Voicing the concern that Saul Bellow’s oeuvre is getting ever more “foreign” is at the same time a way of underwriting its domesticity. Positing that contemporary Americans are out of touch with the tradition of Western literature that constitutes the meaning horizon of Bellow’s work thus entails an incentive to reconnect to it. Behind this is the idea that a people’s identity depends on its association with and remembrance of a body of classics. Interestingly, the same logic underlies an infamous quote that Charles Taylor attributes to Bellow: “When the Zulu’s produce a Tolstoy we will read him” (1994: 42). Taylor cites this provocative statement, not because he thinks Bellow is not entitled to pass judgments on other cultures, but because it is problematic to measure the cultural achievement of the Zulu’s exclusively on the basis of a tradition of “dead white males” (71). Moreover, Bellow locates that achievement entirely in the future. He thus assumes in advance that the time is not yet ripe for the Tolstoy of the Zulu’s to stand up.

Taylor enlists Bellow’s remark about the Zulu’s as an instance of ethnocentrism, whereby the standards of the West are unduly imposed on the Third World. Here, however, we are not so much concerned with the (lack of) ethical correctness of such utterances as with their communicative aspects. It is clear that Bellow would not have been able to say what he said (if, indeed, this is how he said it) in a society that does not put a high price on recognition. The idea of equal recognition, as Taylor suggests, is a relatively recent phenomenon that only became accepted somewhere during the eighteenth century. This, once again, confronts us with a paradox. Bellow’s statement not only expresses the self-assumed priority of Western culture vis-à-vis non-Western cultures. More or less implicitly, it also draws a line between the two. The superiority of Western culture thus only becomes manifest when it is compared to other (supposedly inferior) traditions.

From a functionalist perspective, the quote imputed to Bellow not only bespeaks a form of cultural arrogance but also more or less explicitly establishes a genealogy. The most obvious function of genealogies is to impose a linear valuation order on things. By saying that the Zulu Tolstoy has not yet arrived, Bellow suggests that Western culture is prior to that of Africa, not just historically but also in terms of its intrinsic worth. At the
same time, however, such a lineage is also an instrument for comparison. Comparability, as Harrison White argues, comes as an “unanticipated by-product” of attempts at dominance (1992: 13). Comparison can thus be said to constitute a second, hidden function of genealogies. As appears from the stir it caused, Bellow’s rather inadvertent remark about the literature of the Zulu’s is difficult to put aside. It can be condemned or extenuated, but it cannot be entirely ignored. At least, the comparison is hard to resist. Some may declare an urgent need for a Zulu Tolstoy to answer Bellow’s self-satisfaction. Others will say that there is no need for one, because there already is one. But, whatever the response, a measure of achievement has been set that has to be reckoned with.

In fact, Bellow’s genealogy tells a rather familiar story. The comment is not so different from John Macy’s sneer at those compatriots who, even while displaying excessive deference to standards of “European high culture,” all too eagerly proclaimed the advent of the “Milton of Oshkosh” or the “Shelley of San Francisco” (1913: 8). Although the directionality of the two statements is different, in Macy’s remark the Americans play the role of Bellow’s Zulu’s, there is the same underlying genealogical impulse. Even while the valuation orders have been inverted, this structural impulse has remained intact. Twenty years after Macy complained about the misdirected nationalism of American literary critics, Howard Mumford Jones could still express his regret about English departments’ reluctance to include American literature offerings because it “has no Shakespeare” (1936: 384). Even in 1960, Leslie Fiedler insistently asked: “Where is our Madame Bovary, our Anna Karenina, our Pride and Prejudice or Vanity Fair?” (2003: 25). Again, all of these utterances spring from very different contexts. But the validating mechanism in each case is rather similar. Designations such as the “Zulu Tolstoy” or the “Milton of Oshkosh” can be regarded as condensed paradoxes in the sense that they articulate the singularity of a national culture through its kinship with another tradition.

This chapter is about the function of such kinship ties in American literary history and the laws of succession that govern the discipline. I will focus on three cases in particular: the line that runs from Jonathan Edwards to Emerson, the institutional trajectory of Emily Dickinson, and Robert Lowell and the confessional school of poetry. It has not been my aim to rectify certain misperceptions in the history of American literature or to arrive at a better distribution of literary credit. Rather, what I have tried to show is the involvement of this kind of corrective behavior in the process of canon formation itself. I have selected these cases because they are familiar to most readers and because the canonical status of the authors and texts involved appears beyond dispute (which is not to say, of course, that
they really are). Similar patterns, I suppose, can be discerned elsewhere too. What unites the following analyses is the hypothesis that the memory system of a dehierarchized social order is somehow complicit in the dissent it generates. In such a constellation, remembrance of the founding texts presupposes a failing memory.127

— The Priority of Jonathan Edwards

In the end, the debate over the Zulu Tolstoy is perhaps not all that different from the controversy between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War over who constructed the first hydrogen bomb. At the time, Robert Merton compiled a “calendar” of conflicts over priority in science. As Merton argued, the persistent disputes over who discovered something first cannot sufficiently be explained in terms of the egotism of scientists, given the enormous “concentration of affect” surrounding such issues even when there is little credit to gain (1973a: 295). These conflicts serve to reinforce the reward system of science, in which originality is at a premium. The taboo on multiple discoveries – which, as Merton documents, are much more frequent than one would suppose – could thus be attributed to an institutionalized emphasis on outstanding achievement, which means that the system constantly falls short of its highest expectations. In what follows, I want to extend some of Merton’s insights, which are still highly relevant today, to the domain of literary history.128

A peculiar instance of a multiple discovery is the lineage connecting Jonathan Edwards to the Transcendentalists. This well-established genealogy is generally attributed to Perry Miller, whose essay “Jonathan Edwards to Emerson” first appeared in 1940. David Shumway cites Miller’s essay as the “point of emergence” of the literary descent line running from Edwards to Emerson (1994: 334). Miller’s essay was very influential for a generation of Americanists, especially after Miller included it (under the title “From Edwards to Emerson”) in his Errand into the Wilderness (1956b), a book that played an important role in the institutionalization of puritan studies. The reason I single out Miller’s taxonomy here is because I see it as an interesting case of institutional myopia. The classification was so important for American literary studies, I argue, because it already existed at the time when Miller first published his essay. By this I do not want to slight Miller’s undeniable originality as a literary historian. What I do want to point out, rather, is the role institutions play in the way literary works get classed together.

When scanning some standard literary histories, one cannot but notice how codified the discourse on Edwards is. Most critics agree on the
contradictions that this figure embodied, the conflict between old and new
that he acted out in the service of the American people. With this usu-
ally comes the sense that he has been systematically misunderstood as the
preacher of hell fire. Thus, in the first Cambridge History, Paul Elmer More
regretted that Edwards’s “memory in the popular mind today is almost
exclusively associated with certain brimstone sermons and their terrific
effects” (Trent 1917: 60). Thirty years later, in the Spiller history, Thomas
H. Johnson stressed that the minatory sermons, which were “seldom used
by Edwards in fact,” “misrepresent him as one who despised men when in
fact he loved them as fellow beings sometimes forgetful of the warnings
of a compassionate father” (Spiller 1949: 75-76). In the Columbia vol-
ume published forty years later, Alan Heimert still takes pains to reclassify
Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God as a “highly unrepresentative ser-
mon” (Elliott 1988: 113). And even more recently, Emory Elliott concludes
in the new Cambridge History that the sermon is “not typical of Edwards’s
style” (Bercovitch 1994: 297).

What is interesting about these statements, all of them by established
puritan scholars, is not so much that they differ on the legacy of Edwards
but rather that they agree that Edwards has been systematically misrep-
resented as the arch-puritan. The injunction to rectify the misperceptions
about the author appears equally persistent as the stereotype itself. Return-
ing to Miller, we find the same kind of ritualized language. In his biography
of the theologian, he portrays Edwards as “one of those pure artists through
whom the deepest urgencies of their age and country become articulate”
(1949: xi). This formulation catches the eye because it seems so absolute
and contradictory. Edwards is described as both outstanding (“pure”) and
representative. His personal destiny is recursively fused with that of the
American nation. But this is still a far cry from seeing Edwards as a pre-
cursor of the nineteenth century romantics. We have perhaps forgotten how
unlikely this correlation was at the time.130 To understand how Miller ar-
rived at this position, we have to look into the institutional context from
which it emerged.

