First of all, when I said this morning that most of us were literary types or “intellectuals” brought up on right-wing anthologies, I meant that we go to these colleges and we study the poets proposed by official society. We learn literature from the perspective of officialdom. We study Ezra Pound, who was a fascist, who talked bad about Blacks, Jews, and others. We study this and we're told it's great poetry. No matter that Pound is talking bad about us or putting us down, this must be great. The book says it's great! Eliot is a royalist talking about bringing back the King, the Church, but we suck it all up and use it as a measure of all we call literature, when the actual revolutionary tradition in literature in the U. S. A. is either given to us confused, mixed up, or not at all! We begin with Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, John Crowe Ransom and so forth and so on. We are given all those folks as Great Literature. But in terms of us understanding, let's say, Mark Twain, Melville, Jack London, Dreiser, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois—another old tradition, the revolutionary tradition in American literature which goes at least as far back as Tom Paine—that is given to us so confused that we don't understand it, we don't see them as writers who are part of a tradition. We don't see that there is a revolutionary tradition in American writing as well as a counter-revolutionary one.

When I came to New York, I looked up Allen Ginsberg, who is actually a scholar on a truly impressive scale—in terms of Western poetry I haven't met anybody recently who knows as much about poetry as Allen Ginsberg, a marvelous Blake scholar. Now what Allen was trying to do was to find alternatives to the well-made American poem that Eberhart and John Crowe Ransom were producing. He had begun to study alternative forms, not only Walt Whitman and the American speech tone but William Carlos Williams and the American idiom. The actual sound of America. What is the sound of America? What do things sound like in America? America is not England. What do things sound like here in America? What does it sound like when you sing in American? What does an American poem sound like? But then Ginsberg started doing all sorts of take-offs on Whitman. He saw
Whitman as a true alternative because of Whitman’s Populist tradition, which is actually trying to identify with the masses of the people in the U. S. A.—that long, cadenced, heroic line of Whitman’s—the heroic singing line. And then of course the fact that Whitman was a non-conformist and a homosexual—and so was Allen Ginsberg. So that tied that up even tighter. But primarily the kind of non-conformist, heroic-line, Populist elements in Whitman. It was Ginsberg who first turned me on to all that and actually started me reading Whitman. Who was the other writer you asked about?

... Melville, yeah. See, the thing about Melville, again, was that in traditional Academe—the official Academy—Henry James was always talked about as The Writer, the Great American Novelist. When actually in terms of America, in terms of the great bursting-out tradition of America—the New Found Land—you have to go to Melville. It’s Melville who takes the American experience of whaling and turns it into some kind of profound, eighty-five-levels-of-ambiguity Existential novel! That’s Melville who does that! It’s Melville who writes Benito Cereno, who writes Pierre. It’s Melville who puts us in touch with that crucial kind of American experience. So it was a question again of the Tradition, what tradition are you coming from? Melville was important to us because it was our revolutionary American tradition that he associated himself with from the start. He grabbed those basic, troubling, distinctive American dilemmas and tried to make literature out of them. And like W. C. Williams, he tried to seize the difficult problems of American speech as well. And he didn’t shirk the big problem of race. You can see how that makes him doubly important. Like, if you’re Black, then after you get to the question of how to deal with America, you have to deal with the Black thing. But, see, the point is, according to the Academy, you’re not even American, you’re English! Because they’re still trying to take you into their English works. English Lit. Limited! They don’t even want to admit that the war in 1776 was fought and that the Colonies freed themselves. Over at Yale, they’re not even sure of that to this day!

(Laughter)

... Yeah, well what’s wrong with American art? So what I saw was young poets fighting to be American, to say that we in America have an experience, we’re not in Europe, we’re in the United States. And that there is a particular experience here. And so as that began to dawn on me, I realized that that means that I too had an even more particular experience because I’m an Afro-American. That is a very particular experience. It doesn’t separate you from the others necessarily, but it is a particularity that must be expressed. Just as the American experience as such doesn’t make all of us separate from the rest of the human race, off in the clouds. But it is a particular experience. And to try and gloss over that and hold up European or English models to us—which a lot of the Academy still does—is detrimental to literature.

