THE EXTRA

Capable of who knows what development, *The Extra* is a new departure. Contributors are welcome to submit paragraphs or short items, including announcements, for it. Deadlines run as follows: *March*, 1 November; *May*, 20 December; *November*, 10 June; *January*, 15 August.

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*American Literature: The State of the Art*

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I have been asked to talk to you about "The State of the Art: The Tradition." Such a topic obviously requires both definitions and explanations. What I take to be the meaning of "The Art" is the scholarly study of American literature, bounded on one side by cultural history and on the other by theoretical criticism. "The Tradition" I take to mean essentially the history of how we got where we are and, in particular, the central role that the American Literature Group (and now Section) of the Modern Language Association has played in creating that tradition. And I suppose that I have been chosen to talk about it because I belong to that past, because I studied under Gregory Paine and knew Quinn, Stovall, Jones, Murdock, Hubbell, Gohdes, Cowie, Spiller, Leary, and the others whose names still have for me a magic resonance in my memory. So—here is how I think we got where we are.

In America the formal study of the literature written in the English language really began in the nineteenth century, and the graduate study of that literature, profoundly shaped by the methods of German universities, did not begin until the last quarter of that
century. It had a marked philological emphasis, a special bias toward the old and almost lost forms of writing, and a tendency to ignore whatever was contemporary or even recent. Literature was assumed to have developed through three vast epochs: that of oral transmissions, that of manuscript, and that of the book. The tendency to place special emphases on the first two—on oral transmission and manuscripts—was very great.

The writing done in a young nation whose history from its first English settlement to the present was far shorter than the time that elapsed between the writing of Beowulf and the composition of The Battle of Maldon—writing all done three centuries after Gutenberg and considered even by many of the writers themselves to be colonial—such writing, although in English, received painfully short shrift.

When Jay B. Hubbell went to Harvard as a graduate student in 1906, hoping to study American literature, he found there a single half-course offered only in alternate years. Columbia University, with William Peterfield Trent, was probably the only American university then offering more. William B. Cairns, of the University of Wisconsin, was the only Professor of American Literature in the nation until 1917, when Fred Lewis Pattee was given that title at Pennsylvania State College. Of course, some scholarly work was done in the nineteenth century on our national literature: In 1824 John Neal began a series of papers on American writers in Blackwood's Magazine. In 1829 Samuel L. Knapp published Lectures on American Literature. In 1836 the Duyckinck brothers published their Cyclopedia of American Literature. The first great scholar of our subject, Moses Coit Tyler published his two-volume History of American Literature, 1607–1765 in 1878, and his Literary History of the American Revolution in 1897. Charles F. Richardson's American Literature, 1607–1885 was completed in 1888. In the 1880s and nineties the first American Men of Letters series of critical biographies was published. In 1900 appeared the widely respected Literary History of America, by Barrett Wendell, a work which, Pattee suggested, should be retitled A Literary History of Harvard University, with Incidental Glimpses of the Minor Writers of America. Indeed, when The Cambridge History of American Literature was completed in 1921, it was a summary, embodiment,
and extension of the long background upon which the serious historical and scholarly study of American literature has rested since.

But, although a group of fine scholars, such as Tyler, Trent, Erskine, Pattee, and Van Doren—all obviously trained in other disciplines than American literature—had opened up the forest and revealed that the field was there, their colleagues in colleges and graduate schools still gave American Literature little serious attention. *The Book of Margery Kempe* claimed precedence over *The Portrait of a Lady*; the alliterative *Morte d'Arthur* was chosen over *Moby-Dick*; and *The Prick of Conscience* outscored Emerson's *Essays* in the Anglo-Saxon/American contest. Indeed many members of my generation shared my experience of taking my first American literature course in graduate school.

This condition obviously would not continue. Many factors, important among them being the national self-consciousness that followed the First World War and the spectacular growth of college enrollments, were working to make the serious study of American writing not only possible but intellectually respectable. In that context, and to meet that need, the organization which is presenting this program played the major instrumental role.

In 1920, when the Modern Language Association had only fifteen hundred members, its president John M. Manly, of Chaucerian scholarly fame, urged the Association to organize into three large sections—English, Germanic, and Romance—and several Discussion Groups. In Manly's proposal for Discussion Groups no provision was made for American literature. Killis Campbell, of the University of Texas, protested this omission, and English XII, American Literature, was added. Campbell was its first chairman, Arthur Hobson Quinn its second, and Percy H. Boynton its third.