As it appears, Miller’s essay was not greeted with general acclaim
when it was first published in 1940. In the headnote accompanying the
1956 reprint, Miller felt compelled to defend himself against the charge of
“obscurantist divination” (185). He noted how many readers had miscon-
strued his argument, as if he had suggested a direct historical link between
Edwards and Emerson. What he had meant, instead, was a broader similar-
ity of “ideas” between the two figures:
What is persistent, from the covenant theology (and from the heretics against the covenant) to Edwards and to Emerson is the Puritan’s effort to confront, face to face, the image of a blinding divinity in the physical universe, and to look upon that universe without the intermediacy of ritual, of ceremony, of the Mass and the confessional (1956b: 185)

What, for Miller, bound Edwards and Emerson together (and what connected them with the puritan founders of the seventeenth century) was their shared desire to confront reality directly (“face to face”) without the mediation of institutions. Miller thus invoked an opposition between the (puritan) self and institutions, which justifies his taxonomy. For Miller, this was at the same time a way of justifying his own position as an intellectual historian. While defending the legitimacy of his taxonomy, Miller in the same movement propagated a specific way of doing literary history that goes beyond institutionalized discourse to perceive “deeper” continuities. He explicitly opposed this approach to a narrow “mail-order catalogue” view of literary history, which he regarded as too mechanical and deterministic (185). Here, Miller had in mind the social (literary) histories of the time, which according to him failed to comprehend the greatness of Transcendentalism because they were too intent on class struggle. They focused on Emerson’s views on the 1837 depression, or Thoreau’s comments on the Mexican war, but they frowned upon the more “literary” writings, which were too smug, too optimistic, or too “foreign” for their tastes.

Miller tried to prove the contemporary relevance of Transcendentalism by showing that it “betokened less an Oriental ecstasy and more a “natural” reaction of some descendants of Puritans and Quakers to Unitarian and commercial times” (189, italics mine). The word “natural” is vital here, because it brings to the fore the belief system on which Miller’s taxonomy hinges. Miller saw two distinct strains in the puritan heritage, one that stood for the “spirit,” and another representing “reason” (192-3). In the eighteenth century, however, some people got very rich very quickly and the two strains drifted apart. For Miller, Edwards tried to counter this tendency by establishing a counterculture of the emotions. But his attempt to fill Calvinism with a “new and throbbing spirit” was still constrained by an oppressive theology (195). It took Emerson – “another Edwards” – to “recapture the Edwardsian vision” in a new language, that of transcendental idealism (197). Miller’s point, therefore, was that if one scraped away the “rhetorical embellishments” (the language of orthodox theology in Edwards’s case, and Hindu and Germanic pedantry in the case of Emerson), the direct ancestral line between the two authors became apparent.
What, for Miller, connected the mystical writings of Edwards to those of the Transcendentalists was that both were part of the neglected, spiritual strain of Puritanism.

All along, while talking about the puritans, Miller was implicitly attacking the social historians. Why, he rhetorically asked, do the Transcendentalists, who “by all the laws of economic determinism” should be embracing the new languages of rationalism and Unitarianism, revert to the earlier doctrine of Calvinism (200)?

By pointing out the continuities between Edwards and Emerson, Miller was at the same time securing his own position in the academy as a historian of ideas against the social historians. This connection has been pointed out before (Reising 1986: 53-57). But the point to note is how this pragmatic aspect gets obscured. For Miller, the social historians reduced literary history to class conflicts in the same way as the Unitarians in the eighteenth century reduced theology to Newtonian calculations. In a similar fashion he extended specific mystical metaphors to defend his genealogy against the charge of “obscurantism.”

Miller’s story appeals to the emotions, because we intuitively favor those who go against the grain, those who act naturally, those on the side of the light and the spirit.

Such analogies reinforce both Miller’s taxonomy and his way of doing literary history. We thus get a cascading, self-implicating structure that can be visualized as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{spirit} : \text{reason} \\
\text{Revivalists} : \text{Deists} \\
\text{Transcendentalists} : \text{Unitarians} \\
\text{historians of ideas} : \text{social historians}
\end{align*}
\]

The first opposition, that between “spirit” and “reason,” can be seen as the semantic schema that maintains the whole structure. The primacy of the “spirit” over “reason” is not motivated, it is assumed. It is catapulted beyond question. This, one could argue, is how the self-replicating causal loop emerges on which institutions are founded: the spiritual lineage running from the founding fathers over Edwards to the romantics (up to forties America and after) is not only a product of a specific class of interpreters. It at the same time produces that class and provides it with a patent of nobility.

To recapitulate the argument so far, I have tried to show that the lineage running from Edwards to Emerson did not just appear out of the blue, but served to validate specific institutional formations in the academy, in this case the paradigm of intellectual history. Paradoxically, the geneal-
ogy fulfills this legitimating function by suggesting that the institution in question is not an institution at all, but rather approaches the past “face to face,” without the mediation of established academic standards. Just as Edwards tried to reconnect to the spiritual values of Calvinism obscured by superficial dogma, so Miller tried to go beyond what he perceived as the deterministic story line of Marxist literary histories. I will now illustrate that Miller was not actually the first to discover the genealogy for which he is usually credited. The question then becomes why Miller continues to be regarded as the father of the pedigree, despite evidence to the contrary.

— Multiple Awakenings

Contrary to what his essay might suggest, Miller was not a lone rider heroically opposing Marxist orthodoxy. Once we realize this, it becomes clear that Miller is not the only father of the taxonomy for which he is usually given credit. The link between Emerson and the puritans must have been evident even to contemporaries of the Concord sage. About six decades before Miller, the Scottish literary historian John Nichol saw Emerson’s “combination of stern practical rectitude with an ideal standard” as the latter’s “point of contact with Puritanism” (1882: 279). At the turn of the century, William P. Trent described Transcendentalism as both a “mental” and a “spiritual” movement, the latter aspect being the more important and defining. For Trent, Transcendentalism was above all a religious movement that signified a return to Calvinism. He concluded that “[e]ven the author of The Freedom of the Will had been a poet-mystic” (1903: 303). That same year, George Woodberry described Emerson’s writings as the culmination of the puritans’ search for God: “Emerson was their gift at the great altar of man” (1903: 92).

In America’s Coming-of-Age Van Wyck Brooks famously distinguished two currents in the American mind: the “current of Transcendentalism” originating in the more pious side of Puritanism and still evident in the “final unreality” of contemporary American culture, and the “current of catchpenny opportunism,” already present in the practical bend of the puritans but “becoming a philosophy” in Franklin and resulting in modern-day (equally unreal) business life (1915: 84). Both the “progressive” and the more “conservative” factions in literary studies seem to have called on these two currents. While Brooks at the time represented the former, Stuart Sherman actively campaigned for the latter. In his Americans, he tried to save Emerson for posterity by claiming that the author transcended both “the hard and merely practical genius of the Yankee” and “the narrow and inflexible righteousness of the merely traditional Puritan” (1923: 74).
Emerson thus became the “destined and appropriate counsellor” of America, since he represented “the vital force of their [the two strains in America: that of Franklin and Edwards] great moral traditions.” At the same time, he emancipated them “from the ‘dead hand,’ the cramping and lifeless part of their past.”

This makes it sufficiently clear that Miller’s double genealogy was already firmly ingrained in academic discourse when “Jonathan Edwards to Emerson” appeared in 1940. Ultimate proof of this, perhaps, is that the link was obvious even to Miller’s immediate opponents, the social historians. When he wrote his essay, Miller in all probability had his knife into Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought*. Parrington’s “main currents” were, on the one hand, that of “liberalism” (but not the kind that Miller propagates) represented by Roger Williams, Franklin, and Jefferson, and, on the other hand, that of “Puritanism,” running through John Cotton, Edwards and Alexander Hamilton (1927a: vi). Not only did Parrington differentiate between these opposing tendencies in American culture, he also explicitly drew a connection between Edwards, the puritan mystic, and the romantics: “as the expounder of philosophic idealism [Edwards] was looking forward to Emerson” (156). Parrington had probably received this conclusion without much flourish of trumpets from Barrett Wendell, his tutor at Harvard for whom “[t]he real distinction between the Puritan idealists and the Transcendental idealists of the nineteenth century proves little more than that these discarded all dogmatic limit” (1900: 293-294).

Somewhere between his stay in England (where he encountered socialism) and his move to the West Coast (far away from the intellectual centers of the North-East), Parrington must have reinterpreted Wendell’s “little more” as “little less.” In his *Main Currents*, he stressed that Edwards had failed to fulfill his youthful promise to become a “transcendental emancipator” (1927a: 165). Edwards, though a potential Emerson, presented a tragic and anachronistic figure, who for Parrington had merely quickened the demise of Calvinism in favor of Franklin’s liberal philosophy, that of the unpretentious commoner. Parrington reinforced his position in the academy vis-à-vis Harvard orthodoxy by placing Edwards not at the beginning but at the (dead) end of a literary lineage, which made him the epitome of everything that appeared backward in American society. Interestingly, Parrington tried to save Emerson from the grip of Puritanism by linking him to Jefferson: “they were both romantics and their idealism was only a different expression of a common spirit” (Parrington 1927b: 383). In this way, Emerson was coupled to the vital current in American thought and divorced from the influence of puritan orthodoxy.
Although both Parrington and Miller recognized the continuities between Puritanism and Transcendentalism, there was a strong institutional incentive for the former to downplay it, and for the latter to draw our attention to it. For Parrington, Edwards’s theology was diametrically opposed to the common experience of eighteenth century America. For Miller, on the other hand, it rather signified a return to that common experience in a time when the spiritual values of the founding fathers were increasingly becoming obsolete. What, in each case, counts as “common” is for the most part determined by the institutions in which the viewpoints of both scholars were articulated. If, therefore, Miller’s taxonomy has stayed the course, this may be because he managed to turn Jonathan Edwards into common property by highlighting those features that make the author both outstanding and representative.

