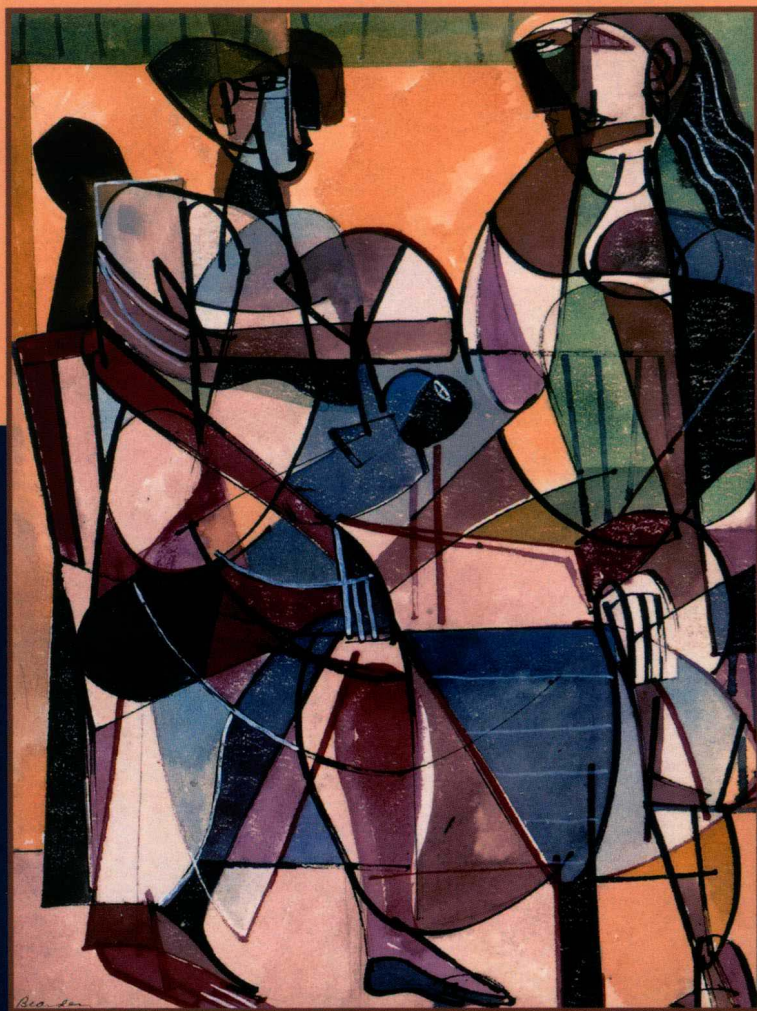


ANITA PATTERSON



Race, American Literature  
and  
Transnational Modernisms

CAMBRIDGE

# RACE, AMERICAN LITERATURE AND TRANSNATIONAL MODERNISMS

ANITA PATTERSON



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## RACE, AMERICAN LITERATURE AND TRANSNATIONAL MODERNISMS

Modern poetry crossed racial and national boundaries. The emergence of poetic modernism in the Americas was profoundly shaped by transatlantic contexts of empire-building and migration. In this ambitious book, Anita Patterson examines cross-currents of influence among a range of American, African-American and Caribbean authors. Works by Whitman, Poe, Eliot, Pound and their avant-garde contemporaries served as a heritage for black poets in the USA and elsewhere in the New World. In tracing these connections, Patterson argues for a renewed focus on intercultural and transnational dialogue in modernist studies. This bold and imaginative work of transnational literary and historical criticism sets canonical American figures in fascinating new contexts and opens up new readings of Langston Hughes, Derek Walcott and Aimé Césaire. This book will be of interest to scholars of American and African-American literature, modernism, postcolonial studies and Caribbean literature.

ANITA PATTERSON is Associate Professor of English and American Studies at Boston University.

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I dedicate this book to my husband Orlando, whose love I will always cherish, and to our daughter Kaia, born in the midst of my revisions, who has brought such everlasting joy and hope.

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## *Introduction*

### *Towards a comparative American poetics*

“Those countries,” says T. S. Eliot, “which share the most history, are the most important to each other, with respect to their future literature.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this book is to examine how shared history – of colonial settlement, empire-building, slavery, cultural hybridity and diasporic cosmopolitanism – informed the emergence, and revisionary adaptation, of modernist idioms in the Americas.

