

*Re-figuring Scholarship: Twenty-Five
Years of the AAS Fellowship Program*

PHILIP F. GURA

WHEN John Hench called to ask if I would speak at the annual meeting about the impact of the Society's fellowship program on trends in scholarship, without quite understanding the magnitude of the assignment I quickly accepted his invitation. After all, I myself had benefited from one of the fellowships and thus felt that I had to make partial payment on a debt that is immense. But I also consented because I take more pride in my membership in AAS than in any other scholarly organization with which I am associated, and I wanted to do as much as I could to make the membership at large aware of how much AAS's fellows have done to clear new paths in a variety of scholarly fields.

I wish to begin this daunting task by briefly seizing the autobiographical moment and recalling for you my own initiation into the mysteries and treasures of this great library. For, indeed, the word 'antiquarian' was on my résumé well before I formally was able to include it there after I was honored by membership in this group. Therein lies an amusing tale. The year was 1975; the place, the MLA convention in San Francisco, where I was hunting for my first full-time job. I had an interview with the University of Colorado at Boulder; and, the market being tight, I was as nervous as could be, more nervous, say, than someone caught using a pen in Antiquarian Hall! I entered the fateful room in a

PHILIP F. GURA is professor of English and American studies and adjunct professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Copyright © 1998 by American Antiquarian Society

sweat, and the lead interviewer, an Americanist who would have so much to do with the group's decision, offered me a cigarette. Most graduate students at that time were at least closet smokers, and, moreover, I figured that I had better be polite. I accepted, and to my horror he pulled out a pack of Camels; and I, who had never smoked an unfiltered cigarette, took his light! Somehow I managed not to choke, and the interview proceeded.

I later learned that in notes taken at that interview this soon-to-be-colleague and dear friend had done a quick pencil sketch of my appearance—the same beard that you see here and that fateful cigarette in my mouth—and alongside it had scrawled the word 'antiquarian' with a question mark after it. He had done his homework for the session, and thus had read my first published essay, on Thoreau and the early New England explorer John Josselyn, which had just appeared in the *New England Quarterly*, then under the editorship of Herbert Brown and which, I think it is fair to say, was not seen as quite as trendy as *Glyph* or *Diacritics*! Quite rightly, the interviewer wondered what might come of someone whose mind ran to such topics at a time when modes of literary scholarship other than the historical were in the ascendant. Unfortunately this wonderful man died before he could see more of the shape of my young career; but to this day I believe that it was indeed his characterization of me as an 'antiquarian,' and not my bravado in accepting the cigarette, that put me over the top, that in his mind set me apart from other of my graduate-school cohort. I believe that he would have been pleased with what the antiquarian in me eventually produced, and that eventually I could put 'Member, American Antiquarian Society,' aside my name.

Recalling this humorous moment, I realized as well that my own knowledge of AAS had begun even earlier, when I was still an undergraduate at Harvard majoring in American history and literature, and thus predated the fellowship program by a few years. How did I myself first hear about the Society and think that I might need its resources? By my work as a college intern at Old

Sturbridge Village, whose then-Vice President and still AAS member Barnes Riznik, was overseeing a bold overhaul of that museum's mission, and had set in motion a series of programs—college internships among them—that soon enough helped revolutionize interpretation in the nation's outdoor museums. Among the many smart things Barnes did was to hire a remarkably intelligent and energetic young assistant, Richard Rabinowitz.

Richard was charged with reinvigorating the ways in which the museum staff taught the public about America's past, and toward that end each year selected and supervised the research and employment of a handful of college undergraduates who presumably might help to redirect and reinvigorate the museum's interpretation staff, many of whom were older and did not come from an academic scholarly tradition. He encouraged us to study history from the bottom up—to learn about the real history of real people—and thus to define and investigate the kinds of projects that brought us closer to the lives of nineteenth-century Americans than we ever thought we could be, with the goal of bringing this sort of knowledge to the thousands of visitors who each year came to OSV. One of the interns immersed herself in research about soap-making and, by implication, personal hygiene in nineteenth-century America. Another studied the layout of New England town commons, particularly in light of changes in transportation networks; another wound her way through the lending records of social libraries to study rural New England reading habits—all this in 1970! I myself delved into my home town's history at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution as the community changed from a farming to a manufacturing village, with a special eye to the ways in which ministers of different denominations viewed the problems associated with such new factory villages, and this project became my senior honors essay.

