The house of thought': nineteenth-century American literature and the philosophical

Thomas Constantinesco, Cécile Roudeau

▶ **To cite this version:**

Thomas Constantinesco, Cécile Roudeau. The house of thought': nineteenth-century American literature and the philosophical. Textual Practice, 2019, 33 (10), pp.1649-1656. 10.1080/0950236X.2019.1665911 . hal-02931109

HAL Id: hal-02931109
https://hal.science/hal-02931109

Submitted on 10 Sep 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Introduction

'The House of Thought': Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Philosophical

Thomas Constantinesco, Université de Paris, LARCA, CNRS, F-75013 Paris, France
Cécile Roudeau, Université de Paris, LARCA, CNRS, F-75013 Paris, France

Philosophy, literature: expectation.
Expectations by one of the other: desire, expectation, solicitation, appeal, desperate insistence.
Jean-Luc Nancy

Why has America never expressed itself philosophically? Or has it – in the metaphysical riot of its greatest literature?
Stanley Cavell

Philosophy, literature. In the space between the two made palpable in Nancy's phrasing by a conspicuous comma in lieu of a more logical, historical, or conceptual articulation, there lies an 'expectation' indeed or at the very least a nagging question that reaches beyond the emergence of the modern notion of literature at the end of the eighteenth-century to the hoary rapport between poetic form and speculative inquiry.[1] Indeed, the last few decades have provided a particularly intense set of reflections on the riotous intimacy between these two, generating a renewed interest among philosophers and literary critics on both sides of the Atlantic. In France, where five of the contributors of this special issue are based, philosophy has turned to (anglophone) literature – poetry, as one would expect, but also theater and the novel – to explore regimes of thought whose singularity has proven a vexing and tantalizing provocation for philosophical practice. From Deleuze's reformulation of Bartleby to Rancière's more recent readings of Poe or Faulkner, from Derrida's *frayage* with Joyce or Melville to Badiou's dubious embrace of Beckett,[2] literature has become a constant, if irritable, partner of philosophical études. In turn, scholarly readings of literary texts in the U.S. have increasingly chosen philosophy as a privileged interlocutor – as in *Slavery, Philosophy and American Literature, 1830-1860* (2005), *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy* (2013), *Melville's Philosophies* (2017) to quote but a few recent titles.[3]

---

[1] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Expectation: Philosophy, Literature*, trans. Robert Bononno (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017 [2015]), p. 1. This special issue takes literature in the modern sense of the term, as it emerged in contradistinction with belles-lettres towards the end of the eighteenth-century, concomitantly with the age of Revolutions. The question of the articulation between the poetic and the philosophical has a much longer history that needs to take into consideration, if not as its origin, at least as one of its paradigms, Plato's expulsion of the Poet from the City.

[2] Gilles Deleuze, 'Bartleby; or, the Formula,' in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 [1993]), p. 68-90 ; Jacques Rancière, *Les bords de la fiction,* Paris : Seuil, 2017 ; Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce', in *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge (New York : Routledge, 1992); Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics,* trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford University Press, 2005 [1998]). For Rancière, or Badiou, however different their approaches, literature does think, or to say it in Deleuzian terms, it is important to conceive of a literary work as a 'literary-speculative' work.

[3] Maurice Lee, *Slavery, Philosophy and American Literature, 1830-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jed Deppman, Marianne Noble, and Gary Lee Stonum, eds., *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy* (New

In her now classic *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Literature and Philosophy* (1992), Martha Nussbaum reminds us how in the 1960s and early 1970s the distribution between literature and philosophy, as disciplines and institutions, required that the line between aesthetic form and speculative inquiry be drawn again and again, forbidding thereby any odd cohabitation of the two.[4] Nussbaum's work, in the wake of Cavell's and others', successfully altered the terms of the debate – moving away from the safe, albeit illusory, principle of mutual exclusion to test the shifting grounds of an open relationship between literature and philosophy. If, as Nussbaum proposes and demonstrates, philosophy can find a home within the realm of literature, it may in turn be productive to look for moments, texts or places where literature adopted the philosophical as one of its practices. This hypothesis implies that we ourselves shift from 'philosophy' to what we tentatively call here the philosophical, by which we mean a move away from philosophy as a discipline and a profession toward migratory practices of thinking.[5] In that sense, the present issue proposes to investigate the complex rapports between two practices of writing and two modes of thinking.

