come enlightened enough to instruct and then to emancipate their slaves and thus until history's eventual goal would be attained.

In the second part, Spahn delineates Jefferson's historical thoughts over the course of his life using the dichotomy of didactic history versus historicism. His didactic history was based on "a teleological concept of history that emphasized less the factual precision than the universal didactic function of historical studies" (103). Historicism—by contrast—was "a concept that stressed the contingency of history and saw the primary function of historical studies not in teaching timeless moral lessons for the future but in coming as close as possible to a unique reality in the past" (103). In his early life, Jefferson believed in the philosophical history of the Enlightenment and its promise that the importance of history writing laid not so much in preserving the details of the past than in providing a set of "timeless examples following a course predictable by universal natural laws" (106). This didactic approach to history was based on the concept that "the belief in an immutable universal human nature: "the philosophical historians tended to expect the future to follow largely the lives prescribed by the past" (109). Particularly after the United States gained its independence, Jefferson began to doubt the universality of Jefferson's speeches of the American Revolution. All the while, he considered it legitimate to embellish Republican versions of the American Revolution through the 'magic' of a masterful style.

Cahill convincingly reads these unexpected reflections on aesthetic matters in one of the era's major political treatises as more than a defensive gesture designed to preempt criticism of the outcomes of the Constitutional Convention (which will, Be Madison suggest here, necessarily imperfect). For Cahill, Madison's recourse to aesthetic theory allows him to demonstrate the "romantic" nature of the Federalist program of the 1780s and its "rational" time and continuous progress.

The developments of the 1780s and 1790s, however, forced Jefferson to reevaluate his attachment to philosophical history. The failure of the French Revolution and the success of the Federalist party led Jefferson to question the 'magic of example.' Would the successful slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue serve as an example to black slaves in the United States? What did the failure of the French Revolution auger for the American experiment in self-government? As Jefferson needed to differentiate between Europe and America and between blacks and whites, he began to doubt the universality of human nature and the comparability of past and present. As a result, Jefferson became more skeptical about 'didactic history' with its pretension of being able to predict the future, and he began to stress the need of understanding past events for their own terms. He did not, however, completely give up on philosophical history but rather sought to deal with the failure of the French Revolution by 'Americanizing' philosophical history. He argued that "Americans and Europeans belonged not only to different spatial nations but also to different temporal nations" (197). He thus tried to associate United States history with 'rational' time and continuous progress.

Upon becoming President in 1801, Jefferson again changed his historical outlook and sought to synthesize both the didactic and the historicist approaches to history. As he wished to be portrayed as a classical and exemplary 'great man' by future generations, he once more became intrigued with the moral lessons of history. When Jefferson became aware that the "natural" rights and the belief in an immutable universal human nature were not so much in preserving the details of the past than in providing a set of "timeless examples following a course predictable by universal natural laws" (106). This didactic approach to history was based on the concept that "the belief in an immutable universal human nature: "the philosophical historians tended to expect the future to follow largely the lives prescribed by the past" (109). Particularly after the United States gained its independence, Jefferson began to doubt the universality of Jefferson's speeches of the American Revolution. All the while, he considered it legitimate to embellish Republican versions of the American Revolution through the 'magic' of a masterful style.


The initial chapter of Edward Cahill's Liberty of the Imagination: Aesthetic Theory, Literary Form, and Politics in the Early United States (2012) begins with a quote that takes us right to "the heart of the book's concern with the extricable intertwining of politics and aesthetics in a wide variety of revolutionary and early national American writings. Madison's ruminations on the vagaries of human cognizance in Federalist 37 testify to just how closely aesthetic and political matters were linked in the minds of many of the era's public figures:

The faculties of the mind itself have never yet been distinguished and defined with satisfactory precision. The efforts of the most acute and metaphysical philosophers.

