We Are Citizens of the World: A Defence of the American Literature Survey (in the Name of Cosmopolitanism)

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Abstract
In this frictionless age of individually tailored newsfeeds, in which deeply illiberal movements on both sides of the Atlantic have set about dismantling fundamental social and political institutions, it is crucial that we in our Scandinavian undergraduate English programs do not abandon our commitment to the traditional American literature survey in favour of more internationally oriented courses in World English, as has been proposed by stakeholders both within and without our discipline. The ability to think critically and independently about our own cultural space, largely defined by American terms, can only emerge dialectically, through a continued engagement with the common patrimony of poets, novelists, and thinkers that have articulated and interrogated the very core values and beliefs of our liberal democracies. Reading deeply in this tradition makes our students better and more informed members of society, more principled in their thought, more sensitive to the difference between universal and relative values, more alive to the existence and needs of others, more aware of how our culture is predicated on questioning, challenging, and critiquing those who hold power and the structures that make the exercise of that power possible. As such, defending the teaching of the American canon is not a conservative, rearward-looking stance, concerned with the primacy and preservation of the works of dead white males. On the contrary, it is a position predicated on the urgent belief that the future health and vitality of our society depends on a continuous critical negotiation with our artistic past.

Keywords: American literature survey, canon, cosmopolitanism, role of humanities, dialectics

In a minor but celebrated operation a year before the end of the Second World War, a British SOE team, supported by Cretan resistance fighters, waylaid and abducted the commander of the German forces in Crete, Major General Karl Kreipe. In his book *A Time of Gifts*, the British Major

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in charge of the operation, Patrick Leigh Fermor, known to our contemporary ears as perhaps the most accomplished of all 20th century travel writers, later recalled the following episode, after three days of anxiety and danger, having eluded their pursuers through the Cretan wilderness:

> During a lull in the pursuit, we woke up among the rocks just as brilliant dawn was breaking over the crest of Mount Ida. We had been toiling over it, through snow and then rain, for the last two days. Looking across the valley at this flashing mountain-crest, the general murmured to himself: '*Vides ut alta stet nive candidum / Soracte …*' It was one of the ones I knew! I continued on from where he had broken off: '… *nec jam sustineant onus / Silvae elaborates, gelque / Flumina constiterint acuto …*' and so on, through the remaining five stanzas to the end. The general's blue eyes had swivelled away from the mountain-top to mine—and when I'd finished, after a long silence, he said: 'Ach so, Herr Major!' It was very strange. As though, for a long moment, the war had ceased to exist. We had both drunk at the same fountains long before; and things were different between us for the rest of our time together. (1977: 94–95)

Reading about this incident I was powerfully struck by how the two enemies shared a moment of mutual understanding through their participation in a common linguistic and literary culture that, even at this pitched moment in history, superseded national and ideological boundaries—Führer und Volk, Queen and Empire. That Latin should allow for the articulation of a unified cultural identity counterbalancing a divided political one, is significant, as this superannuated language survived from the fall of the Roman Empire to the present as the medium of the far and away most important cosmopolitan project of Western Europe, the Roman Catholic Church. But neither co-religiosity, nor any of the other easy affinities the two enjoyed, such as shared profession, class, or ethnicity is what engendered sympathy between them; rather, it was the imprint on their minds by a few lines of Roman verse that alerted them to the moment's transcendent quality, humanised each in the eyes of the other, and revealed a moral dimension beyond the conventional pieties of wartime.

The world in which military men could reasonably be expected to reel off Horace's ninth ode is irrevocably gone, but it does leave the question of what has assumed Latin's function as the language of intercultural communication and classical literature's place as the bedrock of a liberal education? The answer to this question seems obvious. Perhaps our own religious practice has shifted from Catholicism to capitalism, perhaps

