

**Beyond Monodisciplinarity  
and Towards an Integrative  
Framework for the  
Teaching of “Literature”  
and “Civilisation”**

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**Abstract**

*The proposed paper probes into the practical ways in which the two subjects of study, hitherto taught as wholly independent modules each contained within rigid boundaries, could be rendered interdependent under the LMD system. It establishes that “Literature” and “Civilization” are more rewarding for both student and teacher when taught within a fully integrated framework, involving scrutiny of matters from different perspectives, by gauging distinction, comparison, and contrast in order to attain clarification, reconciliation, and synthesis. The proposed integrative approach renders the text the object around which convergence between the two options is formed.*

Despite the evident distinctions between “literature” and “civilisation” as completely autonomous “administrative” units in the English curriculum, the symbiosis between them has become unavoidable in Algerian academia, especially with the onset of the LMD system whose workability rests on integrative teaching. The proposed paper probes into the practical ways in which the two subjects of study, hitherto taught as wholly independent modules each contained within rigid boundaries, could be rendered interdependent. Literature and civilisation are more rewarding for both student and teacher when taught within a fully

**Résumé**

*L’objectif de cette contribution est de fournir des éléments pratiques avec une optique interdisciplinaire à travers laquelle les modules de « civilisation » et de « littérature » du cursus de licence d’anglais dans le système LMD sont intégrés. Par le biais du texte, l’interaction de ces deux unités aide l’enseignant à localiser l’épistémologie commune de convergence et encourage chez l’apprenant l’esprit à contextualiser et à globaliser.*

integrated framework, involving scrutiny of matters from different perspectives, by gauging distinction, comparison, and contrast to attain clarification, reconciliation, and synthesis. Maintaining the traditional monodisciplinary constraints, has detrimental pedagogical consequences as it entails the exposure of the learner to only a one-dimensional knowledge of either subject. Interdisciplinary approach, on the other hand, helps the teacher to find the needed unity and synthesis, and to locate the “common epistemology of convergence” between literature and civilisation within a unifying framework that encourages integration of thought, freedom of investigation, and drive for individual initiatives. In all this, the text becomes the object around which convergence between the two options is formed.

The new reality now in the making in Algerian academia renders both the integrative approach and interdisciplinary programs indispensable. This restructuring both extends and expands the existing programmes, consequently entailing a rethinking of the boundaries hitherto erected between disciplines. In the English departments, the teaching of civilisation and literature as separate and fragmented divisions has therefore become quite anachronistic. More than ever before, the integrative approach is imposing itself as the academic guarantor of mutuality, interaction, and enrichment amongst disciplines. I try in the present contribution to put forward some premises whereby the two options can be integrated within the projected American Studies unit.

Interdisciplinarity provides the mechanism whereby the two categories are not only brought together for thematic and linguistic convenience, but are also propelled into convergence around a new entity which is the text. Roland Barthes’ views on interdisciplinarity are quite pertinent to such a contention:

*Interdisciplinary studies...do not merely confront already constituted disciplines.... In order to do interdisciplinary work, it is not enough to take a subject (a theme) and to arrange two or three sciences around it. Interdisciplinary study consists in creating a new object, which belongs to no one. The Text is, I believe, such object (Barthes 72).*

Interdisciplinarity, with its synergic qualities, has in fact traditionally appealed to academics and researchers who celebrate a kind of intellectuality that promotes pluralism in knowledge and who are opposed to disciplinary limitation and overspecialization. This is not only because of the ability of interdisciplinarity to render possible

the achievement of “unity and synthesis,” but also because of a set of other purposes: to provide answers to intricate questions that no single discipline can explain, to present broad perspectives to specific matters, to establish parallels between different disciplines and professions, and to offer solutions to complex problems that no single discipline can solve. The American Studies teacher and researcher can only be drawn towards the interdisciplinary framework. Indeed, American Studies can be considered synonymous with interdisciplinarity; it crosses rigid disciplinary boundaries to connect—through the text—a wide range of areas that can be regarded as natural or potential allies. Such areas include history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, politics, geography, psychology, visual culture, economics, literature, literary theory, and textual criticism.