James Clifford reminds us that the global practice of migration is very old and widespread.<sup>2</sup> Still, critics such as Amy Kaplan, Betsy Erkkila and John Carlos Rowe have suggested that the formation of American literature should be examined in light of the diasporic consequences and multilingual contexts of imperialism.<sup>3</sup> Sensitive to the constructed nature of national myths, Americanists are ever more alert to the need for analytical perspectives that situate United States cultures in a transnational framework.

Within sociology, the term “transnationalism” has, since the mid-1990s, been used to denote social processes involved in the movement of migrant populations from one nation-state to another, processes that call into question the geographical delineation of national boundaries.<sup>4</sup> In 1993, Paul Gilroy noted how attention to “transnational structures of circulation and intercultural exchange” brought about by diasporic history could help diminish the “tragic popularity of ideas about the integrity and purity of cultures.”<sup>5</sup> Seven years later, Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt announced the arrival of a “transnational moment” in literary scholarship, where the analytical frameworks of postcolonial and ethnic studies are being productively confronted with one another. The revelation of shared histories, they insist, calls for new comparative studies of diasporic identities across national boundaries.<sup>6</sup>

Such renewed interest in comparative methodologies has already contributed a great deal to American Studies, helping critics uncover hidden nationalist agendas and move beyond regional ethnocentrism.<sup>7</sup> I want to push this argument further, though, by studying how transnationalism



informs our understanding not just of “black,” “postcolonial” or “ethnic” writers, but of American modernism more generally. Certainly, as Homi Bhabha contends, we should bear in mind crucial discrepancies among various manifestations of cosmopolitanism, and the suffering of those who were forced to migrate to the New World.<sup>8</sup> But Rowe is also right to suggest that many people, not just slaves and exploited migrants, were dislocated by imperialism; to forget this, he argues, would occlude the densely interwoven and variegated histories out of which these new global phenomena arose.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to the United States, the story of these historic uprootings has been told many times before.<sup>10</sup> The Great Migration of 1630, the accelerating advance of the western frontier, and the arrival of 35 million transatlantic European immigrants during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries present a vivid backdrop for the sustained, paradoxically fruitful confrontation of disparate national cultures, relations tortuously inscribed in the contradictory poetics of self-identification on both sides of the Atlantic ever since the colonial period. Between 1880 and 1930 alone, 27 million people, mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe, came to America in the hope of escaping starvation, at the same time that many Americans were migrating internally to urban areas, especially in the northeast and midwest.

Why did migration remain so consequential for American literature in the twentieth century? The estrangement, alienating aesthetics and cultural self-reflexivity of literary modernism involve, as Anthony Giddens has observed, an oscillation between local and global points of view that was brought on by enhanced mobility.<sup>11</sup> Raymond Williams surmises that, because so many artists were immigrants, and experienced their role as “stranger” in such fundamentally new ways, migration served as an important catalyst of modernist and avant-garde movements.<sup>12</sup> Wondering at the vast scale and consequences of New World diasporic history, and only hinting at its possible effect on the oddly measured cadences of American verse, Henry James ambivalently questioned the very meaning and possibility of nationhood: “Who and what is an alien, when it comes to that, in a country peopled from the first under the jealous eye of history? – peopled, that is, by migrations at once extremely recent, perfectly traceable and urgently required . . . Which is the American, by these scant measures?”<sup>13</sup>

The opening chapters of this book lay a foundation for those which follow by establishing a context for Eliot’s transnational self-conception as a New World poet. Tracing a line of development from Poe and Whitman, to Jules Laforgue (who was born in Uruguay), to Eliot and the Guadeloupean

Creole poet St.-John Perse, I show how the reciprocal exchange of influences between Eliot and Perse helped to nourish the germination of modernist forms in Francophone Caribbean poetry. A. James Arnold has persuasively shown how early poetry by Aimé Césaire was inspired by modernism in Europe, and Michael Dash has argued for modernism's role in shaping the political and literary cultures of Haiti and Martinique.<sup>14</sup> But neither of these scholars examines how Eliot and Perse aided the growth of poetic modernism in Francophone regions. Reconfiguring the preconceived boundaries of American literature, and reconciling historiographic methods with formal analysis and postcolonial theory, I uncover a dense matrix of hemispheric and transatlantic convergences.