Why do I mention all this? Because it was Richard, then a graduate student in the History of American Civilization program at Harvard and now director of the American History Workshop in New York City, who pointed us to this great library as a resource

for the kinds of projects we groped toward defining, and did so right around the time that John Hench was twisting Mark McCorison's arm to find more ways to bring scholars to this great library. Richard, like John, understood that if we were to refigure American history, we had to learn about and use the kinds of resources that were found, not in Widener or Houghton or Beinecke, but at 185 Salisbury Street, Worcester, a name most out-of-staters could not pronounce! The fruits of Richard's own intellectual labors here are found in his marvelous book in American religious history, *The Spiritual Self in Everyday Life*. But in 1972 how few of his cohort at Harvard were willing to make the trek out the Mass Pike to find the treasures stored herein. How few had the vision to understand, as he did—as an intellectual historian already crossing over to what we now call cultural history—that the bare bones uncovered through demography and econometrics, or through post-structural linguistic analysis—then so much the rage—were not enough, that we also needed to mine hitherto unknown or little-used sources that brought us closer to understanding the deeper texture, the very warp and woof of America's past. As moved by the social upheaval of the 1960s as anyone else, Richard and those who came under his charismatic influence sought to bring to the profession of history voices and visions too long submerged and neglected. If demographers, for example, thought that they were somehow telling us a more 'real' story about America's rank and file, we believed that we were doing the same important work but in other, more convincing ways, particularly through recovery and interpretation of print culture—in all its varied forms—through which one could know more about the history of everyday life.

Before I end this bit of personal history, let me acknowledge with affection and gratitude another person in this room who was with us at OSV in those glorious days of the early 1970s, and who even before Richard had arrived on the scene had discovered the treasures of this library. Who was it? Not John Hench, for it would be a few more years before I met him. Not Mark

McCorison, for even though I already was falling more deeply into progressively degenerative bibliophilia, I had not met this great librarian. Who else but the invaluable, and infallibly courteous, Caroline Sloat, then in the Research Department at OSV and who often used the Society's resources for the historical monographs that she produced for the museum. Thus my delight when I learned several years ago that she had come to work here, had come home, so to speak. I might mention, too, others from that golden period whom some of you will recall, many of them members of the Society: Alexander J. Wall, John A. Auchmoody, Henry Harlow, John Obed Curtis, Arthur F. and Penn Shrader, Jane C. Nylander. Through association with such people I served my apprenticeship in how to study and write history.

Lest you think that I have betrayed the trust that John had in me to address the assigned topic, let me indicate how this rambling appreciation leads directly to a discussion of the achievement of the fellows who have worked in these august halls under the auspices of the Society's fellowship program. It seems to me very significant that AAS initiated this program precisely at the time when certain modes of scholarship in history and literature were ascendant. The considerable influence of this scholarship subsequently was neutralized or redirected, if not directly overcome, by the kinds of work that many of our fellows subsequently produced and that in a sense epitomizes how we now are regarded in the larger scholarly community. I speak of course of that to which I already have alluded, of the prominence in the 1970s of scholars who worked in the quantitative dimension of social history, those 'demographers and other plumbers,' as one of my mentors in graduate school so derisively put it; or in deconstruction and other modes of literary analysis—usually put under the umbrella of post-structuralism—based primarily in linguistic or ideological, rather than aesthetic or cultural, inquiry into literary texts.

Now, I am not an outright philistine, and I understand the significance of these developments in both historical and literary

scholarship. I understand, for example, that in some measure the startling recovery over the past two decades of texts by African Americans, native Americans, and women writers owes much to the prodding of scholars who refused to let go unchallenged many of the academy's standard pieties about who and what in American history mattered, and why. But to many scholars in the early 1970s, particularly to young graduate students such as myself, the modes of inquiry attached to such ascendant methodologies seemed at best unpalatable, and their results in scholarship often seemed barren of any deeper intellectual excitement.

