

MEREDITH L. MCGILL

# Transatlantic Address: Washington Allston and the Limits of Romanticism

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING PHASES OF JEROME MCGANN'S CAREER HAS been his recent turn to writing about nineteenth-century American literature. One might say this turn isn't altogether recent: his 1993 book on "The Visible Language of Modernism" takes its title from Stephen Crane's *Black Riders and Other Lines* (1895) and includes a sustained meditation on Emily Dickinson's investment in the visual aspect of her writing.<sup>1</sup> But since 2014, when he published two books—*A New Republic of Letters*, which includes substantial chapters on Edgar Allan Poe and James Fenimore Cooper, and *The Poet Edgar Allan Poe*—the pendulum of McGann's attention has swung decisively in a transatlantic direction.<sup>2</sup>

This shift is particularly welcome to those who study nineteenth-century American literature—and especially American poetry—within a transatlantic context. A prominent Romanticist's fascination with American texts and cultural formations does much to counter asymmetries in prestige and in critical attention that have long structured the transatlantic literary field. Admittedly, most students of nineteenth-century literature on both sides of the Atlantic have been content to write national histories that rarely, if ever, intersect with one another. Critics have addressed the great themes of Atlantic history, recognizing the importance of transatlantic trade and the transformative effects of the forced and voluntary migration of peoples, but they have done so largely from within the confines of nationally framed literary traditions. Indeed, as I noted over a decade ago in *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange* (2008), it would be difficult to underestimate the sway of the idea of a national literature over the discipline of literary study, structuring as it still does undergraduate

1. McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

2. In addition to *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) and *The Poet Edgar Allan Poe: Alien Angel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), McGann has published numerous essays on American literature and culture; for a representative sample, see entries in the bibliography.

instruction, graduate training, and professional formation.<sup>3</sup> A tacit or explicit literary nationalism continues to organize departments of English despite the fact that complexly intertwining histories of language and culture, publication, and literary form tug against the often unquestioned binary division of the field into British and American literatures.

While specialists in nineteenth-century Anglophone literature share an atavistic, nationalist commitment to our materials of study, asymmetries of attention rooted in Romantic-era hierarchies of value continue to ensure that, while Americanists must grapple with British literary precedent and evaluate the literature they study against the backdrop of the dominant tradition, Romanticists and Victorianists are free to ignore contemporaneous literary production in Great Britain's former American colonies. Even important recent scholarship that boldly reconceives nineteenth-century British literature in transnational terms repeats this omission: Manu Samriti Chander's *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (2017) and Jason R. Rudy's *Imagined Homelands: British Poetry in the Colonies* (2017) track the colonial uptake of British poetic forms and poetic ideals in India, British Guiana, Australia, Canada, and South Africa, but omit Britain's former colony, the newly independent United States, from their field of vision.<sup>4</sup> In *Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature* (2016), Daniel Hack examines the complexity of African American writers' engagement with a broad range of British texts, but treats African American literature largely in isolation from larger trends in American literary history.<sup>5</sup>

The rising prestige of the American novel in the twentieth century has ensured that numerous comparative studies embrace the work of writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, and James,<sup>6</sup> but the exclusion of

3. Meredith L. McGill, ed., *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 1–12.

4. Chander, *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (Lanham, MD: Bucknell University Press, 2017); Rudy, *Imagined Homelands: British Poetry in the Colonies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

5. Hack, *Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

6. Important early criticism comparing nineteenth-century American and British novels includes Jonathan Arac, *Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979) and Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). The turn to the twenty-first century saw a resurgence of interest in transatlantic approaches, inspired in part by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), which put the slave trade at the center of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Atlantic culture. *Symbiosis – A Journal of Transatlantic Literary and Cultural Relations* was founded in 1997; field-defining work from this era includes Paul Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and*

nineteenth-century American poetry from serious transnational consideration—outside of the work of our two proto-modernists, Whitman and Dickinson—is striking.<sup>7</sup> One can easily lay the blame for this omission at the feet of Americanist critics who tend to regard Americanness in poetry as discernible only in a break with British poetic norms. We have only recently begun to develop a critical language nuanced and flexible enough to describe the heady mix of cosmopolitanism and provinciality, originality and imitation, postcoloniality, and national and imperial ambition that characterizes metrically regular, formally recognizable American verse. Americanists tend to be embarrassed by the bombastic claims made by nineteenth-century poets and critics who proclaimed the virtues of now-obscure American poems, but it is worth remembering that literary nationalism was itself a transatlantic discourse; there was Young Italy, Young Germany, and Young England before there was a Young America.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, British reviewers had a stake in perpetuating

---

*the Formation of American Literature, 1730–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); and Susan Manning, *Fragments of Union: Making Connections in Scottish and American Writing* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). In 2007 Johns Hopkins University Press published *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, edited by Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); in 2012 Cambridge University Press published an essay collection surveying the field: *Transatlantic Literary Studies, 1660–1830*, edited by Eve Tavor Bannet and Susan Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Very little of this outpouring of transatlantic scholarship considers British, Caribbean, or American poetry.