Senses, perception, judgment, desire, volition, memory, imagination are found to be separated by such delicate shades and minute gradations that their boundaries have eluded the most subtle investigations, and remain a pregnant source of ingenious disquisition and controversy. (11-12)

Cahill convincingly reads these unexpected reflections on aesthetic matters in one of the era's major political treatises as more than a defensive gesture designed to preempt criticism of the outcomes of the Constitutional Convention (which will, Be Madison suggest here, necessarily imperfect). For Cahill, Madison's recourse to aesthetic theory allows him to demonstrate the "romantic" nature of the Federalist program of the 1780s and its "rational" time and continuous progress.
late colonial period by writers such as Hannah Griffitts, Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, and Philip Freneau in chapter two, Cahill shows how intimately their reflections on legitimate and illegitimate pleasures, on pleasures of the mind and pleasures of the body, on self-love and social love are related to the revolutionary cause. Thus, in so-called non-importation poems written explicitly against the British Parliament’s Townshend Acts of 1767—which levied import duties on commodities such as paper, paint, lead, glass, and tea—the bucolic pleasures of America were juxtaposed against the morally corrupt refinements of European culture. Written in support of the patriotic boycott of European imports, a poem like Griffitts’ “The Female Patriots, Addressed to the Daughters of Liberty in America” (1768) called for the substitution of polished imported goods by simpler, domestic products: “for British paints and dyes, ‘the juice of a berry’; for window glass, ‘polished Horn’; and for writing paper, the ‘Homespun’ variety, ‘the Tongue,’ or even a ‘scratch on a Leaf’” (80).

What distinguishes passages such as these from more earlier studies of landscape writing (and indeed from much Early American Studies scholarship more generally) is not so much that they acknowledge the subversive force of the aesthetic, but that they seek to do justice to the complexity and contradistinctiveness of its inherent political valences. For poems as later as the fourteenth, we have learned to expect that Cahill’s exploration of The Federalist reaches well beyond the chapter’s initial (and hardly surprising) observation concerning the elitist presumptions informing the essays’ rhetoric: that it shows that ‘taste’ theorized by eighteenth-century aestheticians as both highly subjective and subject to intersubjective validation, ‘taste’ allowed Madison, Jay, and Hamilton to stage a reconciliation of their political opponents’ insistences that the diversity and independence of the country’s constituent parts must be respected and of their own desire for national consolidation. The rhetoric of taste provided the Founders with a “language of unity and variety” (142) that was perfectly suited to their political objectives. Moreover, it allowed them to disparage anti-Federalist fears as the products of an overheated imagination and dim their opponents’ more detailed criticisms of the emerging constitutional text as expressions of an outmoded (read: rationalist) culture. Cahill demonstrates not only his sound knowledge of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory but also superb close reading skills that enable him to propose convincing new readings.

As he does throughout, Cahill in his third chapter, “Objects of Landscape Writing,” refuses to reduce writers’ uses of aesthetic categories to ornamental expressions (or masks) of supposedly more real and more essential political projects (such as imperialist land-taking and the imaginary consolidation of the nation). Instead, he probes the politics of the aesthetic—its dialectic of liberty and constraint—before cor-relating the aesthetic with realpolitik. Thus, instead of reading Thomas Jefferson’s, John Filson’s, and others’ eulogies of the American landscape’s beauty and sublimity as rhetorical devices designed to mask imperial projects, he argues that the politics of the western landscape is often written into the aesthetic rhetoric that describes it. In prospects of natural and cultivated beauty, we see representations of moderated liberty and national futurity. In scenes of natural and moral sublimity, we see not only images of individual empowerment and imperial ascendance but also those of resistance, revolution, and chaos. (115).

Against earlier critics, who read the descent of the Wielands’ rural community of sensuals and aesthetic pleasures into religious fanaticism, insanity, and homicide as a republican warning against the destructive powers of the imagination, Cahill insists on the multi-faceted nature of the story. In this tale, the imagination in Brown’s novels is the site of fanatical delusion and deceptive error, but to see, and also correct judgment, rational speculation, patriotic sympathy, moral beauty, and transformative sublimity” (165). In developing this argument, Cahill’s writing yet again testifies to the rich diversity of his critical approach as he situates Brown’s novels in their historical contexts, contemporaneous aesthetic debates, and the anti-fiction movement (whose allegedly wholesale rejection of fiction he qualifies in interesting ways).

Cahill’s final chapter turns to criticism published by Federalist writers such as Fisher Ames and Joseph Dennie, who extol the power of genius and the imagination as they draw a strict line between the aesthetic pleasures of refined sensibility and the more ‘rational’ and thus more moderate political valences. Cahill concludes that the aesthetic protest against democratic political power transcends and remains indebted to the dialectic of liberty Cahill has traced with such precision. This is a significant contribution to the ongoing expansion of the canon of Early American Studies.