Since exhaustiveness in a work of this space and time limitation is beyond reach, this study has opted for selectiveness in outlining the interdisciplinary possibilities by highlighting the themes in literature, history and politics which have proven most salient where the two modules could be rendered complementary (merged or intermingled) away from the confining nature of specialized units and beyond any established canons. This is while bearing in mind the significance of intertextuality in the production of the literary text which considers the literary product more a result of interaction and dialogue with other texts than an act of genius by its author.

Without being a manifesto for the contention that the literary text remains valueless unless it mirrors the contextual, cultural circumstances behind its creation, the paper sustains quite unequivocally the premise that civilisation and literature pay more dividend for the teacher / student when taught as a fully integrated entity and freed from the traditional rigid dogma of “disciplinary” identity.

Undeniably, the intellectual climate (i.e. trends in sociology, psychology, philosophy, theology, science, and technology)—perhaps more than the socio-economic and political realities—do a good deal to enrich the literary imagination of a nation. This idea is voiced quite eloquently by Matthew Arnold when he argues that “the grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis” and that “its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual... atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas” (Arnold 22).<sup>1</sup> To synthesize is indeed to harmonize socio-economic, political, and cultural

circumstances with the literary product. Interestingly enough, synthesis can also be the task which the teacher of American Studies is expected to undertake in order to secure harmony between these hitherto separated disciplines. Selection of the appropriate text represents the first step in any synthesizing endeavour.

## I

American Literature is quite unique in being endowed with the quality of being vitally linked to the issue of national identity. American writers were expected to meet the challenge of producing a literature that was totally independent from colonial antecedents. A national literature would therefore effectively contribute to the boosting of the aspiration for independence from the British Crown and nurture the longing for intellectual self-sufficiency.<sup>2</sup>

The first authentically *American* literary documents are in fact believed to be Captain John Smith's reports of New-World explorations and settlements which appeared in 1607. These reports were to do a good deal to motivate the influx of Puritan "pilgrims" who swarmed towards the newly discovered continent with a confident forecast of assured self-fulfillment.<sup>3</sup>

Smith's reports perhaps stand as evidence that literature represents a force which often contributes to the overall shaping of the civilisation of a nation. The reverse of this—i.e. where literature is itself shaped by contextual circumstances—can be clearly seen in Ann Bradstreet's poems and in William Bradford's writings. Style, which is expected to be an internal quality in the literary text, can also at times be dictated by the general socio-cultural reality. In these two writers' works, style is visibly marked by the conception of simplicity advocated by the Puritan outlook. Bradford, for example, advised neophytes in the craft of writing to avoid "silken language" and instead resort to "admirable plainesse." He declared that he would write the history of the Plymouth Plantation in "a plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth in all things" (Mc. Michael 10).

## II

The first seeds of American democratic thought were harnessed by the ideas of some universal theorists, thinkers, and philosophers such as the Englishman John Locke through his "social contract theory" and the Frenchman Baron Montesquieu through his doctrine of

“separation of power” together with the schemes of “checks and balances” devised by John Adams and others.<sup>4</sup> All this offered the American independence movement the intellectual capital to challenge the British Monarchy's legitimacy to continue to govern the American colonies and to make a serious bid for independence towards the creation of a new sovereign republic.

Equally important was the role played by the pamphleteer Thomas Paine whose *The Rights of Man* did a good deal to awaken American political consciousness towards the ultimate goal of American independence. Through this, he launched a scathing attack on the British monarchical system of government by exposing its drawbacks especially by attacking the principle of hereditary rule.<sup>5</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson also articulated the notion of democracy but in a slightly different way. In his *Essay on Politics*, he insists on the concept of “good-will” in politics which he sees as a prerequisite for the establishment of a workable and egalitarian system of government: “governments have their origins in the moral identity of man.” Taking his defence of democracy farther, he opines that “good-will” gives governments a “moral identity” and “separates the individual from all party, and unites him at the same time to the race.”

