

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

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Introduction

There is much criticism, not on deep grounds; but an affirmative philosophy is wanting.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Among the terms and metaphors that structure our casual, non-technical, non-specialized understanding of political participation, *affirmation* and *assertion* stand as somewhat bewildering cases. We casually employ these

terms, as well as their linguistic derivatives, when we describe societal policies such as “affirmative action”. We use them as open categories in political deliberation, when we assert a thesis as “originary” (or as predating any dialectic elaboration), or when we want to signify agreement in a discussion. We also use these terms to describe broad processes of political emancipation, especially when we wish to attribute the agency of this emancipation to those who eventually benefited from it (as, for example, in the African-American tradition of “self-assertion” described by W. E. B. Du Bois [Du Bois 2007, 25]). As to what Hans Blumenberg called “absolute” metaphors of political agency (Blumenberg 2010, 7), “affirmation” and “assertion” function as signposts for the point where our ability to conceptually (as opposed to metaphorically) describe the concrete, functional content and meaning of our actions and opinions breaks down¹. However, affirmation and assertion, as opposed to the other signposts Blumenberg most frequently wrote about (the absolute metaphors of “the naked truth”, the “source”, or the “book” as a metaphor for the legibility of nature, the cosmos, the heart, or history), do not, at first sight, appear to result from the historical sedimentation of successive layers of meaning, a process typical of the “absolutization” of metaphors. The historical unpacking of the past discursive practices in which *affirmation* and *assertion* once operated proves difficult, if not entirely fruitless, and does not lead us far beyond simple etymological insights.

Taking this conceptual poverty or “thinness” (Scott 1998, 257) as its starting point, this article will address the short-lived appearance and subsequent invisibilization of affirmative and assertive discourse during the height of American Romanticism. In his technical writings on metaphorology, Blumenberg points to “the power of metaphors which are related to claims which are difficult to ground in argumentative or indeed in any other terms.”³ I contend that the rise of affirmative and assertive discourse, understood as a counter position to the Romantic “culture of interpretation” (Lundin 2007, 55), marks a crucial step in the establishment of an anti-foundationalist strain in American political culture that paved the way for discursive modes that are essential to postcolonial cultural and literary history. As such, assertive discourse enabled both the propagation and eventual recognition of a number of basal claims in the public sphere (such as the anthropological personhood of African Americans, predating the recognition of their legal personhood) and the denunciation of the covert racial implications of Romantic volubility, i.e. the structurally legitimized hyperproduction of commentary and its incorporation as a racialized disposition by some participants in the public sphere. I begin by somewhat lengthily outlining how several central tropes of German Romanticism were replicated and disseminated in the American literary and academic fields, and conclude with a discussion of Frederick Douglass’s conception of an affirmative hermeneutics and affirmative poetics. As

the rhetoric of affirmation developed by Douglass principally sought to disrupt the verbosity of the literary and political cultures of American Romanticism, I conclude this essay by outlining what affirmative poetics purports *not to be*, rather than attempting its positive, normalizing description. By doing this, this article addresses the philological background of much of American Romanticism from a postcolonial perspective and puts forth one overarching argument: the boundless production of academic commentary, that is, the legitimation of *volubility* by the philological field for the philological field, was first legitimized by Romantic theorists of interpretation in Europe and the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century and equated the production of philological discourse with the distribution of racial prestige, or racial capital. Those who participated in the philological and literary fields as producers of this kind of discourse were demonstrably aware of its inherent racial contents. Thus, I contend that current attempts to decolonize literary theory must seek to avoid the reproduction of a philological, hermeneutic economy that circulated “whiteness” in place of “meaning”. The example set by Douglass, whose *affirmative* hermeneutics proposed to interrupt this circulation of racial capital, also points to the value of affirmative hermeneutics as a model for a self-reflexive approach to academic commentary, an activity itself predicated upon the production of discourse on a quasi-industrial scale.

The Lisp: American Indistinction as German Theory

It is an old joke, and a likeable one at that: “How do you think the unthinkable? With an itheberg.” Edgar Allan Poe, who married a young lisper (Lauvrière 1935, 140), maintained a theoretical interest in lisping and other speech impediments (also: in shipwreck)⁴ throughout his life, beginning with the composition of the early poem “Romance” in 1829, when he was twenty years old:

Romance, who loves to nod and sing,
With drowsy head and folded wing,
Among the green leaves as they shake
Far down within some shadowy lake,
To me a painted paroquet
Hath been—a most familiar bird—
Taught me my alphabet to say—
To lisp my very earliest word
While in the wild wood I did lie,
A child—with a most knowing eye. (Poe 1984, 53)

In this first stanza, Poe’s first bird, a parakeet, perorates on early German Romanticism’s most notorious *credo*: the originary “indistinction” of art and science, phonetics and semantics, consciousness and nature⁵. Friedrich Schlegel, by way of Rousseau, based early *Romantik* around this premise in the founding document of the Romantic sensibility, the 1798 *Athenaeumsfragment* on “progressive, universal poetry” (Schlegel 1958, 37). A decade later Friedrich Schleiermacher expounded, in his

Ethics (1812/1813) and *Hermeneutics* (first edited 1838)⁶, on the implications of phonosemantic indistinction (or what we may call “universal onomatopoeticism” [cf. Jakobson and Waugh 2002, 161-168]) for language acquisition in children. Indistinction and its most undefined antonym, the production of *differences*, became the absolute metaphors of post-Enlightenment interpretation theory.