cosmopolitan ideals are frequently confused with global supply chains, but while Fermor and Kreipe shared a dead language, an ossified culture, today we share a living language, a vital culture: In the same manner that Latin was the medium of the ideological and artistic content of our Catholic past, English is the medium of the ideological and artistic content of our capitalist present. There is a tremendous sense of possibility in this basic truth, in that such moments of understanding as enjoyed by Fermor and Kreipe—the recognition of having drunk at the same fountains—are no longer the exclusive preserve of a narrow socio-economic elite with a classical education. Our shared language and the shared cultural grammar it generates, while certainly far from universal, represents an unprecedented democratisation of access to reciprocal transactions of all kinds in a vast, interconnected marketplace of ideas and expressions. From the susurrus of the academy to the great hum of popular entertainment, the English language serves as pragmatic means for our interchange with the world, though in preparing our educational curricula we should never lose sight of how the terms of this engagement are largely defined by an American outlook and facilitated through the mediation of American content. This latter point is particularly apropos at the present moment, as the very identity and definition of English in higher education in Norway is up for discussion both at the disciplinary and political levels of discourse, and several voices from both within and without the academy are calling for a comprehensive reconsideration of the American literature survey, wishing to replace it with a more expansive course that includes literary expressions from across the entire English-speaking world without privileging received canonical authors and texts. This is in many ways an attractive idea, but one I fear would represent a withdrawal from rather than an advance towards any significant moral or artistic engagement, as it fails to adequately account for the extent to which the American experience defines our own past, present, and future. Indeed, I would argue that it is only through its exploration of the literary tradition of the United States that the subject of English is allowed to serve its noblest formative function, to introduce our students to and encourage them to participate in the great cultural conversation that describes our world.

There can be little question that the pre-eminence of the United States has exercised a transformative effect on global culture in the 20th century, a process that has accelerated in the years since World War II. In the Norwegian context, the English language has thoroughly influenced our

vernacular and is now even threatening to displace it from the public sphere altogether—entertainment, education, workplace—rendering it an entirely domestic language to be used only within the family unit, while American culture in general has emphatically shifted the mores and outlook of a nation that up to 1945 was merely a provincial, diminutive, and infinitely less attractive version of the German Reich (the second one, if not the third). Not that I am in any way suggesting that any of these cultural entities, on either side of the Atlantic, are or ought to be stable or fixed, nor that evolutions or revolutions in language, literature, or culture are inherently good or bad. My point is that just as the English language is a promiscuous mix of Old English, Norse, Norman, French, Dutch, Latin, Greek, and many more, to the point where Germanic words constitute only a quarter of the complete lexicon, American culture is shaped by the continuous melding of widely disparate ethnic and experiential influences, and is transmuted by its own ongoing dynamic interchange with the world. I find it a bit disingenuous, then, in the context of discussing literature surveys, to suggest that American culture is limited to the strictly national, as if we were talking about Luxembourg, Estonia, or Iceland, not just because of the sheer scale and diversity of this immigrant nation of more than 300 million people across 50 states that comprise a land mass more than twice that of all the members of the European Union combined, but because the English-American linguistic-cultural continuum has become, for people throughout our part of the world, the de-facto medium and content of a distinctly cosmopolitan identity. In the exact same way that the English language has ceased to belong exclusively to the English, the discourse of American culture has ceased to belong exclusively to the United States; it has become a kind of common patrimony, to the extent that when we are talking about America we are really talking about a part of ourselves.

In her 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association, Shelley Fishkin heralded the transnational turn in literary scholarship, championing the recent work of scholars who ‘pay increasing attention to the historical roots of multidirectional flows of people, ideas, and goods and the social, political, linguistic, cultural, and economic crossroads generated in the process’ (2005: 22). This ongoing transnational interchange is highly complex and one that requires critical engagement beyond the traditional framework of the field. The past three decades’ worth of investigations into the myriad ways in which American literature

