

31 January 2007  
First Picador Round Table

## Opening Remarks

By Tristan Hughes

As a guest of the American Studies Institute, I thought it might be apt to begin this discussion with a short detour into some of the perhaps lesser known by-ways of American literary history. So let's picture a scene in a New York apartment, in about 1852, where the now largely forgotten – although in his day fairly influential – literary and cultural critic, Evert Duyckinck, is penning a review his friends' new novel. Now, we'll come back to what he's writing in that review in just a minute, but for the time being it might be useful to briefly outline some of the various critical debates that Duyckinck had been involved with during the previous fifteen years of his career.

Central to those debates was the question of nationality and literature: what their relationship was or would be, and how they would shape each other. It may seem slightly difficult today - during a period when American culture, in its many forms, is so ubiquitous and influential – to imagine what an urgent question this was to Americans at the time. But in those relatively early years of the Republic it was a hotly and fiercely contested topic. Over fifty years after winning political independence from Britain, American intellectuals and artists were still keenly attempting to assert and discover what kind of cultural independence had also been won. Did those two forms of independence go hand in hand? Would America remain a cultural offshoot of Europe, or would it forge its own unique, indigenous and representative one? And if so what would it look like? What would make it appear characteristically 'American'?

On the literary front – and I realise I'm simplifying this for the sake of time - this debate created several schools of thought. On the one hand there were those who pessimistically imagined that America simply lacked the social and historical density they felt were required for fiction and poetry - what Washington Irving would call 'storied associations' – that without the ivy-clad castles or cathedrals of Europe, or its metropolitan centres, like London and Paris, Americans would simply have no subject-matter on which to build their own tradition of belle-lettres. Others, more optimistically, proclaimed that the new world actually provided a whole new vista of subjects; that its indigenous inhabitants, its natural wonders (and in their writing native-Americans were as often as not relegated to the position of natural history), and in particular its landscapes, were not only fitting objects for literary expression but had the

bonus of being entirely original ones. American literature would become specifically American by describing America.

However, the crucial question still remained as to *how* it would describe it. For many critics, this was simply answered: it would draw on its European heritage for its forms, and adapt these to an American content. In other words, European styles and genres would be transplanted and engrafted onto American subjects – perhaps the most famous example of this is of course Longfellow, dressing up the story of Hiawatha in metrical clothes borrowed from the Finnish Kalevala. But others, including Dyuckinck, had more ambitious predictions. For them American writing would be geographically determined in a more radical sense than mere subject-matter. Instead (by some means that was never quite clear), American literature would formally reflect and embody the perceived attributes of the American landscape – its size, its scope, its newness, its freedom, its rugged mountains, its boundless plains, its trackless forests. Casting aside its European inheritance American literature would look ... well, it would look something like America.

So let's come back to Dyuckinck at his desk - though not quite where we left him, but a few years before, and with another novel in front of him and another review taking shape beneath his pen. It's a novel by an author called Cornelious Mathews, and Dyuckinck is hailing it as the long awaited great American novel, a triumphant proof and vindication of all his hopes and ambitions for American cultural independence and literary nationalism. Seeing as I'm probably the only person here who's had the misfortune to read it (you should honestly count yourselves as very lucky), let me try to describe it. It's about a woolly mammoth ... an American woolly mammoth, of course, who lives somewhere in the West (obviously) and from time to time is chased around the landscape by a native-American tribe ... and generally goes about doing what I guess woolly mammoths do, or did. So much for the first 600 or so pages. After that I can only imagine Mathews had got Charles Dickens onto his mind – who at the time was making a tour of the United States – and his use of London as a setting for his books, because for the final 200 pages Mathews decides to skip his mammoth forward in history a few thousand years, and have him wandering through Manhattan in the 1840's. It's unimaginably, unbelievably, fantastically, absurd and awful. And yet why was Dyuckinck, who wasn't an unintelligent critic, applauding it?

I think it's because it ticked all the boxes of what he thought an American national literature should look like and contain. It had a big subject – a very big and hairy one. It had American landscapes galore – rugged mountains, boundless plains, trackless forests, and even an American city thrown in for good measure. And, reflecting this, it was itself big and broad – 800 pages big and broad. The fact it was written in tenth-rate Dickensian prose was easy to

overlook, because in every other respect it fitted Dyuckinck's pre-conceived criteria for an original and great American novel. And I'm sure nobody here who studies American literature has ever heard of it, and even me, who's read it, can't remember its title.

And finally, let's return to Dyuckinck those few years later, writing about his friend's book. What he's writing goes something like this: 'A pleasant, and light, yarn about the whaling trade. Not very serious as literature, but quite entertaining in parts – though perhaps too long.' It was slight praise for a book he considered entirely inconsequential. No more than a travel account, a seaman's yarn, set mainly in the Pacific Ocean.

