**A Poetics of Neutrality: Literary Capital & Emerson’s Critical Legacy**

*Emersonian aesthetics is so radical, so diffuse, and even so contradictory that it elicits perennial refocusing*.

**P. Adams Sitney**

In the Romantic legacy, the evaluative conditions of literature and capitalism respectively have diverged so critically as to seem irreconcilable. Marx unconsciously highlighted the terms of this divergence in identifying how genetic theories of production central to Romanticism’s theory of value are sociologically impractical. Writing that the ‘product of labor’ is always ‘transformed in our hands’:

If we make abstraction from [a] use-value, we abstract also from the material constituents and forms which make it a use-value. It is no longer a table, a house, a piece of yarn or any other useful thing. All its sensuous characteristics are extinguished. Nor is it any longer the product of the joiner, the mason or the spinner, or of any other particular kind of productive labor. With the disappearance of the useful character of the products of labor, the useful character of the kinds of labor embodied in them also disappears; this in turn entails the disappearance of the different concrete forms of labor. They can no longer be distinguished, but are all together reduced to the same kind of labor, human labor in the abstract.

Literature’s inadequacy in coming to terms with the division between purpose in genesis, value in use, and value in circulation was exemplified by its formal innovation of this period, *the novel*. In the novel, the humanist imperative of modernity and the structure of Romantic subjectivity collide with political and economic superstructures to establish a formal sphere in which concrete and particular determination miraculously survives the process of commodification, a formalism that therefore proposes to refuse the philosophical exigencies of a market system, even as it is thoroughly embedded within them. Hence Georg Lukács writes that the novel carries ‘the fragmentary nature of the world’s structures into the world of forms’, illustrating the degree to which the writer, or reader, inherits the terms of such an obfuscation in the activity of comprehension. Later critical respondents to Lukács suggest this parallel between economic and cultural formation has been rephrased as a critical tool with which to chart the developmental nature of a literary relation to the body politic throughout the Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century. Ian Watt suggests the novel’s early development is first and foremost responsive to the supersession of feudal relations of patronage by the increasingly powerful and liberated economic relations of the market, publishers, booksellers and a reading public. Benedict Anderson concurs, linking the rise in literary culture to the ‘vernacularizing thrust’ of bourgeois culture and, materially, to the advent of a ‘print capitalism’, as he terms it, that sees the production of the book as ‘the first modern-style, mass-produced industrial commodity’. Underlying these claims are broader questions as to the social value of literature, and it is reasonable to ask whether the literary is capable of confronting the ethical dimensions that accompany the view of literary culture as so entrenched within a market economics; do we look at literature as a mediation of social form, or as a means with which to analyze social pressures? In the binding of author and literary product, or indeed reader and symbol, how can we ascertain the public value of intrapersonal understanding?

Nowhere are the socio-political flaws of this humanist literary value-structure more evident than in the emergence of an American literature in the Nineteenth-Century. As Peggy Kamuf writes:

The American literary institution has repeatedly answered that man is the measure and the ground. In that figure and form it has sought a stabilization of its object, but also of its project, or perhaps one should say its projection.

In Kamuf’s analysis, character, or personality, provides a system with which to regulate the value and meaning of a given referent – framing that value as only ever ‘stable’ when assimilated within the critical logicalities of an individual agent. Kamuf’s emphasis on subjectivity over and above subjection – her insistence that ‘man is the measure and the ground’ – is ironically overturned, however, when she suggests that this ‘institution’ requires that this individual metonymically ‘project’, outlining a ‘projection’ of a culture of expression at large. Every reading has a purchase, she infers, that relates to the greater national contextualization of the singular and specific actions of an author or indeed the culturing of a reader’s receipt of information.

The problem of the classical conception of the ‘American literary institution’ is therefore identical with that of the condition of the novel, as revealed by the Marxist conception of abstraction as a necessary precursor to institutionalization. To foreground the singular perspective would be to cloud the character of the ‘literary institution’ to which she refers - to maximize the authority of that same ‘institution’ would be to delimit the powers of individual observation. Thus the social ramifications of Kamuf’s argument are felt in the sphere of value ascription, and explicitly link the terms of economic and cultural capital. Are human agents entitled, individually or collectively, to determine value within this constant process of abstraction? For the tragedians of American literature—most notably, Melville, whose *The Confidence-Man* is Kamuf’s subject—these conditions threatened the metaphysical basis for literary endeavor itself. *The Confidence-Man*, Kamuf writes, allegorized a concern that literature’s ideological objective was to shrink the world, to attempt to ‘arrest multiplicity at a calculable number’ and make formal and convenient the illimitable depth of ‘an irretrievable past, which can never be made present, which can only be credited therefore’. Under such conditions, literature becomes wholly complicit with capitalism’s mode of abstraction and equalization for the purposes of transaction. In stabilizing the objects of American and Transatlantic historical memory, and in seeking to stabilize the objectives of America’s cultural future to ensure their suitedness to ready transactionality, historical complexity and pluralistic possibility are neutered and neutralized. Herein lies the basis of the criticism levelled at the humanistic, mainly Transcendentalist, ‘American literary institution’ by generations of objectors, from Yvor Winters and Perry Miller to the New Americanists.