That the invocation of Edwards as an important American author (rather than a theologian or metaphysician) legitimates specific institutional formations is, I think, sufficiently clear. Apart from that, Edwards as a pivotal figure between the puritans and the Transcendentalists also provides the discipline of American literary history with a principle of coherence, a way of spreading the burden of remembering. Like Franklin, Edwards stands for a specific tendency in the eighteenth century. Most importantly, perhaps, by stressing the spiritual kinship between Edwards and Emerson, Miller has drawn attention to the “native” roots of Transcendentalism. In this way, he has successfully contributed to the creation of a national literary tradition (one that extends further back than Parrington’s, who had to rely on the French Physiocrats to justify an American brand of liberalism). Miller’s genealogy again made Transcendentalism into a major “American” movement rather than the product of an archaic and conservative caste society. But this was only possible because the institutional groundwork for the taxonomy was already established.

— The Dickinson Myth

The 2005 spring issue of *The Emily Dickinson Journal* contains an article by Amanda Gailey on “How Anthologists Made Dickinson a Tolerable American Woman Writer,” in which she argues how American literature anthologies published between 1897 (following the first posthumous collection of Dickinson’s poetry) and 1955 (when Johnson’s authoritative variorum edition appeared) have systematically projected a false image of Dickinson as a reclusive and eccentric poetic genius invariably dressed in white. Gailey locates the roots of this misrepresentation in a male-domi-
nated society increasingly put on the defensive by the growing autonomy of women.

This naturalized type – the feminized private explorer – was arguably a response, intentional or not, to fears that hung on through the early century of the New Woman, whose characteristics are countered in these anthological caricatures of Dickinson. (2005: 65)

The paradoxical public image of Dickinson as a confined explorer thus provided a “tolerable” counterpart to the modern woman claiming her right to dress, talk and act like men, a right that could no longer be denied her through inherited mechanisms of repression.

Looked at this way, Gailey’s case is highly compelling. However, Gailey does not just present the Dickinson myth as a product of fears about the emancipation of women. In her opinion, the frequent inclusion of Dickinson in early anthologies also served to keep other women authors out, especially those who conformed less easily to the private explorer image. In this way, the myth “helped to check early feminist forces in the academy and to serve the conservative impulse to domesticate educated women” (67). From this perspective, then, the patriarchal social order that provides the immediate context for the early, erroneous reception of Dickinson at the same time motivates the misrepresentations of the poet’s public image. This explanatory move allows Gailey to account not just for the origin of the Dickinson myth but for its remarkable persistence as well, a phenomenon that is related to two further factors: a “prevalent sloppiness in the editing of anthologies” and the “increasing disdain for historicizing poetry, a critical move championed by critics such as T. S. Eliot” (74).

I will focus on these two additional reasons for the dissemination of the myth first, and then return to the enveloping cause, i.e. that of a patriarchal society in need of justification. The case of hack scholarship is the weakest. As Hobsbawm and Ranger have stressed, repetition constitutes a crucial element in the “invention” of traditions. From this perspective, Gailey is definitely right when she claims that anthologies can be regarded as devices for the inculcation of the Dickinson myth in schoolchildren. However, although the profitability of textbooks may partly explain why the myth acquired such wide currency, it cannot account for why it took the shape it did. Moreover, it should be noted that the reason why so many textbooks appear so much alike is precisely because they react to each other. Thus, it does not suffice to state that early anthologists of American literature were just cribbing one another to make easy money on the text-
book market, and that this is the reason why Dickinson has been so pain-
fully misunderstood. At least, this explanation does not take us very far in
accounting for the success of the distortion.

As a second explanation for the lack of interest in the “real”
Dickinson, apart from editorial sloppiness, Gailey enlists the ahistorical
method of many early anthologies of American literature, which she
associates with the aesthetic doctrines of the New Criticism. This seems sur-
prising at first, given that the New Critics have often been credited for
(re-) discovering Dickinson as a “modern” poet. If anything, their formalist
principles were designed to pierce through the biographical criticism of
the foregoing generation, in Dickinson’s case the easy mystifications of
Martha Bianchi and others. Gailey’s point, though, is that the formal-
ist anthologies – such as Frederick Houk Law’s The Stream of English
Poetry (1931) – displayed an “ambivalent historicity,” which means that
they only embraced formalist doctrines in principle but not in fact (78).
In other words, the apparent universalism of these textbooks was a way
of justifying the immured explorer image of Dickinson in the name of its
correction. Even while rejecting biographical information as the basis of
sound criticism, the New Critical anthologies thus relied on unexamined
myths about Dickinson’s personal life.

Citing Alan C. Golding, Gailey notes that since the middle of the
nineteenth century anthologies of American literature have resisted contex-
tualization, but she adds that the New Criticism has considerably strength-
ened this tendency by imposing a false sense of scientific objectivity. Only fairly recently, Gailey argues, anthologies such as the Norton Anthol-
ogy of American Literature have begun responding to the long felt need for
better historical scholarship by selecting more and longer pieces, includ-
ing some of Dickinson’s letters. In an academic climate that puts a lot
of emphasis on historical contextualization, Gailey’s argument about the
false universalism of the New Critics strikes a familiar chord. Indeed, it
seems so self-evident that she can advance her claim without discussing
their work in detail. But is it really true that the New Critics deliberately
assumed a misleading ahistoricity so as to obfuscate their subjective, male-
centered poetics? More importantly, still, did they actually perpetuate the
passive explorer stereotype of Emily Dickinson?

As it appears, Gailey’s argument is neither entirely right nor entirely
wrong. She deals with the tradition of Dickinson scholarship selectively,
gearing it to specific institutional needs. We do not have to get embroiled
in Dickinson studies to bring this out. Consider Richard B. Sewall’s 1963
Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays. Except for Conrad
Aiken’s seminal 1924 essay in The Dial, this book contains no pieces
published before 1930, an exclusion which Sewall justified on the ground that the pre-1930 criticism was “largely biographical” and “fragmentary” (1963: 2). Several contributors were members of the New Critical school or were closely associated with it: Tate, Winters, Blackmur, Ransom, Austin Warren, and MacLeish. Significantly, about two-thirds of the essays stemmed from the post-1955 period (an excerpt from Johnson’s interpretative biography, equally published in 1955, divides the two critical periods). As we will see, the later essays are also the ones most frequently cited in critical debates from the 1970s onwards, when the New Criticism went out of fashion but also started to acquire the coherent profile it had lacked before.

These preliminary observations already render Gailey’s decision to restrict her research to the period before 1955 problematic, and thus partly undermine the validity of her claim about the role of the New Critics in the persistence of the Dickinson myth. The centrality of Johnson’s 1955 edition in Sewall’s collection seems to be a clear indication of the strong need at the time for an original text to establish a kind of basal consensus onto which critical disputes could be anchored. In the decades following 1955, problems relating to the chronology of the poems, their authenticity, the (absent) titles, the use of punctuation marks (Dickinson’s famous dashes), etc. seem to have gradually dissipated.137 Apparently, Gailey’s purpose in confounding the New Critical perspective on Dickinson (as represented in contemporary anthologies) with the pre-1955 period, when the poet’s œuvre was not yet fixed, was to underwrite the lack of historical vision that she attributes to that doctrine. At the same time, it allowed her to discard the important role of the New Critics in the canonization of the poet since the year 1955.

Let us look in more detail at two essays included in Sewall’s collection, one from the earlier and one from the later (post-1955) period, namely Tate’s “Emily Dickinson” (1932) and John Crowe Ransom’s “Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored” (1956). A comparison of these chapters will bring out certain continuities that Gailey’s essay glosses over. Beforehand, I wish to stress the diversity of critical viewpoints united in Sewall’s collection and the futility of grouping them together under one heading. At this time, the (capitalized) “New Criticism” had not yet coalesced into the monolithic ideology with which it came to be associated only later. In his introduction, Sewall took issue with some contributors (notably Blackmur, Ransom, and Winters) and objected to the continuing tendency to condescend to Dickinson. If this confirms Gailey’s argument about the persistence of the image of the childlike genius, it is equally indicative of a desire
to burst through the myth even before feminist critics started to question the false objectivity of the New Critics.

Tate’s essay articulates an outspoken refusal to interpret Dickinson’s poetry in terms of her personal life. Echoing Aiken, he claimed that the poet’s reclusion could not be taken as a sign of renunciation or passivity, but was a “deliberate and conscious” rejection of the age in which she lived (19). Tate thus in no way endorsed the stereotype of the passive explorer. Rather than as a docile spinster disappointed in love, Dickinson here appears as a rebellious poet who intentionally withdrew from life. However, for Tate this did not therefore mean that she was totally disconnected from the world. On the contrary, Dickinson belonged to her time through the “unconscious discipline” of her art (25). In other words, precisely by (consciously) rebelling against it, Dickinson (unconsciously) acted out the discrepancies of her age and thus gave voice to its deepest aspirations. “The poet may hate his age ... but this world is always there as the background to what he has to say” (25). Far from locating Dickinson in a timeless void, therefore, Tate situated her work in relation to a specific historical moment.

