

The Canonical Unconscious

Many of the works that constitute today's new, revised canon of American literature have been the beneficiaries of rediscovery. The idea of rediscovery has been one of the principal motives behind the movement to change the canon, providing much of the impetus for this process. Rediscovery, of course, implies a prior loss. In other words, in order for the rediscovery of the works that constitute the new canon to be possible, they must, at some point, have been forgotten. And in order to understand the importance of their reemergence, it would seem to make sense that we must first have some idea of the reasons for this forgetting. If we understand why publishers, critics, and readers stopped (or never began) publishing, writing on, and reading these works, we should gain some purchase on what significance to attach to the fact that now they are published, written on, and read. The question is, then, Why were these works forgotten? According to Freud, we forget for one of three reasons: because what we perceive is unimportant and we are indifferent to it; because a perception is insufficiently different or distinct (so that it can be easily associated with an existing memory-trace); or because the perception was too traumatic and thus triggered resistance (resulting in repression).¹ Because all three of these types of forgetting have been at work in the formation of the canon of American literature, the canon-opening movement has worked, on different occasions, to counter each type. Thus, these distinctions can serve to guide our survey of the forgetting and subsequent rediscovery of literary works as it has occurred within the canon-opening movement.

Thinking about the exclusion of certain works from the canon as an act of "forgetting" involves deploying psychoanalytic concepts, developed

in reference to the individual subject's psyche, for the analysis of culture. There is, of course, ample precedent for this type of analysis in the Freudian oeuvre itself—*Totem and Taboo*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Moses and Monotheism*. Even as he moves in this direction, however, Freud himself preaches caution: "I would not say that an attempt [. . .] to carry psycho-analysis over to the culture community was absurd or doomed to be fruitless. But we should have to be very cautious and not forget that, after all, we are only dealing with analogies and that it is dangerous, not only with men but also with concepts, to tear them from the sphere in which they have originated and been evolved."² Despite this disclaimer, Freud nonetheless (in the very book in which the disclaimer appears) both embarks upon and encourages the widening of the berth of psychoanalytic concepts to the cultural realm. He does this because he believes, in the last instance, that maintaining an absolute divide between the individual subject and the social order is untenable and implicitly posits a wholeness to the individual subject that it does not have. When we maintain a distinction between the individual and the collective, we ipso facto insist (as this way of putting it suggests) upon seeing the individual as self-identical and the collective divided, or as a conglomeration of many identities. For Freud, however, such a view subscribes to precisely the illusion of individual self-identity that psychoanalysis calls into question. Hence, in sustaining a divide between individual and collective, we partake of the illusion that the individual is not already a collective, not already a divided subject, the illusion that Freud was always at pains to shatter. If we think about it, it shouldn't be deploying psychoanalytic concepts in reference to the collective that we question, but more the use of them in reference to "individuals" about which we should raise doubts. This is especially true of the processes of forgetting, where we can see clear parallels between Freud's descriptions of forgetting on a psychical level and the forgetting that occurs in culture, in reference to the literary canon.

In the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, Freud notes the importance of a pathway of facilitation for the memory of an impression to be possible. He says, "The memory of an experience (that is, its continuing operative power) depends on a factor which is called the magnitude of the impression and on the frequency with which the same impression is repeated."³ Without a certain quantity of magnitude and frequency of repetition, we will not remember. We forget, in other words, because the impression fails to make much of an impression; it seems not to speak to us, and we react to it with indifference. Here, there is a parallel between individual and cultural forgetting, and we can draw the contours of this

category in terms of literary works excluded from the canon. However, such works would not be, strictly speaking, literary. They would be works not considered worthy of literary study because they seemed so foreign to its field: works of science, of philosophy, of history, and even works that were literary but not “literary” enough, including journals, diaries, autobiographies, and so on. The traditional canon of American literature has forgotten—that is, not included—such works, and yet it is not possible to speak about repression in reference to their exclusion. They are forgotten precisely because, to use Freud’s terms from the *Project*, there is no facilitation leading from them to other memory-traces within the canon, and this lack of facilitation makes it impossible for the impression of them to be retained. This is the forgetting that founds a symbolic entity—that is, the canon—through the constitution of an outside to that entity.⁴ It is a necessary, initial forgetting that establishes a field, the gesture by which the literary canon exists at all in a meaningful way, by which there is something instead of nothing.

The attempt to recover this forgotten indifferent material has animated a significant part of the canon opening movement, because so much of the literary work done by excluded groups fits into this category. For instance, the slave narrative or autobiography was the predominant literary form for African Americans in the nineteenth century. To exclude this form from the very definition of “literary,” to render it indifferent, would serve—and did serve—to de facto exclude African-American writing from the canon of nineteenth-century American literature. The journals of pre-nineteenth-century women provide a similar example, as does Native American oral literature. Many of the most well-known rediscoveries have been of this type: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, and *Black Elk Speaks* (just to name a few). When the editors of the third edition (1989) of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* say they have made the anthology larger “to provide space for more *kinds* of American literature,”⁵ they have in mind precisely the above-mentioned works. The kind of canon change that the emergence of such works represents is one that redefines the symbolic boundary indicated by the term “literature.”⁶ Canon opening has attacked the symbolic boundaries of the traditional canon in other significant ways as well, especially as part of a critique of the idea of purely aesthetic standards.

