Enthusiast!
David Herd

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This book has been about the transmission of literature. It has shown various writers taking responsibility for that transmission, whether within their writing or in their cultural activism. The word for both kinds of action has been enthusiasm. Enthusiasm, it has been argued, is integral to what Modern American literature, in particular, knows; enthusiasm being, as each of the writers discussed here has one way or another understood it, the state of mind in which composition is possible. It is also integral to the circulation of literature, enthusiasm and enthusiasts having been, at various moments, crucial to the renovation and continuation of literary activity. What this implies, what a discussion of literary enthusiasm shows, is that there is inherent in literary understanding – in the way literature knows the world – what Shaftesbury called an ‘itch to impart’. Which is to say that in some sense it is inherent in the structure of literary value that there is an impulse to keep discoveries in circulation. ‘Some days,’ Schuyler wrote on 27 April 1971, ‘I have an almost irresistible urge to write.’ ‘There’s no use,’ Pound wrote,

in a strong impulse if it is all or nearly all lost in bungling transmission and technique. This obnoxious word that I’m always brandishing about means nothing but a transmission of the impulse intact. It means that you not only get the thing off your chest, but that you get it into somebody else’s.¹

The word for both Schuyler’s ‘urge’ and Pound’s ‘impulse’, for the state of mind each associates with writing, has historically been enthusiasm. Enthusiasm fully understood, as an intense, sometimes ruinous relation of the mind to its object, is integral to the creation and the circulation of literature.

With the circulatory aspect of enthusiasm particularly in mind, and following Lewis Hyde, an analogy has been drawn with gift economics, where the gift is understood as a form of circulation relatively unencumbered by
mediations (money); and where what matters is not, chiefly, what is returned, but that the thing in question has been passed on. At its best, along the lines of the gift – though both circuits can quickly be corrupted by the will to dominate – literary enthusiasm stands for the ceaseless and unfettered circulation of works and their insights. It is, isn’t it, the most natural thing in the world, when you have read a great work of literature, to want to pass it on; the reading is barely complete before that recirculation has happened. This is what each of the writers in this book believed, each building that insight into their writing practice. As Marianne Moore said, ‘If you are charmed by an author, I think it’s a very strange and invalid imagination that doesn’t long to share it. Somebody else should read it, don’t you think?’

Modern American writing, in so far as it can be understood to have its foundations in Emerson, had its origins, as he observed, in a fully developed, historically aware, enthusiastic view of the world; that enthusiastic point of departure being crucial, so it has been suggested, to the literature’s mobility, form and subject matter. William Penn identified in George Fox’s experimentalism a desire for ‘nearness’ with the condition of inspiration, the same ‘nearness’ that Stanley Cavell has described as American literature’s preferred relation with things. It is a sense of nearness which folds the enthusiasm of religion back into the enthusiasm of aesthetic philosophy. There what it promised, after Kant in particular, in the moment of being out of one’s senses, was a supplement to the processes of understanding and reason [an overcoming of the ‘hindrance of sensibility’], whereby a closer acquaintance with the world is made possible. What enthusiasm thus wants to name is a state of mind in which it is possible to grasp, or to be grasped by, the things and ways of the world. Kant presented this state under the heading of aesthetics, and Heidegger in particular understood it as the work of poetic language. The writers I have discussed in this book have written in the conviction that, as O’Hara repeatedly asserted, composition is a mode of knowledge, that techniques can be arrived at [largely through the jettisoning of inappropriate techniques] whereby through language the world can be better known. *Walden*, according to this point of view, is what Thoreau knew. ‘A Step Away from Them’ is what in mid-town Manhattan, at 12.40 of a Thursday in August 1956, O’Hara knew. ‘Critics and Connoisseurs’ is Marianne Moore’s statement of how things are known. ‘Hymn to Life’ is Schuyler’s knowledge.