His friend was Herman Melville. The book he was reviewing was *Moby Dick*.

And so Dyuckinck, who'd spent the last fifteen years thinking about his national literature and its development, absolutely failed to even guess that he'd just read the first truly great, and American, novel. And he wasn't the only one.

Anyway, this lengthy cautionary tale is a preamble to some thoughts about the problems and pitfalls of considering national literatures, or considering literature in terms of nationality. In this regard, I can only offer my own experiences as an example. I come from a mixed background: I was born in Canada to a Welsh father and a Canadian mother, and brought up in Wales. So far so simple. And yet since becoming a writer those backgrounds seem to have placed me in all sorts of complicated situations concerning how my writing, and me as a writer, are classified and presented. Here in Germany for instance, I'd be described as an author in the Anglo-American tradition – although the 'Anglo' part of that description, implying England, doesn't really fit. In fact, in England, where I'm now published, that term would be refined to describe more accurately my origins – over there I'm considered a Welsh author. Yet back in Wales, where I live, that classification is often refined once again to apparently more accurately reflect the cultural situation: there I'm usually termed a Welsh writer in English, who writes something equally clumsily termed, Welsh Writing in English. The reason for this is that Wales is a bilingual country – both the Welsh language and the English language are spoken there, and have been for over 600 years – and so on the surface this distinction is deemed a necessary one, drawing attention to the existence of a literature that is written in Welsh; though, for reasons I'll come to in a minute, is never described as Welsh writing in Welsh.

It may seem odd how this doesn't apply to other Celtic nations, despite the fact they have many writers who write in Gaelic. James Joyce is not described as an Irish writer in English, James Kelman and Irving Welsh are not known as Scottish writers in English – and I'm sure all of them would've been appalled to be. This is for various historical reasons, the most important of which is that

Wales, for the past hundred years, has based its nationalist aspirations predominantly around the preservation and revival of its indigenous language – in a way that Scotland and Ireland never did.

Now this conflation of national identity and language (and it's worth pointing out that only about a third of Wales's population speak Welsh) can lead to some strange and problematic assumptions on the literary front. One of those is that it's sometimes considered necessary that Welsh writers in English must signal their Welsh identity by writing about Wales, that the only way they are to be distinguished from English writers, is through their use of a Welsh subject matter (I'm hoping the connection with the story I told before is becoming relevant). I've been told several times by writers in Welsh how they never have to worry about this because as soon as they put pen to paper their identity is there in the words, that they can write about anything and anywhere and by definition it will be Welsh.

Yet I don't really believe this. Here's a little known fact: in the nineteenth-century a Welsh-speaking colony was set up in Patagonia, in Argentina. It still survives today and most of its inhabitants speak only Welsh and Spanish. So what about them, I'll often ask. What about a young man or woman who lives in Buenos Aires, say, who sits down to write a novel and decides to write it in the Welsh language, but who has no knowledge of Wales whatsoever, has never been there, whose parents, and their parents before them, have never been there. Will that novel be Welsh? History always plays tricks with apparently simple notions of identity.

And neither do I believe that the English I speak and write is synonymous with England or being English – a conflation that the term Welsh Writing in English implicitly makes. There is a habit, historically very understandable, for many people in Wales to make just that connection. For them English is a colonial language, to be identified only with the colonial power that introduced it into their country. But I have no English ancestry, and I first learnt to speak English in Canada. In fact, I'd go much further than that. I believe that the English I now use - and have used and learnt and heard around me for the last thirty years of my life – is a Welsh language, in exactly the same way that it is an American language, an Australian language, an Indian language, a South African language, a Carribean language, and a Canadian language. For me the term Welsh writer in English is not only faintly preposterous but entirely redundant. I'm a Welsh writer, full stop. Or not quite full stop; semi-colon maybe, or perhaps dash – I'm a Welsh-Canadian writer. And it's been from North America that most of my literary influences have come ... but that's another story again.

My wider point is that as we accept that English has become a global language, we must also be aware that the writers that use it will often bear the marks of

that process of globalisation – that their origins and influences will be diverse and mixed. And that as students and critics of literature it is important that we in turn open up our conception of national literatures to accommodate that fact, to search out and reveal those multiple origins, those plural backgrounds, those hybrid influences – to study writing comparatively in the truest sense of that word, to cross borders with it and allow it to take us places we didn't expect or predict. Because otherwise, like poor Evert Dyuckinck, we risk not being able to recognise what's beneath our own eyes.