

On Volubility: Scholastic Commentary, Racial Capital and the Birth of the Modern Literary Field

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Abstract

This article argues that the attempt to decolonize literary theory will remain self-defeating until academic literary theory, whose structural functioning is predicated upon the hyperproduction of commentary, develops a historically informed mode of enquiry that does not reproduce Romantic volubility and its covert racial contents. This article outlines the emergence of European hermeneutic knowledge practices in the United States in the 19th century and discusses the structural legitimation of “volubility”, or the hyperproduction of philological commentary, as a *dispositif* that enabled the creation and circulation of racial capital among those who participated in the American literary and philological fields. Beginning with a reading of the hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Johann Gottfried Herder and Ralph Waldo Emerson, this article argues that while “meaning” was the purported object of Romantic interpretative practices, “whiteness” came to be the central form of capital circulated among practitioners of post-Enlightenment philology. The article concludes with an analysis of Frederick Douglass’s counter-hegemonic hermeneutics of *affirmation*, which must be understood as a fully developed philosophical contribution to interpretation theory.

Key words: Interpretation, Romanticism, Affirmation, Metaphor, Hermeneutics