As much as we might learn about a town through a demographic analysis of its church membership, for example, too much seemed missing, particularly after one had been exposed to the inspiring scholarship of a Miller, Heimert, Morgan, or Bailyn—the lived experience of the townspeople, say, and some tactile sense of the ideas through which they made sense of the world, and, finally, how knowledge of such things, if itself ascertainable, might still matter to us. So, too, with deconstruction and much other post-structural inquiry, which in the hands of its second- or third-generation practitioners often seemed more an amusing intellectual game than a useful analytical tool. After you turned one trick with one text and demonstrated how its language sometimes worked against any established meaning—how we live in a totally relativistic universe, that is—you performed it on another and another, until you got tenure, and then again, until you were promoted. It seemed as though many scholars didn't care any longer about literature *per se*—about the reasons why a text might have been produced as it was, how it was received, or why it could still matter a century and a half after it was produced. As one recent critic of this postmodern sensibility has written, it 'seemed little more than a moral vacancy, a round and empty cipher, a world of naught.'¹ And, I might add, at the turn of the twenty-first century we hardly need more ways to feel the anxiety such a philosophical

1. David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xix.

nihilism engenders. We need, in other words, nothing less than what we can derive from history, traditionally conceived, knowledge and wisdom to see ourselves as something more than creatures imprisoned by such a bleak vision.

I can cite no more moving example of the frustrations inherent in these new methodologies than the response of my fellow graduate student at Harvard, Alan Kantrow, who recently was featured in the graduate school's *Alumni Bulletin* as someone who, after taking a traditional Ph.D., turned his career in remarkable new directions. As Alan put it, 'I remember going to a graduate seminar at Harvard soon after I graduated. A young professor stood up and said, "When I was a graduate student at Harvard, we all believed that to understand a work of literature well, and to teach it well, we needed to know about the author's personal experience and his or her times. But we know better now." And I thought, "God bless him, if that's what they want to do, fine, but that's not the field I want to be part of."' Kantrow's sentiment was shared by many of us who believed that those other old-fashioned things still mattered.

I don't mean to make us seem braver than we were: for many of us in the disciplines of history and literature who still wanted careers in academe those were frightening times. Who would want us if we didn't work the furrows marked out at places like New Haven, Ithaca, and Baltimore, particularly if old white males in power scribbled 'antiquarian' on our interview sheets? But one way or other we resisted co-optation by econometrics and things francophile, and hunkered down in our carrels to study history and literature the 'old-fashioned' way, through the written record, and in relation to culture, even as that term gradually was reinvigorated by a new generation of scholars at venues like the famous Wingspread Conference on intellectual history (1977). And—here is the important point—some of us were fortunate enough to find the fledgling fellowship program at AAS, an institution that gladly and handsomely supported work in what then were euphemistically called more 'traditional' fields.

Finally, we emerged to find the sun shining and a cool breeze upon us, in large measure because again the tides of academic fashion had turned, first toward the above-mentioned new intellectual history as it was conceived by Gordon Wood, David Hollinger, David D. Hall, and others; and then toward what was called the 'New Historicism.' Our own kind of scholarship, once too traditional because so mired in 'facts,' now became central to the work of critics for whom society and culture now mattered. And the immense resources at AAS enabled the fellows to explore history and culture in exciting and novel scholarship. In various ways, beginning in 1972, the year I graduated from college, AAS's fellows were participating in the all-important project, as our colleague David S. Reynolds has termed it for literary studies but which we might apply to other forms of such scholarship, of engaging in a 'reconstructive criticism' that allows a better understanding of how America's past was shaped by large social, cultural, and environmental factors, as well as by the actions of individuals who can be studied biographically, both for their uniqueness and their representativeness, as examples of how Americans lived in and through certain ideas. As Reynolds puts it in his epilogue to *Beneath the American Renaissance*, itself one of the most important products of our fellowship program, the reconstructive approach encourages interdisciplinarity (again, something that had become all the rage), for it provides a 'means of integrating various disciplines that in the past have been fragmented.' And how does one do such work, say, in literature? The scholar must, Reynolds continues, 'reconstruct as completely as possible the socioliterary milieu of literary works through the exploration of a broad array of forgotten social and imaginative texts.' Reconstructive criticism views the cultural work—literary or otherwise—as 'simultaneously self-sufficient *and* historically shaped by environmental factors in society and personal life.'²

2. David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 561-62.

What better place to engage in this kind of work than at the library with the largest example of America's printed archive within its stacks?