Tate was not only reacting against the biographical commentaries of Dickinson’s earliest exegetes. More or less directly, he was also opposing the Marxist critics of his time, who thought that great poetry had to be revolutionary but who (at least, in Tate’s opinion) failed to consider in what ways it relates to the culture from which it springs. Implicitly drawing on T. S. Eliot’s views on tradition, Tate argued that Dickinson’s work displayed the “perfect literary situation,” by which he meant a point in time when a homogeneous culture starts to dissolve. Tate was convinced that Dickinson had lived during such a period break, as she witnessed the transformation of New England from a puritan theocracy into a province of an eclectic, industrial nation (here, Tate’s agrarian leanings become apparent). Dickinson’s greatness resided in the fact that she captured this “perfect literary situation” without resorting to didacticism or empty abstractions. Unlike Emerson or Hawthorne, Dickinson exhibited a continual tension between abstractions and sensations, which made her poetry at once deeply implicated in her culture and still wholly individual.

It thus appears that Tate’s essay neither projects a clichéd image of Dickinson as a docile spinster nor irresponsibly dislodges her from her own time and place. One may well ask, then, why Gailey faults the New Critics for the dissemination of the Dickinson myth. One reason can be found in the fact that, when discussing the general properties of “the” great poet, Tate was talking about a “he.” In a sense, this already brings us back to Gailey’s first explanation of the myth, or the hypothesis that the image of the homebound poetic genius presented a projection of a male-centered
society. It can hardly be denied that in Tate’s framework Dickinson’s womanhood was largely irrelevant to her poetry. Tate situated her in a genealogy running from Edwards and Cotton Mather to Henry James, with whom she shared a heroic but tragic inclination to withdraw from the world. He further links her to John Donne who, in spite of being a very different poet, equally lived at a juncture (the dissolution of the medieval system), which would explain their shared desire for personal (rather than religious) revelation. From Donne, of course, it is only a small step to Eliot and the New Critics.  

Gailey’s reason for targeting the New Critics may thus have less to do with their so-called ahistoricity than with the fact that they claimed Dickinson as one of theirs. Since the seventies, feminists have placed Dickinson in entirely different genealogies. In Naked and Fiery Forms, for example, Susanne Juhasz located Dickinson at the source of a “new tradition” of American women poets (including Moore, Plath, Sexton, Levertoff, Brooks, Rich, and Giovanni). What, for Juhasz, united these poets was the fact that they shared an often painful awareness of the contradictions involved in being both a poet and a woman, or what Juhasz calls the “double bind” of the woman poet: “Traditionally, the poet is a man, and ‘poetry’ is the poems that men write” (1978: 1). Similar things have been said about the role of the critic too. Gailey’s remarks about the New Critics therefore have to be situated within an ongoing feminist project to claim Dickinson as a leading female poet.

It is from within such a reconstructive framework that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic have strongly criticized John Crowe Ransom for misrepresenting Dickinson as a “gentle spinster,” whose mysterious “romance” with an unreachable lover allowed her to “fulfill herself like any other woman” (Ransom 1963: 97; Gilbert & Gubar 1979: 594). In his “Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored,” Ransom depicted Dickinson as a homely figure whose sole inspiration was the hymnbook. In reaction to this, Gilbert and Gubar present her as “the latest and most consciously radical” in a succession of nineteenth century Anglo-American women writers including the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, and George Eliot (585). Dickinson’s radicalism, for Gilbert and Gubar, resides in her ambivalent enactment of fantasies of renunciation and rebellion that other women authors expressed indirectly in their gothic romances. Rather than childish vanity, her posing would have been a deliberate effort at resolving the constraints inherent in being a woman artist in a male-dominated society.

It is not my intention to counter Gilbert and Gubar’s compelling critique of Ransom, which would merely lead into another reconstructive pro-
gram instead of explaining the underlying dynamic. If we take a closer look at Ransom’s essay, however, it appears that it already highlights certain gothic elements in Dickinson’s work. Ransom makes a crucial distinction between Dickinson the “actual person” and her “literary personality” (97). The former was indeed a “spinster” who in her own lifetime could not but be regarded as an “unusually ineffective instance of the weaker sex,” given her reclusion, the fact that nobody knew about her poetry, as well as “man’s complacent image of woman” at the time (98). In her poems, by contrast, Dickinson put on a “mask” allowing her to transform her apparently uneventful life into a “heroic history,” just as her contemporary Whitman had projected an image of masculinity antithetical to his real life.

In other words, Ransom by no means disposes of Dickinson’s poetic self-dramatization as a mere eccentricity, but rather sees it as a central feature of her art, which allowed her to transcend her “gentle” natural character. Despite its somewhat patronizing tone, one cannot say that Ransom’s essay naively subscribes to the stereotype of Dickinson the otherworldly recluse. The difference is that for Gilbert and Gubar Dickinson’s posing is fundamentally different from Whitman’s, since in her case artistic self-assertion paradoxically takes the form of an eventually disastrous self-effacement, which is intimately linked to her identity as a woman. The opposition between man and woman – or, as they put it, “Somebody” and “Nobody” – articulates the central fault line of Gilbert and Gubar’s study. It is the cognitive device that justifies their genealogy of women writers. As the feminist paradigm gets institutionalized, everything is gradually realigned in terms of the distinction that functions as the basic structure of that paradigm.

Christopher Benfey has shown that feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar, in spite of their claims to the contrary, principally agree with the New Critics about Dickinson’s rebellion against society as well as about her literary personae as a key to that rebellion (2002: 46). Where the two parties do differ is in their interpretation of what Dickinson rebelled against. Whereas for critics such as Tate and Ransom Dickinson subverted the values of the Gilded Age, Gilbert and Gubar claim that she opposed patriarchal society as such (including the agrarian society that Tate and Ransom construct as a corrective to the modern, industrial order). I think this discrepancy reveals two things about the workings of institutions in literary history. First, it shows that Dickinson’s priority is functional for the accreditation of critical schools and the allocation of roles in an academic system based on equal worth. Second, the opposing viewpoints of New Critics and feminists also reveal the strong “concentration of affect” in Dickinson studies.
It is this affective component that leads Gailey and others to block out continuities between their own perspective on the author and the “myths” spread by other critics. Every critical school or doctrine produces its own myths. Feminist critics have replaced the private explorer image with that of Dickinson the sexual rebel, which has generated interesting new approaches to her complex poetry. The point to note, however, is not just that an author such as Dickinson is called in to legitimate specific social groupings, but rather that she can only fulfill this legitimating function because she is represented as unrepresentable. Founding figures do not just embody certain ideals, they at the same time spread suspicion as to the extent to which a given order succeeds in living up to these ideals. Thus, taking issue with the “phallocentric” approach of Tate, Blackmur, and Ransom, Juhasz urges us to think “not about what [Dickinson] did, but about what she did not do” (1978: 11). Here, Dickinson appears less as a representative figure actively promoting the values central to society (such as self-reliance) than as a martyr, whose “sumptuous destitution” anticipates a different kind of order. Such an order manifests itself in a paradoxical way, by opposing its own established doctrines.

— How Dickinson Became an Intolerable Woman Author

Does Gailey eventually answer the question as to how early anthologies of American literature turned Dickinson into a “tolerable” woman poet? If, as Gailey insists, Dickinson’s work needs to be contextualized (the question is of course which context is most fitting), the scholarly reception of that work deserves to be put into perspective too. If critics like Tate and Ransom have not actively questioned the confined explorer myth, they have not slavishly furthered it either. Obviously, Gailey’s essay is less concerned with New Critical ideas than with how these ideas have percolated into school manuals to offer a pseudo-scientific justification for the imposition of a male-centered valuation order during the first half of the twentieth century. However, she never really broaches the problem as to how patriarchal values got institutionalized into practices, or how effective the anthologies were in generalizing these practices. It yet remains to be shown to what degree the Dickinson myth was actually instrumental in the domestication of women.

What seems clear from the above is that this myth is not readily reducible to a mere instrument for symbolically subjecting women, because the malefactors, so to speak, cannot be pinpointed that easily. If the New Critics (as well as some of the anthologies infected by their ideas) have spread certain misconceptions about Dickinson, which they undoubtedly
did, they also seem to have undone some of them, if only by virtue of their disagreements. But even if we grant that the Dickinson myth has in some ways proved socially “useful” for the U.S. or particular social groups in that society, does this also mean that it exists because of this? When asking why the public image of Dickinson has been distorted, we should perhaps also ask what comes in place of the distortion once we have dispelled it and to what degree the distortion has itself been subjected to distortion, i.e. how certain misinterpretations have been exaggerated or simplified to bring out the originality of a new (mis-)interpretation. Instead of looking for the causes of the myth, therefore, it may be more fruitful to ask why everybody seems to agree that Dickinson has been misrepresented. Without the unshakable conviction that the author has been misunderstood (and the sense of duty that comes with it), the New Critics would never have felt the need to reject the “fragmentary” speculations of Dickinson’s early biographers. Similarly, feminist critics like Gilbert and Gubar would never have applied themselves to blaming the New Critics for disarming Dickinson’s poetry by representing her as a “gentle” little girl.