No doubt, the relationship between the philosophical and literature has taken a particular path in nineteenth-century U.S. 'There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but no philosophers', Thoreau quipped as late as 1854,[6] aware as he was, however, of the germination of *ideas* in the textual practice of his fellow Transcendentalists. One and a half centuries later, Cavell's famous corrective reminded us of the so-called American paradox: nowhere better than in literature has America 'expressed itself philosophically.' In the context of the nineteenth-century U.S., it would therefore seem vain to oppose philosophy and literature, to look for, or re-invent, an opposition by means of which *philosophy* has produced, and thus constituted itself against, its other.[7] Nor is insight to be gained by cleansing American literature of the philosophical in the name of textuality, or poeticity. As Derek Attridge concludes, 'Philosophy will always come in by the back door – indeed it will never have left the house.'[8]

Literature, in the nineteenth-century, was indeed the 'house of thought'[9], the place where thinking took place as an embodied practice resisting the diktats of a strict conceptuality. *Pace* Cavell, this tangle of literature and the philosophical may be less distinctive of 'America' than he has proposed, and more akin to a broader Romantic tradition wherein literature not only was 'defined as a major object for speculative thinking, but also turned into an alter ego of philosophy, even a rival', 'offer [ing] thought experiments of its own.'[10] It is important to bear

---

York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Branka Arsić and K. L. Evans, eds., *Melville's Philosophies* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017). One can also mention the issue of *Transatlantica* titled 'Littérature et philosophie' edited by Isabelle Alfandary. *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2013, Online since 14 February 2014. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6453.

[4] Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[5] It is noticeable how the terms 'philosophy' or 'philosophies' no longer reign supreme but face competition with the more capacious and less disciplinary term 'thinking'. See for example Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Jed Deppman, *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008); Sophie Laniel-Musitelli and Thomas Constantinesco, eds. *Romanticism and Philosophy: Thinking with Literature* ((New York: Routledge, 2015); Terence Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[6] H. D. Thoreau, *Walden* (1854) in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: The Library of America, 1985), p. 334.

[7] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, Expanded Edition (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1981]), p. 33.

[8] Derek Attridge, 'Introduction,' *Acts of Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[9] Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (1865), in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, *op. cit.*, p. 999.

[10] Sophie Laniel-Musitelli and Thomas Constantinesco, ed. *Romanticism and Philosophy: Thinking with Literature, op. cit.*, p. 2. In a footnote, the editors note that 'the diversity and complexity of the responses offered

in mind that if the United States has been built on a particularly rich process of literary and philosophical crosspollination, the distinctiveness of 'America' stops short of a blinding exceptionalism. A vibrant transatlantic tradition that insisted on the migrant practice of the philosophical still needs to be reassessed. From the Romantics to the Pragmatists[11] at both ends of the nineteenth century, and across national mythographies, literature and the philosophical were productively, if unsettlingly, entangled. Such creative entanglements are the object of the present issue.