Chapter 1 demonstrates that the transnational implications of Poe's landscapes and style exerted a far greater and more direct influence on Eliot's work than critics have previously maintained. Adapting topographical methods from Poe, Eliot creates richly ambiguous geographical idioms that deepen his poetry's ties to history and express his transnational predicament by evoking contrasts between the Old World and the New. Exploring Eliot's progressive engagement with Perse, I show how a common attraction to Poe as a New World antecedent made fruitful, intercultural relations possible, and laid the foundation for the flourishing of modernist styles in the Americas.

There has been a growing interest in the problem of Eliot's anti-Semitism, but we have still to learn more about the related question of how his poems instantiate his awareness of hybridity on the American frontier.<sup>15</sup> Chapter 2 examines neglected but essential sources of hybridity in Whitman's poetry that explain why Whitman exerted such a strong, inescapable influence on Laforgue, Eliot and Perse. The first of these is the colonial settlement of the New World by the French, Spanish and British, a legacy indelibly etched in New World landscapes. The second involves Amerindian place names that recall the practice of "regeneration through violence" as a constitutive feature of the frontier.<sup>16</sup> These recollections, and the fact that Eliot's early encounter with Whitman happened indirectly through Laforgue, are powerfully brought to bear on Eliot's choice of French as the primary medium in which to sculpt a hybrid idiom. Situated within the Whitmanian contexts elaborated over the course of my argument, the importance of Eliot's translation of Perse's *Anabase*, and Eliot's gradual recognition of the cultural New World dilemmas he shared with Perse, will be brought to light. The painful obliquity of Eliot's reference to the frontier in early poems is, I argue, comparable to what Edouard Glissant refers to as Perse's "dilemma of the White Creole," since both poets embody the contradictions of a New

World settler culture that simultaneously defined itself as colonizer and colonized.<sup>17</sup> The collaboration with Perse warrants closer attention than it has so far received, given that it addresses the concerns of recent Americanist critics by situating both Whitman's frontier and Eliot's modernism within the hemispheric, comparative contexts of migration and empire-building.

Here and throughout I contend that Eliot's historical sense intimately informs his modernism, enforcing his minutest stylistic decisions. But the intertwining diasporic histories associated with New World imperialism extend well beyond Poe's topographies, Whitman's hybrid poetics and the transnationalism of Eliot, Laforgue and Perse. They also involve the Middle Passage, and the movement of African-Americans from southern provinces to urban areas up north. Historians have shown that, when the First World War broke out, the rising number of job opportunities created by war industries combined with hard times and terrifying exploitation in the South, led to another Great Migration, with many African-Americans traveling to cities like Chicago, New York and Detroit.<sup>18</sup> In addition to drawing black migrants in search of jobs, cosmopolitan centers such as Harlem also attracted leading writers and artists; and, with the growing popularity of jazz, blues and African-American dance during the 1920s, the literary arts movement known as the Harlem Renaissance was born.

Chapter 3 begins by examining Hughes's close affinities with Eliot's transnational modernism, affinities that help explain Hughes's contribution to the rise of black internationalism and the hybridity of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the volatile interplay of influences between that Renaissance and other avant-garde movements in the USA, Europe and the Caribbean. The deceptive simplicity of Hughes's early lyrics obscures a concern with craft and stylistic innovation he shared with his modernist contemporaries, and his engagement with the European avant-gardes, and poets such as Laforgue and especially Baudelaire, was deeper and more extensive than has previously been shown. Like Eliot, whose attraction to vaudeville and jazz is now becoming better understood, Hughes was vitally concerned with the relations between poetry and music and the creation of a modern poetics he described as "jazz . . . putting itself into words."<sup>19</sup> Like Eliot's poetry, Hughes's work crosses the divide between "high" and "low" culture.

Finally, and most important for the larger argument of this book, Hughes's influence, like Eliot's, extends to the Caribbean – not just through Aimé Césaire but also through Jacques Roumain, a Haitian poet and novelist whose works Hughes translated and who played a central role in the Haitian Renaissance during the 1920s. Hughes's relations with Roumain

established a cross-current of New World influences that, like Eliot's relations with Perse, would foster the cultivation of modernism and *Négritude* in the Francophone Caribbean. My emphasis on reciprocal influences across racial boundaries resonates with works by George Hutchinson, Michael North, Ross Posnock, Werner Sollors and others, who have attempted to halt the petty division of literature into niches according to each writer's "authentic," socially marked identity.<sup>20</sup>