One obligation that Dickinson studies has towards itself as an institution (in the form of critical disputes, scholarly editions, anthologies, conferences, journals, societies, a “Dickinson Room” in the Houghton Library, etc.) is to keep itself going. To achieve this, Dickinson needs to appear as an intolerable author. Seeing Dickinson as fundamentally unrepresentable creates a degree of coherence in past interpretations, because none of them is believed to truly capture the complexity of the author’s oeuvre. Since all of them are partial, they have at least one thing in common. On the other hand, insistently representing Dickinson as a misrepresented author is also a way of justifying one’s own interpretation by suggesting that it responds to an urgent need to “restore” the poet to her rightful place (while at the same time muffling the fact that earlier interpretations sprang from a similar desire to finally put things straight).

The rationale behind these restorations, however, is not to come closer to the actual historical context hidden behind the mystifications (at least, this is not what drives Dickinson scholarship as an institution), but to realign the facts with governing classificatory styles. As Jan Assmann has put it, traditions can only be exchanged for other traditions (1992: 42). Something similar can be said about the myths surrounding classic authors. Dickinson’s famous white dress has been variously associated with madness, marriage, death, cloistral life, resistance to patriarchy, the Pre-Raphaelites, etc. Another “fact,” the dog Carlo, which Dickinson described in one of her letters to Higginson as her only true companion, seems to have gradually disappeared from view, perhaps because it ill fits the image of
Dickinson as a “radical” woman author. Still other elements – Dickinson would have been fond of horse riding – seem to contradict both the passive image of the “Amherst Moth” and the more militant one of “Judith Shakespeare.” My larger thesis, therefore, is that the semantics gravitating around the figure of Dickinson typically take the form of a self-correcting mistake. Literary history does not proceed continuously (building on known facts), but by inversion: obstacles to understanding are continually transformed into clues for understanding, which then generates further complications. Most debates in Dickinson studies revolve around recurrent themes, such as her lover(s), the father figure, her reading, her eccentricities, etc. Let me focus on one such theme, namely Dickinson’s style.

In a famous letter to Dickinson, T. W. Higginson called the style of the poems she had sent him “spasmodic” and “uncontrolled” (Johnson 1958: 409). In her response, Dickinson half-mockingly cited these reservations (she actually puts them between brackets), which on some level already turned them into badges of honor. Ever since the correspondence between Dickinson and her (supposedly) uncomprehending “Preceptor” came out, Higginson’s words have been repeated time and again (often verbatim) as a sort of disclaimer to underscore how much she has been wronged and how urgently she needs to be rehabilitated. At the same time, the continued allusions to Higginson’s remark seem to function as a means for unburdening Dickinson studies from having to engage directly the vast body of scholarship that has sprung up ever since it was uttered, now almost one and a half centuries ago. Drawing on Higginson’s words in this way serves to justify yet another interpretation of Dickinson’s style, which is then given a chance to correct Higginson’s (as it appears, incorrigible) “mistake.”

In what ways have literary histories attempted to make sense of Dickinson’s formal irregularities? In the first Cambridge History, Norman Foerster noted Dickinson’s “defective sense of form,” despite her undeniable originality as a poet and her rather large following (Trent 1921: 32). He linked her style to the Transcendentalists, and through them, to the puritan tradition, of which she represented the “last pale Indian-summer flower.” Although she “was not a spontaneous singer,” her poetry had an “artless” spontaneity that gave her an “inconspicuous but secure” place in American literature (34). Conrad Aiken, in the 1924 essay mentioned above, thought that Dickinson’s “disregard for accepted forms or regularities was incorrigible” (1963: 15). In 1938, Yvor Winters argued along similar lines that “probably no poet of comparable reputation has been guilty of so much unpardonable writing” (Sewall: 28). Around the same time, Ludwig Lewisohn said that the “very discords” and the “fragmentariness” of Dickinson’s verses finally had to be taken at face value (1939: 358).
Both Winters and Lewisohn were responding to a temporary upsurge of Dickinson’s popularity instigated by the release of previously unpublished poems and letters. Ten years later, Stanley Williams argued in the Spiller history that Dickinson’s fame had “passed far beyond the applause of a cult into established acceptance” (Spiller 1949: 907). Although it undoubtedly had its faults, Williams thought that the “spasmodic quality” of Dickinson’s poetry, rather than an aberration of a half crazy mind, had to be seen as a reflection of the “incongruities and frustrations of human experience” (911). Undoubtedly, these “incongruities and frustrations” sprang from Dickinson’s personal life (which nevertheless remained a mystery); but they also had to do with larger changes (the war, industry, and science) that had affected American society during her lifetime. Even if, given her relative isolation, she was not entirely conscious of the impact of all this, and although she remained tied to conventional forms (unlike Whitman), her irregular verses were nevertheless symptoms of the new America that started to manifest itself at the time of the Civil War.

Rather than as a late Puritan, Williams thus portrayed Dickinson as a precursor of the “new flowering” of American literature that set in somewhere around the 1920s. The “spasmodic” character of her poetry was transformed from a defect into a specifically modern “quality” that anticipated the “metaphysical strain in the verse of today” (916). At the same time, however, Williams rooted Dickinson firmly in the New England tradition by juxtaposing her to Sidney Lanier, whom he counted as her Southern counterpart. Both poets were products of the “sectional” (rather than the “continental”) nation, but in their formal experiments they already signalled the changes to come (although Williams found Lanier’s style much less adventurous than Dickinson’s). Dickinson’s peculiar poetic style was thus both a manifestation of her regional identity and a way of transcending the constraints of her cultural background in the direction of a truly “modern” sensibility.

Starting out as a latter-day Puritan, Dickinson has gradually moved up the valuation order to become a pivotal figure between the New England tradition and the modernists. Those who stressed her New England roots have generally attributed her stylistic irregularities to the limitations of her milieu. Richard Chase thought that the “spasmodic and unstable emotional texture” of her verses revealed the monotony and isolation of the New England scene (1951: 24). Echoing some of the opinions mentioned above, he concluded that “[n]o great poet has written so much bad verse as Emily Dickinson” (203). For those who saw Dickinson more as a forerunner of the formal innovators of the twentieth century, her so-called eccentricities signalled the extent to which she had broken free from her cultural back-
ground. In *The Literature of the American People*, Arthur Hobson Quinn argued that Dickinson’s “spasmodic leaps” of perception were not just the product of an “undisciplined child” but revealed a “purposed defiance” of formal regularities (1951: 734).

In time, the forward-looking Dickinson has won out. In 1965, Albert J. Gelpi claimed that Dickinson “sought to speak the uniqueness of her experience in a personal tongue by reconstituting and revitalizing – at the risk of eccentricity – the basic verbal unit” (1965: 147). According to Gelpi, this deliberate, anti-romantic aesthetic proved her kinship to such later poets as Pound, Williams, Moore, and Cummings. Gelpi further distinguished between a “Dionysian” and an “Apollonian” strain in American poetry. While the former “derived palely from Emerson and descended lustily through Whitman to Carl Sandburg and Jeffers, and more recently to Jack Kerouac and Brother Antoninus,” the latter proceeded “from Edward Taylor through [Dickinson] to Eliot, Stevens, Frost, and Marianne Moore, and thence to Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop” (146). By characterizing Dickinson as an Apollonian rather than a Dionysian poet, Gelpi disaffiliated Dickinson from Emerson, with whom most critics had associated her, and turned her from a belated Transcendentalist into a precursor of the moderns.

Not much later, Ruth Miller argued that Dickinson had forged a “unique style, a poetic manner altogether at home in the twentieth century” (1968: 4). For David Porter, Dickinson’s “modern idiom” not only announced the American modernists, but also pointed to “certain kinds of postmodernist poems that are being written today” (1981: 7). Marshall Walker claimed that Dickinson’s “highly individual use of imagery, off-rhyme and unconventional syntax give a foretaste of modernist emphases on impersonality and language” (1983: 116). Most recently, Molly McQuade has suggested that Dickinson wrote “as if to bid farewell to the Victorians and urge on the modernists” (2004: 373). More examples could be given, but I think the trend is sufficiently clear. During the last half century, Chase’s assertion that “perhaps two thirds” of Dickinson’s work is substandard has come under serious attack (1951: 203). Similarly, Ransom’s claim that no more than “one out of seventeen” of her poems are destined to become “public property” is approached with very deep suspicion (1963: 89).

How can we explain Dickinson’s metamorphosis from a late “Indian summer flower” of Puritanism into a proto(post-)modernist? We may point the finger at the early critics and stress how deluded they were. But, if this kind of reaction can be legitimate, it also partly obscures the extent to which it is itself responsible for producing precisely that against which it
is a reaction. In other words, the canonization of Dickinson as an important American author requires that every interpretation of her oeuvre will have to remain, at least in part, a misinterpretation. The resulting mistakes or myths paradoxically reinforce Dickinson’s immaculacy by boosting the debate about the true import of her poems. As it appears, Dickinson’s “spasmodic” style has been retroactively sanctioned by the body of criticism that it has engendered. By making Dickinson into a precursor of the modernists, a feminist avant la lettre, an early postmodernist, or what not, the literary institution continually predicts itself.

