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## Can “American Studies” Develop a Method?

I MUST ask the reader to accept for the present occasion two definitions. By “American Studies” I shall mean “the study of American culture, past and present, as a whole”; and by “culture” I shall mean “the way in which subjective experience is organized.”

The problem of method in American Studies arises because the investigation of American culture as a whole does not coincide with the customary field of operations of any established academic discipline. The phrase “as a whole” does not, of course, imply a global attack directed simultaneously toward all the aspects of our culture. The defining characteristic of American Studies is not the size of its problems but the effort to view any given subject of investigation from new perspectives, to take into account as many aspects of it as possible.

In order to illustrate the need for such a shift of perspective, I should like to draw upon my own experience by considering the example of Mark Twain. He was a writer and his work belongs to the traditional field of American literature. But I can think of no other man whose work so clearly needs to be placed in a social setting before it can be fully understood. No other American writer of comparable importance is so unmistakably of the people. He took his materials and his technique from American culture, and he developed in collaboration with his audience. He served his apprenticeship in newspaper offices; he perfected his style by practicing the art of oral story-telling. His work is an almost uninterrupted commentary on matters uppermost in the minds of his readers and hearers, and he had a remarkable ability to objectify the memories and dreams of his public. It would be peculiarly artificial to try to deal with his books as if they were self-contained autonomous universes.

But how can one do justice to this central phenomenon of nineteenth-

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century American culture? It is true that much study of Mark Twain's life and work needs to be undertaken along perfectly conventional lines: his dependence upon literary predecessors, for example, has even yet not been fully investigated. Yet the student of this remarkable career soon finds himself asking questions that lead beyond the usual limits of literary history or criticism. One question, which is probably at bottom anthropological, concerns the matter of taboos governing what may be said, what may be represented, what may be published. Since Van Wyck Brooks's *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (and that is now thirty-five years) a great deal has been written about the supposed censorship of Mark Twain's work, either imposed by others or self-imposed. The subject is of primary importance in the study of Mark Twain; at the same time it bears very widely on the recent history of American literature, and on the development of attitudes in the culture generally. But no one knows very much about it. We are at a loss if we ask to what extent the taboos evident in Mark Twain's work are individual idiosyncrasies and to what extent they were actually (as he often maintained) imposed by the culture. It is even more difficult to determine whether these canons of propriety were enforced uniformly throughout the society, or whether they varied according to geographical regions (as Bernard De Voto assumes in his chapter on "Cryptorchism") or according to social classes (as is implied in Santayana's celebrated identification of a "genteel tradition" in America).

The literary historian approaches this problem by examining the fiction published in magazines and books during this period; the correspondence between editors and writers; and book reviews, especially those which comment adversely upon supposed violations of taboos. But the information gathered from these sources needs to be interpreted in the light of a thorough knowledge of class structure, of the stratification of taste according to levels of sophistication, and of the different audiences to which different magazines and publishing houses addressed themselves. I do not believe, for example, that the usual methods of literary history enable us to explain why Harriet Beecher Stowe's "The True Story of Lady Byron's Life," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1869 under the editorship of William Dean Howells after careful revision by Oliver Wendell Holmes, should have cost the magazine fifteen thousand subscribers—more than one-fourth of its list. The incident suggests that the public which read books (and literary magazines, among which the *Atlantic* enjoyed the highest status) had an appreciably stricter sense of decorum than did Howells and Holmes. The *New York Tribune*, mouthpiece for a larger but still relatively literate segment of public opinion, asserted that *Innocents Abroad* showed "an offensive irreverence for things which other men held sacred." Yet Howells published

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a highly favorable review of *Innocents Abroad* in the *Atlantic*. At the other end of the spectrum of tastes, or of degrees of sophistication, *Innocents Abroad* had an enormous sale among people who seldom read anything except newspapers. Perhaps the exaggerated concern for literary propriety came neither from the extreme highbrows nor from the public at large but from a kind of upper-middlebrow audience defined by the subscription lists of the literary magazines. If there were regional differences among segments of this audience, they have not been clearly defined.

