American Literary Mentors

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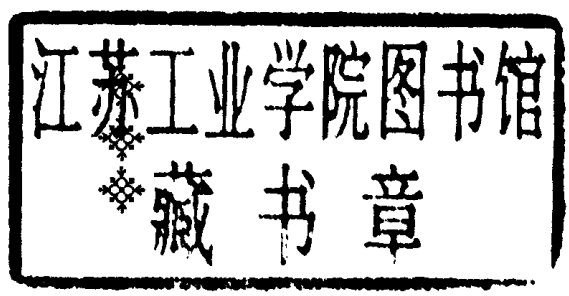

University Press of Florida
Gainesville · Tallahassee · Tampa · Boca Raton
Pensacola · Orlando · Miami · Jacksonville

04 03 02 01 00 99 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

American literary mentors / Irene C. Goldman-Price and Melissa McFarland Pennell.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8130-1712-2 (alk. paper)
1. Mentoring of authors—United States. 2. American fiction—History and criticism. 3. Mentoring in literature. I. Goldman-Price, Irene C. II. Pennell, Melissa McFarland.
PS374.M47A44 1999
813.009—dc21 99-36103

The University Press of Florida is the scholarly publishing agency for the State University System of Florida, comprising Florida A&M University, Florida Atlantic University, Florida International University, Florida State University, University of Central Florida, University of Florida, University of North Florida, University of South Florida, and University of West Florida.

University Press of Florida
15 Northwest 15th Street
Gainesville, FL 32611–2079
http://www.upf.com

To Elsa Nettels, Ph.D., professor emerita of the College of William and Mary—teacher, scholar, mentor, colleague, and friend. The contributors join the editors in dedicating this collection to Dr. Nettels, a woman of great accomplishment and generosity, in honor of her recent retirement.

PREFACE

This volume arose as a project to acknowledge the role that good mentoring has played in the careers of many literary scholars and academics and to honor one special mentor, Dr. Elsa Nettels, professor emerita of English at the College of William and Mary. We chose as our subject literary mentoring—how people encourage other people to produce literature—as a natural reflection of Professor Nettels's own lifelong talent. All of the contributors to the volume share an interest in American literature and have benefited in their professional lives from friendships with Elsa Nettels.

The volume should speak to literary scholars and students interested in American literature, and also to general readers who want to know more about the varying sources of inspiration and encouragement on which writers have drawn. Those interested in mentoring relationships in other fields should also find food for thought in these essays.

The editors wish to acknowledge their own mentors, in particular Dr. Elsa Nettels, to whom we dedicate this book. Over the years many literary scholars have gratefully acknowledged debts to her for professional, and sometimes personal, assistance. She has written letters for jobs, grants, awards, tenure, and promotion; she has fought adverse tenure decisions; she has shared sources, citations, and research skills generously. She has arranged numerous panels at conferences large and small, often inviting junior scholars to participate where they might not otherwise have had an opportunity to present their work. Her frequent reviews of other scholars' work are thorough, fair, and open-minded evaluations. Her warm encouragement and her criticism of new projects are always offered in the spirit of making an already good idea better. Her own scholarship, including *James and Conrad* (1977), *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells's America* (1988), and *Language and Gender in American Fiction* (1997), as well as dozens of articles and conference presentations, sets a standard worthy of admiration and emulation.

For help with this project, we wish to acknowledge Carol Farley Kessler, Alan Price, Shirley Marchalonis, and Elizabeth Hayes for their helpful comments on the proposal and introduction to this volume, and to thank our acquisitions editor, Susan Fernandez, for picking up the project midway, and our project editor, Jacqueline Kinghorn Brown, for supporting it through to publication. Thanks to Jean Blackall for her assistance and support from the inception of the project, to Daniel Fogel for his suggestions on contributors, and to the English department of the College of William and Mary for their help in tracking down students and faculty who had worked with Elsa Nettels.