The eight essays collected here[12] all attend to the practice of thought that develops, and takes the form of, the literary texts that they investigate – an array of different genres, from novels, romances and tales to essays and poetry. What emerges from their inquiry is the multifarious ways in which literary writing and philosophical inquiry intersect, question, provoke and unsettle one another in nineteenth-century American literature. Although situated historically, it is our first contention that this practice of thought is nonetheless amenable to anachronistic revisions contingent on the readers' own historicity. 'Freeing the texts from the self-coincidence of time',[13] the essays below do not trace within nineteenth-century American literature the echoes of contemporary philosophy only – reading Whitman with Hegel, Melville alongside Marx, or Wharton and Bergson, to take a few examples. Rather, they prompt untimely transatlantic conversations: reading Hawthorne with Levinas and Winnicott; Melville and Whitman with Deleuze, Agamben, and Nancy; Dickinson with Derrida; Douglass with Merleau-Ponty; or James with Butler. They also use the philosophical as an anachronistic third term to reveal unwonted proximities or help reassess long-established intimacies, as between Emerson and idealism (via Cavell), Poe and Kant (via De Man), or Melville and Nietzsche (via Deleuze). Thus read as the locus of an ongoing, if anachronistic, practice of thought, American literature emerges as nationally and historically unbound. What comes out of these various conversations and confrontations, then, is an invitation to further de-exceptionalize our reading protocols, but also to move beyond conventional historicism and engage in new practices of disciplinary hospitalities.

The extent to which these new hospitalities have defamiliarized what we know, or think we know, about nineteenth-century U.S. literature, may nonetheless seem limited, in the sense that

---

by American writers to their British and European forebears, as well as the richness of the relation between literature and philosophy in nineteenth-century America' need further development. The present issue is one attempt at addressing these questions.

[11] As Cornel West and Richard Rorty among others have shown, the Pragmatists were indebted to the tropes of American Romanticism but not only. Sean Epstein-Corbin more recently suggested that pragmatism also drew on the tropes of moral sentimentalism that fueled the sentimental novels of the mid-nineteenth century. The emergence of an American philosophy, then, should not be detached from the literary milieu it sprung from; what is now referred to as classical pragmatism was entangled with literary practices themselves indistinguishable from practices of thought. See Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Sean Epstein-Corbin, 'Pragmatism, Feminism, and the Sentimental Subject', *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society,* vol. 50, no. 2 (2014), pp. 220-245.

[12] The project for this special issue originated in an international conference on 'American Literature and the Philosophical' held in Paris in 2017. We would like to take this opportunity to express our thanks and gratitude to all the participants for a series of lively and enriching conversations, to the editors of *Textual Practice* for welcoming our project, and to our selection of contributors for the unwavering enthusiasm and energy they brought as we put together this issue.

[13] For Rancière there are 'modes of connection we can call *anachronies* without any disparaging intent: events, notions, significations going against the course of time, setting meaning into motion, freeing it from all forms of contemporaneity, from the self-coincidence of time.' (J. Rancière, 'Le concept d'anachronisme et la vérité de l'historien,' *L'Inactuel*, no. 6, automne 1996, p. 67, translation Th. Constantinesco and S. Laniel-Musitelli, quoted in 'Introduction: Thinking with Literature', *Romanticism and Philosophy, op. cit.,* p. 6)