Much of the reconstruction of the literary canon that has taken place in recent years owes many of its successes to a critique of formalism in literary studies, a formalism that was instrumental in the formation of the

canon of American literature.⁷ This critique helped to expand the symbolic boundaries of the canon, to fight the forgetting that resulted from an arbitrary barrier separating the literary from the nonliterary. In breaking down this barrier, the critique of formalism exposed the political kernel lying within aesthetics; it made clear that there was no pure aesthetic judgment, that behind every aesthetic judgment was hidden a political one. For instance, Joyce Warren claims that “the mass exclusion of these ‘other’ writers from the canon of American literature is not simply a matter of aesthetic taste; it is also a political act.”⁸ The critique of formalism allows canon openers such as Warren to challenge the very idea of an aesthetic justification for the canonical status of literary texts. In fact, the idea of aesthetic excellence has fallen into such ill repute that few critics continue to invoke it at all.⁹

This fundamental insight—that the aesthetic is the political—opened up the possibility of a reevaluation of the canon, because it called into question the ground of previous judgments of canonicity. Therefore, the once unimpeachable ground of masters like Nathaniel Hawthorne or William Faulkner lost some of its privileged aura (as did the work of art in Benjamin’s famous essay), and the canon broadened. Just as no aesthetic judgment retained an aesthetic purity, neither did artistic creation retain its position transcendently above culture. Criticism began to see the artist less as creator and more as cultural product. Grasping this trend, Cecelia Tichi, in her overview of New Historicism, notes that “to call Melville a genius or great author is emphatically to remove him from his cultural milieu.”¹⁰ This undercutting of privileged ground created a space for writers, such as Lydia Maria Child or Fanny Fern, perceived to be of cultural or political—rather than aesthetic—significance, to rise in importance, just as it demonstrated the culture and political aspects of the “masters.”¹¹ Hence, it allowed the canon to include a broad range of works that the traditional canon could not but regard as indifferent material. The indifferent, however, though it can involve repression, is not the repressed. The recovery of these works, while clearly important, is thus not the return of the repressed, simply because of their difference. To remember them is to access new memory facilitations, but not the overloaded facilitations that have been isolated as a result of repression.

The second category of forgetting includes, in complete contrast to the first, that which is too easily assimilable. These impressions are not indifferent, and they do not lack facilitations. Their pathway, on the contrary, is all too facilitated. They are so similar to existing memory-traces with which they associate (through the process of facilitation) that they produce no memory-trace of their own. In other words, this is the

kind of forgetting that occurs when everything blurs together and when it is impossible to separate the memory of one thing from the memory of another. As Freud says in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, such memory-traces “succumb unresistingly to the process of condensation.”¹² As such, they are cases of what Freud calls “the *normal* process of forgetting.”¹³ In terms of contemporary literature, these are the books of Tom Clancy and Danielle Steele, books that can so readily be assimilated to other books in the genre that they are indistinct. In the history of American literature, we can see this kind of forgetting in the exclusion from the canon of works like Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide World* and Zane Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

This kind of forgetting has been of great importance to a historicist approach, which seeks the conscious essence of a historical or cultural epoch—what such an epoch thinks about itself. Jane Tompkins was one of those at the fore of this movement, which has today, in the forms of new historicism and cultural studies, become predominant. In *Sensational Designs* (an explicit attempt at canon opening), Tompkins argues for a change in the very concept of what constitutes literature and its study, and in what makes a literary work worthy of study. According to her, “novels and stories should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment.”¹⁴ If the authors that Tompkins rediscovers—Susan Warner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Brockden Brown, and others—are easily assimilated to other memory-traces, then all the better, because what we should seek in canonical literature is precisely the well-facilitated memory path. As Tompkins points out, “I have not tried to emphasize the individuality of genius of the authors in question, to isolate the sensibility, modes of perception, or formal techniques that differentiate them from other authors or from one another. Rather, I have seen them, in Foucault’s phrase, as ‘nodes within a network,’ expressing what lay in the minds of many or most of their contemporaries.”¹⁵

Certainly, the recovery of what has been forgotten in this way has its importance: it does provide insight into the consciousness of prior historical epochs. This importance, however, is limited, because in rediscovering “what lay in the minds” of a particular culture at a particular moment in this way, we restrict ourselves primarily to consciousness and ignore the unconscious. In such works, we tend to see what an epoch wants to think about itself, not what it doesn’t. The very popularity of a work such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* suggests that what it had to

say was something that people wanted to hear and that it allowed people to see themselves in the way in which they wanted to be seen. When we rediscover such popular works and thus find out the conscious mind of the epoch, we don't touch on the unconscious.¹⁶ Material that has been forgotten because it is too common is never unconscious material in the dynamic sense (i.e., repressed material). What the rediscovery of it fails to give us is any indication of the truth of the canon itself—that is, what the canon absolutely cannot admit and must repress.