both draws on and gives rise to cultural energies across time and space—Yogita Goyal evokes the 'cross-cultural dialogue of the Information Age, where the diffusion of cultural forms through immigration and the spread of capital and commodities is ubiquitous and dazzling in both speed and reach' (2017: 6)—have since fully justified Fishkin's enthusiasm, and a great number of critical studies have not only served to decentre what may be legitimately understood by the term 'American,' but have also supplied productive new paradigms for thinking about power and influence in the age of American empire. Still, while generally underpinned by progressive political convictions and motivated by the desire to demonstrate the arbitrariness of national delineations, transnational scholarship may nevertheless, as Winfried Fluck cautions, ironically serve to reiterate American exceptionalism by implicitly suggesting how 'the global dominance of American culture … can now be attributed to the fact that American culture is already in itself constituted by diversity and has thus anticipated an international trend toward cosmopolitanism' (2011: 369–70). To Fluck, whose concern is less with exploring questions of hyphenated identity than with developing an overarching critique of neoliberal globalism with all its attendant ills, the virtue of the transnational approach lies in how it allows us to 'enhance our knowledge and capture the full complexity of America's international entanglement' (2011: 380), an outlook I find particularly apropos for the American literature survey in Norway. While the culture of the United States is in itself certainly extraordinarily rich and diverse, though perhaps not more so than that of any other continental formation, it is the profundity of its global reach and influence, certainly unparalleled by any other current political or cultural entity, that renders it irreducible to our educational efforts. Irrespective of our different political persuasions, if we truly wish to explore how the world is connected 'through networks of power, commerce, culture, and resistance' (Goyal 2017: 2), we cannot afford not to privilege the literature that has written us into being.

The great American writers and the great topical concerns of American literature are kept alive not just by an elite of literati or by inclusion in our college survey courses, but by being continuously recycled into the pop cultural pulp or pap that, in the conventional dietary metaphor, is avidly consumed by our young. Consumed, yes, but like the food we eat provides nourishment for our bodies, so do our Netflix binges provide the fodder for our imaginations, over time supplying the very

fabric of our thought. Bakhtin knew it: 'Even the most intimate self-awareness is an attempt to translate oneself into the common code … In this regard, consciousness … is not just a psychological phenomenon but also, and above all, an ideological phenomenon, a product of social intercourse' (1926: 486). We fashion ourselves and the world in which we live from the linguistic, conceptual, and cultural tools available to us, and these come with a provenance. Melville, Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson are still fresh and relevant as part of a cultural continuum that, because of ideological constitution and historical accident, forms the superstructure of global hegemony. In other words, American empire has universalised American concerns. Turning one's back on this fact is to keep our students from the knowledge and skills they need to engage critically with the world in which they actually live. We may approve or disapprove of this world, but we have a responsibility as their teachers to contextualise it for them, allow them to see where it comes from, and explain what dialectical struggles underpin it. Abandoning the teaching of the American survey in favour of World English or Commonwealth literature, as some of my colleagues now propose, is in this sense akin to discussing 20th century music without privileging jazz, blues, rock, rap, and hip hop over raï, gharbi, raga, guzheng, and Tuvan throat singing. To be sure, there are places in the world where *A Tribe Called Quest* is not as relevant as *Tyva Kyzy*, but we do not teach in one of those places. Even if such a move is motivated by the most deeply sympathetic progressive convictions, it is doing our students a massive disservice, denying them access to the best our culture has to offer and leaving them prey to the worst, whether out of Hollywood or Washington. No doubt, they will continue to Netflix and chill, but if they have not read Cotton Mather, if they have not read Nathaniel Hawthorne, if they are unfamiliar with the roots and branches of American puritanism, then how can their responses to TV drama like *The Handmaid's Tale*, or the reasoning of reactionaries like Mike Pence, for that matter, ever move beyond the simply adjectival?

I would at this point like to stress that I am not asserting the inherent exceptionalism of American literature, nor am I claiming that it rises above the parochial. In spite of its remarkable diversity—the last ten chronological entries in the Norton Anthology are for Alvarez, Harjo, Dove, Cisneros, Erdrich, Song, Lee, Alexie, Lahiri, and Diaz—there is arguably a lack of interest in an experience beyond the American experience, even if the setting is abroad or within an immigrant