To review chronologically the projects of our fellows is to watch the progress of this kind of revolution in history and literature as scholar after scholar discovers the riches of this library and then expands his or her research to take into account its incomparable holdings. Consider, for example, the projects of that first batch of fellows, chosen for 1972-73. Gaylord P. Albaugh was completing research for bibliography and the history of American religious newspapers and periodicals established before 1830. Richard Crawford was at work on 'A Bibliography of American Sacred Music Imprints through 1810.' Michael Harris was looking into books and the book trade in the Ohio Valley before 1850. Mason Lowance was studying symbolic expression in Puritan religious writings, moving toward the completion of his *The Language of Canaan* (1980). Georgianne McVay was studying the verbal humor in the caricatures of David Claypoole Johnson. And Perry Viles was gathering materials on adolescence in America, with an eye to establishing curriculum content for undergraduate seminars in social history. What a wonderful launch!

Now let's take a selective look at what the crop of fellows twenty-five years later proposed as topics. Paula Bennett is at work on the emergence of modern subjectivity in American women's poetry between 1850 and 1900. Barbara Lacey is studying religious imagery in the eighteenth-century religious imprint. John Nerone is deeply immersed in a history of United States newspapers from 1790 through the Industrial Revolution. Jordan Baker's topic is 'Currency of Words: Paper Money and Textual Representation in Early America.' Megan Haley is researching 'Pest Control Strategies and their Social Implications in the Chesapeake' over two centuries. Melissa Homestead explores Harriet Beecher Stowe and copyright. Cynthia Packard's topic is 'The Black Image in Photography, Art, and the Popular Press, 1850-1876.'

Phew! How to generalize about twenty-five years of such variety! What an instructive intellectual odyssey I have just completed, reviewing chronologically a list of the fellows and their topics, and then studying the alphabetized 'Directory' that John and his staff compiled, with an eye to what published research emerged from the fellows' stays at the Society. Why, I said to myself, even with my affection for AAS, had I ever taken on this task? But after the initial panic wore off, I realized that the more I looked, indeed the more I saw; and the patterns that emerged do suggest certain things about both the projects the fellows brought here and, more importantly, how the scholarship nurtured during their fellowship time consequently influenced the fields in which these individuals have labored.

First, let me say that I find most remarkable, even in the earliest years of the program, precisely what Reynolds described as a *desideratum* fifteen years later, the increasingly *interdisciplinary* nature of the work that our fellows produce, for it is the ways in which this library has allowed scholars to make connections hitherto unseen or unsuspected between or among different fields of inquiry that frequently have produced the most important results in scholarship. Now, rest assured—I cannot review the work of a couple hundred individuals to make this point; but I do want to try to characterize and suggest the significance of some of this work in the fields I know best.

Admittedly, I don't know much about doing bibliography but I want to begin with it, for, as we all know, people who work here, staff and visiting scholars, always have led the nation in this kind of work. From Albaugh's project in that first year, finally completed two decades later with the publication of his magnificent *History and Bibliography of American Religious Periodicals and Newspapers Established from 1730 to 1830* (1994), and Crawford's *American Sacred Music Imprints, 1698-1810* (1990), also supported in the program's initial year, to Robert Winans's *Descriptive Catalogue of Book Catalogues Separately Printed in America, 1639-1800* (1981) and Karl Kroeger's works on William Billings,

to name just the work of a few of these scholars—through the depth of its collections AAS has helped us define more completely the universe of print culture, even as such projects still continue, as with the cataloguing of the Society's immense broadside collection under Georgia B. Barnhill's direction. Simply put, how could scholars around the world ever do without the bibliographical work produced at AAS? It is the very foundation of all subsequent scholarship.

Let me speak at more length about a discipline with which I am more familiar, that of literary study, for it is undeniable that some of the work produced by AAS fellows has revolutionized our understanding of early American literature, particularly for the period from 1776 to the Civil War. First, I point out an important side-effect of such scholarship, that the more such works are completed and published, and the centrality of our collections duly noted in the acknowledgments, the more applications to our fellowship program we receive from scholars who wish to research topics in literary history, a situation very different, for example, from that at the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, where I also have been fortunate to spend time as a fellow, but which has been home to very few scholars in literature.