This American Literature Group was then—and, I trust, as a Section still is—active, dynamic, and vigorous in its support of our national literature. To those of us who have had the good fortune to know the moving spirits in the early Group—Jay Hubbell, Arthur Hobson Quinn, Thomas O. Mabbott, Robert E. Spiller, Ernest E. Leisy, Gregory Paine, Norman Foerster, Ralph Rusk, Kenneth Murdock, Howard Mumford Jones, Clarence Gohdes, Lewis Leary—it is difficult to think of them as Young Turks storming the battlements of an entrenched Establishment. But that
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is what they were, and to many in the august Modern Language Association in the 1920s and 1930s they must have seemed as dangerous and disruptive as the New University young radicals who created the coup d'état at the 1969 MLA Convention.

The Group immediately set about creating the tools necessary for making the formal study of American literature effective. In 1923 they formed a committee to make reports and, if possible, to publish them. These reports were to include a list of articles on American literature that appeared in scholarly journals, information on manuscript and research resources available in libraries, and a list of doctoral dissertations on American literature completed or in progress. (In 1928, a total of 56 dissertations had been completed and 77 were in progress; by 1933 the total had risen to 406; by 1962 it was 3,443. Since then the explosion of what we are pleased to call knowledge has been violent.) Thus the Group early set itself busily to the task of assembling the tools of its trade.

But any new movement that is revolutionary needs a manifesto, and in 1928 the American Literature Group produced one: The Reinterpretation of American Literature, edited by Norman Foerster, with essays by Foerster, Pattee, Hubbell, Howard Mumford Jones, Murdock, Paul Kaufman, Vernon Louis Parrington, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and Harry Hayden Clark, and a bibliography by Gregory Paine. The book argued that American literature was created from the elements of European culture and the American environment and shaped by four primary factors: the Puritan tradition, the frontier spirit, romanticism, and realism. The Reinterpretation was a call to action for scholars interested in the American literary experience. As Howard Mumford Jones has said: “The higher study of American literature turned the corner after World War I. For the first time in American history, professors of the subject pooled their sources in two works, published some seven years apart. These were the Cambridge History of American Literature . . . and the Reinterpretation of American Literature. . . . The first of these titles looked backward. The second looked to the future.”

By 1927 the Group was actively working toward the creation of an official journal, and in 1928 it entered into an agreement with Duke University for the publication of American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography, volume
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one, number one of which appeared in March 1929, with Jay B. Hubbell as managing editor and an editorial board consisting of William B. Cairns, Kenneth Murdock, Ralph Rusk, and Fred Lewis Pattee. We are commemorating today the fiftieth anniversary of that journal, in whose pages have been published some of the best scholarly essays on American literature, has been maintained a bibliographic listing of articles on our subject, and have been reviewed most of the scholarly books in the field. American Literature has generally been a strong—indeed an essential—voice for serious, responsible, and dignified scholarship.

Essentially the tradition of American literary scholarship can be suggested by the publications which the Section has sponsored, beginning with The Reinterpretation. It has produced in the journal American Literature a continuing bibliographical and review instrument. Its official bibliographer has not only produced the quarterly listing "Articles on American Literature" in the journal; he has also worked effectively for the Section on the annual MLA Bibliography. The three massive compilations of Articles on American Literature, by Lewis Leary, have also resulted. The Section has continued the publication and updating of Dissertations on American Literature begun in 1923. A series of books of essays on research and scholarship have been sponsored and their revision and updating encouraged: Eight American Authors, Fifteen (later Sixteen) Modern American Authors, Major Writers of Early American Literature, and Fifteen American Authors before 1900. Since 1963 it has sponsored the annual survey and critique American Literary Scholarship. It has encouraged the development of histories such as The Development of American Literary Criticism and Transitions in American Literary History. Its committee on research has from time to time issued reports like Trends in Research in American Literature, 1940-1950. It was the parent organization that brought into being the Center for Editions of American Authors, whose efforts have gone a very long way toward giving us textually sound editions of the major American writers. It has fathered the four American literature Discussion Groups of MLA: Early American Literature, Nineteenth-Century American Literature, Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century American Literature, and Twentieth-Century American Literature. It annually awards the Foerster Prize to the author of the best article published in
American Literature, and from time to time it presents its greatest honor, the Jay B. Hubbell Medallion, to one who has labored valiantly and fruitfully in the field of American literary scholarship.

But after the continuing publication of the journal, the most impressive and, on the whole, successful of the activities of its members acting under the broad aegis of the Section has been the three-volume Literary History of the United States, edited by Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Henry Seidel Canby, and Thomas H. Johnson, and written by fifty-five contributors. The LHUS, as we all know it, first appeared in 1948 after more than a dozen years of discussion, writing, and editing. It has been three times revised and supplemented, the Fourth Edition appearing in 1974.