By way of criticism, let me mention two major points. In few instances, Cahill’s writing yet again testifies to the adequacy of the categories in all their complexity rather than simply subscribing to either Easton’s and Bourdieu’s critique of aesthetic ideology or Armstrong’s and Scarry’s salvaging of the democratic or emancipatory power of beauty. Second, I am impressed by the rich variety of writings from several genres that he explores: from classic literary works such as Timothy Dwight’s The Conquest of Canaan (1785) and Brown’s Wieland (1798) to sorely understudied texts such as Fergusson’s “The Dream” or The Farmer’s Daughter and the Farmer’s Son. Company agent Manassah Cutler’s thoroughly commercial landscape description An Explanation of the Map Which Delineates That Part of the Federal Lands, Comprehended between Pennsylvania West Line, the rivers Ohio, Mississippi, and Scioto, and Lake Erie (1788) enables Cahill to make a significant contribution to the ongoing expansion of the canon of Early American Studies.

Since I have distributed my praise of Cahill’s excellent book freely throughout the preceding paragraphs, let me mention two more features of Liberty of the Imagination that make it an important contribution to Early American Studies. First, although he acknowledges the work of Eagleton and Bourdieu and more recent returns to aesthetics by scholars such as Isabel Armstrong and Elaine Scarry, he explores the social and political implications of early American writers’ discourses on aesthetic categories in all their complexity rather than simply subscribing to either Easton’s and Bourdieu’s critique of aesthetic ideology or Armstrong’s and Scarry’s salvaging of the democratic or emancipatory power of beauty. Second, I am impressed by the rich variety of writings from several genres that he explores: from classic literary works such as Timothy Dwight’s The Conquest of Canaan (1785) and Brown’s Wieland (1798) to sorely understudied texts such as Fergusson’s “The Dream” or The Farmer’s Daughter and the Farmer’s Son. Company agent Manassah Cutler’s thoroughly commercial landscape description An Explanation of the Map Which Delineates That Part of the Federal Lands, Comprehended between Pennsylvania West Line, the rivers Ohio, Mississippi, and Scioto, and Lake Erie (1788) enables Cahill to make a significant contribution to the ongoing expansion of the canon of Early American Studies.

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to inform U.S. American Studies more generally—ultimately is.

In a related vein, for a treatise so alert to eighteenth-century aestheticians’ probing of the possibilities and limitations of human perception, it comes as a surprise that Cahill completely ignores Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s original definition of aesthetics as “the science of sensuous cognition” (§ 1, I: 60).1 His characterization of Baumgarten’s Aesthetica (1750/1758) as concerned with “philosophical questions of taste” (3) misses the mark and betrays the book’s almost exclusive focus on early British aesthetics. In a way, this bias is well-motivated since it is British, not German or French, aesthetic treatises that were read in revolutionary and early national America. But a more than cursory engagement with a few of the major continental European aestheticians of the era such as Baumgarten, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, Charles Batteux, and Jean-Baptiste Dubos would have revealed that the transatlantic republic of letters that Cahill analyzes with such acuity is by no means limited to the Anglophone world. And yet, given Cahill’s admirably learned engagement with the major continental European aestheticians, it seems to me that such a charge borders on injustice in the face of the author’s important, multi-faceted contribution to Early American Studies, a field that has neglected aesthetic considerations for too long.

Basil Philippi Schweighauser


The role of Christianity in African American culture and literature is comparatively well-explored, and it is by now well-known how African Americans ranging from Ban- neker and Angfolk to King Jr. utilized Christian traditions and individual Biblical figures (e.g. Moses) in order to advance their cause. The role of African spirituality, however, has been mostly neglected, especially with regard to fiction. Where hoodoo culture and conjure elements in literature are investigated, they are usually not recognized as part of a long historical development. Elizabeth West’s comprehensive study of African American spirituality and its African roots in literature from the seventeenth century to the Harlem Renaissance is the first of its kind and fills a crucial gap in African American literary studies.

Although West acknowledges that the spiritual culture of the African continent was and is by no means monolithic, she assumes that certain philosophical and ethical principals are shared by various African traditions according to this shared African cosmology “all world entities emanate from a ‘cosmic oneness’” [...]” (1). West claims that “four principles [are] central to pre-Middle Passage Af- rican cosmology: 1) the value of memory [e.g. of the ancestors] to both individual and group well-being; 2) the belief that community represents the essence of human existence and being; 3) the view that nature—both animate and inanimate—represents divinities; and 4) the belief that sense therefore fills a crucial role. West thus demonstrates that “the centuries-old contention that Africans arrived in America with little if any meaningful culture, and that upon arrival in America they had been effectively dispossessed from their past, misrepresents the central influence of African culture in African American life”—nor was their worldview entirely absorbed in a Euro- pean one, but rather transformed and merged into “Afro-Christianity” (20). In reducing “African spirituality” to a few core principles and in not differentiating between individual Christian denominations, West runs the risk of overgeneralization. However, this proves an only seeming weakness of her study as her approach is in accord with the literary texts themselves which do not offer any more de- tailed differentiation within these opposite categories.