In any event, during the 1870's Mark Twain had a complex problem of adaptation to his various audiences. Howells was introducing him to the world of polite letters through the pages of the *Atlantic*. The canvassers for the American Publishing Company were selling tens of thousands of his books to quite unliterary purchasers. On the lecture platform Mark Twain himself was in direct contact with large miscellaneous audiences—in the Middle West, in the East, and (as early as 1872) in England. He was, in fact, one of the pioneers in the discovery and the formation of the mass audience which is so conspicuous in the twentieth century. In these circumstances, he could obviously not have been the free creative artist in the Romantic mode that seems to have been Brooks's ideal. The autonomy of Mark Twain's works was impaired before they were written, and by forces that were in large part internalized in the author. It does not take us very far to conclude, as Brooks did, that this is a scandal. We must recognize that the inhibitions on literary expression (that is, the demands of various special audiences and of the embryonic mass audience) were a complex trait of the culture in which Mark Twain lived. We need to understand them in order to understand Mark Twain's work. We also need to understand them in order to understand the culture.

Indeed, it may turn out that one of the distinctive fields of American Studies is precisely this ambiguous relation between works of art and the culture in which they occur. Certainly the student of Mark Twain is confronted at every turn with problems arising in this area. Let me cite another example. In his early work, especially in *Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It*, Mark Twain uses three distinct prose styles. One of these is a vernacular style, based on the everyday speech of men with little formal education—rivermen, stagecoach drivers, prospectors. The second is patterned on the ornate, elevated rhetoric of the pulpit and of political oratory in the manner of Daniel Webster. The third is a direct, unpretentious style representing the impersonal attitude of the skilled reporter. The vernacular style is felt to be appropriate to characters of low social status and reflects various attitudes toward them—sometimes a little patronizing, more often sympathetic and admiring. The elevated style embodies an aspiration toward

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genteel culture, for which indeed it serves as a matrix; it is often used with perfect seriousness, yet is also often burlesqued. The direct style is apparently felt as being neutral, as being somehow outside the hierarchy of classes. The relation of these styles to one another, and Mark Twain's development (never complete) toward an integrated personal idiom, are delicate indices to his perception of distinctions among social classes, of his own place in the status system, and of the status of the audience he believes himself to be addressing.

An examination of these aspects of Mark Twain's style requires a careful discrimination between attitudes toward social status that he has taken over unconsciously from the culture, and attitudes that spring from his conscious recognition of social stratification and of his place within the status system. It is possible, for example, that his most satisfactory style might turn out to depend on his achievement of a personal autonomy—an achievement that was intermittent rather than accomplished once and for all. Furthermore, we have to recognize drastic changes in Mark Twain's relation to the status system at different periods of his career. Especially in the five or six years immediately preceding his marriage in 1870, and for a year or two after it, he shows the signs of rapid upward social mobility, and this movement along the dimension of social status is inextricably involved with his development as a writer. Thus almost concurrently he moved from California to the East coast; he ceased being a newspaper correspondent to become a platform 'lecturer,' a contributor to literary magazines (including the *Atlantic*), a writer of books, and even a dramatist; after several years of a hand-to-mouth Bohemian existence he began to make a large income from his writing; and despite the perfectly rational misgivings of the Langdon family, he married Livy. He made his celebrated efforts at reform by trying to give up liquor and profanity, and to become a Christian as that term was understood in Elmira. He built his expensive house in Hartford. In place of Steve Gillis, Joe Goodman and the members of the San Francisco Minstrel Troupe, he acquired as friends the Rev. Joseph Twichell, Charles Dudley Warner and William Dean Howells. These biographical facts point in two directions: toward American culture (or the varieties of American regional subcultures) at the end of the Civil War, and toward the literary development recorded in Mark Twain's writings. The problem is at once biographical, historical, sociological and literary.