Irene Goldman-Price wishes to acknowledge Ball State University and the Pennsylvania State University—Hazleton campus for support of her research, and especially to thank Alan Price—first mentor, then friend, now husband—for his moral support and practical assistance.

Melissa McFarland Pennell wishes to acknowledge the University of Massachusetts Lowell for support of her research; she also thanks her husband, Steve Pennell, for his many kindnesses and encouragement.

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Introduction

Irene C. Goldman-Price and Melissa McFarland Pennell

Whoever one's mentors are and have been, I begin to see that they take their places in the imagination like the statues of the saints above the Vatican. Or they act as the heel stone framed in the archways at Stonehenge. More likely they are the magnets in the many compasses an artist wears out over a lifetime. It is said that when human beings picture someone else, they place the person on a landscape about ten feet in front of them. Mentors cast light and shadow, complicate the foreground. Surely it is like falling in love. One needn't strain one's voice in order to speak nor cup one's ear to hear all that one's mentor has to say.

Deborah Digges (112)

"If I ever succeed in making anything of myself—as you seem to think I can—I will always count your letter as one of the principal means to that end." With these words Lizette Woodworth Reese welcomed Edmund Clarence Stedman as her mentor and guide. Over the course of their twenty-year friendship, he would praise her work, assist her in finding a publisher, advise her on preparing her manuscripts, and talk of her to his influential literary friends.

Whether it be insisting on more intellectual depth and solidity, as Edith Wharton did with Philomène de la Forest-Divonne, or undertaking the "honest, painstaking labor" of fair-minded criticism, as Marianne Moore did for Elizabeth Bishop and William Dean Howells did for so many younger writers, literary mentors in some way encourage, enable, and nurture creative expression and help an author negotiate the complicated pathway from creation to publication. Mentoring in general and as defined in the following essays takes a wide variety of forms. Mentors can give advice as to work habits, reading, and subject matter. They often introduce the protégé and his or her works to editors, publishers, critics, and other authors, using personal influence to get the work of the protégé into print. They offer truthful criticism mixed with sympathetic engage-

ment in the lives and work of their protégés. As Diane George has described in the *Ohio Review,* her mentor "keeps on giving me permission to have feelings that I might actually write down instead of banishing them to remote islands of the unconscious . . . " (50). Mentors may provide an example, set a challenge, or lead by inspiring adulation. Some relationships are strong, intense, and exclusive, with the pair meeting frequently, while others may take the form of an occasional correspondence and rare meetings. The relationship may be rewarding or torturous to the mentor. It may continue for a lifetime, for only a brief period, or, as one of our essayists suggests, it may begin only beyond the realm of physical existence.

Metaphors abound for the ways in which one person can assist another in creative endeavor. As Deborah Digges says in the epigraph, a mentor can be seen as a magnet in the compass, the essential element that draws the arrow to true north. A mentor is a canonized saint, or perhaps author—someone whose life has been exemplary, whose worth and loyalty to the divine have been proven under duress, someone who now sits far above, offering inspiration but also, perhaps, an unreachable goal. A mentor is the heel stone, pointing to the rising sun just one day of the year, in that mysterious, mystical circle whose meaning, if we could unlock it, would explain the relation between earth and sky, between humans and the universe we inhabit, between inchoate inspiration and the words necessary to commit one's imagined world to paper. Mentors can appear to be the objects of an idealized or an eroticized love.