It is worth noting that Johann Gottfried Herder had laid the ideological groundwork for the advance of indistinction as one of the central tropes of Romantic aesthetics and epistemology. In his monumental philological study *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1783), Herder developed a theory of hermeneutic indeterminacy according to which interpretations do not merely ascertain meaning, but also circulate and attribute racial markers to interpreters. For Herder, texts are akin to the “jungle” of plantation slavery. Interpreters must develop the ability to ascertain the “logick of ancient figurative language” in order to transform this “jungle” into plantations of legible textual material (Herder 1833, 35-36)⁷. The attribution of racial prestige was predicated on the demonstration of philological abilities, naturalizing the access to cultural participation as a racial “trait”, as well as disseminating a racist equation of philological literacy with whiteness across the literary and philological fields. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was an astute reader of the works of Schlegel, Schleiermacher and Herder, institut-

ed this racial and technocratic content in *Nature* (1836), which reads like a reinvestment of Herder's hermeneutic doctrine:

Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. *Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*, *Spirit* primarily means *wind*; *transgression*, the crossing of a *line*; *supercilious*, the *raising of the eyebrow*. [...] Most of the process by which this transformation is made, is hidden from us in the remote time when language was framed; but the same tendency may be daily observed in children. Children and savages use only nouns or names of things, which they convert into verbs, and apply to analogous mental acts. (Emerson 1983, 21)

Emerson's understanding of historical and biological processes is strikingly ambiguous, although it is couched in a transparent supremacist equation of children with "savages": in this passage, "root" denotes both etymology and natural growth; the "transformation" of material appearances into words is *both* a natural process and cultural procedure. The hypothetical reader who, like Herder's "slave", does not know "when to quit", and who uncovers the contradictions of Emerson's meta-linguistic expositions, is in effect deprived of a primary text. Of course, Emerson is not being tritely proto-deconstructive, even though deconstructive critics readily exploited such fault lines to further their own program

(Monot 2016, 182-186)⁸. Rather, Emerson is drawing upon the anthropometric and racial content of Herder's theory of interpretation. Emerson's *Nature* signals to its own metaphorical and metonymic tangledness in order to prompt Herderian renunciation (the ability to "quit" interpreting a text) as the sole adequate hermeneutic attitude amongst its readers, and thus enable the performance and self-attribution of racial markers amongst his almost exclusively white readership.

Emerson's later works, *English Traits* (1856) in particular, have helped substantiate the claim by recent critics that Emerson ought to be recognized as a "full contributor to white race theory" (Painter 2010, 183), rather than as an admittedly reluctant supporter of the abolitionist movement. In a passage from one of his more popular later lectures, Emerson supplements his familiar Neoplatonic doctrine of the One and the Many (Emerson's entirely dehistoricized and Romanticized rephrasing of "German Idealism") with, quite strikingly, a discourse on economy, anthropometry, and community. Emerson ponders the sums worth paying for "a superior slave, secretary and manager, an educated slave; a man of genius." He explains:

Time was, in England, when the state stipulated beforehand what price should be paid for each citizen's life, if he was killed. Now, if it were possible, I should like to see that appraisal applied to every

man, and every man made acquainted with the true number and weight of every adult citizen, and that he be placed where he belongs, with so much power confided to him as he could carry and use. In the absence of such anthropometer I have a perfect confidence in the natural laws. I think that the community [...] will be the best measure and the justest judge of the citizen, or will in the long run give the fairest verdict and reward [...]. (Emerson 1888, 49)

For Emerson, however, such judgments are only valid if the community that pronounces them limits its judicial efforts to the narrow confines of *disinterested interpretation*. This, too, Emerson had learnt from Herder: white readers “cheerfully” interpret poetry without any instrumental intent and without receiving a salary (or “bread”) for doing so⁹. Emerson had taken this logic equally far in his resignation sermon from Boston’s Second Church in 1832, in which he explained that he was “not interested” in administering the Eucharist, yet outlined a complex set of interpretive reasons that declared “disinterest” the sole appropriate stance for biblical—and, by extension, literary—interpretation (Emerson 1993, 194). Conversely, communities of *interest*, understood as temporary, instrumental coalitions mediating as “the Few” between the individual and totality (“Society,” “Nature”), yet doing so along the line of a definite hermeneutic or political intent are, as Emerson has it in “The Divinity School Address”, necessarily “sick and faithless” (Emerson 1983, 87; Monot 2016, 60–61).