From “Literary Hegemonies”

HELEN BAROLINI

The dominant culture, working under its own rules and models, within a tight network of insiders—editors, agents, reviewers, critics—is not eager to recognize and include in its lists that which does not reflect its own style, taste, and sense of what is worthwhile...

Literature is not only in the great and practiced writer. It is also in the new voices which add to the store of human experience; in the voices which, by enriching and extending the national literary achievement, become of permanent value.

Ethnic writing was not given entry to the cultural mainstream of the American literary world but existed, at best, in some backwater of folklore and curiosities [until very recently]...

In a country this size, comprised of such rich and varied strains, there should be room for all facets of literary expression and familiarity with them. But that is not the case. There are hierarchies and hegemonies which, consciously or unconsciously, promote and decide what is literature and what is not. The facts of literary life are elementary: it is not simply publication, but what comes both before and after that counts.

... Books which are not reviewed are buried.

And that is exactly what happens to the overwhelming majority of books which are published without special advocacy: if they are not signaled for attention by powerful names, they die.

*A section of the Introduction to The Dream Book: the Writings of Italian-American Women.
Harvey Shapiro, former editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, and also a panelist at [a] symposium, revealed a dismaying statistic: *The Times*, which does more reviewing than any other publication in the country, can mention only about 8 percent of all books published in a given year. Even so, between the daily edition and the Sunday book review section, it manages to give double reviews to some books (all too predictable) while the vast number are not reviewed at all. Too bad, says Shapiro, but that's how it is.

Books that are not reviewed are not picked up elsewhere along the tightly linked chain of literary life. Literary achievement is gauged by appearance in required reading lists, literature course outlines, textbooks, anthologies, critical appraisal, book reviews, and bibliographies.

When I was in school, American literature was identified regionally—the New Englanders, the Southern school, the expatriates, Western Expansion. Jules Chametzky, a scholar of cultural pluralism as reflected in American literature, has written about literary regionalism. It became, toward the end of the nineteenth century, "a strategy for ignoring or minimizing social issues of great significance. These issues concerned race and class and the new money-power; an upheaval in American ethnic composition; far-reaching challenges to older American social assumptions and mores. Such matter called for serious literary treatment; but such matter deeply explored could upset notions of unified national culture."1 Local color and regional literature could be accepted by the dominant public and leading editors, but only insofar as they reinforced notions of a basically homogenous rather than a conflicted nation and culture.

Katherine Newman, a scholar and critic, has proposed discarding many of the old theories of American literature "since they were fitted to a specific body of literature: that of the Anglo-American seaboard culture." Taking a wider view of the whole oeuvre, other characteristics can be discerned, and she sees one characteristic of American literature (particularly relevant from the ethnic perspective) as eccentricity, in its exact meaning of being off-center, asymmetrical, irregular, uneven.

For that is another characteristic of American literature that Newman cites as deriving from the pressure of pluralism: "It is *choice-making*, value-seeking, repudiating the superficialities of our society. . . . The greatest American theme is not the fulfillment of 'the Amer-

ican dream' of material success, but rather the selection of a cultural mode which will satisfy the spiritual and emotional needs of the individual. The chief preoccupation of our writers is *the necessity of choice*."2 . . .

Literary history is falsified if it doesn't record all voices and give access to these voices by publishing, keeping in print, and making part of study courses those writers who aren't only the prominent ones of the dominant tradition. As Newman says, the critical function is to examine works on their own aesthetic terms, to relate them to the entire corpus of American literature, and to overcome the internalized stereotypes and cultural myths that have caused critical myopia.

Publishers say they cannot afford to be crusaders. But Black writer Zora Neale Hurston replied that she refused to be humbled by second place in a contest she never designed, and she identified what comes out of safe, marketable publishing as candidates for the American Museum of Unnatural History, i.e., a weird collection of stereotypes—nondimensional figures that can be taken in at a glance, as, the expressionless American Indian, the shuffling Negro, the inarticulate Italian, etc.

NOTES


Orange: Hiring

Harriet Zinnes

Those lips. Very red, and behind them the teeth, irregular, and not a full set. Why not a full set? He doesn’t ask, but he looks at her. Straight at her face. Her yellow face. Her hair bound, but a few strands hover near her face, that yellow face. She is not oriental. No, not oriental. She is a wispy young thing, comes from Alaska. How did she