My final two chapters document responses to modernism in the Anglophone Caribbean. Drawing on the work of Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott, two of the most self-conscious Caribbean modernists who came of age during the decade leading up to independence, I explain how and why they creatively revised the experimental techniques of poets such as Whitman, Eliot, Pound and Crane. Once again, as in my discussion of Hughes's poetry, I explore differences as well as similarities. I present Walcott and Harris within a complex historical contention: at the same time that these Caribbean poets drew on resources that would help them resist assimilation of their distinct local cultures to a modernist project, the internationalist ethos and varied formal repertoire of modernists in the USA helped them to reconceive their roles as New World poets.

As a result, they recovered and realized an unwritten history of migratory cosmopolitanism in the region. Nearly four centuries after African slaves were first brought to the New World, over half a century after indentured laborers arrived from India and China to work on Caribbean estates in the post-emancipation era, and a decade before the onset of the Great Migration of African-Americans in the USA, the pull of large, labor-intensive projects such as the Panama Canal and the growth of sugar industries in Cuba stimulated an early wave of external migration from the Anglophone Caribbean at the turn of the century.<sup>21</sup> During the late 1950s and early 1960s, rapid industrialization in developing countries such as Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana and Barbados prompted internal migrations to urban areas; external migrations of colonial subjects, present and former, into London as the imperial center; and, since the mid-'60s, a more or less constant movement to and from the eastern USA.<sup>22</sup> The consequences of this diasporic history for emergent Anglophone writers were formative and far-reaching. "What religion is not a *mélange*?" asks Walcott; "What culture is not a *mélange*? . . . And that to me is very 'New World'."<sup>23</sup>

Given the shared history and fertile crossing of cultures throughout the New World, it is surprising that the link between US modernism and the development of poetry in other parts of the Americas has been a relatively neglected area of research – although, thanks to the efforts of critics such

as Dash, Simon Gikandi, Jahan Ramazani and Charles Pollard, the tide of criticism has begun to turn.<sup>24</sup> The omission is all the more striking when we realize that Harris and Walcott have repeatedly stressed the affinity, in sensibility and style, among modernists in the USA and writers from other regions in the Americas.

One plausible cause of such neglect is that the importance of modernism in the Caribbean has been obscured by theoretical rubrics such as “post-modernism” and “postcolonialism.” There is also an insidious tendency among critics to use the terms “modernist” and “modern” synonymously, ignoring Stephen Spender’s useful contention that not all modern artists consciously elected the mannerisms of modernist style.<sup>25</sup> Adding to this confusion is the unhelpful temptation to generalize about a uniform condition of “modernity,” in the Black Atlantic and elsewhere. And because any consensus regarding the meaning of “postmodernism” is riding on the claim that Euro-American culture has by now made a radical break from modernism, the “modern” has, in its turn, been personified, often melodramatically, as a force threatening to destroy whole literatures and societies in the non-Western world.<sup>26</sup>

Another cause for neglect has been the charge of elitist absolutism raised against Eliot by multiculturalists who regard him as a provincial, rigid apologist for a racially circumscribed canon of classic Western literature. As a result, far too little has been said about how Eliot’s poems instantiate his awareness of hybridity, an awareness reflecting his own close knowledge of the frontier. We may well disagree with Eliot’s hierarchical valuing of cultures, his conviction that hybridity was, as he put it, an “insoluble problem,” or the nature of his political commitments. But the fact remains that Eliot’s work was of signal importance to subsequent generations of black poets in the Americas, and it is well worth asking why.

Finally, the application of global contexts and perspectives to Caribbean literature is a source of anxiety to scholars who fear this will efface national, regional and ethnic distinctions that are a source of cherished cultural uniqueness. Thus, it is understandable that Silvio Torres-Saillant, in *Caribbean Poetics*, warns against the dangers of a hemispheric approach to Caribbean literatures that “aim[s] to unveil global truths about writing in the archipelago” but ends up “underestimating the validity of the knowledge produced by Caribbean minds.”<sup>27</sup>