Though the work sometimes bears the scars of engagement with thorny poststructuralist scholarship, for the most part the kinds of literary studies for which we have become famous very often do indeed treat literature as Reynolds suggested we should, as complex artifacts of the imagination undeniably influenced as well by a myriad of social and cultural factors. His own justly lauded study of the forms of popular literature that underlay the achievement of the great writers of the American Renaissance, as well as his more recent cultural biography of Whitman, epitomizes the effectiveness of this approach, just as it demonstrates the prescience of the great librarians who collected what was then dismissed as mere 'ephemera' or 'popular' literature, knowing in their hearts and minds that some day people like David Reynolds

would come knocking. How could we ever presume to know why *Walden* or *The Scarlet Letter* or Dickinson's poems are 'better' than other contemporary writing unless we seriously investigate the nature of the immense body of literature against which such masterpieces were read? Elegantly simple in its main premise—read exhaustively all around the authors you are studying—Reynolds's work opens so many pathways for further investigation. What more could we ask of scholarship than it serve and stimulate us in this way?

The same can be said for a very different kind of work, Cathy Davidson's *Revolution and the Word* (1986), the most influential study to date of the early American novel. Reading early American texts through lenses sharpened by reader-response theory and gender studies, Davidson's work provides a myriad of new ways to understand late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American fiction that few thought worth reading, introduced us to scores more whose titles we did not even know, and made us aware as never before of how ideologically charged hitherto denigrated and dismissed 'sentimental' and 'Gothic' writing really is. Based in wide and deep reading in history, her scholarship epitomizes ways in which the fields of history and literature have begun to cross-fertilize, and has influenced many scholars, including my own student and AAS fellowship alumna, Karen Weyler, who is doing very interesting work on the directives toward the regulation of excess—both material and sexual—in early American fiction.

Like Davidson's scholarship, that of Michael Warner, in his highly regarded *Letters of the Republic*, also has been provocative. His examination of the connection between the development of print culture and the rise of what Habermas has called the 'public sphere' has reinvigorated our examination of late eighteenth-century texts. Basing his analysis of such familiar texts as Franklin's *Autobiography* and Charles Brockden Brown's novels on the premise that reading had become relevant in a new way as 'print discourse was now systematically differentiated from the activities

of the state and civil society,' Warner demonstrates how what he calls the 'megapolitics of print discourse' indelibly marked the emergence of new kinds of reading communities, and thus provides novel ways for us to consider the profession of authorship in that period.³ Most recently, in his *The Transformation of Authorship in America*, Grantland S. Rice, another of our fellows, has challenged Warner's thesis, arguing for a much more highly developed sense of the profession of authorship among late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers. As they became more aware, Rice argues, that printed texts were not so much 'sociopolitical commentary' but rather forms of 'property and commodity,' they thought of their efforts, and their position in American culture, differently from what Warner argues. The politics of authorship, in other words, is replaced by its economics, and so the early American novel developed as it did. As Rice puts it, his analysis suggests 'how the aesthetic strategies American prose writers deployed to maintain critical agency in the face of objectification and conventionalization' precipitated some of the formal characteristics of early American fiction. And not the least important of these was 'a self-reflexive preoccupation, structurally as well as thematically, with authorship, texts, and textuality,' something that continued to mark many sophisticated American novels through the period of the American Renaissance.⁴ Rice's is, I believe, very strong work.

Invoking Davidson, Warner, and Rice also reminds me as well of how frequently fellows at AAS who matriculate from literature departments have willingly joined hands with intellectual and cultural historians to pioneer topics in the history of the book, so much so that we have become one of the world's centers for such scholarship. Here the redoubtable David Hall, who for the past two decades has been so closely identified with this Society, comes

3. Michael D. Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), x, xiv.

4. Grantland S. Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 4 and 11.

immediately to mind; perhaps more than any other American, both through his elegant scholarship on popular religion as embodied in his *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment* (1989), and his oversight of various programs and seminars at AAS, he has bravely led AAS into *l'histoire du livre*, having just delivered to Cambridge University Press the first volume of the five-volume *A History of the Book in America*, which he oversees as general editor. But Hall is only one among many. Such a study as Michael Harris's in 1972 of books and the book trade in the Ohio Valley early on marked the great work in this direction that would be carried out in these halls; and so too Michael Winship's work on Ticknor and Fields, *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (1995), Charles Clark's *The Public Prints* (1994), William Gilmore's *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life* (1989), and the two powerful studies by Richard Brown, *Knowledge is Power* (1989) and *The Strength of a People* (1996)—all these marking AAS's centrality to this field. These works have become benchmarks in the new and growing field of the history of the book, and of such allied topics as authorship, knowledge, communication networks, and the like, in America, and have brought us closer than ever before to understanding how previous generations of readers encountered and understood their worlds. All this scholarship was written with major fellowship support at AAS.