community. That being said, it should in fairness be pointed out that the depiction of five continental cultures meeting, co-existing, adapting, and changing in a Brooklyn neighbourhood, while focused on life in the United States, probably represents a far more significant and sustained engagement with the often tangled and conflicting formation of the cosmopolitan self than the belletristic portrayal of the mutual affinity and easy conviviality of cultural and economic global elites. In any event, such parochialism is not unique to American literature. *All* literature is essentially parochial—and what elevates it from this parochialism has partly to do with qualities inherent to the work and partly with the knowledge, abilities, and interests inherent to the readership. Literature must be defined both in terms of its intrinsic qualities, whether cognitive, moral, or aesthetic, as well as by its extrinsic qualities, how it forges connections within the literary realm and how it engages with and impacts the world of its readers. This latter idea is not to be confused with a work being topical—sometimes two years might date a work more than two hundred or even two thousand years—rather, it has to do with recognising that literature's relative importance proceeds from the readership's cultural purview: We recognise the greatness we are conditioned to recognise, and we engage with the issues that we are predisposed to care about. It is worth noting that the question thus confronting us is not 'why read literature?', but rather 'why read American literature?' For the former, all the usual defences of reading may be brought to bear: It forces us to confront key ethical questions, it builds empathy and encourages emotional engagement, it allows us to explore the vertiginous abyss of human interiority, and so on. For the latter, we have to seek additional justification in the centrality of the American experience to Western culture, how its literary expression serves as the necessary concomitant to the vernacular literatures introduced over the course of a decade or more of basic education.

The literatures of the Nordic countries, crystallised from the broadly similar yet undeniably distinct geographical, social, cultural, and historical conditions of our particular corner of the world, are inextricably linked with the rise of the nation state and the formulation of a national identity, a characteristic perhaps somewhat more pronounced in those realms belated to their independence. As a budding student of what was then and still is somewhat charitably termed Nordic literature, I was not surprised to find, upon arriving at university, that what this actually meant was

Norwegian literature, and that while worthwhile poetry, prose, and drama may well have been written by our Nordic brethren, this would remain wholly beyond my ken, and that my time would once again be devoted to the vagaries of taciturn farmers, uprooted industrial workers, and fishermen in boiled-wool mittens. Not that there is anything wrong with that. If we accept the nation state as a valid political entity (and, given the deplorable current state of pan-Scandinavianism, it seems difficult to identify a viable alternative), then that entity must necessarily sustain itself through a continuous negotiation with its own past. Each of us are, for better or worse, defined by a national, a regional, a local, and a familial identity, and it would impoverish our thought not to listen to what those who went before us found it most important to hand down to us. But this self, whether nourished in the schoolhouse or by the family hearth, must find its complement in a larger, more expansive self that addresses itself to the concerns of a wider world, a world beyond its own immediate kith and kin.

Consider, in this respect, the efforts of the Founding Fathers to establish a nation predicated not on ethnicity but ideas, and the concomitant effort made to enfranchise each individual citizen of that polity. Does Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur have anything to say on 'the American, this new man' (1782: 69) that has a bearing on our own current handwringing over what it means to be, say, a Norwegian? Does Thomas Jefferson's principled defence of civil liberties retain its culturally invigorating tenor in a Norwegian society that kept its law against blasphemy until 2015, a law some political parties are keen to reintroduce? Emerging from the first modern nation predicated on a multicultural identity, the literature of the United States has already rehearsed the same issues that all the Nordic countries will have to come to terms with over the next several generations, as new voices emerge and our societies inevitably undergo a period of cultural redefinition and change—in other words, as they evolve in a more cosmopolitan direction. I would argue, therefore, that if we were to close our eyes on the American past, we would at the same time close our eyes on the Nordic future, radically impeding our ongoing efforts to understand disparity, bridge difference, and build a common sense of purpose. Studying American literature—the literature that has sought to explore, shape, celebrate, critique, and transform the ideas that form the very basis of our societies—not only allows us to contemplate what we think about and how we go on thinking about it, it

empowers us to engage in a thoughtful, informed discussion about American culture's, which is to say our own culture's, merits and demerits.