LHUS in 1948 was what its editors had intended it to be—a work for its own generation. They said, "Each generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms." And indeed it is the past defined in the terms of the 1940s and resting solidly upon the first massive period of historical and critical examination which American literature had had, the period between the two World Wars, that is, preserved in LHUS. And one can further add that it is that past as the academy saw it. Without ignoring the questions which may be raised about the quality of some of the individual essays, the sometimes strange omissions and peculiar inclusions, the matters of emphasis which cause us problems as we use the book, one must admit that it is an extremely well-done attempt to bring forward for its own time a record of the "best that had been thought and said" in the academic world about American literary culture.

In 1945, when the first edition of LHUS stops, about a quarter of a century had passed since the publication of the Cambridge History, and CHAL was dated and almost quaint. In 1974 another quarter of a century had passed, and LHUS was also dated, but it had escaped the quality of quaintness. Between 1920 and 1945 so much primary and indispensable work, largely in the area of literary history, had been done on the American experience that the reshaping of the nature of our literature was virtually complete when the editors undertook the first edition of LHUS. Edward Taylor and Melville were then in the canon. Many of the basic biographies had been written; the letters and journals were at least
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partially available. The primary remaining problem was textual; only Sidney Lanier’s work existed in an adequate scholarly edition.

In the years since 1945 much has happened in the criticism of literature. Critical schools have waxed and waned, to be replaced by other critical schools that in turn have done the same. The New Critics have risen triumphant over the historical scholars, only themselves to be attacked from various vantage points. The Neo-Aristotelians have won their corner of the field, particularly in regard to fiction and drama. The Marxists have reasserted a position now far more sophisticated than their earlier stands in the 1930s. The psychological critics have also staked out a corner of the literary world, particularly those psychological critics who deal with myth, archetype, or language. The phenomenologists are asking us to look at our literary experiences in terms of conventions, structure, and deconstructions, and the structuralists are now bringing us the products of their explorations in anthropology, linguistics, and literary analysis. And we can be confident that these critical schools will in time give way to still others. None of these movements and counter-movements was anticipated or even suggested in LHUS, and this was true in large measure because LHUS had no critical stand and, except on rare occasions, no serious critical concern. But the fact that the LHUS is today dated but not quaint indicates the importance of the ground-breaking scholarly work which was done in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. The bulk of the basic historical facts were generally available by 1945.

If what I have described represents adequately the tradition of American literary scholarship, I think we may sum it up this way: It sees literature as closely related to cultural history. It sees and prizes the utility of accurate fact and data. It operates on the simple—perhaps naive—doctrine that a literary work is about something other than itself or the making of itself. Although its adherents embrace from time to time a variety of often conflicting critical stances, the tradition itself is critically eclectic. It seems to have a relatively simple—although by no means simplistic—view of reality and of history, and it tends to subject literature to the customary American pragmatic tests.

Perhaps its day has past. Certainly much of the work on which the adherents to that tradition have given their best efforts is largely done—most of it done recently enough to stand for a while longer. The question now is how we shall treat the products of
their strenuosity. What does the future hold for American literary study? Or, for the American Literature Section of the Modern Language Association?

Certainly a substantial body of historical, scholarly, textual, and bibliographical work will continue to need to be done. Each generation not only writes its own literary histories; it also establishes its own texts, compiles its own bibliographies, and revises its own canon. But the importance of the tradition of American literary scholarship often today appears a diminished thing—except when it is ignored, and then its centrality becomes embarrassingly obvious. Two types of study today make literary scholarship of this sort seem sometimes dull—the American studies approach and the fashionable critical approaches.

In the American studies approach, inspired by the adventurous muse and seeking the design of the present, fearing the machine in the garden, having determined the lay of the land and sampled the prophetic waters, the American Adam will undoubtedly continue to pursue throughout the virgin land, in form and fable, the great themes of love and death, until, becoming aware of the Puritan origins of his Self, the vanishing American returns, regenerated through violence. But as the Americanist continues this grandiose pilgrimage, he will—whether he knows it or not—be using and on occasion exploiting the resources, the texts, and the bibliographies that the historical scholars I have been talking about bequeathed him. May he learn to use them with a sense of accuracy and respect for fact.

And the fashionable critical schools will continue to theorize, deconstruct, and self-destruct. The neo-Aristotelean critics will pursue their nonmonistic questions of form; the psycholinguists will continue to explore the sometimes shocking depths of our writers' unconscious; the phenomenological critics will worry us about our own consciousness; the semiologists will inspect signs and conventions; the structuralists will seek patterns that unify texts; the deconstructionists will deconstruct to their hearts' content—but all of them will be dependent on that basic work which I have described as the fundamental tradition of American literary study.

Fifty years ago our colleagues were likely to refer to our subject matter as "American literature so-called." We have come a long way, Baby!