7. In addition to the essays collected in *The Traffic in Poems*, treatments of nineteenth-century American poetry within a transatlantic frame include Virginia Jackson, “‘Our Poets’: William Cullen Bryant and the White Romantic Lyric,” *New Literary History* 49, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 521–51; and “American Romanticism, Again,” *Studies in Romanticism* 55, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 319–46. See also the essays collected in the special issue of *Victorian Poetry* 43, no. 2 (2005) on “American Victorian Poetry,” edited by Jackson. Tricia Lootens’s *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017) shows how taking American poetry seriously can enrich our understanding of Victorian verse; African American poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper remains a touchstone for Lootens throughout this study and the culmination of her argument about race, politics, and the figure of the poetess. Scholars of British literature who have studied the popularity of American verse in Great Britain and British verse in the United States include Katie McGettigan, “Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and the Transatlantic Materials of American Literature,” *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 89, no. 4 (2017): 727–59; Kristie Blair, “Transatlantic Tractarians: Victorian Poetry and the Church of England in America,” *Victorian Studies* 55, no. 2 (2013): 286–98; and Joel Pace, who has written widely on the American reception of Wordsworth and co-edited with Matthew Scott *Wordsworth in American Literary Culture* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

8. Nineteenth-century cultural nationalist movements with a range of political commitments adopted the prefix “Young,” beginning with Young Italy and Young

the idea that former colonists could not manage to produce poetry worth reading. British periodicals regularly reviewed American collections of poetry, sometimes with savage glee, cementing their sense of the sophistication of British verse by comparison. For example, an essay in *The Foreign Quarterly Review* evaluating Rufus Wilmot Griswold's groundbreaking anthology *The Poets and Poetry of America* (1842) (along with four other books by American poets), begins with a supercilious, blanket dismissal: "American Poetry always reminds us of the advertisements in newspapers, headed 'The best Substitute for Silver:—if it be not the genuine thing, it 'looks just as handsome, and is miles out of sight cheaper.'" For decades, in literary periodicals with widely ranging political and religious commitments, British critics lambasted American poets and poetry for being imitative, rule-bound, and insufficiently national: it is "rather the echo of poetry than poetry itself" (*Monthly Review*, 1832); "there is nothing [in this volume] that might not have been written by an Englishman. We can trace in it no thought or image to what we should conceive to be the moral or scenic influences of America" (*Literary Examiner*, 1835); American poems "are laboriously correct, but undaring and tame . . . [marking] the uneasy anxiety after *English* which guided their compositions. Like elegant translations, or accurate copies, these writings please and satisfy but do not move us" (*Dublin University Magazine*, 1843). That much of this critique is recognizable as self-loathing tends to sharpen rather than undermine a critic's confidence in his own judgment: "the transatlantic poets give us back our own coin, thinned and deteriorated by the transit" (*The Athenaeum*, 1846); American poetry displays "the errors of our own art and criticism exaggerated"; it is "an example of what poetry ought not to be" (*North British Review*, 1852).<sup>10</sup> Reviewing American poetry offers British critics an opportunity to reflect on the grounds of national identity

---

Germany in the early 1830s, followed by Young Ireland and Young England in the early 1840s. On the relation of mid-1840s American literary nationalism—loosely centered around John O'Sullivan's New York monthly, *Democratic Review*—to these European movements, see Edward L. Widmer, *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58–63.

9. "Article 1," *The Foreign Quarterly Review* 32, no. 64 (January 1844): 291–324, esp. 291.