Thus, we come to the third category of forgetting—repression. Repression is a forgetting that emerges in response to an impression that overloads the psychical apparatus. This overload has effects in the psyche, as Freud says in the *Project*, “as though there had been a stroke of lightning.”¹⁷ It tears down the barriers set up within the psychic system, leaving “permanent facilitations behind [. . .] which possibly do away with the resistance of the contact-barrier entirely and establish a pathway of conduction.”¹⁸ The barriers that protect the psyche—its defenses—lose their effectiveness in the aftermath of an overload of excitation. In response to this traumatic overload, the psyche represses, which involves keeping the impression as far from consciousness as possible. As Freud puts in his essay on “Repression,” “*the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious.*”¹⁹ Repression does not, however, eliminate memory-traces of the impression from the unconscious, but in fact works to constitute the unconscious proper. If forgetting has been tendentious and we may rightly call it a repression, then the works that fit into this category of forgetting are the unconscious of the canon, and as such, they have a truth to tell us—nothing less than the truth of the canon itself—because, as Freud tell us in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “the unconscious is the true psychical reality.”²⁰

Which leaves us with an important question: How do we distinguish repression from the first two categories of forgetting? Perhaps we can find the answer in the nature of repression itself. Repression, unlike other forgetting, is not something done once and then completed. It must be constantly sustained, and it must be sustained extra-symbolically. Freud points out that “the process of repression is not to be regarded as an event which takes place *once*, the results of which are permanent, as when some living thing has been killed and from that time onward is dead; repression demands a persistent expenditure of force.”²¹ What has been repressed continues to haunt us, refusing to die once and for all, and necessitating “force” rather than symbolic activity to be forgotten. In terms of the canon, this means that the canon's repressed does not

include those works that can be dismissed conclusively on the basis of a set of—however arbitrarily constructed—canonical criteria (such as aesthetic considerations, etc.). When canonical criteria form the basis for an exclusion from the canon, this indicates a symbolic exclusion, but not a repression. A work repressed by the traditional canon must *not* have been excluded because of aesthetic deficiencies, because of a failure to meet certain formal standards, but must have necessitated a show of force. In other words, this kind of exclusion is an irrational forgetting, one not following from the formal standards that guide all the other exclusions (and inclusions).

For many years, formalist demands, often of a New Critical variety, were the theoretical justification for decisions about the value of literary works and their place within the canon.²² These criteria (complexity, ambiguity, irony—in short, difficulty) readily account for the exclusion of certain works, such as, for instance, Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok*, a novel that makes no bones about its political aims. But this act of forgetting is not a repression precisely because it has a once-and-for-all quality to it and because it works symbolically. Once the formalist criteria are in place, there is no need to give another thought to a work like *Hobomok*. It doesn't trouble the sleep of our formalist critic, because this exclusion makes sense within the formalist symbolic system. If something can be symbolically explained—made sense of within a particular symbolic system—then it does not require an act of repression. Repression only becomes necessary when the symbolic system does not facilitate the exclusion of something that must nevertheless be excluded.

We encounter repression when we discover those works whose exclusion from the canon doesn't make sense, is *non-sensical*. In other words, what about those excluded works that, according to even New Critical criteria, should be canonical mainstays? These are the works that strain a system of symbolization, which for the symbolic entity we call the traditional canon occupy an unsymbolizable place—the place of what Lacan calls the Real. For many involved with canon opening, canon exclusion is exclusively a symbolic business, and hence demands a symbolic revolution: old standards excluded works by marginalized writers, new standards must be inclusive of these works. This project has its value—it has made possible access to the repressed of the canon—but because it remains wholly within symbolic considerations and doesn't consider the failure of the symbolic, it doesn't touch on the Real. It is precisely this Real that the pages that follow will attempt to engage, which is why the works under discussion will not be those whose exclusion from the canon formalist criticism can explain, but those whose

exclusion it can't. These exclusions take us by surprise, and in this lies their importance. This is why Freud says in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* that "I am as a rule only concerned with [. . .] those [cases] in which the forgetting *surprises* me because I should have expected to know the thing in question."²³ Certain exclusions take us by surprise precisely because, according to the prevailing criteria, they should be included in the canon. These works—and I will discuss four: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper," Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—because of the senselessness of their exclusion, because, in a word, of their repression, represent our path to the canonical unconscious.²⁴

The term "canonical unconscious" necessarily implies the existence of an unconscious on a cultural level, what seems like the Jungian "collective unconscious." According to Freud, however, Jung's term is misleading, and it is misleading for two very different reasons: it implies the existence of a collective soul that unites humanity, and, even more important, it leads us to believe (incorrectly) that the unconscious can ever be anything but collective. As Freud says in *Moses and Monotheism*, "I do not think that much is to be gained by introducing the concept of a 'collective' unconscious—the content of the unconscious is collective anyhow, a general possession of mankind."²⁵ The unconscious is always "collective anyhow" because it exists in reference to the symbolic function, at the point of the symbolic order's failure. Although the content of the unconscious varies for different subjects, it nonetheless exists in the same place vis-à-vis the symbolic order—that is, in the place of the unsymbolizable. This becomes clear in Lacan's echo of Freud's refusal of the term "collective unconscious." He asks, "What solution could seriously be expected from the word 'collective' in this instance, when the collective and the individual are strictly the same thing? No, it isn't a matter of positing a communal soul somewhere, [. . .] it isn't a question of psychological entification, it is a question of the symbolic function."²⁶ In other words, the unconscious is structural, rather than substantial, and it exists in reference to the symbolic order. It always exists at the same place—a gap in the symbolic chain—which is why we can talk about it in cultural terms, though the pathway to this place is clearly subject to individual variation.