### III

Historical speculation, such as the concept of “Manifest Destiny,” constituted a vision for the future which the Puritans helped to establish as one of the major political precepts that would eventually largely shape American thought. Such concept is closely linked to what has been branded as the “American Dream.” The teacher of American Studies is to take notice of the fact that understanding concepts of this kind certainly helps in the general endeavour to comprehend the fabric of the “laissez-faire” doctrine.<sup>6</sup>

This doctrine, upon which the capitalist system has been built, has marked America's national existence from its very beginnings. A widespread tendency to celebrate this precept would henceforth gain momentum with scores of writers praising the go-ahead spirit and the “rags-to-riches” pattern. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* amply illustrates this in its idealization of the self-made man who apotheosizes the American dream of upward mobility. This wave was to be strongly sensed in the wake of the Civil War with the rise of what was to be branded as the “Gilded Age,” and the large-scale rapid

transformations it provoked in the American way of life. And this can be caught in Carnegie's flamboyant statement "... the old nations of the earth creep on at a snail's pace; the Republic thunders past with the rush of an express" (qtd. in Arnold 201).

But, capitalism has also been appraised differently. Henry David Thoreau exposed other facets of this system offering an alternative to Adam Smith's "supply and demand" theory; it is also a severe indictment of the economics of materialism which, to him, thwart man's aspiration towards liberty.<sup>7</sup>

Mark Twain, who himself coined the phrase "Gilded Age," wrote in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner a novel bearing the same title to satirize the process of get-rich-quick and reveal the political corruption of the Grant Administration. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* drew its substance from the hardships inflicted upon the immigrant employees and their families to provide graphic descriptions of what he sees as "the home of oppression and injustice, a nightmare of misery, an inferno of suffering, a human hell, a jungle of wild beasts ..." (Downs 349). And, in turn, once published, it itself served as a piece of evidence to incriminate the unscrupulous meat packers and to strengthen the hands of the Roosevelt Administration in its anti-Trust campaign, namely to push Congress to pass the famous Pure Food and Drug Act and the Beef Inspection Act which would revolutionize socio-economic legislation in not more than six months after the appearance of the novel (Hill 164).

Other writers chose to turn towards the writing of utopias in order to invert the situations in which they lived. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* is a utopian novel whose hero goes to sleep for more than a century. He wakes up in the year 2000 to find the city of Boston an agreeable place, purified of all blemishes which used to plague it in the past. This novel expresses the dissatisfaction of many Americans with the hard conditions of labour, the stifling grip of monopoly, and the widespread political corruption. The influence of this work went far beyond the immediate appreciation of professional readership. It in fact played a major role in the formation of nationalist clubs in the 1890's and ultimately in the rise of the politically influential "Populist Party." Bellamy continued to represent a major force in the reformist movement. His *Equality* (1897) helped to foster "an attitude towards social change" which would inspire politicians

well into the twentieth century (Winson 41). The Franklin Roosevelt Administration and its “New Deal” programme was no exception.

The capitalist order has in fact continued to be omnipresent in American thought inspiring countless literary figures to look into man’s immediate moral and socio-economic preoccupations. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is a direct comment on how capitalism damages the nucleus of human relationships and stands at the origin of intense human tragedies.

#### IV

The “Pilgrims’ progress” and Westward expansion are vitally linked to the themes of Democracy and Capitalism. The ambitious believers in the pursuit of happiness embarked upon a conquest of new lands in order to secure better chances for self-realization. Whilst endeavouring to keep away from the now exhausted old world and to fulfil a life of promising potentialities in the new world, the pioneers—in their march westward—inflicted pernicious damages, namely the extermination and expropriation of the Indian population and the irrational exploitation of the nation’s natural bounty.

The “frontier *motif*,” which represents a significant driving force behind a large part of American literature, has developed to become almost a metaphor in the nation's culture. James Fenimore Cooper in his *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans* exposes the ugly side of the westward expansion. Highlighting the purely economic motives behind such movement, he pinpoints its social and moral consequences on the indigenous community.

The other aspect of the opening of the frontier lies in the aggravation of the plight of the farmer. The influx of the newly invented machinery boosted the pace of agricultural production almost to uncontrollable levels. And what was meant to be a blessing for the farmers turned out to be a curse, driving scores of them to bankruptcy as a result of the colossal surplus of goods that the market could not absorb. Hamlin Garland addressed himself to the plight of the farmers and to what he once called the “mystic quality connected with free land” which “has always allured men into the west”; this, to him, was no more than “a myth” (Holloway 33). *Main Travelled Roads* emanates from this very context where the farmer is shown as a victim of huge debts which he could never pay off, and as helpless in the face of wild changes.

