilroy describes them, and the case of American literature. From the earliest attempts to canonize American literature in the nineteenth century to the present day, the tendency has been to trace a lineage of truly American authors either back through the American Renaissance to the Puritan fathers or, alternatively, back through the sentimental tradition to captivity narratives. The scholar-critic who participates in such a project looks for continuities between present-day cultural production and one or the other of these origins. To illustrate the difference with regard to American literature between the classic essentialist model of diaspora and a culturalist model like Gilroy's, we must keep in mind the difference between writing in seventeenth-century colonial America and the literature produced in America during the second half of the eighteenth century. Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, for example, equates her situation as an English woman captive to natives of North America with that of a Christian whose faith is tested in the wilderness. That the traces of what she identified as "English cattle" and an "English path" were equivalent to signs of God's presence should tell us that Rowlandson was writing as an English woman, who wanted to maintain her ties to other English people and ultimately her fitness to return to the community of her origin, or if not that, then the kingdom of heaven.¹⁹ One hundred years later, such authors as Philip Freneau, Timothy Dwight, and Joel Barlow write as Americans reproducing English literature for and about a new nation—whose culture, they insisted, was no less English for having been transferred to and reproduced in North America. In other words, the kind of writer who emerges in America during the second half of the eighteenth century represents a decisive shift away from that of the transplanted English man or woman.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, American authors reinvented the homeland by producing a generic notion of Englishness particularly adapted to the North American situation. In what is considered one of the first American novels, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), the American protagonist can conduct a successful courtship because he is familiar with English letters. By way of contrast, his English predecessors tended to squander the same cultural capital in relationships that read like tawdry tales of seduction. What distinguishes Worthy from the European libertine is a taste in literature that manifests itself in a capacity not only to feel the proper sentiments but also to put them in writing; Worthy wins a wife by means of his skill as a letter writer. We can also see a generalized Englishness produced in the works of Charles Brockden Brown, who was keen on writing a body of American letters that would achieve recognition in England. The protagonist of Brown's *Clara Howard*

displays a single-minded devotion to English literature that would classify his British counterpart as a dilettante. This same devotion on the part of an American artisan makes him worthy of marrying the daughter of an English gentleman. Rather than preserve an ancient tie to the land from which Englishmen immigrated to America, this novelistic notion of Englishness transforms the concept into one that can travel. “English” is no longer a state of being, nor is it a matter of who one is so much as a performance and a question of what one does. There is abundant historical evidence to back up what these literary examples suggest: that by the last half of the eighteenth century, an increasing number of Americans were thinking of themselves as generically English. T. H. Breen ascribes a notable rise in the consumption of English goods to a “re-Anglicization” of America.²⁰ Differences between the English in Virginia and those in Massachusetts apparently began to matter less than their common cultural ground as British colonials, thanks to what historian Colin Kidd has described as the process of “anglicizing homogenization,” a process that became pervasive from 1760 on.²¹

To remain English—and we have every reason to think most colonial Englishmen wished to do so—they would have had to reproduce certain elements of their Englishness in North America. By ensuring the reproduction of that culture in subsequent generations—which is, I believe, the implicit purpose of any literature, but especially a literature produced in a colonial situation—Anglo-America was reproducing itself. That “self” was a reproduction, not of the mother culture, but of what had from the very beginning been an adaptation of the mother culture to a diasporic setting. From this it follows that a certain adaptation of English culture came to dominate the American colonies because the British did a better job of reproducing the culture of the homeland away from home than, say, the Germans did in Pennsylvania, the French in northern New England, or the Dutch in New York. I am not suggesting that British immigrants were especially good at retaining their sense of themselves overseas. I am only saying that they were especially good at reproducing cultural practices at once adapted for the colonial setting and yet able at once to distinguish Anglo-Americans from every other group and to subordinate other cultures to a pervasively normative and yet curiously elastic definition of Englishness. It is the ability of English culture to travel, take root elsewhere, and subordinate other groups, even to the envy of its competitors, that fascinates me, an ability peculiar not only to the fashion and food ways linked to English culture but to the literature as well. On these grounds, if for no other reason, I argue that we stand to learn something new about American literature and its curious relation to English culture by thinking of it in terms of a diasporic literature—one aimed at reproducing certain traits of Englishness in a radically non-European environment.