The term *mentor* is itself a metaphor, drawing on the role that Odysseus's friend played in bringing Telemachus into his manhood. It is worth noting that, in *The Odyssey,* Mentor is both a man and a vessel for Athene, the goddess of wisdom. As a human and an old friend of Odysseus's, Mentor can provide support for Penelope and Telemachus in keeping the suitors at bay, but it is not until Athene takes on Mentor's shape that s/he can engender the action that will send Telemachus on his journey in search of his father and thus allow his father's journey home. Mentor—man and god, male and female—gives Telemachus the courage to stand up to the suitors, to act independently of his mother, to question Nestor, to do the deeds necessary to bring his father home. When Telemachus hesitates, out of modesty and awe, to question Nestor, Mentor/Athene assures him that to question is his destiny: "For just this did you sail on the ocean to learn about your father / Where the earth has hidden him and what fate he has met" (3.15–16). Telemachus demurs, claiming that he has no experience in quick speech and that modesty becomes a young man addressing an elder. But "Then the bright-eyed goddess Athene spoke to

him: / 'Telemachus, some thoughts you will have in your mind, / And a god will suggest others. For I do not think / You were born and raised without the favor of the gods'" (3.26–28). Thus Mentor/Athene affirms for the young man that his thoughts and words are divinely inspired and therefore to be trusted, and that the mission on which he has embarked is the proper one for him. When Mentor/Athene leads the way, Telemachus "[goes] along in the god's footsteps" (3.30).

This origin of the term suggests, then, that a mentor helps his or her protégé to gain access to divine guidance, serves as a vehicle through which guidance comes, and reassures the protégé that thoughts and actions will be fruitful. It might also suggest that, without such a mentor figure, the divine spark as well as the necessary guidance and advice might have no means of reaching the protégé. In that case, can a writer succeed as an entirely "self-made (wo)man"? Or will she or he languish, unproductive?

A number of recent scholarly books and one nonscholarly volume have explored the relationship between a writer and his or her teachers, patrons, and friends. Two of them are collections of essays by various scholars. Looking specifically at women writers and their male patrons, the essays in *Patrons and Protégées* (Marchalonis 1988) focus primarily on literary "friendships" of the 1840s to 1880s, examining issues of gender and hierarchy and suggesting previously unnoticed complexity in the relationships between prominent men and their (female) protégées, including Henry James and Constance Fenimore Woolson and William Dean Howells and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, among others. The essays are set in the context of gender relations and of the changing conditions of the literary marketplace. In the collection *Mothering the Mind* (Perry and Brownley 1984), various scholars raise issues concerning the ways in which "silent partners" create the conditions that "catalyze creative work" (4). Also placing their arguments in a gendered context, they explore relationships between the artist and supporting friends or relatives who perform such maternal functions as "intercepting the world, conferring unconditional approval, regulating the environment, supplying missing psychic elements, and mirroring certain aspects of the self of the artist" (6). In this metaphor of the relationship, deliberately juxtaposed with the more "insistent, judgmental, and directive exhortations" of literary fathering (14), the "mother" provides a nurturing space in which the child/artist can play in safety with benign approval.

The other two books are in-depth studies by single authors. David Laskin's *A Common Life* (1994) looks at the sometimes helpful, sometimes competitive friendships between four pairs of writers of relatively equal

stature across the chronological spectrum of American literature. These relationships—Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James and Edith Wharton, Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty, and Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell—while surely nurturant of creativity, are more all-encompassing than mentoring because of the quantity of nonprofessional time the writers spent together and the relative professional equality of the writers. But the complexity of the relationships makes an instructive study for those interested in how writers affect each other's careers.

Ideally, mentoring and guidance are straightforwardly helpful in nurturing an apprentice toward his or her goals. But, inevitably, as in all human interaction, emotions complicate matters. Prejudice or jealousy, the desire to dominate, the growing competence of the apprentice, or erotic attraction can skew the relationship, sometimes fueling greater productivity on the part of the apprentice, sometimes silencing the apprentice, often causing psychic damage and the breakdown of the relationship. In *Erotic Reckonings* (1994), a study of writers and their literary mentors who were also their lovers, Thomas Simmons contends that relationships of mastery and apprenticeship are inevitably erotic, modeled not after Mentor and Telemachus but rather Abelard and Héloïse. He looks at three pairs of poets and examines the complicated interactions of their personal and creative lives, finding not just support but also cruelty, theft of ideas, undermining of the other's career.