We do not know how Emerson's first readership dealt with the metalinguistic aporias that speckle his texts, yet D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) suggest that, by the late 1830s, the questions raised and the racial promises made by Herder and Emerson had become pervasive across the American literary field. In his essays on Poe, Lawrence summarizes what he considers the crucial preoccupation, as well as the crucial indeterminacy, of Poe's major tales: "The central law of all organic life is intrinsically isolate and single in itself. [...] Each individual organism is vivified by intimate contact with fellow organisms: up to a certain point" (Lawrence 1971, 71; Monot 2016, 69). In Lawrence's account, Poe's tales obsessively stage situations where this limit is transgressed, and where "individual organisms" ultimately break down as a result of *indistinction*. Arguably, Lawrence does not point to the political contradiction of American individualism or to the "horrible pottage of human parts" (171) of Whitmanian democratic sentiment. Rather, Lawrence seems to suggest that the phronetic identification and regulation of the "certain point" at which ontological and political equilibrium gets thrown off is also the central difficulty of Romantic hermeneutics. Let me briefly retrace how this tension was brought to a pitch in the early decade of the 19th century in Schleiermacher's work on a "general", post-Enlightenment theory of interpretation.

Schleiermacher's and Herder's radical transformation of Enlightenment hermeneutics into a *general* Romantic

theory of interpretation consisted, among other advances, of the slow elaboration of an additional interpretive tool, variously described as *identification* or *divination*, that claimed that a direct and unmediated insight into another's "constitution" was not only possible, but also could produce interpretive material worthy of being reintroduced into the hermeneutic process. As such, unmediated intersubjective insights, or what Emerson described as "without experience, to divine" (Emerson 1983, 662), required a number of anthropological reductions in order to secure the status of *Divinatorik* (hermeneutic divination) as a stable methodological device. Emerson, who had read Schleiermacher's first essays on hermeneutics during his formative years as a Unitarian minister, drew upon the most consequential of these anthropological reductions—the trivialization of pain—in order to explain why he did not believe that the Eucharist had to be commemorated, and consequently preferred to resign from his position at the Boston Second Church. In his resignation sermon, Emerson offhandedly explained that Jesus, "sitting with his countrymen celebrating their national feast", thinks of his impending death and speaks, as "a friend to his friends", with "natural beauty and feeling" (Emerson 1993, 190) of the coming covenant—and crucifixion. Of the Eucharist itself, Emerson unambiguously stated that the cultural, bodily and national "constitution" of New-England Unitarians would not tolerate the use of such an "Eastern" ritual: "*the use of the elements*, however suitable to the

people and the modes of thought in the East, where it originated, is foreign and unsuited to affect us. Whatever long usage and strong association may have done in some individuals to deaden this repulsion I apprehend that their use is rather tolerated than loved by any of us” (Emerson, 192; Monot 2016, 73). As such, Emerson’s reading of Romantic hermeneutics brought the covert culturalist and ethnicist content of his philological and philosophical source material (Schleiermacher, Herder) to the foreground.

Let us return briefly to Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* to further elucidate Schleiermacher’s indirect¹⁰ contribution to the emergence of racial ideology in American Romanticism. Lawrence’s argument, to which I broadly subscribe, contends that the theory of interpretation in German and American Romanticism was unable to reinvest its own ideological determinations in the hermeneutic processes it attempted to formalize (Lawrence 1971, 75). Deprived of the ability to question not only the interpreter’s own perspective, but also his methodological apparatus, Romantic hermeneutics merely remained the application of a system of interpretive patterns derived from a circumscribed body of texts, practices, and uses, rather than a truly “general”, self-elaborating and self-revising descriptive and interpretive apparatus that could produce an abstract description of *any* process of understanding.¹¹ Poe himself gave a twofold response to this problem in

“The Gold-Bug” (1843) and “The Raven” (1845). The first line of “The Gold-Bug” sketches out a central narratological and epistemological indeterminacy: “Many years ago, I contracted an intimacy with a Mr. William Legrand” (Poe 1984, 560). Very well. But *from whom?* And an intimacy *with what?* If Legrand and the unnamed narrator contract an intimacy with each other, they also contract, as I would like to argue, an intimacy with the covert workings of American letters. It is Jupiter, Legrand’s black servant, who “infects” (560) Legrand and the narrator with a knowledge of the blind spot in their hermeneutic rationalities; as Poe liked to suggest, epistemics and epidemics bear more than a phonetic resemblance. Jupiter, Legrand and the narrator reach the summit of a hill that, akin to Herder’s textual “jungle” and Emerson’s metalinguistic commentary, is “thickly overgrown with brambles” (570). Jupiter, perched birdlike in the upper limbs of a large tree, strictly follows Legrand’s erratic, pre-Romantic orders:

‘Well now, Jupiter, do exactly as I tell you—do you hear?’