From the very beginning—assuming, of course, that our surveys do not place an undue emphasis on tedious Puritan sermons—the main canonical progression of American literature, greatly enriched by its inclusion of minority voices, rehearses questions crucial to the formation of global citizenship, not merely in the sense, as in Nussbaum's well-known defence of the value of literature, that it 'promotes habits of mind that lead toward social equality in that they contribute to the dismantling of the stereotypes that support group hatred' (1996: 92), but in that it asks students to consider how their own lives and times integrate into a larger and ever-expanding cultural continuum where the self blends into the other and what is past is prologue. From the provincial backwater of Irving to the imperial metropolis of DeLillo, major writers like Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Douglass, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, Twain, Chopin, Adams, James, Wharton, DuBois, Pound, Stevens, Fitzgerald, Toomer, Hughes, Ellison, Bellow, Updike, Pynchon, Morrison, and a host of others, have each in their own way grappled with the question of how the American consciousness is shaped or transformed by its participation in a larger world, an effort that, broadly speaking, was motivated by the desire first to define and then to question the notion of American exceptionalism. These are poets and thinkers who interrogate the very core values of our civilisation, making it clear to us what we are truly about. Reading them makes our students better and more informed members of society, more principled in their thought, more sensitive to the difference between universal and relative values, more alive to the existence and needs of others, more aware of how our culture is predicated on questioning, challenging, and critiquing those who hold power and the structures that makes the exercise of that power possible. Mario Vargas Llosa once remarked that literature represents humanity's best means of 'forming critical and independent citizens who will not be manipulated by those who govern them' (2001: 9), and I would argue strongly that this ability to think critically and independently does not proceed from ignorance, nor can it exist in a vacuum; rather, it emerges from an intimate knowledge of what has already been discussed, it enters into a dialogue with both history and the present world. The notion of a purview is crucial, here, how the range and fabric of our thought arises from an inherently dialectic process. My point is that defending the teaching of the American

canon is not a conservative, rearward-looking stance, concerned with the primacy and preservation of dead white male culture. On the contrary, it is a position predicated on the belief that the future health and vitality of our society depends on a continuous negotiation with our past. In its tendency towards subversion of temporal authority and normative values, in its multivalence and cognitive strength, in its sheer diversity and refusal to admit a dominant point of view, American literature impels an ongoing critical examination of both society and self that can only be termed moral.

As such, the attempt to reorient the subject of English away from its traditional focus on the US (and, for that matter, the UK), as can for instance be seen in the succession of drafts for the future Norwegian grade-school planning frameworks, or in the heated discussions over the fate of the national literature surveys at the universities, to me ultimately implies a reductive attitude, in which the complexities, difficulties, and ambiguities of the cultural and intellectual history of the English-speaking world at large are inevitably reduced to short, non-contextualised, programmatic introductions to a host of strictly delineated topical issues, such as race, class, gender, human rights, and ecological devastation. For or against slavery? Discuss! Doubtlessly well-intended and easier on the teacher, this shift towards a kind of slapdash sociology, in which classroom texts are merely efferent rather than aesthetic (Rosenblatt 1978), in my view threatens to fatally impoverish the subject of English of its formative qualities, reducing it to yet another channel for morally simplistic (which is to say propagandistic) art. This is a danger that Northrop Frye warned against, asserting that 'there can be no such thing as a sociological 'approach' to literature' (1949: 6), not because sociologists should not use literary material, but because they are under no disciplinary obligation to pay attention to literary value. If we produce candidates who, at the various levels of instruction, are merely able to parrot whatever truisms are currently in fashion, a true exchange of ideas will cease, an activity that can only receive its nourishment and continuing vitality from rehearsing the ultimately unresolvable complexities of literature.

I was recently in Russia, attending a lecture on 20th century American literature. The professor methodically traced its progression through the century, carefully avoiding mention of any of the writers typically represented in anthologies such as the Norton. Of particular interest to her, and in her view beyond question the preeminent American novelist of the

century, the one who most succinctly summed up the experience of modern American man and woman, was Erskine Caldwell, purveyor of the kind of gothic melodrama that Leslie Fiedler aptly termed 'horror-pornography' (1960: 475), while 'the number two American writer,' as you have no doubt already guessed, was Brainard Cheney. Of course, concern for the plight of the earthbound Georgia tenant-sharecropper proceeds readily from the orthodox Marxist-materialist outlook of Stalin-era literary criticism, but I was nevertheless left with a nagging feeling that perhaps her grasp of the literary, cultural, and political history of the United States was somewhat tenuous, and that her enthusiastically nodding students, for whom her word carried the ring of absolute authority, ultimately deserved better.