A more belle-lettristic exploration of literary mentoring came in the 1994 issue of *Ohio Review* (vol. 51), in which contemporary writers were invited to comment on their own experience of being mentored. They wrote of favorite teachers, of friends, of writers' groups, of authors whose works had inspired them or shown them the possibilities of language or subject matter. While Deborah Digges describes a constant process of taking on and then discarding mentors, David Lazar opines that "mentorship is usually a singular, if you will, monogamous, relationship. One can have many teachers, multiple and various influences, but to speak of more than one mentor . . . seems excessive, even a bit intellectually or emotionally promiscuous" (27).

It seems, then, that each protégé experiences mentorship in a distinctive and personal way; that encouragement, advice, inspiration, and other help comes in various, sometimes unexpected ways; and that the relationship has profound effects on both protégé and mentor.[1] *American Literary Mentors* seeks to extend the discussion begun in these works by exploring the mentoring relationship in the lives and works of a variety of American authors writing from the 1870s to the middle part of this cen-

tury. We asked a group of scholars who we knew were interested in the subject to write for us, giving them free rein to choose the authors and works that spoke to them. The resulting essays give a rich and suggestive picture of the possibilities of the relationship and also offer a variety of approaches to the study. Some of the essays treat their subjects biographically, looking at how a particular author was or was not adequately mentored at important times in his or her development. Others look from the point of view of the literary mentor at what skills and personality traits are necessary to be a good guide for a fellow writer or artist. Some essays provide critical analyses of fictional accounts of mentoring relationships, discovering how authors have worked out imaginatively their own questions about mentors and protégés. Still others examine how encouragement and instruction can come from sources other than living human beings. The essays are representative in that they consider women and men; poets, novelists, and one diarist; editors and critics as well as creative artists; protégés and mentors. Together they present a well-rounded consideration of the origins and development of artistic ambition, craftsmanship, and productivity and of the complexities of the mentor/protégé relationship. They also suggest a variety of ways to examine these issues in the lives and works of other authors.

Although the time span covered by the essays was not deliberately chosen, changes occurred in the nature of authorship and publishing during the period from the 1870s to the 1960s in the United States, changes that made the role of mentor or guide most significant. A discussion of this period can help set a context for the essays. Authorship had just emerged as a profession in the early nineteenth century and remained in a state of flux during the post–Civil War era. Prior to the Civil War, as Shirley Marchalonis notes, "literary America was a small world of the eastern seacoast with three publishing centers: Boston, New York, and Philadelphia," and in this small world "the last great age of patronage" thrived as the literary establishment "supported itself, . . . inspected and judged new writers, and . . . perpetuated itself by letting in suitable members" (xi). For those within the establishment, personal relationships aided in the production of literary material, as printer-publishers engaged in long-term relationships with authors and provided, in some circumstances, advice and encouragement as well as remuneration. For those somewhat removed or not personally acquainted, however, a high degree of formality characterized the relationships, a pattern that lasted to the end of the century. Those outside the known circle, for instance, often received responses to inquiries and submissions in letters signed with a firm's name rather than an editor's. As Barbara Reitt explains, "The

careful distance that the [editor and author] maintained could become particularly pronounced when the author was not a member of the circle of authors, scholars, publishers and other men of letters who formed the inner circle of the American literary establishment" (34). In 1860 a midwestern outsider like William Dean Howells found it necessary, as a young man of twenty-three, to seek and present letters of introduction from established New England authors to make inroads into Boston's literary marketplace.