‘Yes, massa.’

‘Pay attention, then!—find the left eye of the skull.’

‘Hum! hoo! dat’s good! why dar aint no eye lef at all.’

‘Curse your stupidity! do you know your right hand from your left?’

‘Yes, I nose dat—nose all bout that—tis my left hand what I chops de wood wid.’

‘To be sure! you are left-handed; and your left eye is

on the same side as your left hand. Now, I suppose, you can find the left eye of the skull, or the place where the left eye has been. Have you found it?

Here was a long pause. At length the negro asked, ‘Is de lef eye of de skull pon de same side as de lef hand of de skull, too?—cause de skull aint got not a bit ob a hand at all—nebbber mind! I got de lef eye now—here de lef eye! what mus do wid it?’ (574)

This very first step in practical interpretation runs along the line of Enlightenment hermeneutics, and draws upon advances in Higher Criticism (Grusin 1991) to exhaust the linguistic and discursive possibilities of a given text without bringing the properly subjective dimension of hermeneutics into play. In his last question, Jupiter draws attention to two ambiguities concealed in Legrand’s command to “find the left eye of the skull.” Firstly, Legrand assumes an anthropological standard as a hermeneutic blueprint that neither fits the object of interpretation (a skull does not possess “hands”, and an eye socket is not an “eye”) nor the interpreting subject (Jupiter himself, who is left-handed, and both an “infernal black villain” and Legrand’s “guardian”¹²). Secondly, Jupiter eruditely draws attention to possible phonetic and phonosemantic ambiguities in his master’s orders (for instance the homonymy of the relative direction “left” and “lef”—this homonymity would still exist without Jupiter’s Gullah dialect [Shell 1982, 20]). Philologizing without any sense of restraint, Jupiter embodies the overzealous textual critic of Herder’s pre-Romantic her-

meneutic anthropology—and it is only as the laborious practitioner of a technical, philological, pre-Romantic form of hermeneutics that Jupiter becomes racialized. Fearing Legrand's impatience, and perceiving the aporias of Legrand's technical interpretation, Jupiter turns to a divinatory, prophetic amendment to pre-Romantic hermeneutics; this step remains concealed by Jupiter's elusive "nebber mind", and eventually leads to his choosing the wrong eye socket. Yet Legrand, too, has perceived the hermeneutic processes that underlie Jupiter's ultimate choice:

We had taken, perhaps, a dozen steps in this direction, when, with a loud oath, Legrand strode up to Jupiter, and seized him by the collar. The astonished negro opened his eyes and mouth to the fullest extent, let fall the spades, and fell upon his knees. 'You scoundrel,' said Legrand, hissing out the syllables from between his clenched teeth—'you infernal black villain!—speak, I tell you!—answer me this instant, without any prevarication!—which—which is your left eye?' 'Oh, my golly, Massa Will! aint dis here my lef eye for sartain?' roared the terrified Jupiter, placing his hand upon his *right* organ of vision, and holding it there with a desperate pertinacity, as if in immediate dread of his master's attempt at a gouge. 'I thought so! —I knew it! —hurrah!' vociferated Legrand, letting the negro go [...]. (Poe 1984, 576; emphasis in original.)

The ability to *divine*, that is either to “imaginatively and temporarily become” the author of the text to be interpreted, or to intersubjectively “guess” (Schleiermacher 1977, 317-318) the linguistic combinations that covertly structure the text at hand, distinguishes the Romantic interpreter from his pre- or anti-Romantic counterpart. Convolved as they are, and taking place either in “profound silence” (Poe 1984, 576; Monot 2016, 278)¹³ or during dialogical gaps (“nebber mind”), neither Legrand’s divinatory retracing of Jupiter’s decision-making nor Jupiter’s own probabilistic interpretation of Legrand’s orders correspond to the “technical” interpretation of Enlightenment philology. Both Legrand and Jupiter commune in a hermeneutic practice that is founded on the temporary suppression of their assumed anthropological differences, and posit that intersubjective, collaborative, and indistinct hermeneutic processes are not only possible, but also necessary for the continued unfolding of the plot—no indistinction, no treasure, no tale.