It is true, as Torres-Saillant demonstrates, that the Caribbean has produced a metadiscourse that explains its own literature. Such a metadiscourse has been and will continue to be invaluable illuminating, as my own reference to writings by Walcott, Harris and various Caribbean critics will

confirm.<sup>28</sup> But it would be erroneous to conclude from this that we know all there is to know about the history of Caribbean poetics without considering the roles of Eliot, Pound, Hughes, Crane and Perse in the historical emergence of modernism in the region. Despite its limitations, as one possible conceptual configuration among many, my hemispheric, comparative, transnational approach offers a salutary corrective to Torres-Saillant's "internal logic" and "centripetal vision," because it reveals cross-currents of influence that are obscured by his study.<sup>29</sup> Continuing with earlier attempts by scholars to resist separatist oversimplification and restore historical linkages between modernism and the colonial and postcolonial archives, I define the skeptical reassessment of modernism as a crucial aspect of Caribbean discourse. The influences I document are openly acknowledged by the writers themselves, and are essential to a comprehensive account of modernism in the region.

Simply put, this book explains how the transnational modernism of Eliot and his avant-garde contemporaries served as a heritage for black poets – not just in the USA but elsewhere in the American hemisphere – and why shared New World history would have made a difference in bringing this about. Although recognizing these intertextual relations is vital, the account I give in the pages that follow is not intended in any way to be exhaustive. My purpose is more general – to reveal the contours of "lyric history" in America, where history inheres in the meaningful articulation of poetic form.<sup>30</sup> Robert Pinsky warns against the dubious supposition that American poetry is somehow bereft of historical memory; the uniqueness of any poet's voice, he maintains, has to do with the poem's embeddedness within cultural reality.<sup>31</sup> And, years ago, Paul de Man offered a powerful admonishment against the ahistoricism of New Critics in the United States:

In evaluating what American criticism stood to gain from a closer contact with Europe, one would have stressed the balance achieved in some of the best European works between historical knowledge and a genuine feeling for literary form. For reasons that are themselves part of history, the same synthesis was rarely achieved in America . . . The predominant influence, that of the New Criticism, was never able to overcome the anti-historical bias that presided over its beginnings.<sup>32</sup>

Surely, to correct against the anti-historical bias of formalist criticism, it is better to strive for a balanced synthesis of historical knowledge and literary form than to abjure formal analysis altogether.

Therefore, in addition to showing how each poet's intimately regional perspective is defamiliarized within a labyrinth of transnational convergence, this book also defends a corollary claim about the mutual entailments

of history and modernist poetics. I wish, for example, to consider how a collective, hemispheric memory of dislocation might encourage a creative practice of allusion, where black poets in the Americas could find expressive freedom by looking to their modernist precursors as an idiomatic resource. Each of the chapters demonstrates how poets from very different cultures and regions arrived at singularly local lyric standpoints, not by casting off modernist techniques as anxiety-provoking vestiges of an earlier era, but by “signifying,” in Henry Louis Gates’s sense, on modernist forms that encrypted, in a highly condensed fashion, the experience of diasporic estrangement.<sup>33</sup> Attending to specific questions of language and poetic method, I hope not so much to emphasize the assimilation of regional differences as to demonstrate the remarkably various and unique ways in which every idiom evokes the fact of transnational mobility and, in so doing, works against racial and national separatism.

Adopting a comparative approach that brings history back into modernist forms, but retains insights won by theory and stylistic analysis, I hope to contribute both to the critique of exceptionalism in American Studies and to the historicist reconsideration of Eliot’s modernism begun in recent years.<sup>34</sup> I extend the work of Americanists such as Kaplan, Erkkila and Rowe by taking poetics as an enriching, essential correlative to history and politics, and my account of Eliot’s abiding, fraught relationship to Whitman and Poe, as well as Symbolists such as Baudelaire, Laforgue and Perse, confirms Albert Gelpi’s pathbreaking reassessment of modernism’s subtle continuities with Romanticism.<sup>35</sup> And though I am ever mindful of local cultures, I consistently question polemical paradigms that have pitted a vastly oversimplified caricature of hegemonic “white” modernism against the subversive tendencies unleashed by black poetry.<sup>36</sup> Hybridity, cosmopolitanism, cross-culturation: these are not the special province of any nation, race or *-ism*. The territorial divide between “modernism” on the one hand, and “postmodernism,” “postcolonialism” and “black,” “mass” and “folk” culture on the other, may have served, for a time, to create necessary critical distance from an era too close, and too complexly diverse, for comfort. But given that such abstractions have become more of a hindrance than a help, the historicity of poetic forms should now be brought more deliberately to bear on their use.