— The (Not So) Personal Voice: The Confessional Poets

As Sigrid Weigel has argued, “when a genealogy has developed, then comes the question as to its origins” (2002: 266). Genealogies do not so much solve the problem of origins as call it into existence. In other words, without genealogies, we would not have to worry about where they begin. In what follows, I will focus on the emergence of the so-called confessional school in American poetry. In a first section I will trace out the problems inherent in this designation. Who belongs to this school? What kinds of criteria determine its membership? How has this particular classification developed? Who are the leaders and who are the disciples? Are there significant precursors? Is there such a thing as a “confessional” poetic mode or style, and if so, how can we define it? I will then try to develop a functional explanation of the persistence of the label “confessional,” despite the fact that it apparently fails to contain the above questions. In the final section, I will zoom in on the status of Robert Lowell as the professed leader of the confessional school.

When tracing the origins of the confessional school, it appears that there has never really been a clear understanding as to what exactly makes a poet or poem “confessional.” Instead, we merely encounter a generalized dissatisfaction or discomfiture about the label, a sort of negative consensus. M. L. Rosenthal, who is usually credited for having introduced the designation “confessional” in an often-cited review of Lowell’s Life Studies for a September 1959 issue of the Nation, later argued in his study on The New Poets that “it was a term both helpful and rather limited” (1967: 25). He further noted that “possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage.” This shows that, already in 1967, the term “confessional” had become sufficiently institutionalized to call it into question. By that time, Lowell had abandoned the “confessional” style of his Life Studies and had entered his so-called “public” phase, while younger poets like Frank O’Hara had started to openly attack what they
perceived as the exaggerated emotionalism of the confessionals.\textsuperscript{156} These younger poets initiated a return to a more impersonal poetic style that in their opinion was better attuned to urban life.

Yet, Rosenthal’s doubts about the usefulness of the term “confessional” did not lead him to dismiss it entirely. Rather, he tried to specify what set the truly “confessional” poems apart from the frauds. In a paradoxical move, he argued that the really “confessional” poem was not really confessional, but in fact highly skilled. Instead of abandoning all poetic principles, the best confessional poets insisted emphatically on form.\textsuperscript{157} Thus, Lowell’s “Skunk Hour” and Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” counted as “genuine” examples of confessional poetry, whereas Sexton’s “Music Swims Back to Me” or Snodgrass’s “The Operation” were not, because these poems failed to achieve a “fusion of the private and the culturally symbolic” (80). Lowell remained the \textit{chef d’école} thanks to his superior mastery of form, which made him the “natural heir” of the modernists, especially Eliot, Pound, and Hart Crane (141). Plath and Ginsberg at their best managed to include the cultural dimension that was less clearly present in the work of Roethke, Berryman, and Sexton.

Although the label “confessional” seems to have persisted, the canon behind it has changed a great deal. Rosenthal’s 1967 study did not yet include such poets as Snodgrass, Kumin or Wakoski, who are now considered to be important representatives of the confessional school.\textsuperscript{158} Clearly, Rosenthal’s conception of an unconfessional confessionalism was a response to the recurrent charge of critics trained in Eliotic impersonality that the work of the confessional school, as one review of Life Studies put it, was “too unique to be universalized” (Standerwick 1972: 79). But Rosenthal may also have been reacting against a widespread opinion among the younger generations that confessional poetry was merely a “transitional mode” that remained “too solipsistic and extreme” to reflect a more general postmodernist poetic sensibility (Altieri 1979: 53, 60).\textsuperscript{159} Rosenthal tried to counter this double critique from the old and the new guard by making \textit{Life Studies} an “indispensable phase” in Lowell’s own development and that of American culture as a whole (1967: 78).

Rosenthal’s universalization of the “confessional” mode may have served to disaffiliate it from an overpowering Eliotic modernism and thus free it from the charge that it represented a complacent period in American literary history that was, as Geoff Ward has formulated it, “parody-modernist rather than postmodern” (2002: 166). The retention of the label “confessional,” despite the definitional problems that it continued to engender, can from this perspective be explained in terms of the effort on the part of the poets and critics who came into their own immediately after the Second
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World War to assert their difference from the previous generation. The institutional concerns of this “middle” generation may indirectly have reinforced the conception of a “confessional school” of American poetry. This classification was naturalized through the opposition between “public” and (merely) “private” poetry, and the paradoxical notion that the universal appeal of the former depends on the extent to which it manages to link the poet’s personal life with broader social concerns.

When he coined the term “confessional,” Rosenthal could not have predicted that it would get accepted as a designation of a dominant poetic mode during the first half of the 1960s. In other words, he could not have intentionally introduced the label to promote a specific “school” of poetry, because at the time there was no such thing. The term “confessional” only acquired this significance when it started to function as a mark of both distinction and disapproval. But the fact that the institutional effects of the classification were largely unintended does not therefore mean that they went entirely unrecognized. On the contrary, Rosenthal could only proffer the notion of an unconfessional confessionalism because the “confessional” style had started to generate resistance, not just from outside the “school” but also from some of its leading representatives. When trying to set apart the true “confessionals” from the false or less representative ones, therefore, Rosenthal was clearly aware of the strategic interests involved.

In one way or another, the demand for recognition on the part of a poetic generation feeds back into the literary pedigrees that underwrite its existence. This filter-effect will normally be apparent to most members of the institution in question, even if they do not feel that what they are doing when interpreting and classifying literary texts is reducible to the politics of recognition. This distinction between intention and recognition seems to me a crucial one when it comes to understanding the inner logic of the literary institution. Most classifications are not deliberately designed for political purposes. Assuming as much, would be to commit an intentionalist fallacy. On the other hand, it is equally problematic to overestimate the degree to which scholars are fooled by institutions. An example of such an overstretched inference is the often-voiced idea that we are furthering vested interests, even in the process of dismantling them. This kind of argument is not necessarily false, but it can result in misleading half-truths that deny the possibility of institutional change.

A filter-explanation of the success of the confessional school recognizes that an institution may have beneficial consequences not strategically designed to that purpose. Yet, such an explanation also has limitations. It fails to account for the fact that those who should reap benefits from the
institutionalization of the confessional school have had so much trouble with recognizing the label. Even those most closely associated with the “confessional” style have approached the term as, at best, a misnomer. A complicating factor is that those perhaps most active in promoting the confessinals happened to be British critics like Alfred Alvarez, who in 1962 published an anthology titled *The New Poetry*, which suggested a break with the generation of Larkin and which included work by the American poets Lowell and Berryman. Later, in *The Savage God*, Alvarez identified Lowell, Berryman, Plath and Ted Hughes as the leading exponents of post-Eliotic “Extremist” art concerned with an often fatal exploration of the poet’s psyche (1972: 279). This involvement of English critics should come as no surprise, especially given Plath’s, and later also Lowell’s removal to Great Britain. Would it be plausible, then, to attribute the ambiguous standpoint of American critics regarding the usefulness of the term “confessional” to a dispute with some of their British colleagues over inheritance rights?

The body of scholarship on confessional poetry that has sprung up since the 1970s reveals that the American critics do not just quarrel with their English counterparts, but also among themselves. In an influential article titled “Realism and the Confessional Mode of Robert Lowell,” Marjorie Perloff took issue with Rosenthal and some other critics in his wake, who would have “completely misunderstood” the nature of the “confessional” poem by treating it “as confession rather than as poetry” (1970: 470, 471). According to Perloff, the best “confessional” poets, in particular the Lowell of *Life Studies*, were not just driven by a romantic desire to break free from the symbolist mode of Eliot and the New Critics; what set Lowell apart from the work of his “less accomplished disciples” (Anne Sexton, for instance), who shared his penchant for “titillating confessional content” but not his artistic genius, was his “superb manipulation of the realistic convention” (476).

The issue here is not whether or not Perloff is right in criticizing Rosenthal by pointing out the “realistic” structure of Lowell’s “confessional” poetry; what is of interest, rather, is that she formulates her critique by copying the latter’s paradoxical ideal of a universal confessionalism, or the assumption that what makes a “confessional poem” confessional is that it is not merely confessional but in fact highly crafted. The same logic seems to underlie Louis Simpson’s *Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell*, which came out a couple of years later. Simpson singled out the authors mentioned in the title because, for him, they represented an “American movement” in poetry, which he traced back to the Imagists: “those who have given American poetry a character,
who have made it possible to speak of American as distinct from English poetry, have followed in the steps of the Imagists” (1978: xi).\textsuperscript{164}

However, the idea of a golden age only makes sense when it is interrupted by a period of decline, which then serves to highlight the greatness of that golden age. In Simpson’s narrative, the strong influence of the later Auden in the U.S. after the Second World War accounts for the fact that “the stream of experiment that had begun with the Imagist poets (...) receded into the background” (xii). It would take Dylan Thomas to finally remove the “Audenesque façade” and to initiate a new period of experimentation, of which Ginsberg, Plath, and Lowell were the most important exponents. Simpson thus projected the poets of the “confessional school” as the culmination of a characteristically “American” tradition in poetry. Only, here, the label “confessional” was associated with English rather than American poetry. In the American context, Simpson argued, the term as Rosenthal had introduced it “can mean very little – in fact, is misleading” (120). It is no coincidence that the only American poet who for Simpson conformed to the label was Sexton, whom Rosenthal had identified as one of the lesser members of the movement.