Mark Twain's attitudes toward American society found expression not only in his style, but in the use of recurrent figures or types of character: in his early work, for example, what has been called the vernacular character (most fully illustrated in *Huck Finn*); in his later work, a figure that might be called the transcendent character (the best illustration being Young

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Satan in *The Mysterious Stranger*). These figures occur in many different guises over a long period of time. They are persistent themes in Mark Twain's writing, and they exert a strong influence on the shaping of plots in his works of fiction, on his imagery and especially on his language (what would *Huckleberry Finn* be if the language were altered?). Both figures embody the author's attitudes toward society, or rather his reading of social situations. The vernacular character is, so to speak, outside society because he is beneath it; the transcendent character is outside society because he is above it. There are strong hints here of Mark Twain's own alienation from the society. His principal problem as a novelist was how to conceive of significant action for characters whose relation to society was so special. The problem was evidently forced upon him by the culture of late nineteenth-century America. It lies at the center of his literary development, yet it cannot be adequately dealt with by literary methods alone. What is needed is a method of analysis that is at once literary (for one must begin with an analytical reading of the texts that takes into account structure, imagery, diction, and so on) and sociological (for many of the forces at work in the fiction are clearly of social origin). Such an analysis would not only take us much farther into Mark Twain's fictive universe than criticism has gone in the past; it would also give us a new insight into American society of the late nineteenth century, for the vernacular figure and the transcendent figure are not peculiar to Mark Twain. They were widely current in American literature and thought; they are cultural, not merely private and individual, images.

The final problem I shall mention that is posed by Mark Twain's career is his relation to the established role of the Man of Letters, the Author, as that role had been defined by New England in the place accorded Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, and so on. This role, one of the massive features of nineteenth-century American culture, was undergoing rapid change during Mark Twain's lifetime, and by the time of his death it had, I think, all but disappeared. In our own day the figure of the Alienated Artist has to some extent taken the place of the figure of the Man of Letters. Mark Twain felt the impact of the social forces that created both the older and the newer role of the artist in America, and at the same time his unprecedented popularity gave tantalizing glimpses of yet another role for the artist—that of the darling of the mass audience, a poker-faced bard whose jokes concealed his Whitmanian function of bringing the great democracy to knowledge of itself. This last possibility was never more than a possibility, but the partial extent to which it was realized defines one dimension of the unique achievement of *Life on the Mississippi*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee*. After the 1880's the pressures of personal misfortune

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and even more importantly of cultural change prevented this kind of achievement. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, *The Mysterious Stranger* and the lesser works of Mark Twain's last two decades are written from the perspective of alienation (an alienation which, it should be pointed out, was accompanied by increasing fame and popularity). To explain the shift in the direction of his development has long been a capital problem of criticism. It is an equally important problem of cultural history, and neither can be solved without full exploration of the other. To find out what was happening to the man and to the society we have to ask questions which lead simultaneously to literary analysis and to analysis of social change.

Yet I must confess that the inquiries I have described are largely hypothetical. The student who tries to explore American culture even in this limited fashion by drawing upon the techniques of literary criticism and of the social sciences soon encounters difficulties.

The difficulties are due in part to the trend of literary studies in this country during the past two or three decades, which has moved away from rather than toward the social sciences. Just recently there are signs of a major shift of direction in literary criticism which may conceivably lead to more interest in the social setting of works of art. Such a change of direction would be most welcome. The techniques of analysis that have been developed by recent literary criticism should ultimately make it possible to deal with the relation between literature and culture at a much more profound level than has been attainable in the past. But change of this sort does not occur overnight, and the dominant force in literary studies is likely for some time yet to continue to be what we are familiar with as the New Criticism. This means that in general, the guiding principle will be a concern for the autonomy of the work of art.

If the New Criticism is about to give way to an even newer criticism, there is all the more reason to acknowledge its solid accomplishments. Like all literary revolutions, the New Criticism proposed to *écraser l'infâme*: it set about purifying criticism from the contamination of everything that was not literary. Again like other revolutions, this one brought with it a remarkable élan. It improved the morale of literary studies. It gave to scholarship and criticism a new penetration and intensity, and it markedly raised the level of literary instruction in American colleges and universities.