V

Wild changes also characterized antebellum American reality where the peculiar institution of slavery collided head-on with the rising spirit of White democracy; and where the feudal system, on which the plantation economy rested, came to jeopardize the very basics of the democratic spirit upon which the American republic had been built.

Southern planters ardently defended the plantation system and with it the institution of human bondage which was highly rentalist by "King Cotton." To them, the fall of this system would sharpen competition in the labour market, rendering labourers no more than "wage-slaves." This view in fact became a major premise widely cherished by the proponents of slavery such as Gordon Bennett whose *New York Herald* went to great lengths in juxtaposing life in the slave quarters with that in the English slums of industrial cities like Liverpool. To him, balance was easily tilted towards American slavery:

The slave lived like a prince. He had his cabin, neat, clean, and weather-proof: he had his own garden patch, over which he was lord paramount; he was well-fed, well-lodged, well-clothed, and rarely overworked; sleek, happy contented, enjoying his many holidays with gusto, he lived to a great age (qtd. in Parrington 104-5).

This argument served as the intellectual capital of a long wave of pro-slavery literary works. The most illustrative example is perhaps William J. Grayson's "The Hireling and the Slave." It offers a portrayal of the life of the wage-slave confronted with a hostile environment. Its second part draws a magnificently picturesque image of the life of the "bond-slave" by demonstrating the easy-going type of country life. He then turns to Harriet Beecher Stowe on whom he launches a scathing attack branding her as "a moral scavenger" who "snuffs up pollution with a pious air" (qtd. in Parrington 105).

Grayson's attitude was prompted by the threat of the abolitionist movement which he saw as being voiced through publications like Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Drawing a good deal from the slave narratives such as Frederick Douglas's *Autobiography*, Stowe's novel hammered into the minds of skeptics the bitter reality of human bondage, offering insights into the day-to-day suffering of the bondsmen and their aspiration to be free. This aspiration is given voice in the different slave cultural forms which were mostly a mixture of European and African cultural norms (Holloway 22).

Songs and folk-tales, which denounced slavery and made folk heroes of the rebellious slaves, were part of their multi-faceted resistance to the “Peculiar Institution.” The praise chanted by the Louisiana slaves for their folk hero St. Mala, who rebelled against his master, is an illuminating case in point (Blassingame 52). By shouting, singing, and preaching, the slaves expressed their despair and discontent with the institution that was behind their dehumanization, showing unequivocal desire for freedom contrary to the “Sambo” propaganda promulgated by the slavocratic oligarchy. Stopping short of overtly attacking Slavery, the folk singers intelligently and subtlety denounced the *status quo*.

This type of Afro-American literature, which can be branded as that of social and moral protest, was to be carried beyond the age of Slavery and well into the twentieth century; it has become almost a manifesto for the Community’s disenchantment with the excesses of the white-dominated Establishment and as a cry against black invisibility.

The teacher of American Studies certainly finds ample material to explore with his/her students in addressing himself to the theme of Afro-American protest be it political or literary. The Harlem Renaissance era heralded an Afro-American cultural flowering especially with the formation of a non-white audience, stimulating writers of that era and of the later decades to protest against their fellow men’s socio-economic and political marginalization. Margaret Walker’s poem “For My People” (1937) and Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) perhaps epitomize both the Afro-Americans’ new literary spirit and their wide political awakening which can easily be integrated in the same American Studies course.

## VI

The post-World War II era, which witnessed a rather unprecedented surge of American interventionism and of American adherence to military alliances, also stimulated an impressive proliferation of the socio-political war novels. Such novels were by and large conceived as microcosms or miniature versions of American society where the military institution epitomizes supremacy; where the domineering army commander is perceived as the oppressor; and where the soldier—who is brave enough to face up to these

paradoxes—deserves the status of a “hero.” The struggle, which is inherent within the structure of the American military institution, is portrayed as one between the administrative apparatus and the individual rather than as between the American army and the enemy.