the corpus under investigation may be said to largely 'reconstitute exclusivity.' Is it because, as Elizabeth Duquette has recently suggested, the philosophical is not so much an instrument of subversion as a mode of reproducing old critical dichotomies between politics and philosophy, between works 'that are worth studying in themselves' (and deserve the label 'philosophical') and those that do '"work" or argue about politics' (and therefore are forbidden from the practice of thought)? 'What […] would it mean if we were to choose *not* to choose between politics and philosophy…?'[14] Duquette's timely provocation should not pass unacknowledged; the practice of thought, we concur, should by no means be deemed the exclusive province of the a-political; or, put differently, a focus on the philosophical should *not* exclude those texts that are too readily catalogued as politically committed, hence impervious to the speculative thinking. In many respects, Jennifer Lewis' phenomenological reading of Frederick Douglass's narrative and autobiography in the present issue takes up this challenge, as she turns to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and others to attend to the complex renderings of Douglass's experience of racial embodiment and its consequences for his politics as well as his aesthetics. No longer a marginal figure in today's literary canon, Douglass's speeches and essays and narratives are yet to be read as philosophy in act, or more to the point, as the loci of a practice of thought in its own right. We, like Duquette, can only look forward to more of such endeavours, even though we contend that canonicity, arguably 'constricted' need not be constricting and that there is still original work to be done from within its frontiers.[15] More importantly maybe, we hope that this present issue can contribute to going beyond the binaries that still inform our textual and critical practices: historicism vs. anachronies, but also political vs. philosophical, and, as we shall see, philosophy as abstract thinking vs. literature as embodied practice. While it is assuredly productive to look for the philosophical in literary texts that, on the face of it at least, seem primarily concerned with 'argu[ing] about politics', several of the following essays reveal that, even with canonical works, we can indeed 'choose *not* to choose between politics and philosophy'. If we pragmatically take the risk of considering the political as a practice that need not be distinguished from the knitty-gritty of politics, then whether in the form of Emerson's imagination of a nation of thinkers and writers (I. Alfandary), Hawthorne's affective ethics (M. Noble), Melville and Whitman's philosophical poetics of community (T. Claviez), or James's ethics of corporeal vulnerability (J. Rivkin), the philosophical pursuits of nineteenth-century American literature appear deeply and inextricably political. Because it chooses not to choose between politics and philosophy, just as it refutes the mutual exclusion between literature and the philosophical, this special issue aims at unsettling the eye of the beholder as much as the object of their attention, and open the way to other pursuits of the kind.

Following the entanglements between literature and the philosophical in nineteenth-century U.S. literature has helped bring out the body as a possible third term between the two, another unhinging instrument that questions the mutual exclusivity between abstract thinking and embodied practice. In the essays below, the body and bodily experiences materialize as sites where thinking also occurs. As Marianne Noble argues, tracing the evolution of Hawthorne's ethical thinking from *The Scarlet Letter* to *The House of the Seven Gables*, 'Hawthorne's key trope for the lived experience of the infinitude of the other [becomes] the warm, living body', which allows for 'the emergence of a heart-based ethics', away from the 'condition of perpetual guilt' that Hawthorne scholarship has tended to emphasize. Jennifer Lewis, for her part, shows

[14] Elizabeth Duquette, 'Attention Spans', *American Literary History*, 30, no. 4 (2018), p. 797.

[15] This is also Robert Levine's argument who, as the editor of the 1820–1865 volume of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, notes that 'while the authors […] may have stayed the same over the past few decades, they have changed as well as we read them in relation to a reconfigured canon.' R. S. Levine, 'The Canon and the Survey: An Anthologist's Perspective', *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists,* vol. 4, no. 1, 2016, pp. 138-39.

that Douglass's experience of racial embodiment and encounter forced him at first into 'careful living', understood as 'a perpetual performance of servility', yet also empowered him to 'a rebellious, care-less way of being in the world', whereby he 'learned to philosophise *through* this experience, subtly developing what amounts to a phenomenology of nineteenth-century African American embodiment'. Exploring the ambivalent politics of James's *What Maisie Knew*, Julie Rivkin charts the tension between 'empathy' and 'xenophobia' that results from Maisie's heightened awareness of the vulnerability of others, as well as her own, to contend that, 'in Maisie's divided response to the experience of embodied vulnerability', the novel 'performs its own reckoning with the condition of [what Judith Butler calls] "precarious life"' as underlying 'a global community founded on susceptibility to injury'. Common to all three essays, then, is an attempt to think through the ethics and politics of embodiment as they take shape in literary representations of the feeling, thinking body.