If we grasp the structural nature of the unconscious—that it is always in the same place—then we can see that it makes little difference whether we are talking about the unconscious of an individual or that of a culture. In both cases, the term "unconscious" refers to that position within

the symbolic order where symbolization breaks down. It is in this sense as well that the unconscious is not historical, not subject to the variegations of historical change. At every point in history, what cannot be spoken is the symbolic order's failure, because if it is spoken, it is no longer a failure, precisely because it is spoken. That is, to speak the failure of the symbolic order is already to *not* speak that failure, to attest to that order's success rather than its failure. The point at which the symbolic order fails is always a traumatic point, because when we arrive there we can't find the words to make sense of it. It remains nonsensical—as with the forgetting of the four works under discussion here—creating a quantity of excitation that cannot be discharged and thereby blocking the normal pathways of the memory. This is the process of repression.

For decades, these works went unremarked on by critics, untaught by teachers, and unpublished by presses. And yet, judged by their formal qualities alone, they would seem to be among the great works of American literature. We can see one piece of evidence for this in the sheer number of critical disputes these works have engendered since their recovery, disputes not about inclusion or exclusion, but about interpretive difficulties. For formalist criticism, aesthetic excellence begets a kind of critical fecundity: the greater a work of literature is, the more criticism it gives rise to (because of its ambiguity and difficulty, two of the fundamental values of this criticism). This kind of formalist aesthetic thus determines aesthetic value by the richness of the literary work, by the amount of material a work provides for interpretation. According to this standard, "The Yellow Wall-paper," *The Awakening*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* have shown themselves to be some of the richest works in American literature, each occasioning a myriad of critical debates since their recovery. This richness suggests to us that the exclusion of these four works was an act of repression, because in all ways they fit the criteria for the canon.

But the most important indication that a repression has taken place is the presence of a trauma. We repress only what is traumatic—an impression that the psyche (or in this case the canon) cannot handle. At this point, then, the next logical step would thus seem to be an inquiry into the response that these four works engendered at their initial publication and then concluding from this response why they were never acknowledged canonically. Such a historicist approach might recount, for instance, the words of Horace Scudder (the editor at *Atlantic Monthly*), noted by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, when he, after reading it with horror, rejected "The Yellow

Wall-paper” for publication: “I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!”²⁷ Or, it could recount the shock of William Dean Howells (until then, a staunch supporter of Charles Chesnutt) on reading Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*, a novel that Howells claimed “would be better if it was not so bitter.”²⁸ Such responses, though they may be exemplary, cannot, however, indicate the presence of a trauma, precisely because they are (symbolic) articulations of why these works are objectionable made contemporaneously with their repression. One cannot name a trauma or repressed material *while it remains traumatic and repressed*—such is the very nature of repression. Reasons for a repression may be given at the time of the repression, but if a repression is at work, these will never be *the* reasons for the repression. The trauma itself, at the time of repression, cannot be named, because repression removes material from consciousness. If someone could have said, at the time, precisely what was traumatic about these works, there would have been no need for repression. The articulation of the trauma does away with the repression of the trauma, as Breuer discovers, much to his surprise, during his treatment of Anna O. The fact that “each symptom disappeared after she had described its first occurrence” reveals to Breuer the relationship between symbolization and trauma: if we are able to symbolize a trauma, it ceases to be a trauma, and the symptom that it has produced disappears.²⁹ Whatever contemporaries said about the traumatic dangers of these four works, these words—because they are words and because they were spoken when they were spoken—cannot help us.

It is only in hindsight, after the trauma has ceased to be traumatic, that it can speak. This is why the historicist approach is doomed to miss the repressed: it can only discover conscious reasons for forgetting or exclusion, not unconscious ones. At the time of its repression, the repressed *could not speak* in a way that made sense—and it could not be spoken about. In digging up what was actually said historically about these works, we can never find—no matter how exhaustive our research—a direct word on the repressed itself, simply because such a word cannot exist. The reasons editors, critics, and readers gave—if they gave reasons at all—were reasons that had nothing to do with the repression, but served as a screen for it. After the repressed has returned, however, we can begin to hear what it would have said when no one could have heard it. When the repressed returns, it starts to speak for the first time. This is why Lacan says, in *Seminar I*, that “repression and the return of the repressed are the same thing.”³⁰ The return allows us to hear retroactively what the repressed had to say in the past. Only through listening for the

return of the repressed through interpretation can the past act of repression be discovered. This is why psychoanalysis necessarily focuses on forging a *construction* of the primal, traumatic scene, rather than trying to access a memory of it. The original scene is only traumatic retroactively, in the future anterior—it will have been traumatic. In other words, only after the fact can we construct the scene that necessitated the repression, as is most clearly illustrated in Freud's analysis of the Wolf Man. For Freud, whether or not the Wolf Man really witnessed the primal scene suggested by his dream of wolves in a tree is wholly beside the point, because such a scene is inevitably a construction. As Freud puts it, "Scenes from infancy are not reproduced during the treatment as recollections, they are the products of construction."³¹ Hence, only as a construction after the fact, only when the repressed returns, can we discover what was traumatic about "The Yellow Wall-paper," *The Awakening*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, now that they aren't traumatic any longer. And when we recognize the presence of trauma—where the trauma was—we gain insight into why these works were repressed.