But these results were achieved only at a certain cost. The New Criticism has made it extraordinarily difficult to relate literature to the culture within which it occurs and of which it is indisputably a part. From the beginnings of the movement in the work of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, it has borne the imprint of the image of the alienated artist. The cult of pure literature has implied a strongly negative attitude toward society,

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which within this tradition is habitually viewed as irredeemably Philistine and depraved: in Eliot's phrase, a "panorama of futility and anarchy." Although the actual techniques were largely invented and applied by other men, the master image of the movement has been Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and the critical undertaking has been strongly influenced by Eliot's idea of literature as a timeless order of eternal objects. This order he calls tradition, but it is very different from the usual conception of tradition because it is outside time and thus unhistorical or even anti-historical.

The pioneer technician of the New Criticism, I. A. Richards, had a somewhat different set of assumptions—he was at the outset, during the 1920's when he exerted his greatest influence on literary studies, an avowed Benthamite. His effort to state the doctrine of pure literature in positivist terms seems at first glance quite remote from the ideas of Pound and Eliot. But the effect of his teaching was essentially the same. Although he has now modified his original distinction between the statements of science, capable of being verified by empirical tests, and the pseudo-statements of poetry, which seem to be verifiable propositions but actually have no referent outside themselves, it has had great influence. And it separates art from society just as drastically as does Eliot's supernaturalism or Pound's denunciations of the "old bitch gone in the teeth," the "botched civilization."

Despite the sincere desire of some of the leaders in the movement to recognize the intimate relation between a work of art and its social setting, the effect of the New Criticism in practice has been to establish an apparently impassable chasm between the facts of our existence in contemporary society and the values of art. In this respect, the philosophical position of the New Criticism seems to me to bear a striking resemblance to Edgar Allan Poe's conception that art belongs to a non-empirical realm of 'ideality' totally divorced from the sordid or commonplace facts of everyday life. The root of the matter is the belief in an extreme dualism of nature and spirit. If society is taken to be a part of the natural order, and art is assigned to the realm of spirit, it becomes impossible to relate art (except negatively) to the actual culture within which it occurs.

We are no better off if we turn to the social sciences for help in seeing the culture as a whole. We merely find society without art instead of art without society. The literary critic would cut esthetic value loose from social fact; the social scientist, despite his theoretical recognition that art is an important aspect of culture, uses techniques of research which make it difficult or impossible for him to deal with the states of consciousness embodied in serious art.

To a student of literature, the social scientists seem to proceed ordinarily as if certain tangible values inherent in society were the only values that

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need to be taken into account. They find their reality in observed fact, and like all other scholars they have defined facts as the data which their methods of inquiry enable them to discover and record. The extreme form of this tendency is the emphasis on quantification, on the use of data susceptible of statistical treatment. The sociological studies of literature which I have encountered characteristically involve a 'content analysis' of large numbers of works of popular fiction or drama. The assumption on which they are based is, in the words of one such study, that popular literature "can be regarded as a case of 'social fantasy'—that the psychological constellations" in such material "indicate sensitive areas in the personalities of those for whom the work has appeal; their needs, assumptions and values are expressed ('projected')" in the play or novel or short story. Popular literature is used as if it were a body of material resulting from a series of projective psychological tests. This seems to me entirely justified, although I am not sure one can accept Lyman Bryson's contention that "today's popular art did not come out of yesterday's fine art . . . [but] is something developed out of natural social habits and needs by the machine." Popular art is certainly notable for its lack of originality; it is meant to be a homogeneous product identified by brand labels that the customer can count on. Its characters and situations are indeed, as another sociological study maintains, "ubiquitous mass symbols," extremely limited in range at any given moment. The relative homogeneity of popular art lends itself to the quantitative methods of content analysis.