In this respect, Legrand’s later didactic elucidation of the successive interpretive steps that lead him to discover Captain Kidd’s buried treasure is nothing if not the *obscuring* of the actual “decoding” that took place below the surface of narrative explicitness. Legrand is rewriting a non-linguistic and collaborative interpretation as a philological and autonomous exercise in “decyphering”, as a strictly rational exercise that is “more than a mere

guess”, more than mere “probabilities,” as an exercise that will remain “insoluble” to “the crude intellect of the sailor” (Poe 1984, 587-588). Appropriately, when Legrand explains how he managed to decipher the paper slip, he begins by covering up all traces of indistinction, and by wiping out its phonosemantic cipher: “we are enabled, at once, to discard the “th” ”. Thus, the “natural division” (589–591) between different words and different races is reinstated, while the necessity of non-racialized, collaborative hermeneutic practices is ironically demonstrated by the unfolding of the plot itself.

Poe’s second response to the aporias of Romantic hermeneutics leads us back to our originary Titanian joke. Of all of Poe’s narrative poems “The Raven”, with its extremely dense layering of the sibilants /s/ and /z/, is also the poem lispng readers are most likely to mispronounce:

Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking

Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—

What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore

Meant in croaking “Nevermore.” (Poe 1984, 83; my emphasis)

While the Jupiterian “nebber mind” functions as a floating signifier that stands in for tabooed, collabo-

rative and necessary hermeneutic practices, the raven's "Plutonian" answer, "Nevermore", serves the opposite function, precisely that of equating indistinct, collaborative "thinking" with sinking, disintegration, and downfall. While "Nebber mind" lingers on the textual surface of the narrative *because* of its tenuous (and illicit) referent, the signifier "Nevermore"—half croaked, half heard—elicits an unbridled production of referents through the narrator's questions, thus becoming a "supersaturated" (Garber 2001, 141) signifier, burdened with ever superadded meaning. In "The Gold-Bug", the imbalanced power relation between Jupiter and Legrand is temporarily suspended, although it remains framed by its linguistic markers—commands and insults. Although Legrand's discourse formally supersedes Jupiter's own, the plot finds its resolution in a dialectical gap. Jupiter's "nebber mind" hence encapsulates the tale's dialectic of hermeneutic revelation and racial prohibition, while the Raven's "Nevermore" discloses the literary, that is, Romantic, necessity of this dialectic. Like "the Gold-Bug", "The Raven" stages the hazards of indistinction, while revealing its aesthetic productivity. The narrator explicitly sets out on a hermeneutic process, seeking to determine

What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous
bird of yore

Meant in croaking "Nevermore."

This I sat engaged in *guessing*, but no syllable expressing

To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my
bosom's core;

This and more I sat *divining*, with my head at ease
reclining

On the cushion's velvet lining [...]. (Poe 1984, 83-
84; emphasis added)

The raven answers the narrator's question explicitly; the narrator is complicit, through his ceaseless questioning, of the raven's production of meaning. The narrator and the raven are thus engaged in an explicit hermeneutic dialogue that discloses both the inner workings of Romantic interpretation, as the hermeneutic categories of divination ("divining") and induction ("guessing") emerge on the textual surface, while also disclosing its limits: the dialogical and communal production of meaning is unable to produce anything other than the self-continuation of dialogue. We are led to witness the resulting collapse both of the narrator's sanity and of the dialogue itself, the last stanza ending on a "nevermore" that is not the raven's, but the narrator's own—a collapse that is preceded by the symptomatic return of voiceless dental fricative (θ / "th"):

"Wretch," I cried, "thy God hath lent thee—by these
angels he hath sent thee

Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories
of Lenore;

Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this
lost Lenore!"

Quoth the Raven "Nevermore." (Poe 1984, 84)

Metahermeneutic Authorship and Affirmative Authorship

How does an authorial construction based on the production of hermeneutic aporias affect the political field from which it claims to be independent? First, by legitimizing volubility as both a category and a style of public and institutional discourse, that is, the unbounded production of academic and para-academic commentary; for this, Poe's "Raven" stands as a kind of paradigmatic fable. To take a more contemporary example which, I think, is representative of this circular economy of text and commentary—or structurally legitimized *volubility*—let us turn briefly to a passage from Emerson's essay "Nominalist and Realist" (1844):

Thus we settle it in our cool libraries, that all the agents with which we deal are subalterns, which we can well afford to let pass, and life will be simpler when we live at the centre, and flout the surfaces. I wish to speak with all respect of persons, but sometimes I must pinch myself to keep awake, and preserve the due decorum. They melt so fast into each other, that they are like grass and trees, and it needs an effort to treat them as individuals. (Emerson 1983, 580)

While Emerson here purportedly puts forth an identifiable socioethical position, commentators have fundamentally differed in their interpretation of this passage.