The difficulty of achieving such insight stems from the nonsensical nature of repression. The act of repression doesn't make sense because it isn't a symbolic act. Though symbolic justifications by and large successfully sustained a relatively homogeneous canon, some works, because the symbolic justification could not work for them, demanded an extra-symbolic act of repression, an act of force. Today, however, as these works have made their way into the canon, the repressed has returned, seemingly opening up this canonical unconscious. They are no longer excluded and have become part of a new canonical symbolic structure. The effect of this inclusion is not, as we might expect, a breakthrough revelation of a heretofore repressed unconscious. It is, instead, a closing up of that unconscious. Contrary to what we might expect, the traumatic kernel of these works—what provoked their repression—is not now, all of a sudden, revealed. Instead, the trauma is even further repressed. When these works were excluded from the old canon, the unconscious was open, but it remained inaccessible precisely because no one could read the works that would reveal it. When they were included in the new canon, this was, as Lacan says in *Seminar XI*, "a making present of the closure of the unconscious" and an "enactment of the reality of the unconscious."³² At the moment at which the unconscious is realized and thus made accessible to interpretation, it closes up, precisely because it ceases to be unconscious. But while the unconscious is open, it remains inaccessible to interpretation. This is the bind we face when approaching

the unconscious. The more that the canonical repressed gets symbolized, the less truth it has to tell us. And increasing symbolization has been the driving force behind the canon opening movement.³³ This increasing symbolization makes it almost impossible to see what was ever traumatic about these works in the first place. We rightly wonder, if they were so traumatic, why is everyone so eager to publish them, read them, and write about them today?

The emergence of formerly marginalized texts into the literary canon represents a fundamental change in some aspects of the controlling logic of that canon—a change toward a wider symbolization. As Paul Lauter explains in his discussion of canon change, “the major issue is not assimilating some long-forgotten works or authors into the existing categories; rather, it is reconstructing historical understanding to make it inclusive and explanatory instead of narrowing and arbitrary.”³⁴ In a pamphlet advertising a new edition of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, the anthology on the forefront of canon change, its editors claim that it “represents a reconception of the very nature of literature in America.”³⁵ These new visions of the canon see it as, for one, nonhomogeneous; that is, the canon no longer tells—and American literature is no longer conceived as—an uninterrupted narrative of literary evolution. It is now clear that this historical evolution has been marked by wide cultural divergence also. For instance, Arnold Krupat points out that much of Native American literature, unlike most white American literature, “attempt[s] to present many voices in [one] text [which] has the result of legitimating those voices.”³⁶ Hence, because they create meaning in a way unlike works already in the canon, the introduction of such texts into the canon of American literature demands a shift in its logic—a shift to a logic of inclusion (i.e., increasing symbolization).³⁷ Canon changes have been possible because new texts have been admitted under the principle of inclusion—and “inclusion” has become the watchword of canon change. The 1989 (third) edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, the most popular literary anthology, had to undergo a physical change in the volume in order to make room for new writers. In their discussion of the writers added to their canon (which is, clearly, what this anthology is meant to approximate), the editors claim that the “new authors expand and enrich” the volume, thus demonstrating, in their praise of the anthology, inclusion—and symbolization—of difference as the driving force behind their work.

Over the last three decades (but beginning in earnest in the late 1980s), this process of symbolization has proceeded, as the former canonical repressed has taken a place at the center of the new canon. The move-

ment for the rediscovery of forgotten works had its genesis in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We can see the contours of this movement most prominently in publishing history. Prior to that time, what are now considered major works in the American literary canon were out of print—and had been so for decades. As late as 1963, “The Yellow Wall-paper,” *The Awakening*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* were all out of print. In addition, all of the other works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Charles Chesnutt, and Zora Neale Hurston were also out of print. Just over thirty-five years ago, these four writers, who today are central canonical figures, were not even considered important enough to have *one* book in print among all of them. Between 1964 and 1974, all of the above-mentioned works came back into print. Putnam first published *The Awakening* in 1964; Gregg, Arno, and the University of Michigan all published *The Marrow of Tradition* in 1969; Fawcett World published *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1969; the Feminist Press published “The Yellow Wall-paper” in 1974. Some additional small presses began to publish these works in the following years, and then, in the mid-1980s and after, the major presses began to take an interest in them.

As of 1996, there were *twenty-two* editions of *The Awakening* in print, including those of Random House, Norton, McGraw-Hill, Knopf, Bantam, and Penguin (not exactly marginalized presses). The popularity of this novel in particular has increased so dramatically that it would be silly to continue to call it a “noncanonical” work; it has become part of the core of the nineteenth-century American literary canon. This represents an incredible shift from its status in 1963: out of print and almost completely ignored. Other changes have been perhaps less dramatic, but still quite apparent. In 1993, Penguin published a “Penguin Classics” edition of Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*. It also appeared in Dutton’s 1992 *The African-American Novel in the Age of Reaction: Three Classics*, and Vintage’s *Three Classic African-American Novels*. The emergence of these editions reveal Chesnutt’s increasing importance as a canonical figure. The new editions of most of Zora Neale Hurston’s work (her four novels, two books on folklore, and autobiography) published in 1990 by HarperCollins reveal much the same thing. Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” is now in print in seven editions (including a Bantam edition) and in the 1992 *Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*.³⁸ All four writers now also have a significant presence in current literary anthologies.