This panel seeks to propose the groundwork for an alternative conception of how literary and economic capital might productively intersect. It engages with the potentialities of a mode of neutralizing poetics in the work of the American author most often identified with its problems—Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson’s own formal enterprise underscores this difficult diametric between the private and the public text and repeatedly antagonizes the possibility of a signification that could permeate the dividing line between such spheres. Emerson recurrently situates the *reader* as a means with which to navigate the difficult relationship between form, personality and reception, and his own theory of a literary labor would presage a conception of the essential neutrality of a text that proposes a critical resonance both within and without the remit of American Transcendentalism as an epochal school and positions his literary theory as entirely conversant with the difficult conception of literature as a model of capital, both in terms of a view of personal use and property and the possible circulation of meaning.

In his ‘General Formula for Capital’, Marx alludes to a need to fix a process of valorization that allows for a definite view of personal need while still advocating an impartial circulation that maintains the atmosphere of an ‘incomplete sale’. This is crucial to Emerson’s cyclical criticism, and consistently prevalent within contemporary critiques of Emerson’s aesthetics. Sharon Cameron, for instance, repeatedly draws allusion to the fixtures within Emerson’s thinking that aggregate a view of individuality as ‘an index of behaviors’ and systematize the ‘fury of personality’. Cameron observes, somewhat uneasily, that such indexical and systematic efforts to render the text a public commodity leave that text submissive to ‘an impersonal register of value identically legible to all’; paradoxically, however, this view of the impartial commodity within an impersonal market proves crucial to Emerson’s own view of criticism. In his late essay ‘Quotation and Originality’, he outlines a critical theory, complimentary to his conception of a ‘creative reading’ in ‘The American Scholar’, which endeavors to illustrate reception as a productive procedure. Nowhere does he indicate that the auratic qualities of a work of art are supervened by citation and reproduction; quite the opposite, Emerson’s suggestion is that the auraticism of a work is developed through (and contingent upon) an engagement by the reader – thereby foregrounding the subjective character of a reader’s affectivity over and above a question of authorial intention and centralizing interpretation as a key feature within his view of a romantic creative agency. That Emerson’s theoretical position hinges so heavily upon the conditions of application argues that the work itself must remain neutral and ahistorical ahead of the instance of its use: ‘the receiver’s aim is on life, not on literature’, and supports a view of ‘indifference to the source’. This idea is further taken up in recent critical appreciations of Emerson’s view of reading, as Eric Keenaghan suggests, as this neutrality or ‘indifference’ enables us to critically project the political or social institutions to which Kamuf alludes:

What we do in the privacy of our studies – that is, how we read – enables us to live in a critical, and potentially political, relationship to our selves and our culture. The best readers among us are those who are affected by ideas, which are always strange and originate outside of our selves. Ideas and thoughts are the secret substance of our potential commonalities. They are improper and belong to no one and to no age.

Hence there are other potential paradigms for conceptualizing how a poetics of neutrality in American letters intersects with ideas of capital. For although such a poetics seems to devalue historical particularity and the perspectival singularity of subjectivities other than that of the individual who is writing/reading text, it nevertheless possesses the unique benefit of ascribing value in a manner that makes such conditions communicable, subject to intellectual transaction, and thereby enables communitarian futures in ways that particularity perpetually disallows. As such, it effectively contributes to aligning experience with a transpersonal standard of value; a conceptual step that returns this model to the epistemological conditions of capital’s impersonal terms for assigning measure and ground. On such terms, cultural and human capital realign with the lexicons of economics, and the possibility of a fruitful, and necessarily posthumanist, discourse of cultural economies emerges.

The participants on this panel seek to elaborate on why Emerson is a critical figure in thinking through how literature might successfully mediate between the conditions of transaction and the priceless singularity that always lies back of affectivity. By what theoretic or pragmatic means does his writing manage to transcend, and yet enrich, the personal experience that each reader brings to his texts? Do such methods help us to comprehend the role that Emerson has taken, and continues to take, in arbitrating cultural value in America and dictating the formation of the canon? Engaging with these questions not only opens up the possibility for a further revision of Emerson’s aesthetic philosophies and an Emersonian scholarly tradition but also invites speculation as to the possible application of his thinking within a Twenty-First-Century context.