Such attentiveness to bodily thinking is evidenced more generally across the whole issue, as many contributions confront, and attempt to rethink, the vexed opposition between mind and body, spirit and matter, which has determined the idealist course of Western philosophy, as one where, to revert Judith Butler's terms, bodies do not matter.[16] For several of our contributors, not only do bodies matter – as in the case of Edouard Marsoin's valuation of Melville's 'belly philosophical' whereby 'ways of dieting' are connected with 'ways of thinking' – but matter itself matters. This is for instance the case in Francie Crebs's parallel exploration of the mathematical sublime in Kant and Poe, which reveals 'a material Kant' and in turn 'a material Poe', albeit a non-phenomenological one, very much at odds with recent, New Materialist perspectives on Poe. Taken as a whole, the essays gathered here contribute to recovering the body as a textual practice and the literary text as embodied thinking, where 'thinking', if we dare push their conclusions a bit further, more largely points to a 'cognitive activity that includes emotion, imagination, kinesic response, and (not least) interaction with other humans and the world at large,' to quote Terence Cave,[17] or in other words, where literature emerges as a complex 'cognitive affordance' that not only exemplifies thought but performs a mode of thinking (re-situated in the body of the reader also) peculiar to itself.

Inseparable from the concern for the materiality of (bodily) experience, for instance in Marsoin's and Crebs's essays, is indeed a common focus on the materiality of language itself as precisely the locus where the philosophical develops in and as literature. Emerson's writings represent perhaps the clearest instantiation of this critical position, for, in the words of Isabelle Alfandary, 'In the experience of life and of thought that Emerson inaugurates, the writing of literature does not distinguish itself from the writing of philosophy'. Yves Gardes' meticulous exploration of Emerson's philosophical poetics bears this claim out: in the wake of renewed scholarly interest in Sharon Cameron's reading of Emerson's impersonal,[18] Gardes demonstrates that Emerson's philosophical practice operates at the ground level of syntactical strategies, word arrangements, and echoing signifiers, where personhood is both enacted and unseated. Building on the conviction that writing is a form of thinking, then, the contributions to this special issue propose a series of exercises in close reading as they dwell on images and tropes, but also rhythm and syntax, and follow the philosophical momentum of literature. While Peter Coviello has argued for 'close reading as a way of doing history', this issue offers a vindication of close reading as a way of also doing philosophy.[19] In his disquisition on the

[16] See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
[17] Terence Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
[18] See in particular *American Impersonal. Essays with Sharon Cameron*, ed. Branka Arsić (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).
[19] Peter Coviello, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 16, 13–14; *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), pp. 18–20.

affordances of metaphor vs. metonymy as poetic figurations of community in Melville and Whitman, Thomas Claviez delves into the mechanics of both tropes to emphasize the contiguity and contingency that they perform and that '[open] up news inroads into thinking community anew', at the junction of literature and the philosophical. Likewise, Antoine Cazé attends to 'the figurative language of poetry' with which Dickinson grapples as her lyrics dramatize 'the *difficulty* of thinking'. Close reading 'It was not Death', one of Dickinson's most often cited poems, in dialogue with Derrida's meditation on 'the gift of death', Cazé shows her 'probing the *question of death* in an oblique way, speculating and pondering from the not so safe distance of poetic form' whereby the poem is seen to '[call] into question the philosophical question raised by death […] – the absence that makes us radically present to ourselves, making us *be here* in the figurative reminder of our mortality'.

In their methodological, generic, and thematic variety, then, but also their complementarity, the contributions gathered here approach nineteenth-century American literature as a mode of thinking while taking in their stride recent, larger shifts and concerns within American literary studies, such as the emphasis on embodiment and materiality and the renewed attention to the materiality of literary form. These exercises in close-reading put American literature to work and, by doing so, do not so much attempt to draw the contours of two disciplines anew as to challenge both philosophy and literature as concepts the better to bring them out as indistinctly poetic and speculative practices. Put differently, this issue does not aim at redefinitions nor resolutions; rather, it hopes to '*make* a problem for us', as Cavell would say,[20] and raise attention to the messy yet productive entanglements of speculative thinking and poetic writing when lodged under the same roof.

[20] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, New Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1979], p. 159.