“The confessional writer,” Simpson concluded, “is at all times aware of the profit to be made from exhibiting his soul” (169). By contrast, what he called the “personal voice” in the work of among others Ginsberg, Plath, and Lowell, was not merely a representation of life but the transformation of personal experiences into an often highly experimental art. Simpson’s position was something like the inverse of Rosenthal’s. Neither his canon nor his poetics departed dramatically from that of earlier exegetes. Where he did differ was in his very negative evaluation of the designation “confessional” and its association with English (Auden-inspired) poetic traditions. But, even here, his perspective was in a sense an extension of earlier doubts about the validity of the term.

The paradoxical idea that less confessionalism equals more confessionalism is equally evident in Charles Molesworth’s \textit{The Fierce Embrace}. This work discussed Lowell and Ginsberg in a separate chapter immediately preceding that on “confessional poetry” in order to accentuate that both these poets had “advanced beyond the psychological mire of ‘confessionalism’” (1979: 41). Here, also, it seems that the negative application of the term “confessional” served not so much to oust the classification altogether, but to separate the sheep from the goats. The goats, in this case, were the actual “confessionals” Plath, Sexton, Snodgrass, and Berryman. Molesworth further claimed that the “confessional” vogue, although its idiom had survived in the surrealist parables of contemporary poets, was largely over. The poets identified with this mode (which Lowell and
Ginsberg had managed to transcend) formed a sort of lost generation, which had “neither the energy to accept the terms of its forebears nor the determination to reject them in favor of a newer, more truly public discourse” (76).

That the public/private paradox has persisted in more recent criticism is apparent in William Doreski’s *The Modern Voice in American Poetry*, which discusses the work of Lowell in conjunction with that of established modernists like Frost, Stevens, Williams, Moore, Pound, and Eliot. Doreski faults Harold Bloom, who in a 1987 essay collection identified Lowell’s rhetorical stance in *Life Studies* as a “trope of vulnerability” (1995: 137). Bloom saw this trope as a washed-out version of Williams’s poetics and a weak reaction against former idols Tate and Eliot, which had given rise to a “confessional” school of poetry that, despite its temporary fame, now turned out “period pieces” rather than truly lasting work.165 In response to Bloom, Doreski tries to prove that Lowell’s “trope of vulnerability (...) remains a central rhetorical motif in contemporary poetry” by indicating how it has strongly influenced three poets at the high-point of their careers, John Ashbery, A. R. Ammons, and Louise Glück (138).

Doreski stresses Lowell’s originality by turning a reputed critic’s deprecative identification of Lowell’s poetics with the “trope of vulnerability” into a mark of distinction on the one hand, and, on the other, by once more pointing out the inadequacy of the term “confessional”: “[e]ven M. L. Rosenthal (...) has repudiated it as obviously inaccurate and sensationalist” (139). This allows Doreski to dissociate Lowell from his “sometimes rather histrionic” followers. In his readings of individual poems, however, Doreski does not actually drop the label “confessional,” but seems to use it interchangeably with Bloom’s “trope of vulnerability.” Thus, while Ammons’s “Easter Morning” is “as confessional as anything in Lowell,” Ashbery’s vulnerability is most apparent when he “confesses to having attempted to avoid confessing” (144, 147). Doreski concludes that the “poetry of confession,” rather than being an “outmoded form of discourse,” in fact constitutes “the poetry best prepared to accept the consequences of misreading” (148). In other words, since the “confessional” poet is most liable to being misunderstood, he is paradoxically best placed to articulate the impossibility of adopting a purely confessional stance.169

My larger aim in documenting these shifts in appreciation has been to show that the “confessional school” of American poetry was not institutionalized through some ulterior design but as it were by default. The institutional pattern has paradoxically sustained itself through the critical resistance it has engendered. Few will deny that, on some level, every social group needs a renaissance of some kind to postnatally underwrite its
existence. Even if social memory is much too capricious for individuals to be able to deliberately institute a usable past, it is clear that one’s membership in a specific cultural community will condition the connectivity of communicative themes. This is a recognized effect of cultural belonging. Without therefore trivializing the importance of individual agency in the process of institution formation, I think that a functional perspective may considerably deepen such an account by making it responsive to the paradoxical nature of literary evolution. Institutions are irreducible to either the intentions of its constituent members or the hidden motivational needs of the group as a whole, although these elements are often indispensable to the explanation. What is crucial, however, is that the starting point is not some kind of initial consensus but rather a communicative deficit, which at once obstructs and fuels the debates.

For every renaissance there is a dark age. A genealogy only becomes operative when a gap appears between the founding moment and the present. Every generation necessarily remembers and forgets more or less in the same way, but each remembers different things. During the early sixties, T. S. Eliot was such a dominant presence that few were inclined to confront his work head on. Snodgrass said: “I read The Waste Land if somebody tells me to but I never tell myself to” (quoted in Perloff 1970: 473). For later poets, however, it became once again rewarding to reach back to Eliot. Importantly, this opening was only created because there was a sense that Eliot had been neglected by the foregoing generation whose “confessional” style now seemed threadbare. The reaction against Eliot’s poetic doctrines during the “Age of Lowell” can thus be seen as a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for the later revival of his oeuvre. The incentive to break free from the previous generation blinds us to what binds us to it (and there is always a connection, if only the desire to be different). Hence, the function of the “confessional school,” apart from its more overt serviceability as a vehicle for articulating the identity of a poetic generation, is the paradoxical one of establishing a basis for difference. The communicative purpose of the classification is not so much to dissociate the “confessional” poets from the previous generation, to divorce American from English poetry, or to distinguish the true members from the falsies; rather, it lies in the comparison of dissimilar things.
In the eighth and last volume of the new *Cambridge History of American Literature*, which focuses on poetry and criticism after 1940, Robert von Hallberg argues that the publication of *Life Studies* in 1959 “initiated a turn toward what has been called confessional poetry” (Bercovitch 1996: 22). The quote shows, first, the remarkable persistence of the contested term “confessional poetry” for over a quarter century, and second, the unquestioned priority of Lowell as the father of the school (although the verb phrase “has been called” already indicates that the label was applied retrospectively). If anything, this reveals literary history’s relative unconcern with historical facts. W. D. Snodgrass had published parts from *Heart’s Needle* several years before 1959, and Lowell had read the entire volume in manuscript when working on *Life Studies*. Moreover, Lowell at some point explicitly acknowledged that his reading of Snodgrass had motivated him to develop a more “confessional” poetic idiom: “He did these things before I did, though he’s younger than me and had been my student” (1987: 245).

We do not have to look hard to retrieve such a statement (in fact, it first appeared in an often-cited *Paris Review* interview). Most if not all experts on post-war American poetry are aware of the fact that, chronologically speaking, Lowell did not start off the “confessional” mode. But, even while it is explicitly acknowledged that others “did these things” before him, Lowell’s firstness has seldom actively been questioned. For instance, in the second volume of his *History of Modern Poetry*, David Perkins notes that Ginsberg “was Confessional before Lowell” (1987: 410). But this assertion in no way seems to affect Lowell’s originality as a poet (in fact, it was uttered in a chapter exclusively devoted to him). Nothing in the make-up of Perkins’s history reveals a desire to challenge the established view that Lowell was the head of a school of “confessional” poets. We could even say that this view has to be presupposed for an utterance like the above to be understood at all. Even while citing evidence to the contrary, Perkins thus in a sense reaffirms Lowell’s priority.

How can we account for this? What about those who wrote “confessional” poems before there even was such a thing? Are we dealing with what the Oulipians, referring to their literary models, ironically categorize as “plagiarisms by anticipation” (Motte 1986: 5)? Lowell’s apparent immunity from incriminating fact may suggest that there is some hidden cause at work that indirectly sustains his status as a literary founder. What makes Lowell more representative than, for instance, W. D. Snodgrass? For Rosenthal and others, Snodgrass was one of the lesser “confessional”
poets, because unlike the others he did not generalize from his personal experiences to make wider claims about the human condition. Molesworth thought that Snodgrass’s work had a “period feel” to it (see, in this regard, Bloom’s remark about the “confessional” poets as writers of “period pieces”) in that it was “too self-consciously protective of the speaker’s emotional weakness to be totally private” on the one hand, and “too engaged with a barely warded off self-pity to be instructively public” on the other hand (1979: 63).

It thus appears that Snodgrass failed to bring the dimensions of the “public” and the “private” to a fruitful synthesis and that, for this reason, he was unfit to become the leader of the “confessional school” of American poetry, even if he had in some ways anticipated Lowell’s turn away from formalist poetics. This perspective, however, is not consistent with the initial reception of Heart’s Needle, for which Snodgrass received the Pulitzer Prize in 1960, the year when Lowell was awarded the National Book Award for Life Studies. Does this mean that the early reviewers were blind to the bathetic banality of Snodgrass’s poetry, which no more than a decade later appeared so obvious? For Molesworth, the initial excitement over Heart’s Needle, “though it was a first book,” was an indication of how fed up the public had become toward the end of the fifties with “the desiccated, argumentative ironies of post-Eliot poetry” (62).