Having lived in the United States for ten years, during which time I earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in English and American literature, visited more than 40 states, made friends and enemies of different backgrounds and persuasions, married into a family of mixed ethnic and religious background, lived on the wrong side of the tracks, wrote penitent letters to the IRS, and in general remained thoroughly integrated into the country's daily round, I do feel that I am able to convey a responsible version of the American experience to my own Norwegian freshman audience, though I would be the first to admit that there are a great many books I have not read, places I have not been, life circumstances I cannot access, and perspectives I cannot lay claim to. But when I talk about, say, Flannery O'Connor, I know the places and the people she writes about intimately, and my personal experience and 25 years of reading within the same tradition informs and strengthens my teaching of her work. In this I gather I am no different than any of my distinguished peers, raised in a New Critical tradition that privileged the internal structure and independent value of the literary object, but yet having absorbed the caution of cultural theorists like Cornel West that 'it is impossible to grasp the complexity and multidimensionality of a specific set of artistic practices without relating it to other broader cultural and political practices at a given historical moment' (1993: 42). And knowing this, perhaps even taking a little pride in my ability to forge such sometimes unexpected connections, I wonder at what point our efforts to teach, say, World English or Commonwealth literature, which is to say to represent the life and experience of a series of different individuals from different backgrounds in different cultures at different times, none of

which any of us have at best more than the most tangential relation to, would involve a level of oversimplification, decontextualisation, emotional projection, and, frankly, wholesale romantic imagination that renders the entire enterprise suspect? However progressive our motivations might be, however sharp our critical gaze, this to me involves a certain happy-go-lucky appropriation of narratives for our own ends that seems, well, more colonialist than cosmopolitan. Let me go further still: Are we academics or are we not? Is English a narrowly defined subject or a convenient catchall of subjective opinion? If grinding scholarship and years of first-hand experience are no longer requisite, if we can just talk off the cuff about anything, everything, what legitimacy do we retain as a scientific enterprise? Read a story of young love among the competing clans and rivalling political factions of the Sandawe minority of Dodoma, bone up on key tenets of East African animism, apply a dab of francophone critical theory, and feel wholly entitled to represent the 'other' to our own enthusiastically nodding students. Lord, grant me the confidence of a mediocre white man!

To me, this kind of lateral ignorance is by definition parochial, and this is why abandoning the American 100-level survey in the name of cosmopolitanism, as proposed by my fellow Americanist and good friend Stephen Dougherty, is perhaps the most fatuous argument of all. Despite painful missteps, shortcomings, and flaws, contemporary Western civilisation, with its roots in an Enlightenment political philosophy first and most convincingly realised in the United States, has arguably produced the most free, the most diverse, the most equal, the most progressive, the most enfranchised, the most tolerant, the most educated, the most scientifically accomplished, the most artistically heterogenous, and yes, the most cosmopolitan societies in the history of the world. To dismiss the need for a sustained, in-depth engagement with the mainline ideas and experiences that have produced this hegemonic cultural continuum, ideas shaped by centuries of struggle against tyrannical authority, social injustice, racial bigotry, and sexual discrimination, is, in my view, dangerous, as it proceeds from the common and erroneous assumption that the values that underpin current liberal democracy are universal values that can safely be taken for granted. This is simply not the case, and as deeply illiberal movements on both sides of the Atlantic have set about dismantling fundamental social and political institutions, institutions currently offering the only effective resistance to a host of

executive abuses, it is crucial that we continue to educate our students in the intellectual and artistic history of the United States before moving on to the (in the context of undergraduate-level English in Scandinavia) important but decidedly secondary enterprise of representing alternate points of view. We must be allowed to wrestle with the ideas and experiences that have given shape to our societies, to measure ourselves against the promises—whether fulfilled or betrayed—that the past has articulated for us. And at a time when the ugly American incarnate is tweeting demotically straight from the White House, I see it as our responsibility as teachers—as our moral responsibility—to give voice to a different American identity, a different American story, an America we likely do know but our students likely do not. If we fail to do this, what will we accomplish but produce a generation of young people completely unaware of the cosmopolitanism inherent to American culture, young people as ignorant of Thoreau and Whitman as they are of Du Bois and Washington, young people who can only cry: 'All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?' (Jones 1979)