Now from such examples both well-established and young scholars have moved into a host of allied topics—Meredith McGill's pursuit of the issue of copyright, Richard R. John's book on the post office and early American communication networks, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (1995), Ronald and Mary Zboray's painstaking work in all aspects of the history of reading in nineteenth-century America, Jim Green's study of Mathew Carey, and Rosalind Remer's *Printers and Men of Capital: The Philadelphia Book Trade in the New Republic* (1996) on Philadelphia book production. Without doubt, one of the major contributions of our fellows has been to take what hitherto had been fields cultivated primarily by bibliogra-

phers and make them central to such large and varied disciplines as intellectual and cultural history, as well as to literary criticism. Working hand in hand with cataloguers and librarians, scholars in the history of the book are an example to the wider world of how cooperative scholarship can transform existing modes of inquiry.

Let me now shift gears a bit, though, for as I assessed other of the voluminous contributions to scholarship made by our fellows, I realized that, while many works fall neatly into such disciplinary categories as literary history or history of the book, many more are not so readily placed in established fields, even as they distinctively bear the marks of a term of fellowship spent here. In the time remaining let me try to describe some of this important work in another way. It seems to me, for example, that beyond disciplinary boundaries we can speak of three kinds of scholarship that emerge from our fellows' work at AAS: first, that which truly *originates* here, that could hardly be conceived, let alone written, anywhere else. In this category I place much of the work that I have just mentioned, for the sources scholars discover here sometimes move them to conceptualize novel and path-breaking work. And I think as well of such wonderful studies as Steve Nissenbaum's *The Battle for Christmas* (1996) and Christopher Clark's 1995 study *The Communities Movement: The Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association* about a utopian community in Florence, Massachusetts, all of whose extant records reside herein. Our library quite simply pushes researchers into new areas of inquiry, ones they would not have considered had they not discovered what resources are in this building.

But second, and what probably comprises the largest output of our fellows, there is scholarship supported and expedited by our collections; that is, work whose contours and depth have been undeniably shaped and augmented by their authors' stay at AAS. Here I have in mind such works as John Brooke's *The Heart of the Commonwealth* (1989), that rich study of society and politics in Worcester County; Harry Stout's *The New England Soul* (1986), based in his reading of hundreds of manuscript sermons in this

and other archives; Alan Taylor's Pulitzer-Prize winning *William Cooper's Town* (1995); or, more recently, Dale Cockrell's *Demons of Disorder* (1997), a brilliant study of early blackface minstrelsy that is greatly enriched by his use of extensive runs of contemporary New York newspapers that are found only here. Indeed, as one peruses the publications listed in the 'Directory of Fellows,' one realizes that there are literally a few hundred essays and scores of books which might have been written elsewhere but which have been permanently and in some cases definitively marked by the sources to which scholars have been introduced in this library.

And finally, there is scholarship that is brought to a certain, special completion by the use of this library, work already richly conceived when a fellow took up residence but which subsequently became the better dressed, more fully footnoted, more intellectually dense and suggestive because of the author's stay with us. Here I think of works like William Freehling's *The Road to Disunion* (1990); Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Office of the Scarlet Letter* (1991); my colleague Peter Coclanis's work on the South Carolina Low Country; Alden T. Vaughan's many publications on the image of the Native American in early American culture; Mary Beth Norton's *Founding Mothers and Fathers* (1996). But I find most frustrating the fact that such a list has no logical stopping point and to go on only makes me want to go on yet further, so that I can mention all the fellows' work!