10. Review of *Poems by William Cullen Bryant, an American*, *The Monthly Review* (April 1832): 490; review of N. P. Willis, *Melanie and Other Poems*, *The Literary Examiner* (April 19, 1835): 244; "The Poets and Poetry of America," *Dublin University Magazine* 22, no. 128 (August 1843): 230; review of Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven, and Other Poems*, *The Athenaeum* 957 (February 28, 1846): 215; "American Poetry," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 42, no. 247 (July 1850): 9. Alexander H. Everett identified the dismissive attitude of British reviews as a problem for American writers in "The Tone of British Criticism," *The North American Review* 31, no. 1 (July 1830): 26–66.

and to identify an undertaking in which the British continue unquestionably to excel. Despite laudable American progress in oratory, history, and the fine arts, “[i]n poetry alone they are still palpably inferior” (*Fraser’s*, 1850). Many of these reviews circulated widely in the American press;<sup>11</sup> even negative notice by the British literary establishment was eagerly consumed by American readers.

Homi Bhabha has taught us to recognize the charge of colonial mimicry as fraught with ambivalence and the need for disavowal. He argues that colonial discourse endlessly proliferates “inappropriate objects” designed to fail: “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.”<sup>12</sup> Bhabha wasn’t thinking here of Anglo–American cultural relations, but his account of colonial discourse describes well the sense of prohibition that surfaces in many British reviews of American poetry: it’s not that Americans haven’t written good poetry, the critic in question suspects that for some reason, they simply *can’t*. I want to suggest that we have been reading nineteenth-century American poetry under the long shadow of hostile British criticism, taken up with various levels of agreement, resignation, defensiveness, and resentment by American writers. The answer to this critical predicament, however, cannot be to insist ever more loudly on the fact of American literary independence, but rather to study how the terms of this mutual entanglement are worked out in different ways by poets, publishers, and readers.

American poets are often explicit in their address to British authors and British texts, which, after all, comprised the bulk of the literature circulated in the United States well beyond mid-century. How we are to understand American poets’ transatlantic address? What might it look like if we lifted the invisible barrier that keeps scholars of nineteenth-century British and American poetry from studying each other’s material and examining the forms of their relation? We are used to the idea that American artists struggled with their inheritance of British cultural norms. What would it take for the talk-back, the generic experiments, the refigurations and transformations of Romantic-era American verse to be considered as a critical part of the larger Anglo–American literary field?

11. British quarterlies and monthlies were subscribed to by elite Americans and by libraries, while the major quarterlies were reprinted in their entirety and sold at a steep discount. A wide range of British magazines were routinely mined for individual articles and recirculated in whole or in part by American eclectic magazines. For example, the editor of *Littell’s Living Age* (1, no. 1, May 11, 1844) cleverly omitted the condescending opening of the *Foreign Quarterly Review* essay on American poetry noted above, and published its assessments of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Fitz-Green Halleck, William Cullen Bryant, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as if they were four separate reviews.

12. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October* 28 (1984): 127.

## 1. Forgetting Washington Allston

American painter and poet Washington Allston provides a good example of the invisibility of antebellum American poets to literary critics, even when their verse appears, hidden in plain sight, smack dab in the middle of the Romantic canon. Despite having a suburb of Boston named after him—supposedly the only community in the US named after a painter—few nineteenth-century scholars on either side of the Atlantic could tell you much about Washington Allston or name a single poem that he wrote. Of course there are important exceptions to this general rule: Morton D. Paley provides a detailed account of Allston's formative influence on Coleridge's aesthetics in his *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts* (2008) and Gurion Taussig explores Coleridge and Allston's passionate attachment to one another in the postscript to his *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship, 1789–1804* (2002).<sup>13</sup> But Allston was hugely important to numerous British and American writers who cared about the relationship of poetry to the fine arts: not only Coleridge but also William Wordsworth, Robert Southey, and Anna Jameson; Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody.<sup>14</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson begins his essay "Self-Reliance" with a veiled reference to one of Allston's poems; it

13. Paley, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship, 1789–1804* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 315–27.