Precisely because of such religious and aesthetic origins, Modern American writing runs freely and readily into conflict with bureaucracy, as this book has several times shown. Which means that as this book has turned its head to the situation in which it is written, so an American literature born of an enthusiastic state of mind has once again been taken as a riposte to a
British formalism. But this is not to make a national argument, not least because, as Emerson, Thoreau and Pound in turn did battle with the bureaucratic mindset, it was in American universities, quite as much as in some specious, generalized sense of British character, that they found their target. Not to mention the fact that now, above all, as America exports its religious-economic base across the world, there is nothing to endorse in its headline sense of national fundamentalism. Melville anticipated this – it is tempting in this context to say ‘foretold’ – and it is critical to Moby-Dick that he understood how deeply enthusiasm can corrupt. Hence Ahab, in whom Quaker peculiarities, though ‘unoutgrown’, were plainly distorted, and through whom an original impulse to permit general participation in spiritual experience became an urge to dominate, to exercise tyranny over others’ minds. Yet to shy from enthusiasm because in every spiritual experimentalist there is an incipient antinomian would be, as it were, to throw Ishmael out with the saltwater. It would be to ignore in Moby-Dick, and the cultural possibilities it sets up, Ishmael’s urge to see what whaling is, and once having seen it to pass it on in the form most appropriate to its transmission. It would be to ignore, also, the novel’s generous and unforbidding circulation of other texts. And above all it would be to ignore the fact that in Ahab what Melville presents is an enthusiast who has become, among other things, a bureaucrat, who uses form and ritual as a mode of coercion, whose relation to things involves constantly converting them into what they are not. Ahab, as generations of commentators have rightly observed, is a proto-dictator, and unquestionably his status as such owes in part to his charisma, and so through a process of distortion to his enthusiastic origins. But that he can manage his mission owes to his readiness to mediate and manipulate knowledge, to operate according to the prescriptions of the bureaucratic mind.

In so far, then, as this book about American literature, written from and referring to a British university setting, makes an argument back and forth across the Atlantic, what is at issue is the form of literary knowledge. What the American writers I have been discussing variously present is an ongoing argument for forms of expression which follow writing's insights and imperatives. The currently coercive character of the forms and procedures of British university existence mean that what literature knows, and how it operates, is, on a routine basis, being lost from view. Bureaucracy, in its current British academic manifestation, has two general characteristics. The first is a tendency to subject non-specific, machine-readable language – the most graphic version of which is the projected star-rating system of the RAE – whereby in the process of valuation the terms of the work are so translated as radically to diminish its proposed content. The second and related general characteristic is a tendency to bring the circulation of literary work,
understanding and values to a halt. What is required by the present bureaucracy are ‘outputs’, where outputs are endpoints, assessable products that can be assigned a numeric value, and where that value becomes the object – the work existing for the purpose of audit – and where the effect of audit is to foreclose the process of transmission; to bring it to a halt; to effect a STOP. It is in the nature of bureaucracy, this is to say, that it militates directly against the understanding of literature; that it works in opposition to the enthusiastic state of mind which, at some level or another, is vital to literary activity.

Such enthusiasm is difficult to sustain. Of the enthusiasts discussed in this book, only Moore lived out a long and relatively steady life. Thoreau died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-four. Melville died in obscurity, having long since retreated from the American literary scene, deeply despondent at the reception and commercial failure of Moby-Dick. Pound’s cultural enthusiasm distorted into zealous anti-Semitism. Frank O’Hara died at the age of forty, in a state, so some have argued, of literary exhaustion. James Schuyler was periodically hospitalized throughout his life. Emerson had anticipated this. ‘What is a man good for,’ he asked ‘without enthusiasm? and what is enthusiasm without this daring of ruin for its object?’ What he understood was that, difficult as it can be to sustain, and whether at the time people like it or not, literary culture requires enthusiasm. Which makes it all the more important that the writer as enthusiast should be recognized, that their terms should be understood, that the energies by which they circulate value should be appreciated and made known. And it makes it crucial that institutions professing a concern for literary culture, instead of operating procedures that militate daily against its dissemination, should permit the enthusiasms by which such culture is passed on.

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