Let me, then, as William Bradford said so wonderfully in his history of Plymouth as he came to describe his remembrance of the Pilgrims' landfall, here stay and make a pause, and try to draw some sort of conclusion. First, please know that, as I just said, there are many, many other works produced here that have had great influence in other emergent fields—the new field of 'frontier' history, for example, has been forwarded by the work of Peter Onuf, Daniel Richter, and Michael Bellesiles, all of whom have been fellows, as well as by that of the aforementioned Alan Taylor. Or think of studies concerning race in American culture, which brings to mind such work as that of Nell Irvin Painter. I have said

little of work in the graphic arts, in which people like David Tatham have been so influential. Or communications studies, the field in which David Nord is so central, through his ever-widening web of studies of the publications of various antebellum religious tract societies. The work on crime literature and rogue narratives by Daniel Williams and Daniel Cohen also is significant to students of popular culture as well as to literary and intellectual historians; and so is Gary Kornblith's and Jonathan Prude's scholarship on the rise of factory life in the antebellum period. Book after book, essay after essay, treasure after treasure, so that finally I stand before you simply in awe of the overall quality that this fellowship program has produced. Our 'Directory of Fellows' reads like a *Who's Who* in the American Academy.

But a select *Who's Who*, for what links all these fellows, even those who have bravely ventured into the severe terrain of demography or deconstruction, is, first of all, an awareness and intellectual acceptance of the almost limitless extent of this nation's printed archive as it has been collected here. For to work profitably at AAS a scholar must have utter humility, as one realizes that there always is one more pamphlet in these stacks that pertains to whatever topic it is that he or she wishes to pursue. Second, these fellows are marked by an admirable intellectual adventurousness and curiosity that drives them to assimilate the seemingly limitless variety of materials they encounter here, to understand how disparate sources fit, and sometimes beautifully complete, the projects in which they are engaged. And finally, I think that most of the scholars who choose to work here do in fact believe, *pace* many of their more theoretically inclined colleagues, that something called 'history' does indeed exist, and that one's attempt to discover and pattern information about the past remains as rewarding and noble a profession as it was in the time of Francis Parkman or George Bancroft. Or even in the more recent past, when giants like Morison, Miller, and Matthiessen stalked the earth, scholars who believed, as David Harlan puts it about Miller in his provocative new book, a work, by the way, that came

to me as I was finishing this talk and in which one can find elaborated with much eloquence some of the points I have raised herein, that by showing us how to think deeply about the past—‘how to think within a particular *progression* of thoughts’—they taught us as well ‘how to place ourselves in time, how to see ourselves as part of an ongoing tradition, the latest in a long historical sequence.’⁵

I hope that I have done justice to John Hench’s request to speak to the amplitude of the work that has been produced by the AAS fellows—our fellowship, we might call them. Let me end by invoking the experience of another deep antiquarian, this one from America’s past, one whose words and wisdom we continue to treasure in large part because of his appreciation of the redemptive power of history. In Hawthorne’s charming reminiscence, ‘The Old Manse,’ which introduces his collection of stories, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, we find a leisurely discussion of an attic room in his Concord home where young scholars came to study with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s grandfather William Emerson, and, later, the venerable Ezra Ripley had boarded. Therein Hawthorne found many odd volumes, presumably the remains of a clerical library. Good historian that he was, he ‘burrowed among these venerable books, in search of any living thought, which should burn like a coal of fire, or glow like an inextinguishable gem.’ But to his surprise he found no such treasure among the leather-bound books. ‘All was dead alike,’ and he could not but ‘muse deeply and wonderingly upon the humiliating fact, that the works of man’s intellect decay like those of his hands.’ ‘Thought grows mouldy,’ he continues. ‘What was good and nourishing for the spirits of one generation, affords no sustenance for the next.’

After examining some works that pertained to the more recent Unitarian controversy and noting that these had an effect even more depressing than the more ‘venerable’ tomes, which at least were ‘earnestly written’ and might be ‘conceived to have possessed some warmth, at some former period,’ Hawthorne lit upon some

5. Harlan, *Degradation of American History*, xviii.

old newspapers and almanacs. These genuinely excited him, he wrote, for they 'reproduced to [his] mental eye, the epochs when they had issued from the press, with a distinctness that was altogether unaccountable.' 'It was as if,' he continued, 'I had found bits of magic looking-glass among the books, with the images of a vanished century in them.' Interrogating a tattered portrait of an eighteenth-century divine who had lived in the Manse, Hawthorne wondered why it was that 'he and his brethren, after the most painful rummaging and groping in their minds, had been able to produce nothing half so real, as these newspapers and almanac-makers had thrown off, in the effervescence of the moment.'⁶