## CHAPTER I

# *Transnational topographies in Poe, Eliot and St.-John Perse*

### ELIOT, POE AND THE ENIGMA OF NATIONALITY

Weighing the importance of Poe's style for his own coming of age as a poet, in a 1948 lecture Eliot presented Poe as something of an enigma. "One cannot be sure that one's own writing has *not* been influenced by Poe," he said; "I can name positively certain poets whose work has influenced me, I can name others whose work, I am sure, has not; there may be still others of whose influence I am unaware, but whose influence I might be brought to acknowledge; but about Poe I shall never be sure."<sup>1</sup> Contrasting with this perceptible uncertainty in "From Poe to Valéry," in a previously aired BBC broadcast Eliot remarked upon Poe's enduring power in terms that were far more unequivocal. "Poe chooses to appear, not as a man inspired to utter at white-heat, and not as having any ethical or intellectual purpose, but as the craftsman," he observed; "His poetry is original . . . ; he has the integrity not to attempt . . . to do anything that any other poet has already done. And . . . his poetry is significant: it alters the Romantic Movement, and looks forward to a later phase of it. Once his poems have become part of your experience, they are never dislodged."<sup>2</sup>

There are many reasons Poe's body of work would have had a persistent but ambiguous appeal for Eliot over the course of his lifetime. First, and most often discussed, is the point raised by Eliot in the radio broadcast, and by F. O. Matthiessen two years earlier in *American Renaissance*, regarding Poe's emphasis on craftsmanship and advocacy of an impersonal poetics.<sup>3</sup> Second, and closely related to this, is Poe's connection to the Romantic Movement. Matthiessen proposed that Poe's significance inhered in his declaration that lyric practice must not be separate from the theory that includes it, as well as Poe's "strict if brittle" adherence to principles of art that would liberate Baudelaire and the French Symbolists from the "effluvia" of Romanticism.<sup>4</sup> In a 1927 review of Hervey Allen's *Israfel*, Eliot suggests that Poe was actually far more closely aligned with the Romantics than



Matthiessen implied. For Eliot, it was Poe's ability to inherit and explain Romanticism that proved to be so liberating to his successors; by calling attention to Poe's transmutation of the Romantic legacy through Byron's poetics, he shrewdly addressed a conspicuous omission in Poe's own copious writings on this subject.<sup>5</sup>

Evidently, Eliot was drawn also to Poe's isolation and originality – two aspects of Poe's condition as an American writer that gain significance in the context of Eliot's effort to come to terms with his own isolation during the emotionally volatile years leading up to *The Waste Land*. "The great figures of American literature are peculiarly isolated," he contended in another early review,

and their isolation is an element, if not of their greatness, certainly of their originality . . . Hawthorne, Poe and Whitman are none of them so great as they might have been. But the lack of intelligent literary society is not responsible for their shortcomings; it is much more certainly responsible for some of their merits. The *originality*, if not the full mental capability, of these men was brought out, forced out, by the starved environment. This originality gives them a distinction which some heavier-weight authors do not obtain.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, well before he publicly celebrated Poe's literary merits or concern with craft, Eliot extolled Poe's embrace of what Poe himself described as the ideal of "a criticism self-sustained" – his advocacy and practice of impartial independence as a critic.<sup>7</sup> In the same 1919 review, Eliot praised Poe as "the directest, the least pedantic, the least pedagogical of the critics writing in his time in either America or England."<sup>8</sup> This insistence upon Poe's achievements as a critic, combined with his emphasis on Poe's originality, helped to promulgate a robust tradition in biographical and literary scholarship – a tradition that began with James Russell Lowell's influential account of Poe's criticism as "fearless" and "without the heat of partisanship" – that depicted Poe as one of the rare poet-critics in nineteenth-century America who managed to maintain a principled opposition to the nationalist bias and cliquish favoritism that pervaded the literary marketplace during his era.<sup>9</sup>

Eliot's view of Poe is restricted and idealized. As a reviewer, and as editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* and the *Broadway Journal*, Poe wrote criticism that was often shaped by the institutional pressures of literary nationalism and a national literary marketplace in ways Eliot would have condemned.<sup>10</sup> But, to his credit, Poe made no secret of his antipathy towards the nationalist sentiment flaunted by critics and politicians in his day. An 1845 letter in the *Broadway Journal* roundly castigated editors for their