Expansion and commercialization in the American publishing industry following the Civil War intensified the nationalization of literature. These factors also redefined relationships between authors, editors, and publishers, as the personal bonds that had characterized publishing during the prewar era began to crumble for all except the major authors. Though they had prided themselves on their status as "gentlemen" who had direct contact with the authors they published, many publishers, facing the new demands of a corporate culture and large-scale competition, became increasingly removed from the negotiations and communication with individual authors (Coultrap-McQuin 32). The greater role played by literary agents as negotiators in the publishing process by the end of the century altered the relationship between publisher and author (Tebbel 14). Though Walter Hines Page might argue that "the literary agent had no legitimate function once the author and publisher have become intimate" (Madison 161), John Tebbel suggests that "it became a question of two businessmen, agent and publisher, negotiating, while the editor-and-author relationship, with the publisher more and more removed, went on in the way now familiar in our time" (147). Thus, the old network of publisher-author relationships that once offered support and guidance was slowly giving way, declining further as the concept of "trade courtesy," which had regulated competition for authors' works at mid-century, also collapsed under the pressures of a new culture. Despite Tebbel's observation, even the editor-author relationship was not without its complexities and tensions generated by the changing practices of literary publishing. As Ellery Sedgwick indicates, editors felt increasing pressure from market forces to encourage writers to produce works that capitalized on current tastes and fashions, constraining the types of support and advice an editor might give.[2] Thus Stedman, Howells, Wharton, and Moore, as our essayists illuminate, provided truly necessary services by helping young writers to meet editors and publishers and by enticing the latter to read the work of their protégés. Moreover, they could at times offer advice and guidance less influenced by the demands of the marketplace.

Emerging authors in the late nineteenth century had to navigate a marketplace made more complex by the proliferation of magazines and the centralization of control in publishing houses.[3] Increased competition between publications that featured serious writing reflective of the values and concerns of "high culture" and those that catered to the tastes of the mass market and depended upon a steady stream of popular (but not necessarily good) writing forced writers to choose between satisfying the market, and thus earning money, or being true to their inner visions, to their authentic voices. Earlier in the century, some authors who ultimately became part of the literary establishment and whose work eventually entered the canon began their careers producing the "potboilers" that found a ready market in cheap periodicals and weekly papers. Opportunities to contribute to this market increased with the rise of the literary syndicates later in the century, tempting some authors away from "serious" but possibly less lucrative work. As Lichtenstein observes, "the advent of the literary syndicate had an immediate effect upon the relationship of the author to his work, his editor and the financial rewards of the industry" (40). Yet, by the 1880s, choosing to publish in syndicates and mass-market publications threatened one's potential for the successful placement of one's work in literary magazines and with respected publishers. Thus, novices depended on guidance from experienced authors and editors—in short, from mentors—to help them determine the appropriate career steps to take, as well as to help them develop their talents as writers and poets. The literary experiment imagined in Howells's *Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), for instance, suggested ways for a business manager to assist both editor and contributors in producing a good literary product that would sell to the public.

The decades following the Civil War also witnessed marked changes, specifically in the experiences of women authors. Throughout the nineteenth century, women had expressed a sense of professionalism toward their work, but, in the second half, more gained entry into the publishing business through editorial work on magazines. While it made women known in the business, editorial work nevertheless posed a dual threat to a literary career, since the time it consumed could not be devoted to writing and a woman "might rise to a level of considerable responsibility within a firm without ever becoming well-known somewhere else" (Reitt 40).[4] Awareness of this threat to a promising career surely influenced Sarah Orne Jewett's 1908 remark to Willa Cather urging her to leave her position as managing editor of *McClure's:* "I cannot help saying what I think about your writing and its being hindered by such incessant, impor-

tant, responsible work as you have in your hands now. I do think that it is impossible for you to work so hard and yet have your gifts mature as they should" (O'Brien 344).

Women in literary publishing still faced challenges that were influenced by gender expectations, not only at the turn of the century, but well into the modern period. To meet these challenges they depended on networks of support that included sympathetic editors as well as other women writers, often finding a significant mentor within one of these two groups. In *Doing Literary Business* (1990), Susan Coultrap-McQuin indicates that, among the women writers who did succeed, "each became confident enough of her own abilities to pass on advice to other authors, either through personal encouragement and mentoring . . . or through articles . . . on pursuing a literary career" (195). Unfortunately, those women who did not receive personal and professional support or find a mentor to guide them often struggled to fulfill their potential.