West examines the literary evolution of African spirituality in black women’s fiction from Wheatley to Hurston through a three-stage model consisting of “a formative, persisting and a transformative period” (21-22). Accordingly, Wheatley’s poetry and the religious prose of her early-nineteenth-century successors represent the ‘formative stage’ as they show the tension between African-rooted spirituality and western Christianity. While Phillis Wheatley’s poetry has often been called “poetry that concedes” (11), her mod- erationist, West highlights her discursive appropriation of scripture and history which based the black American experience both in the Great Awakening and African cosmology. In her use of the sun as an image, for instance, Wheatley “carefully construes” her African-rooted reverence for the sun with her adopted Christian concept of an omnipotent God” (39). West also identifies a close affinity between African ideas of divinity and ancient Greek and Roman mythology, so that Wheat- ley’s classical references are not only indicia of her learnedness in western culture but are also expressive of her rootedness in an Afri- can worldview.

For black spiritual women writers after Wheatley (e.g. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lucretia Mott, Maria Stewart), who were all at least one generation removed from a firsthand African experience, West observes “an emerging Afri- can American cosmology that muffles its Afri- can voice and assumes the discourse of Chris- tianity. Black African American literature reflects this trend in various ways” (50). West shows that the spiritual beliefs and practices of the early Americans fully human and black Christians as equal to whites. Even unacknowledged Af- can carryovers such as spirit possessions, out-of-body experiences, and visitations from the dead would be couched in Christian discourse, since this belief in vision and prophecy was common to both Africans and Christians. These writers thus progressively subdue the African self in African American discourse while in practice—through oral and ritual traditions—African spirituality would survive.

West shows how in the ‘period of persis- tence,’ which reaches from the mid-nineteenth century across the post-Reconstruction era into the Harlem Renaissance, this tendency to silence Africa and replace it by a Christian discourse continued in Evangelical Christian discourses, African American folk literature, and spiritual narratives (by Mary Prince, So- journer Truth) and full-length novels (Hannah Crafts’s The Bondswoman’s Narrative, Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig, Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Elizabeth Keek- ley’s Of One Drum, and Pauline Hopkins’ Iola Leroy). These writers thus progressively subdue the African self in African American discourse while in practice—through oral and ritual traditions—African spirituality would survive.

As these beliefs and practices were subsumed as the slave community regarded for the dying, the appreciation and reconstruction of commu- nity through memory, or the protagonists having visions, these are typically reframed in a white Christian worldview when, for in- stance, visions are qualified as ‘superstition.’ This way, at the expense of African spiritual- ity, the white Christian community created the core marker of the protagonists’ humanity.

The sentimental novel of the Reconstruc- tion era (e.g. Ellen F W. Harper’s Trials and Triumphs) typically propagates white middle- class values, education, and Christianity as the main virtues to promote individual and communal racial uplift; it dismisses emotional and community-based black spirituality—evident in “moaning and shouting” (104) during church service—as inferior to refined and ra- tional bourgeois white Christianity. Later in Iola Leroy, Harper shows more appreciation for emotion-filled black Christianity, which proves to be restorative in reuniting fami- lies and communities; nevertheless, Harper continues to ignore any connection between the African spirit, ancestral religion, and Christianity. This is true for Harper, Pauline E. Hopkins (in Contend- ing Forces, Hagar’s Daughter, Winchester, and Of One Blood) “gives voice and agency to African American folk belief” and presents “African mysticism as central to the plot de- velopment” (117). In her novel A Mammie, Har- rison shows her “Jwt’s knowledge and re- collection of African spirituality” (54). By the time of this work, the term ‘African spirituality’ is used to refer to a largely Christianized form of spirituality which is linked to the ‘African’ (10). Hinduism the ‘religion of the dead’ would be couched in Christian discourse, since this belief in vision and prophecy was common to both Africans and Christians. These writers thus progressively subdue the African self in African American discourse while in practice—through oral and ritual traditions—African spirituality would survive.

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