Here Hawthorne, I would say, made the same discovery that his friend Henry Thoreau did when he marvelled at the way a simple workingman's account book could evoke the past. 'Hard but unquestionable history,' he said of this document. Or when, shivering on top of Mount Greylock, as he recounts the story in his *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), Thoreau sat before bed 'reading,' as he put it, 'by the light of the fire the scraps of newspapers in which some party had wrapped their luncheon; the prices current in New York and Boston, the advertisements, and the editorials.' He found this 'business' part of the paper, as he called it, the 'most useful, natural, and respectable,' for these sections 'were more closely allied to nature, and were respectable in some measure as tide and meteorological tables are,' something he could not say of other parts of the paper where he found the attempts at 'wit and humor' dismal failures. Even on the mountaintop he found 'such a scrap of paper' an 'inestimable companion,' suggesting as it did 'pleasing and poetic thoughts' because of the very materiality the advertisements represented.⁷

Or the same discovery that Isaiah Thomas made when he

6. Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Mosses from An Old Manse,' in *Tales and Sketches* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1136-38. This material appears in a slightly different form in Philip F. Gura, *The Crossroads of American History and Literature* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania University Press, 1996), 10-11.

7. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden; or, Life in the Woods, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 30, 151, and 125.

walked around Boston collecting broadside ballads and other printed ephemera. Hawthorne, Thoreau, Thomas, and the great librarians who have served at AAS—Mark McCorison, say, when he hunted Vermont imprints—understood that to know the past as well as we can, we cannot study just great books by famous people but have to work with any and all the traces we can find, often in the most ephemeral materials, using our imagination to allow light to fall on the shattered bits of mirror so that they can indeed reflect the surrounding age. Such an appreciation of the potential magic inherent in all aspects of the historical record to evoke another age is yet another sentiment that unites those who have worked in these august halls, where thousands upon thousands of Hawthorne's mirror-like fragments sit ready to catch light from the scholar's lamp, and thus are justly treasured like crown jewels. A government report, a bookseller's catalogue, the Mather family library, a sheet of lithographed sheet music, a first edition of Cooper's work, an almanac, an emigrants' guide, a history of the Sandwich Islands, a railroad map, the Cambridge Platform: here they are all equal, waiting for the fellow who will turn whatever fragment she chooses until it catches the light thus so, brightly illuminating another corner of our past, and kindling the flame of her scholarship.

As Thoreau rightly said, 'Critical acumen is exerted in vain to uncover the past; the *past* cannot be *presented*; we cannot know what we are not.' Yet, he goes on to say, 'one veil hangs over past, present, and future, and it is the province of the historian not to find out what was, but what is.' Those who have held AAS fellowships have distinguished themselves in just that project, and have brought much deserved credit to themselves and to this great institution where every day we recognize that although we never can attain the ideal of reporting truly objective knowledge about the past, we are compelled to pursue the project, for, as the literary historian David Perkins has written, 'without such pursuit the otherness of the past would entirely deliquesce in endless subjective and ideological reappropriations.' A function of the study

of history, then, is, as Perkins eloquently suggests, to set the past 'at a distance, to make its otherness felt.'⁸

As I believe any of our distinguished fellows will testify, the satisfaction of such work is great, and the fellowship program that has allowed so many people to experience this sentiment is eminently worthy of this institution's continuing, and, indeed, expanded support. For the result of the first twenty-five years' worth of scholarship must be understood as having played an integral role in the recent reinvigoration of scholarship in American cultural history in all its varied forms. Our fellows, from that first group in 1972 to those working in this room today, have indeed made this 'otherness' felt, and thus have allowed us to know ourselves better. T. S. Eliot, another writer obsessed with history and culture, put this eloquently in the conclusion to one of his *Four Quartets*. 'We shall not cease from exploration,' he wrote, 'And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.'⁹ Let me conclude my portion of this symposium by asking you to honor and thank with hearty applause those twenty-five years of fellows who have taken us on just such rewarding journeys, indeed showing us, to cite Thoreau one last time, not just what was, but what is.

8. David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 185.

9. T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding,' in *Collected Poems, 1909-1982* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 208.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.