Sharon Cameron contends that Emerson is venting “his disillusion with the conventional idea that persons are separate and integral entities” (Cameron 2007, 80). On the other hand, David M. Robinson reads this passage as one of Emerson’s crucial Declarations of Self-Reliance: “it is individuals and their particular lives that finally constitute the texture of social life, and the only sphere of moral action” (Robinson 1993, 73). Alex Zakaras in turn interprets the metaphor of the “melting” individuals of mass democracy as Emerson’s discovery of a proto-Hegelian theory of recognition: “the observer’s view is salient: individuals are unable to impress others even with the bare fact of their own discreteness” (Zakaras 2009, 46; Monot 2016, 69-70). In light of the hermeneutic figures described above, I would like to argue that the variety of meanings in Emerson’s text is arguably circumscribed by the intention of making these contradicting interpretations possible: Emerson’s covert reinscription of the hermeneutic dialectics of the One and the Many as the sole condition of possibility of interpretive, philological commentary suggests that “Nominalist and Realist” does not mean much beyond its interpretive scope, narrow as it may be.

The construction of Emerson’s authorship is *metahermeneutic* in that it reintroduces politically connoted hermeneutic categories in the production of literary texts that, once “interpreted” along the lines of the same hermeneutic principles, covertly reframe philological com-

mentary within these originary conditions of possibility. Against this form of *metahermeneutic authorship*, the American literary and political fields produced an alternative construction, *affirmative authorship*, from around 1840 onward. I want to suggest that while *affirmative authorship* proved effective as a counter-position to the dominance of hermeneutism¹⁴ in the literary and political fields, it nevertheless failed to produce corresponding responses from institutional criticism: philologists are left, uncommonly, without an adequate *théorie* to deal with assertive poetics.

Emerging during a time when public intellectuals, Emerson included, viewed it as their socio-ethical duty to engage in sophisticated discussions of the anthropological status of African Americans—and indeed, pointed to the sophistication of these discussions as their incontrovertible form of legitimacy—and routinely argued for a deferral of a possible military intervention of the North, the emergence of affirmative authorship nevertheless drew upon the non-foundationalist strain that had become apparent in Romantic and democratic epistemology around the 1830s.¹⁵ Yet while Emerson, in West's somewhat evasive account of the roots of American pragmatism, indeed asserted “the primacy of power-laden people's opinion (doxa) over value-free philosopher's knowledge (episteme)” (West 1989, 212-213), authors who based their authorial legitimacy on affirmation pointed out the contradictions and risks inherent

in any deliberative culture that refused to trace “power” back to reasons other than doxological.

Frederick Douglass’s affirmative and assertive rhetoric is enlightening in this respect. In “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered” (1854) Douglass begins by drawing attention to the artificial proliferation of “elaborate arguments” in the public sphere, asserting that

The Negro is a MAN. His good and his bad, his innocence and his guilt, his joys and his sorrows, proclaim his manhood in speech that all mankind practically and readily understand. [...] The horse bears him on his back—admits his mastery and dominion. The barn-yard fowl know his step, and flock around to receive their morning meal from his able hand. The dog dances when he comes home, and whines piteously when he is absent. All these know that the negro is a MAN. NOW, presuming that what is evident to beast and to bird, cannot need elaborate argument to be made plain to men, I assume, with this brief statement, that the negro is a man. (Douglass 1999, 284)

Douglass is highlighting, here and elsewhere, the always implicit anthropological construction of a “human language” as the common denominator of Romantic hermeneutics, of ante-bellum political participation, and of philological legitimacy. The disruptive intent of

his speech is then multiple: to unveil the coupling and permeability of the literary and political fields, and to interrupt the redundant discursive productivity of each field individually, to cut off the constant flow of verbal waste that constituted the Romantics' proudest alchemical activity, converting words into power, Unitarians into Public Intellectuals, and Slaves into "secondary men"—some of the Romantics being candid enough to acknowledge the resemblance of their philological pursuits with digestion or, in other more colloquial words, with "talking shit" (cf. Meehan 2011, 97–121). Derrida and Frege are of course right when they point out that assertive speech acts respectively entail a "coup de force" (Derrida 1986, 11) or the deployment of an "assertive force" (Frege 1956, 294), for these speech acts must produce their own legitimacy as they formulate their intended illocutionary effects. Yet it seems to me that in the case of classical abolitionist writing such as Douglass's addresses and autobiographical works, these assertive speech acts, such as that of declaring oneself "a man" or "a human being", do not produce a legitimacy that is *their own*, but rather point to the illegitimacy of the foundations of public discourse in ante-bellum political culture, and trace these foundations back to the anthropological contents of Romantic hermeneutics. Douglass pits the elaborate linguistic aporias of Romanticism against his own conception of public discourse, proclaiming his "manhood in speech that all mankind practically and readily understand" (Douglass 1999,

284; Monot 2016, 218-221). In this, Douglass seems to have clearly identified the anthropological reductions of Schleiermacher's and Emerson's *divinatory* mode of interpretation, as well as the banalization of pain these reductions ultimately consist in:

It was a most painful situation; and, to understand it, one must needs experience it, or imagine himself in similar circumstances. Let him be a fugitive slave in a strange land—a land given up to be the hunting-ground for slaveholders—whose inhabitants are legalized kidnappers—where he is every moment subjected to the terrible liability of being seized upon by his fellowmen, as the hideous crocodile seizes upon his prey!—I say, let him place himself in my situation—without home or friends—without money or credit—wanting shelter, and no one to give it—wanting bread, and no money to buy it,—[...] I say, let him be placed in this most trying situation,—the situation in which I was placed,—then, and not till then, will he fully appreciate the hardships of, and know how to sympathize with, the toil-worn and whip-scarred fugitive slave. (Douglass 1994, 90)

While Douglass begins by inviting his readers to “imagine” the situation of a slave, the passage ends with a clear disavowal of identification—or, to speak with Emerson and Poe, of indistinction. With Douglass, the Emersonian rhetoric of “experience” finds its entirely deromanticized counterpart: Douglass does not reject divination on the grounds of the theoretical indefensi-

bility of intersubjective understanding, but because divination has demonstrably buttressed the “colonizing tendency” of the Romantic culture of interpretation, and enacted its “imperious insensitivity to other voices and [reduced] the complex variety of human experience to its own terms” (Davey 2006, 21)¹⁶.

What, then, is metaphorical about affirmation and assertion? It seems to me that an era that predicated the survival of its subalterns upon linguistic conventions and literary diversions could not avoid seeing these subalterns rephrasing their most basal existential claims in linguistic terms. While Emerson considered slavery little more than a “horrid story” (Emerson 1995, 10), while the abolitionist John A. Collins considered the whip scars on Douglass’ back a “diploma” (Douglass 1994, 661; Monot 2016, 232), while William Lloyd Garrison took Douglass “as his text” (365-366), Douglass himself adequated assertive speech acts with the attempt at literalizing the condition of African Americans as *human beings*, rather than as “metaphorical men” or, as Emerson put it, “imitative, or secondary [...] men” (Cabot 1887, 430). In this respect, Rorty’s insightful discussion of the respective functions of literal and figurative language in the liberal democratic project is quite to the point, in that the possibility of a literal language, a language “irrelevant to the Romantics” (Rorty 2009, 19), was precisely the object of sustained inquiry and elaboration by mid-century heterodox public figures.

Arguably, the adequation of assertive speech acts and *self*-assertion had been outlined as a hermeneutic possibility by the early German Romantics themselves, Schlegel and Schleiermacher alluding to “behaupten” (“to affirm”) as one of the means, along with the inferential and divinatory modes of interpretation, of extracting meaning from opaque texts (Schleiermacher 1977, 317-318). Yet it is precisely because the possibility of an affirmative mode of interpretation was ultimately discarded by the Romantics that Douglass’ disruption of the hermeneutic culture of the mid-century must be understood as a fully developed philosophical contribution to interpretation theory. As a reaction against the dominance of a type of voluble, technocratic hermeneutics that was typical of early German and later American Romanticism, Douglass put forth a counterposition that arguably overrides a long tradition of philological, post-Herderian commentary: “I cannot, however, argue; I must assert” (Douglass 1999, 283; Monot 2016, 219).

This then, confronts the current attempt to decolonize literary theory with the question of the legitimacy and function of the discipline’s most constitutive systemic necessity, the large-scale production of scholarly discourse. Scholastic reiteration is a particularly insidious form of insult, adding futile volubility to historical injury. The affirmative hermeneutics initiated and developed into a philosophical counterposition by Douglass point

towards an alternative discursive style for postcolonial literary theory, a style in which investigative, reinvestigative, problematizing and reproblematicizing inquiry makes way for constative utterances and the willful termination of specific public and academic debates. This type of affirmative discourse must however remain predicated upon normative criteria that enable the reliable identification of those debates that are artificial, redundant, overdrawn and, in many cases, long settled. The definition of these criteria, I would like to suggest, would be a worthy object of postcolonial literary theory, if only on account of the historical legitimacy of affirmative discourse.

Notes:

1. Blumenberg pits conceptuality against metaphoricity, a set of terms he discusses in the frequently anthologized introductory chapters of *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, yet occasionally does so metaphorically (rather than conceptually). “To break down” is my own metaphor, which summarizes Blumenberg’s much more expansive and evasive ones.