By the turn of the century, the rise of internationalism in literature (a phenomenon that affected the careers of writers like James and Wharton) added to the array of publishing outlets and professional contacts for authors, but it also increased the potential for isolation and the loss of regional literary communities. Literary work by its very nature entailed a level of isolation, and the loss of regional communities forced writers to identify with new groups forming around literary enterprises. While Howells and others acknowledged that authors' dinners and other celebratory events hosted by publishers provided advertising opportunities, these occasions also helped to reinforce a new sense of literary community centered around the publishing house rather than the regional literary center. The willingness of authors to attend these events (which began to replace the private "salons" of an earlier era) had as much to do with their need for connection to other writers as it did with the need to stay in the good graces of their publishers. For younger writers, these occasions also became opportunities to meet those with established literary reputations; the right mentor provided important avenues of contact at these galas.

Changes continued in the publishing industry throughout the modern period. Charles Madison refers to the years 1900–1945 as the era of "the commercialization of literature," though the seeds of this change had been planted in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Publishers such as Henry Holt "deplored the scrambling and scuffling to obtain best-selling authors" (Madison 161), while Frank Dodd asserted that books were selected for publication "for the credit of the house" (Tebbel 7), arguing that quality as well as salability still mattered. Many publishers began to

incorporate practices from the syndicates, such as books written "on contract," and the advertising of books expanded to levels not imagined in the 1870s. In 1933 Edith Wharton wrote to Rutger B. Jewett, her editor and friend at Appleton and Co., "The fact is I am afraid that I cannot write down to the present standard of the American picture magazines. I am in as much need of money as everybody else at this moment and if I could turn out a series of potboilers for magazine consumption I should be only too glad to do so . . . " (*Letters* 572). Though there were exceptions, such as Wharton and Rutger Jewett, most publishers and editors no longer enjoyed sustained friendships with their authors, so that the depersonalization of the business of literary publishing continued.

Thus, as the publishing industry and the relationships it engendered changed profoundly over the course of a century, an author's need for guidance, supportive criticism, and encouragement remained, or even grew. As Richard Brodhead remarks, "No one appears in authorship without the prior achievement . . . of thinking him- or herself over from a person in general into that more specialized human self that is an author" (110). And no figure plays a more important role in supporting this transformation and the realization of its goals than does the literary mentor or guide.

The essays that follow concern themselves with numerous aspects of literary mentoring and comment on each other extensively. Presented chronologically, they begin with Robert J. Scholnick's investigation into a classic instance of mentoring, "'The last letter of all': Reese, Stedman, and Poetry in Late-Nineteenth-Century America," in which he contemplates Edmund Clarence Stedman's guidance of the younger, fledgling poet, Lizette Woodworth Reese. By looking at the letters between them, Scholnick chronicles the twenty-year friendship that begins with thirty-one-year-old Reese seeking reviews and help with her earliest books of poetry from the established writer and editor, to a much more secure Reese offering emotional support and loyalty to a dying widower in his seventies. The affection that grows between them, restrained by propriety, serves to inspire Reese to more and better poetry even as it assuages Stedman's sense of his own waning power as he grows older.

Two essays on William Dean Howells look more closely at the mentor than the fledgling writers—not surprisingly, perhaps, given Howells's own career as editor and "Dean" of American letters. Melissa McFarland Pennell, in "The Mentor's Charge: Literary Mentoring in Howells's Criticism and Fiction," combines biography and literary analysis as she looks at Howells's sense of the responsibilities of a mentor, both as he lived the role himself and as he depicts his character, the Reverend Mr. Sewell, in an