The presence of a work in a literary anthology is at the same time a sign of and an argument for its canonicity. That is, the anthology both

represents the contemporary canon and helps to form it. This latter, more active aspect, is not now openly avowed by the anthologies themselves, though it was in the past.³⁹ In the preface to the 1970 edition of Houghton Mifflin's *American Poetry and Prose*, the editors proclaimed, "*American Poetry and Prose* has helped to shape and inform the changing canon of our literature since publication of the first edition in 1925. It is our belief that it will continue to do so for the critical generation of students coming of age in the 1970's."⁴⁰ Though they continue to function in this active way, contemporary anthologies tend to stress only their role in "representing" the canon, rather than in creating and substantiating it. Nevertheless, the presence of a work in an anthology is an indicator, as much as its publication history, of its status in regard to the canon, especially after the explosion in popularity of anthologies in the 1980s. The publication of the first edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* in 1979 dramatically changed the face of literary studies, especially in college classrooms. It made many works—even complete novels—available in an accessible and handy form. The success of the *Norton* format can be measured simply by noting the emergence of several similar anthologies in its wake. The presence or nonpresence of a work in the *Norton Anthology* thus became more and more a significant factor in a work's canonical status, as the anthology's popularity grew. In the first edition of 1979, no works from Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Charles Chesnutt, or Zora Neale Hurston appeared in the *Norton Anthology*. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* did appear, as part of the anthology's attempt to redress critical neglect of women writers. In the second edition of 1985, however, "The Yellow Wall-paper" and one story by both Chesnutt and Hurston appear, and *The Awakening* is no longer presented as an example of the anthology's breadth of coverage, but is included without comment, accepted as a fully legitimized part of the canon.

The full canonization of major rediscovered figures such as Gilman, Chesnutt, Chopin, and Hurston occurs in the 1989 edition of the anthology. In this third edition, all of these writers have become staples of the anthology and accepted members of the canon it professes to represent, and they no longer garner any special mention as significant recent additions. In fact, the language of the preface undergoes a notable evolution from the 1985 edition. In the earlier (1985) edition, the editors claimed,

A major responsibility of this Norton Anthology is to redress the long neglect of woman writers in America. In the new edition,

almost eight hundred pages represent the work of thirty-five women (six more than in the first edition), from Davis to Walker. Another responsibility is to do justice to the contributions of black writers to American literature and culture; we include sixteen black authors who provide the opportunity to trace explicit discussions of the distinctly black experience in both polemical and imaginative writings.⁴¹

The language that suggests an ethical responsibility (redressing neglect and doing justice) disappears in the 1989 edition, and the emphasis turns to expansion and greater inclusion.⁴² This is significant because it clearly indicates a change in attitude: the inclusion of white women writers and African-American writers is not something exceptional that needs justifying in ethical terms. Equal “representation” has become the norm. This change in attitude in the *Norton Anthology*, one of the more conservative and traditional anthologies, leaves little doubt that a radical transformation has taken place.⁴³

Changes in the *Norton Anthology*, given its groundbreaking presence and its centrality in American Literature classrooms, illustrate the movement of the foundation of the canon, but it is *The Heath Anthology*, an anthology expressly created with concerns of multiculturalism in mind, which shows the real forward movement of canon change. The first edition of *The Heath Anthology* appeared in 1989, and its success prompted a second edition in 1993. Selections from Gilman, Chopin, Chesnut, and Hurston all appear in the first edition, which is not surprising, given the motives working in the creation of this anthology. Its project, according to an advertising pamphlet, is “a reconception of the very nature of literature in America,” an attempt to reconceive the canon in light of rediscoveries of heretofore “lost” writers and also a shifting emphasis in the values by which literary works are judged.⁴⁴ In light of this attempt, the creators of *The Heath Anthology* claim that “it is the truest picture available of our literature—the *real* American literature.”⁴⁵ The basis for this claim clearly lies in the breadth of the anthology’s symbolization, in its “project to reconstruct American literature” based on the idea of inclusion.⁴⁶

The third indicator of a changing literary climate (after print histories and anthologies) is the volume of criticism written about literary works. The number of critical articles and books written about a work indicates, probably more directly than a print history or presence in an anthology, the estimate of a work in the academy at large. Of the three, this is the area less directly influenced by market factors, the will of publishers, and

so forth. In 1960, according to the *MLA International Bibliography*, there were no works of criticism written about Gilman, Chopin, or Chesnutt, and one brief article written on Hurston. In 1990, there were eleven works on Gilman, thirteen on Chopin, five on Chesnutt, and seventeen on Hurston. Clearly, over this thirty-year period a dramatic change has taken place. It is also evident if we look at larger spans of time. Throughout the entire decade of the 1960s (and despite the fact that the recovery of Chesnutt and Chopin was already well underway),⁴⁷ there were no works of criticism written on Gilman, twelve on Chesnutt (including many introductions to republished editions of his books), eight on Chopin, and two on Hurston. The first *half* of the 1990s reveals a remarkably different climate: fifty-six works on Gilman, twenty-three on Chesnutt, one-hundred and thirty on Chopin, and one-hundred and forty-two on Hurston. This trend illustrates that the rediscoveries of these writers have been internalized by the academy, that they have become very much a part of what critics write about. The shift indicates most forcefully that these writers are no longer a part of the canonical repressed.