14. William Wordsworth became intrigued by Allston after hearing Coleridge talk frequently about him. Wordsworth socialized with Allston and visited his studio while he was in London, crediting Allston's painting "Jacob's Dream" (1817) for a key metaphor in "Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Beauty." See William H. Gerds, *A Man of Genius: The Art of Washington Allston, 1779–1843* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1979), 99–100. Robert Southey dedicates a few flattering lines to Allston in "A Vision of Judgement" (1821). Anna Jameson and Allston's friendship began when she visited the US in 1837; shortly after his death, she reviewed his life and achievements in the *Athanaeum* (January 6 and 13, 1844), reprinted in her *Memoirs and Essays Illustrative of Art, Literature and Social Morals* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1846), 99–126. Washington Irving and Allston met in Italy before Coleridge's arrival; Irving's "The Wife" (1819) is often taken to be inspired by Allston's financial troubles while in England. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844) is similarly thought to have been inspired by Allston. Margaret Fuller reviewed the 1839 Boston exhibit of Allston's paintings in the *Dial* (July 1840, 73–84); she also wrote an elegy upon learning of Allston's death, included in *Summer on the Lakes in 1843* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1844), 68–69. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody published an early treatment of Allston's work, "Allston the Painter" (*American Monthly Magazine*, May 1836); a nine-part review of the 1839 exhibit (*Salem Gazette*, May and June 1839); and a set of posthumous reflections (*Emerson's Magazine and Putnam's Monthly*, October 1857). These essays were revised and collected in *Last Evening with Allston, and Other Papers* (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1886).

is the example of Allston that provokes Emerson's influential consideration of the superior authority of inner light to that of social convention.<sup>15</sup> Rufus Wilmot Griswold dedicated his enormous, canon-making 1842 anthology *The Poets and Poetry of America* to "Washington Allston: the eldest of the living poets of America, and the most illustrious of her painters."<sup>16</sup> How is it that we have forgotten him?

Allston was born on a rice plantation in South Carolina in 1779 (hence the patriotic first name), but he was educated from an early age in New England. Shortly after his graduation from Harvard in 1800, he sold off his share of the paternal estate, including twenty-four enslaved persons, in order to finance his European education in painting.<sup>17</sup> After two years' study at London's Royal Academy under the tutelage of Benjamin West and Henry Fuseli, Allston traveled to Paris to examine the riches of the Louvre, then on to Rome where he formed an intense and lasting friendship with Coleridge. When Napoleon's army threatened to invade Italy, Coleridge took refuge for a few months in the villa Allston rented outside the city; the two of them spent long hours sketching, walking, and talking about art history and aesthetics. Allston painted, including a well-known portrait of Coleridge currently in the collection of Harvard University's Fogg Museum, while Coleridge took notes, released for a blissful interlude from his various torments. Upon leaving Italy under some duress—on an American vessel for fear of capture by the French navy—Coleridge wrote passionately to Allston: "had I not known the Wordsworths, [I] should have loved & esteemed you *first* and *most* / & as it is, next to them I love & honor you."<sup>18</sup>

Allston lingered in Italy, returned to Boston to marry, then moved to London in 1811 to launch his career. Allston and Coleridge resumed their friendship during the 6-year interval Allston spent in England, with Coleridge supporting him in numerous ways: coming to his aid in illness

15. C. P. Seabrook Wilkinson persuasively identifies the poem as Allston's by comparing Emerson's essay to contemporaneous journal entries; see his "Emerson and the 'Eminent Painter,'" *New England Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1998): 120–26.

16. Griswold, *The Poets and Poetry of America* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1842).

17. Nathalia Wright gives the details of the bill of sale in her *The Correspondence of Washington Allston* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 37.

18. Coleridge to Allston, June 17, 1806, in Wright, *Correspondence of Washington Allston*, 53. Biographical information on Allston's life can be found in Wright's prefaces and notes in *The Correspondence of Washington Allston*, and in Joy S. Kasson, *Artistic Voyagers: Europe and the American Imagination in the Works of Irving, Allston, Cole, Cooper, and Hawthorne* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 43–83. Taussig discusses Coleridge and Allston's friendship, as does Richard Holmes in *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 53–60 and 360–64; Paley's chapter "Allston Redux" (93–135) is the richest account of Allston and Coleridge's relationship in the years after Allston returned to England, 1811–18.

and comforting him on the death of his wife; introducing the painter to English artists and patrons; and writing a series of essays on aesthetics for *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* to help advertise a grand exhibition of Allston's paintings.<sup>19</sup> Allston returned to the United States in 1818, sales of his paintings having slowed and the funds from his patrimony having run dry, but Coleridge published one of his friend's poems anonymously in his *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), where it has lurked, mostly unnoticed by scholars, ever since.