2. “Assertion”: Livy uses the Latin *adsereret*, from the stem *assere*, “to claim rights over something, state, maintain, affirm”, in the sense of a speech act, and in the context of slavery: “He commissioned a client, M. Clau-

dius, to claim the girl as his slave [...]” (Livy 1912, 44). It is doubtful whether a “Begriffsgeschichte” (conceptual history) of *assertion* can properly distinguish the term’s general usage from the much more uncommon topical meaning that is the subject of this essay. The source from Livy (mentioned in footnote 2) perhaps wrongly suggests that the connotation of the Latin *assere* with slavery and emancipation was generally known. The Latin *manumissio* (“affranchisement”), however, has a well-known conceptual history that has been studied by classicists and scholars of African-American history alike.

3. I roughly translate Blumenberg’s more detailed original explanation: “Die Stärke der Metapher, die sich einer argumentativ schwer oder gar nicht fundierbaren Behauptung zugesellt, beruht auf der manifesten Anschaulichkeit ihres Transplantationsmaterials, dem ‘die Natur’ als Fundus legitimierender Qualitäten dient” (Blumenberg 1971, 201).

4. The joke refers, of course, to the Titanic, nicknamed “The Unsinkable”. Poe’s “Raven” not only puns on thinking/sinking, but also suggests that the narrator’s mental breakdown is akin to a shipwreck (and respectively depicts the shipwreck in *Arthur Gordon Pym* as a mental breakdown).

5. Romance, an art form and a secular scripture, teaches

a linguistic abstraction, the alphabet. The lyrical “I” as a pre-conscious babe in the woods, to whom *episteme* is taught through song, is a topos in theories of pre-romantic and early romantic pedagogy, especially those of Friedrich Schlegel, Rousseau and Schleiermacher.

6. Schleiermacher’s writings on hermeneutics, which consist of sketches, lecture notes, brief essays and uncompleted manuscripts, were compiled and published posthumously.

7. I have often written about Herder, Emerson, Schleiermacher and, much more succinctly, Poe, notably in a recently published monograph in German, in which many of the primary sources discussed here are examined in greater detail. Some repetitions in argumentation and wording are unavoidable (Monot 2016, 154-164).

8. See also Paul de Man’s discussion of linguistic and organic “origination” in Hölderlin’s “Brod und Wein” (1800), and his eventual trivialization of “pain” as a “specifically linguistic” effect of translation (de Man, 1984; de Man 2002, 85-86).

9. Alciphron is a youth; he studies this poetry not from compulsion, not from the necessity of his profession, or of bread, but from a love of it” (Herder 1833, 21; see also Monot 2016, 154-164).

10. Schleiermacher's more direct contribution, at least on a structural level, would arguably reside in the notorious antijudaism of his early work (Blum 2010, 50–51).

11. I am rephrasing Gadamer's concluding remarks in *Truth and Method* on Schleiermacher's conception of universality: "When we read this, we can see how tremendous was the step that led from Schleiermacher's hermeneutics to a universal understanding of the historical sciences. But however universal the hermeneutics that Schleiermacher evolved, it was a universality with very perceptible limits. His hermeneutics, in fact, had in mind texts whose authority was undisputed" (Gadamer 2013, 201; Monot 2016, 104-106).

12. "It is not improbable that the relatives of Legrand, conceiving him to be somewhat unsettled in intellect, had contrived to instill this obstinacy into Jupiter, with a view to the supervision and guardianship of the wanderer" (Poe 1984, 561).

13. The motif is recurrent in Poe's "hermeneutic" tales, notably in "The Purloined Letter", in which the narrator is "mentally discussing" the events that had united him to Dupin in a previous tale, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", yet does so in "profound silence" (Poe 1984, 560).

14. "This perspective is the foundation of the 'philolo-

gism' which, according to Bakhtin, leads to treating language as a dead letter destined to be decoded (and not to be spoken or understood practically); more generally, it is the foundation of the *hermeneutism* [sic] which leads to conceiving any act of comprehension according to the model of *translation* and turns the perception of a cultural work, whatever it may be, into an intellectual act of decoding which presupposes the elucidation and the conscious application of rules of production and interpretation" (Bourdieu 1992, 314; emphasis in original).

15. As outlined in Cabot's notoriously unreliable *Memoir*, Emerson's earliest address on slavery (1837) is unambiguous: "The degradation of that black race, though now lost in the starless spaces of the past, did not come without sin. The condition is inevitable to the men they are, and nobody can redeem them but themselves. The exertions of all the abolitionists are nugatory except for themselves" (Cabot 1887, 429).

16. Nicholas Davey explains this tendency with respect to Gadamer's critique of Schleiermacher: "The 'will to method' exhibits a colonizing tendency. On one level, the focus and drive that attaches to the organizing power of the will to method is philosophically attractive. However, the energetic impetus toward orderliness and closure betrays an imperviousness toward alterity. The will to method has an imperious insensitivity to

other voices and reduces the complex variety of human experience to its own terms. This reductive impetus is not an expression of invincibility but an inability to face the risks of dialogical exposure” (Davey 2006, 21; Monot 2016, 98, 241).

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