Through this massive effort to remember the repressed, what is necessarily missed is what the repressed reveals—its truth. The very act of remembering indicates a closing up of the unconscious. We can understand this through a reference to remembering dreams. For Freud, a dream offers us our unconscious desire, albeit in a disguised form. But there are, we might say, two different types of dreams—those we can remember and those we can't. In the latter, the dream-work (or, the functioning of symbolization) does not succeed in disguising a trauma well enough so that we can become conscious of it, whereas in the former, the disguise is effective in diffusing the trauma. In these two types of dreams, we should see a distinction between symbolization and repression. The "effective" dream offers us the real through, for instance, displacement or condensation: in a dream, my mother appears in the guise of my spouse. I can easily recount the dream, because it situates a trauma in a symbolic form. It is not necessarily the content of the displacement—spouse for mother—that diffuses the trauma, but the very form of the dream itself. Here, the dream parallels symbolization precisely: both function primarily not to disguise reality but to provide respite from a trauma or a threat.

Some dreams, however, even though they are symbolic by virtue of their form, nonetheless take us to an encounter with trauma, albeit through the mechanism of the symbol.⁴⁸ These are the dreams we are not all that eager to remember in the morning—so we repress. Like symbolization, repression also provides a respite, but of a fundamentally different order,

because the threat repressed is such that it cannot be revealed, even through the mechanism of the symbol. With repression, I do not simply remember the dream in a distorted form, but I don't remember it at all. This indicates a threat or a trauma such that it can't be symbolized away, which is why both Freud and Lacan place such importance on what a patient forgets. In forgetting lies the key to trauma. In his *Seminar I*, Lacan suggests that "the most significant dream would be the dream that has been completely forgotten, one about which the subject couldn't say anything."⁴⁹ Where there is repression, there is a threat so dangerous that it cannot be spoken or recounted. When nothing is forgotten, however, this indicates that the threat has been symbolized, that repression is no longer necessary. This is precisely the process that Freud describes the ego orchestrating in the *Project*: the ego subdues the intensity of the trauma through what Freud calls "side-cathexes," or what we might see as connections to signifiers. He says,

If the trauma (experience of pain) occurs—the very first [traumas] escape the ego altogether—at a time when there is already an ego, there is to begin with a release of unpleasure, but simultaneously the ego is at work too, creating side-cathexes. If the cathexis of the memory is repeated, the unpleasure is repeated too, but the ego-facilitations are there already as well; experience shows that the release [of unpleasure] is less the second time, until, after further repetition, it shrivels up to the intensity of a signal acceptable to the ego.⁵⁰

Through the process of symbolization (linking the trauma up with more and more signifiers or pathways of facilitation), we do away with the need for continued repression. This end of repression means that the unconscious no longer speaks, that where it was once open, it is now closed. When the trauma can be symbolized, it no longer remains a trauma, and it no longer speaks the truth of our being. It is this end of a trauma—this closing of the unconscious—that we can see in the canonization of "The Yellow Wall-paper," *The Awakening*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Today, these works no longer dwell in obscurity, but proliferate on course syllabi, as dissertation subjects, and amid publisher's catalogues. The more they proliferate, the less they speak qua unconscious, simply because symbolization always silences the unconscious, closes it up.

That said, it would be disingenuous to lament the closing up of the unconscious, because without its closing we never have access to it. If the

unconscious did not close, the four works we are discussing wouldn't be in print or available for discussion at all. But as we move further and further away from the moment of this closing—the moment of the re-discovery of these works—we risk losing sight of the opening altogether, obscuring the fact that these works were once traumatic, though they no longer are. We risk, to put it in pseudo-Heideggerian terms, forgetting the earlier forgetting. The more that we symbolize these works (publish them, read them, write about them—in short, canonize them), the less it becomes imaginable that they were ever traumatic, and they become so commonplace that whatever edge they once had becomes thoroughly dulled. Soon, they come to seem just like other works written at the time, part of a historical continuity, rather than a disruption of it. This process has occurred with each of the four works under discussion here. Where once critics saw disruption, today they see continuity. Where once they saw the Real, today they see a symbolic chain. Before getting to the individual examples of this process, however, we should first look at the moments through which, as a rule, all traumatic discoveries move.