More often than not, the war novel advances the conviction that the oppressive quality of the military institution does not apply only to exceptional cases like war. It in fact goes beyond such cases to envelop the whole fabric of American life. War novelists like Ned Calmer highlight this idea by drawing an analogy between the military institution and the business institution. In his *The Strange Land* (1950), he pictures a group of American generals sitting comfortably away from the front and giving orders to helpless soldiers from a safe distance. One of the characters likens the situation to that of a “board of directors meeting” and he exclaims: “How much the whole war run like a vast corporate enterprise by groups of men like these sitting in comfortably warm rooms after hearty meals...!” (133).

Other war novelists even go as far as expressing their fear of the real dangers which were believed to come from within the American system rather than from without. Norman Mailer in his *The Naked and the Dead* (1951), attributes the qualities of tyranny, cruelty, and lack of sensibility to the General whose expression “was very close to the complacent and hard appearance of any number of American senators and businessmen” (36).

Disillusionment and loss of faith in the American democratic ideal also quite visibly mark the war novel. The attitude of hearty patriotism proves to have failed to grasp the motives of the soldier who tends to defy the U.S. military institution by shunning away from the war front. This attitude is mainly the outcome of the waning belief in the chivalric brotherhood which is traditionally believed to be an essence of the combat spirit. It is also the outcome of the growing conviction that the individual is evaluated only according to what he achieves in the name of his country. This is amply illustrated in Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (1961) where the major protagonist—a bombardier soldier—seeks circuitous means to evade combat.

Literature written in protest against war is not limited to the novel as a genre. The 1960s were years in which poets got involved in political activism. In 1966, for example, Robert Bly and David Ray founded the association “Poets Against the War” which campaigned against the American policy in Vietnam (Hallberg 8). Such poets were inspired by “intellectual liberalism” which, as a movement of the

1960s, attributed the understanding of contemporary political issues to purely intellectual bases rather than to political manifestations.

James F. Mersmann asserts that post-World War II poetry is mostly Vietnam poetry.<sup>8</sup> Most of the poems of this period launched harsh attacks on the corruption of the political institution in the United States. Lyndon Johnson's false promises concerning his Vietnam policy in the Presidential elections of 1964 provoked poets like Robert Duncan to dismiss him as immoral (Duncan 21). Duncan unhesitatingly branded American political and military leaders as "liars and masters of lie." Robert Bly even described the U. S. government as a faulty source of information and democracy as a presumptuous, misleading notion (Bly 28).

As it draws largely from the general socio-economic, political, and cultural settings of the American reality, this poetry has been branded as "culture poetry." As a literary variation, it further fosters the premise that the modules of civilisation and literature are by far of more moment to the teacher / student's intellectual experience when integrated and rendered complementary than when arbitrarily dissociated.

Interdisciplinarity, by its integrative nature, is simply the key to "unity of knowledge" between literature and civilisation which are two categories interacting within the same domain—American Studies. Regarded as a new mode of knowing, interdisciplinarity sets the ground for a much needed reunification of action and thought to meet the current pedagogical and social mutations in Algeria and elsewhere. As it has been demonstrated in the present paper, the application of the interdisciplinary approach renders possible the dialogisation of recurrent themes in the two categories through a viable selection of texts. Away from the myth of American exceptionalism, interdisciplinarity—which crosses boundaries—also gives way to the possibility to interconnect less recurrent areas and subjects and also to present unheard voices in both options.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This idea is also articulated by Karl Shapiro in his *In Defense of Ignorance*. New York: Random House, 1960. 22.

<sup>2</sup>See Benjamin T. Spencer. *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign*. Syracuse: Syracuse U. P., 1957.

<sup>3</sup>See Bradford Smith. *Captain John Smith: His Life and Legend*. New York: Norton, 1953.

<sup>4</sup>See Alfred H. Kelly and Winfred A. Harbinson, eds. *The American Constitution: Its Origins and Development*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1970; see also Michael J. Heale, *The Making of American Politics*. London: Longman, 1977.

<sup>5</sup>See Edward Foner. *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. New York, 1976.

<sup>6</sup>See Susan P. Lee, and Peter Passell, eds. *A New Economic View of American History*. Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1979.

<sup>7</sup>See Henry David Thoreau. *Walden or Life in the Woods*. Washington DC.: Ladder Edition, repr. 1985.

<sup>8</sup>See James F. Mersmann. *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War*. Lawrence: Kansas U.P., 1974; see also Walter Lowenfels, ed., *Where is Vietnam?* New York: Doubleday, 1967.

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