But is nothing of consequence about a culture to be learned from its serious art? I suppose that when we speak of a serious novel, for example, we have in mind a work whose meaning is not exhausted by the identification of stereotyped ideas and attitudes in it. It is serious precisely because it differs in some respects from the mass of popular literature with which it is contemporary and with which, to be sure, it probably has something in common. The serious work has its period flavor but it also has other qualities, and some of these other qualities may be quite unique. Yet what the serious work uniquely expresses is not on that account unreal, or on that account alone unrepresentative. A description of the culture within which this book of permanent interest was created would be incomplete if we left it out of account. Subtract the work of a few dramatists from what we know of Periclean Athens, or of Elizabethan England, and our image of the culture undergoes a drastic change, quite apart from merely esthetic considerations.

The procedures of content analysis do not seem to be adapted to the analysis of works of art differing appreciably from popular art. The content that is analyzed is too rudimentary; it is, again by definition, a factor

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common to large numbers of works, which means a factor that is very far from exhausting the particularity of even a simple work of art. We need a method that can give us access to meanings beyond the range of such a systematic simplification—meanings that are not, so to speak, homogenized. Lacking such a method, the sociological study of the arts will inevitably yield an image of the culture which is truncated. Contemporary American culture is no doubt frightening enough, but it is made unnecessarily appalling by studies of popular art which by implication define the culture without reference to any subtleties beyond the horizon of the mass media. There is more to us than that!

In fact, there is more than that in the sociological findings. Reading the articles in the journals, one may easily forget that after all, the same culture which has produced the soap opera has also produced the sociological journals. Yet if the mass culture is there, so also are the observers and interviewers, the statisticians and the appraisers. Only, they have hidden themselves. The man who conducts the content analysis and identified the obsessive fantasies in the movies describes a world from which freedom is entirely absent and in which consciousness itself is rudimentary. He silently assumes that he and the colleagues to whom he reports his findings monopolize freedom and consciousness. The mores of his craft (borrowed from the natural sciences) oblige him to conceal his own consciousness behind statistical tables, and he seeks to deny his own individuality by a ceremonial avoidance of the first person. A kind of automation is suggested by these devices of rhetoric: the third person and the passive voice seem to establish as the model of the society a self-contained mechanism from which consciousness has been banished. The scientific observer is outside the field of his observations. He simply makes dial-readings.

I have suggested that the rhetoric of the social sciences seems to reflect an effort to minimize the role of consciousness. This observation can be justly extended to other aspects of the attitude toward language that an outsider encounters in reading current scholarship in these fields. Content analysis of works of literature, for example, requires the investigator to leave entirely out of account the actual words of the individual texts. The content which is extracted for counting and comparison with the content of other texts is detached from its original form of expression and thereafter exists (if it exists at all) in the neutral linguistic matrix of paraphrase. Here again, a procedure which may be suitable in dealing with texts lacking distinction of style is inappropriate in dealing with a serious work of literature. For what can be paraphrased is a small part of the whole meaning of such a work. The range of possible human experiences beyond the limits of paraphrasable meaning is the province of imaginative or poetic language.

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The complex modes of statement which characterize the truly imaginative use of language (and I would be understood here as referring to the different vocabularies of the several arts) are the only instruments we have for embodying and communicating the full content of consciousness.

These more complex meanings are just as real as are the stereotyped fantasies of popular art; in fact, they are more real, because they are more precisely and durably embodied in the medium. And they are part of the culture. A hundred years ago it might have been said that they make up the whole of culture. We believe differently now, and I trust I have made it clear that I have no intention of trying to reinstate a conception of the arts as existing in a separate esthetic realm which contains all values. But I believe the social sciences have reacted too strongly against Matthew Arnold's view of culture. A fully adequate science of society will recognize the existence and the importance of the experiences and attitudes with which Arnold was concerned. And this recognition is possible only for one who is aware of the almost infinite subtlety and complexity of imaginative modes of statement. To recognize no serious and accurate function of language except its use as an instrument of precise denotation is to reduce the scope of consciousness and to deny the significance of whole universes of human experience. The result is a mutilated image of man and of culture.