Should we deprive our students of reading Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, writers and thinkers to whom they would otherwise have no direct access, we would not only severely inhibit the awareness of how ideas engage, mutate, and evolve over time and across borders, we would leave them vulnerable to distortions of what the American (and by extension the Western) artistic and cultural narrative is, likely producing two equally fallacious opposing polarities: That of the American tradition as one of oppression, patriarchy, racism, and colonialism—and that of the American tradition as one of liberty, equality, tolerance, and democracy. The point is that by actually reading American literature, you would be as quickly disabused of your notions of an exclusionary and intolerant intellectual tradition, as you would be of a triumphantly progressive one. Political leaders might sound the clarion for America as the city on the hill, but the entire history of American letters amounts to a radical questioning of this claim. Kipling called for Americans to pick up the white man's burden, but if there is one thing American literature shows us, it is the readiness to reject such calls. As Gerald Graff points out, in his overview of the series of conflicts inherent to literary instruction on American college campuses, the imposition of a uniform canon 'not only

failed to turn academic literary studies into the effective instrument of nationalist ideology some of the founders hoped they would be, but in some ways it subverted that ideology' (1989: 13).

It is dangerous to leave the corrective of canonical engagement behind, as the fringe political stances that are presently gaining currency throughout the West are predicated, as reactionary and radical stances alike tend to be, on a caricature of the culture they seek either to preserve or subvert: President Trump talks about the pre-eminence of Western culture but remains blithely ignorant of the tradition he purports to defend; the activists who wish to decolonise our universities (a debate making a splash through a much-publicised 2018 PRIO seminar in Oslo) build their argument on an understanding of both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric truth that seems almost wilfully benighted. These symptomatic attitudes, that each in their way are damaging to the commonweal, can only gain traction if we allow cultural amnesia to take hold, if we neglect to cultivate an historical consciousness in our students, as knowledge of and engagement with the canon of Western thought—and, in terms of understanding our own contemporary world, the literary tradition of the United States—will immediately dispel such simplistic narratives and outlandish misrepresentations, and serve as a bulwark against what I think can fairly be termed political and intellectual immoderation. This is a function at the heart of a scholarly discipline that, as Bennett argues, in the wake of World War II was consciously designed 'to provide an alternative to radical and reactionary politics … [to] equip [students] with common experiences, intellectual touchstones, ideas and debates that mitigated extreme partisanship, or worse' (2018: 4). As outlier narratives on both sides are gathering momentum—Bennett symptomatically notes that 'the editorial logic of right-wing media resembles closely the default position of many recent books and dissertations in literary studies' (2018: 8)—it seems vitally important that we as college teachers do what we can to counteract the popular shift away from cosmopolitan liberalism towards narrow tribalism (Mann and Ornstein 2012)—whether on the right or the left, whether motivated by nationalism or identity politics—by protecting and nurturing the very survey course in which such a cosmopolitan identity is explicitly celebrated in terms that our students not only can relate to but recognise as their own.

In order for our society to work—and I mean society in the most all-embracing sense—we need a shared language, and we need a shared cultural space. Without these two preconditions, establishing relationships that bridge difference through mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect would be impossible. No doubt, polyglots and polymaths will find each other as they always have, I am not worried about them. But if what we wish for is a broad-based democratic engagement with the world, then the English language is the pragmatic means of interface, and the American literary tradition is the necessary intellectual and artistic framework for rehearsing the common challenges that confront us, whether emotional, ethical, social, or political. By teaching the American survey and cultivating a belief in the value of its lessons, we may arrive at a sense of who we were, who we are, and who we wish to become that sees our respective tribal identities circumscribed, contextualised, and challenged by a larger, more expansive cosmopolitan identity. In this frictionless age of individually tailored newsfeeds, in which each man is truly an island, such a corrective seems more imperative than ever.

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