The discovery—or rediscovery—of something traumatic typically moves through three different moments: they are, according to Lacan, the instant of the glance, the time for comprehending, and the moment for concluding.⁵¹ First, in the instant of the glance, the traumatic discovery appears as a purely contingent happening: we know that what we have uncovered is important, but we don't know or fail to see where that importance lies. At this point, in other words, we know only that the material is traumatic, but not why it's traumatic—or how it changes anything. Here, discovery has the status of the Real. This is why the initial discoverer is always blind to her or his own discovery: the brightness of the point of discovery makes it impossible to discern the discovery's impact. Second, in the time for comprehending, after we become thoroughly familiar with the traumatic material, it loses its traumatic edge and becomes indistinguishable from the rest of the symbolic network in which it is embedded. The traumatic Real of the initial discovery gets symbolized, integrated into an already existing narrative structure. Here, we actually become overacquainted with the discovery, thereby allowing it to become common sense—something everyone recognizes and thus something that can't possibly be traumatic. Our familiarity becomes a barrier to knowing the importance of the discovery, to recognizing the trauma.⁵² Third, however, in the moment for concluding, we are able to see the trauma once again, but this time we can understand it, grasp its significance, because it is no longer traumatic. Like the initial response, the third moment also sees something traumatic in the material, though

it also sees that trauma within a symbolic locus.⁵³ At this point, we are able to see precisely how the traumatic discovery represents something new. In this sense, the moment for concluding owes a debt to the time for comprehending because the way in which it obscures the trauma can point us in the direction of that trauma's significance. Even more important, the time for comprehending also provides distance from the trauma through its symbolization, and this distance offers us room to make sense of it. By dimming the initial brightness of the traumatic discovery, the time for comprehending allows us to look at it without being blinded, so that we can grasp its significance.

We can see a concrete example of this process in, of all places, Freud's discovery of psychoanalysis and the unconscious. Initially, of course, this discovery had a definite traumatic edge, undercutting the priority of consciousness (and its supposed self-transparency) in the human subject. Freud's comment to Jung as they were arriving in America—"They don't realize we're bringing them the plague"—indicates that he himself was well aware of the traumatic import of his discovery. Instead of being a "plague" to America, however, it would be more accurate to say that the plague worked in the other direction. American-centered ego psychology managed to dull the traumatic edge of Freud's discovery, rendering it palatable, not so plague-like. In this way, psychoanalysis lost its radical edge and became a vehicle for normalization. It was in response to this situation that Jacques Lacan authored his "return to Freud," which aimed at restoring the traumatic dimension of the Freudian discovery by emphasizing the way in which that discovery involved a complete rethinking of subjectivity. In this way, Lacan returned the difficulty to Freud and at the same time made clear precisely where the trauma of the Freudian discovery lay.

Lacan repeats the Freudian discovery, and this repetition isolates its original trauma. For Lacan, the traumatic importance of the discovery lies in its displacement of the ego from the center of the subject, its rejection of the priority of the ego. Not coincidentally, Lacan latches on to the dimension of Freudian thought that ego psychology explicitly downplays and minimizes. Emphasizing the structural model of the psyche that Freud developed in the 1920s, ego psychology pictures analysis as a process of allowing the ego to "regain" the upper hand over the unconscious. Buttrussing and strengthening the ego become, in this therapeutic universe, the most important contributions of psychoanalysis. Thus, ego psychology strips psychoanalysis of its danger, its traumatic force, and works to normalize it (just as it works to normalize subjects in therapy). Nonetheless, the very focus of this normalization—what ego

psychology chooses to emphasize (the ego) and deemphasize (the unconscious)—paves the way for the Lacanian return to Freud. In response to the obfuscations of ego psychology, Lacan grasps just what it was about Freud's discovery that was traumatic—its displacement of the ego and its grasp of the split in the subject.⁵⁴ Ego psychology, though it does its best to efface the traumatic impact of the discovery of psychoanalysis, ends up making it possible for Lacan to identify the significance of that traumatic impact, to locate it in its specificity. Through this example, we can see precisely how the time for comprehending (the obscuring of its traumatic impact) is crucial for the moment for concluding (which grasps the meaning of the trauma).

Discoveries have to occur twice, and they must do so for two reasons. First, after an initial discovery, there necessarily occurs a period in which that discovery becomes normalized and symbolized, in which its importance is lost. Second, when a discovery first makes itself felt, it appears as a contingent occurrence—as an irruption of the Real—and it is impossible to grasp where, precisely, the significance of the discovery lies. This is why Hegel insists, in the *Philosophy of History*, that all revolutions must occur twice. He says, “In all periods of the world a political revolution is sanctioned in men's opinions, when it repeats itself. Thus Napoleon was twice defeated, and the Bourbons twice expelled. By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency, becomes a real and ratified existence.”⁵⁵ To put it in Lacanian terms, in its first manifestation we perceive a revolution as Real, then we symbolize it (thereby obscuring its radicality), and finally we see the way in which it has effected a fundamental change upon symbolic relations (that it has not simply been assimilated). We can see a similar trajectory in the critical history of the four rediscovered works under discussion here, except that in each case we remain at the stage of symbolization, in which critics are intent on denying the traumatic edge of these works and are determined to demonstrate their continuity with the prevailing symbolic network.

When readers and critics first rediscovered these works, they greeted them with great fanfare. The initial response was to celebrate the radicality (i.e., the trauma that they represented to the traditional canon) implicit in the mere existence of the works. The first rediscoverers grasped that they had access to material that had long been repressed—and thus which had said something that people were reluctant to hear. The importance of the rediscoveries, in the eyes of the initial rediscoverers, was entirely political and consisted in bringing forth voices that had previously been silenced. Not only did these voices represent new perspec-