I have described a situation in which, as it seems to me, the characteristic methods of literary criticism and the social sciences exhibit, each in its own way, serious shortcomings from the standpoint of the enterprise of understanding American culture as a whole. The social sciences seem to me to assume too hastily that all value is implicit in social experience, in group behavior, in institutions, in man as an average member of society. Current literary criticism assumes, also too hastily, that value lies outside society, in works of art which exist on a plane remote from the Waste Land of our actual experience. I have sincere respect for the accomplishments of American scholarship in all these areas, and I recognize that these accomplishments have been made possible only by the rigorous narrowing of fields of inquiry, by the specialization of interests that has been so marked a feature of scholarship in this country during the past half-century. On the other hand, I also believe that the desire to study American culture as a whole, which underlies the nascent movement toward American Studies, has valid motives behind it, and that without disturbing sociologists or literary critics in their important undertakings we can properly ask whether a method can not be found for investigating the whole of the culture.

The concept 'culture' seems, in the abstract at least, to embrace the concepts 'society' and 'art.' Why may we not say quite simply that the problem of method in American Studies can be solved by presupposing a

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value implicit in culture which includes and reconciles the apparently disparate values assumed in the disciplines of, say, literature and sociology? From this point of view, the problem of method in American Studies might seem to find its answer in the already existing field of cultural anthropology. But is this formula more than a verbal solution to the dilemma? The central question is whether cultural anthropology can take account of the full range of meanings available to us in the arts of complex modern societies like our own. From a sketchy acquaintance with some of the scholarship in this field, I gain the impression that when it undertakes the study of complex societies, it tends to resemble sociology, with perhaps a stronger inclination to invoke comparisons between advanced and preliterate cultures. Moreover, cultural anthropology does not seem to differ appreciably from sociology in its assumptions about the relation of fact and value.

I conclude, in short, that no ready-made method for American Studies is in sight. We shall have to develop one for ourselves, and I am afraid that at present we shall have to be content with a very modest program. The best thing we can do, in my opinion, is to conceive of American Studies as a collaboration among men working from within existing academic disciplines but attempting to widen the boundaries imposed by conventional methods of inquiry. This implies a sustained effort of the student of literature to take account of sociological, historical and anthropological data and methods, and of the sociologist or the historian to take account of the data and methods of scholarship in the fields of the arts. I am optimistic enough to believe that inquiries which have their starting-points in various academic departments can converge as they are brought to bear upon a single topic, namely, American culture past and present.

Method in scholarship grows out of practice, or rather out of repeated criticism of practice intended to remedy observed shortcomings. In the inadequacies of answers we have found to our questions we discover clues to the reformulation of the questions, and the reformulated questions in turn suggest new ways of finding answers. If I insist that the development of a method for American Studies is bound up with an effort to resolve the dilemma posed by the dualism which separates social facts from esthetic values, I do not imagine that a new method can be deduced from philosophical premises. A new method will have to come piecemeal, through a kind of principled opportunism, in the course of daily struggles with our various tasks. No one man will be able to redesign the whole enterprise. What will count is the image in our minds of the structure we believe we are helping to build. Such an image will influence a long series of particular decisions, will determine a tendency over a period of time rather than give us a new apparatus all at once.

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From the standpoint of the social sciences the lines of investigation I have mentioned probably seem of limited value because they point to the analysis of specific, individual cases. This is an inevitable consequence of the nature of literary and historical inquiry. But I venture to suggest that individual instances embody whatever uniformities may exist in a culture, and that a really exhaustive knowledge of the concrete case—a work of art, a specific situation, a career—might well lead to the recognition of aspects of the culture which have previously escaped attention. At the very least one might hope for suggestions capable of being formulated as hypotheses and then tested against more extensive evidence. Why is it not conceivable that the masterpiece of literature, or the exceptionally productive career, might turn out to be an expression of the culture in ways beyond the scope of stereotyped examples of popular art or merely average life-patterns?