Other critics, however, may in their turn reject Molesworth’s position as the product of a peculiar 1970s academic thought style. Critical opinions do not suffice to explain Lowell’s firstness, which, as we saw, has scarcely been challenged over the years. By attributing Lowell’s status as the founder of “confessional poetry” to his superior literary merit, we end up in the kind of tautological loop that we set out to explain. Merely stating that Lowell voices a generational vision obviously begs the question. However, the very fact that Molesworth felt compelled to account for the initial flurry over Life Studies may already point to another possible explanation of Lowell’s primacy, which has less to do with the intrinsic qualities of his poetry than with the inner logic of the literary institution. As the contrastive conjunction in “though it was a first book” seems to indicate, a successful debut writer tends to awaken suspicion among literary scholars. Why should this be the case?

Whereas Snodgrass was a new face on the poetic scene in 1960, Lowell’s reputation had been established at least since the publication of his second poetry collection Lord Weary’s Castle (which earned him the Pulitzer Prize in 1947). As the story goes, Lowell started out as an over-enthusiastic disciple of Tate and Ransom (his mentors at Kenyon), only to find his true voice in the late 1950s after a period of prolonged personal
and mental troubles. In a sense, then, Lowell’s personal trajectory was emblematic of a broader evolution in modern American poetry. This effect was no doubt strengthened by the fact that he was descended from a respectable New England lineage (which, as is well known, included James Russell and Amy Lowell), but also by his own qualms with this family history. His mental instability, as translated in his poetry, could thus easily be taken as a symptom of a larger cultural predicament. Snodgrass, by contrast, could not boast of such an outstanding curriculum. At the beginning of his career, Snodgrass had no visible part in an existing tradition, and for this reason he could not be taken for a trend-breaker.

It seems illogical to consecrate a debut writer as the leader of a poetic school, when this school also includes a one-time mentor and an accomplished poet in mid-career. All this calls to mind Zuckerman and Merton’s observations on the Matthew effect in science. This is how Merton describes the phenomenon:

The Matthew effect consists of accruing of greater increments of recognition for particular scientific contributions to scientists of considerable repute and the withholding of such recognition from scientists who have not yet made their mark. (1973b: 447)

As Merton has convincingly documented, even though the nasty implications of the Matthew effect for up-and-coming researchers are usually painfully obvious, its social function in the communication system of science mostly goes unobserved. This function, according to Merton, is to “heighten the visibility of new scientific communications” (447).

Could it be that there is an invisible hand involved in the case of Lowell’s status as the initiator of confessional poetry? Can we argue that there has been an institutionally motivated misallocation of recognition, which makes that praise which should have gone to a younger poet has been bestowed on an established colleague, and that this transference of credit has served to “heighten the visibility” of the “confessional” mode in American poetry? It certainly makes sense that Lowell’s *Life Studies* has struck many observers as a clean break from New Critical poetics, because Lowell himself had been a promising exponent of that tradition. His conversion to a more personal idiom may have helped to turn “confessional poetry” into a dominant poetic mode during the early sixties and after. Surmising an invisible hand effect in the case of Lowell and the confessionals thus appears legitimate, since this would allow us to explain why Lowell has been credited as the founder of the school, even though historically speaking this does not make sense.
However, the invisible hand mechanism cannot seem to explain why, at least initially, Snodgrass did not suffer from a lack of recognition. On the contrary, his poetic career may have been smothered by excessive early praise. Rather than a dearth of recognition, there appears to have been too much of it too soon. This, at least, is how Snodgrass himself at one stage must have perceived it, as the following rather laconic statement testifies: “As soon as it becomes obvious that you could do some good work, and you receive recognition, you’ve got trouble” (quoted in Gaston 1978: 155). In this respect, then, we are not dealing with an instance of the Matthew effect as Merton described it. However, Merton notes that under certain circumstances the reputation of scientists can work against them. In such cases, the Matthew effect turns suicidal; it becomes an “idol of authority” that blocks rather than facilitates the progress of science (457). This may account for Snodgrass’s ambivalence towards his early success. A literary classic suffers by definition from a lack of recognition, since otherwise we would not keep investing in it. One way of extending the life of a literary text, therefore, is by making sure that it does not get overpraised.

Lowell once said of his great-granduncle James Russell that he had been “pedestaled for oblivion” (quoted in Axelrod 2004: 293). However, as minority communities started to assert themselves in the academy and society at large, the author of Life Studies, with his oppressive New England pedigree, seems to have undergone precisely such a fate. Not unlike T. S. Eliot a generation before, Lowell came to suffer from what Thomas Travisano in an article on Elizabeth Bishop refers to as the “Papa Haydn” syndrome (Travisano 1995: 923). As classicism gave way to romanticism, Haydn’s dominance began to work against him; likewise, from the 1970s onward, Lowell’s reputation came under increasing pressure when the confessional mode began to run out of fashion and efforts were made to get away from a conception of poetry as the exclusive province of privileged white males. In this context, Lowell was no longer enough of an outsider to be considered representative. But, even though what I have discussed above pertains to a very specific episode in American literary history, roughly between 1940 and 1960, similar mechanisms are at work in the pluralistic canons that emerged later.180

What Travisano describes as the “Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon” is a case in point. In reaction to critics like Cary Nelson, Travisano stresses – quite rightly in my opinion – that the remarkable transformation of Bishop from what John Ashbery referred to as a “writer’s writer’s writer” into a founding mother of the feminist tradition cannot be explained in terms of a simple repression and recovery scheme. For one thing, Bishop was never really “repressed.” A close friend of Lowell, she was never short of influ-
ential admirers and advocates (Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and John Ashberry, to name just a few) and, more often than not, her work received favorable, if at times patronizing, reviews. Long before she became something like a phenomenon, Bishop was the American Poet Laureate from 1949 to 1950. At the same time, and because of this, Bishop was never really “recovered.” As Travisano points out, contrary to what one now might expect (or predict), early feminist critics like Alicia Ostriker strongly objected to the impersonal and apolitical character of Bishop’s poetry as opposed to the more directly autobiographical profile of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, or Adrienne Rich.

It was Rich who, in a 1983 review of *The Complete Poems* published five years after Bishop’s death, acknowledged the poet’s “essential outsiderhood” linked to her unacknowledged lesbianism. As Rich admitted, Bishop’s reputation as an impersonal poet in the line of Marianne Moore “made her less, rather than more, available to me” (Rich 1983: 15). As long as she read Bishop’s work through the (male, heterosexual) lens of her artistic artistry, Rich was unable to appreciate the poet as part of a feminist tradition. As the troubled woman identity underneath the artistic persona became apparent, however, Bishop could be restyled from a poet who was not personal enough into one whose refusal of a purely confessional stance revealed her courageous embrace of a divided identity. Bishop could now serve as an inspiration for female and lesbian poets aiming to transcend the more blatant confessionalism that by the end of the 1960s was starting to run out of fashion. In view of the initial unease toward Bishop’s obliqueness, it is ironic that Bishop studies now abounds with autobiographical and political readings of her work, many of which, as Bonnie Costello remarks, tend to allegorize the poems’ personas into a selectively autobiographical image of “an alcoholic-asthmatic-lesbian-homeless orphan,” thus neglecting Bishop’s strong links to the modernist tradition (Costello 2004: 340).

Bishop’s extreme make-over from a “modest maiden-aunt” into a “conscious resister,” whose reticence does not so much bespeak an apolitical stance as underline a strong personal involvement in world affairs, has been accounted for in terms of deliberate efforts on the part of women writers and critics during the last half century to build a countertradition challenging existing patriarchal norms and traditions. But the Bishop case also reveals that the feminist paradigm could only claim her as an important “outsider” figure because it had itself been involved in marginalizing her. As Travisano puts it, “before feminism could contribute its momentum to the Bishop phenomenon, feminism had first to recognize and claim Elizabeth Bishop” (908). What this reveals, in my opinion, is that a
purely causal explanation of the making of an author or literary grouping or lineage fails if it does not register the paradoxical dynamic of American literary history as an autotelic process. What gets “repressed” in a regime that derives its legitimacy at least as much from the cultivation of martyrrial outsiderhood as from the remembrance of founders is not merely whatever does not fit into the dominant thought style, since being off center in a system that continually off-centers itself may not be such a bad place to be in. Rather, what tends to get repressed – which I mean in a functional sense, i.e. what has to remain latent to guarantee the survival of the established order – is the self-implicatory dynamic of canon formation.

Early success as a bar to success, rejecting praise as a way of accepting it, taking credit by giving credit: literary history abounds with such contradictions. In a sense, these are different manifestations of the basic problem of the discipline, namely the fact that recognition is only attainable when there is not enough of it. Literary histories respond to this problem of recognition by bestowing praise on misrecognized authors and texts, by constantly filling the gaps as it were. In doing so, they at the same time nourish the desire for recognition. If there is something like a Matthew effect in American literary history, therefore, its function is not primarily to “heighten the visibility” of specific groupings or schools, but rather to articulate the paradoxical togetherness of the visible and the invisible in the process of attributing literary value. Genealogies and literary canons in general can therefore not one-sidedly be reduced to devices for imposing power relations. Even while establishing valuation hierarchies, they inevitably open up the possibility of seeing things differently.