In the ode "America to Great Britain"—identified in a footnote as written "by an American gentleman"—Allston invites reciprocal recognition from British readers through a one-sided address from one personification to another. In entreating British response, Allston's "America" celebrates the consanguinity between the two nations, claims a shared literary culture, and fantasizes about the power of a unified Anglo-American navy. Coleridge's headnote identifies the poem as "Written in America, in the year 1810." Its inclusion in *Sibylline Leaves*, initially slated for publication in 1815, seems designed to ride the current of transnational optimism in the wake of the signing of the Treaty of Ghent. In the poem, America assures Great Britain that the prestige of English—the language of Shakespeare and "our Milton"—will be multiplied as it ricochets off the vast American coastline; it will

with rev'rence meet,  
Ten thousand echoes greet,  
From rock to rock repeat,  
Round our coast.<sup>20</sup>

Allston's America longs for terms of equality—"a joint communion" bred of common manners, arts, and a creepy, unified "voice of blood" proclaiming "We are One"<sup>21</sup>—but the poem cannot overcome its conditions of address. In Allston's poem, America is a supplicant courting a response it cannot guarantee.

In including the poem in his collection of scattered verse, Coleridge appends a somewhat anxious footnote describing the poem as a "tribute of

19. Coleridge's "Essays on the Principles of Genial Criticism" was initially published in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* as a companion to the exhibition; the essays are reprinted in *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), vol. 11, part 1, 350–81.

20. Allston, "America to Great Britain," in Coleridge, *Sibylline Leaves: A Collection of Poems* (London, Rest Fenner, 1817), 277.

21. Allston, "America to Great Britain," 278.

respect” that in no way compromises Allston’s or America’s independence.<sup>22</sup> But Allston’s poem was mistaken for Coleridge’s in some American reprints and taken to have English origins abroad.<sup>23</sup> Coleridge’s inclusion of the poem in his volume is one form of reply to Allston’s appeal, but “America to Great Britain” was largely ignored by British readers; indeed, Allston’s plea for transatlantic recognition remains virtually unknown to scholars of British Romanticism.<sup>24</sup>

The publication history of this poem bears out what Allston’s personified “America” assumes—that some version of British poetry is internal to the American tradition, but that the inclusion of American poetry from this period in a larger tradition of Anglo-American verse remains open to question. In what follows, I will consider Allston’s exploration of his predicament as a provincial artist through a reading of his famous, unfinished painting, “Belshazzar’s Feast,” then return to his poetry, and to that of one of his contemporaries, Fitz-Greene Halleck, to demonstrate some of what scholars of nineteenth-century British literature have to gain by listening to and finding ways to answer American poets’ transatlantic address.

## 2. Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin

When Allston set sail for Boston in 1818, he carried with him a rolled-up canvas, his most ambitious painting yet—an enormous, 12x16 foot, biblical history painting of the episode from the book of Daniel where the Jewish prophet interprets the ghostly writing on the wall for the Babylonian king, the last ruler of his empire.

22. Coleridge ventriloquizes Allston in this note, insisting that “The Author would not have it supposed that the tribute of respect, offered in these Stanzas to the Land of his Ancestors, would be paid by him, if at the expense of the independence of *that* which gave him birth” (278). Coleridge’s punctiliousness here may be explained by the fact that he and Allston had fallen out in 1814 over questions of national identity. Interestingly, Allston’s friend and editor Richard Henry Dana recasts this note as if it were Allston’s own when he reprints the poem in the posthumous collection *Lectures on Art, and Poems by Washington Allston* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), 292.

23. See the letter to the editor of the *Rhode Island Journal*, reprinted in the *Christian Register and Boston Observer* April 22, 1837: 16. In his “An Appendix of Autographs,” *Graham’s Magazine* 20 (January 1842): 44–49, Edgar Allan Poe notes that Allston’s “Address to Great Britain” had been “attributed to an English author”; see also Allston’s letter to Griswold thanking him for accurately attributing the poem, since it had appeared “in several works as of English authorship.” Wright, *Correspondence of Washington Allston*, 464.

24. Paley is an important exception here; see his *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts*, 134–35. After its appearance in Griswold’s anthology, “America to Great Britain” was regularly anthologized as a representative Allston poem, sometimes mistitled as “America to England.”



Figure 1. Washington Allston, “Belshazzar’s Feast,” between 1817 and 1843, oil on canvas. Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of the Allston Trust, 55.515.

At the time of Allston’s arrival in Boston, he estimated he had six to eight months’ work to do on the painting, but he would continue to work on “Belshazzar’s Feast” off and on, at times intensively, for the next twenty-five years, leaving the painting unfinished with the figure of the king blotted out for repainting at the time of his death in 1843.

“Belshazzar’s Feast” has come to represent the hostility of the early US to fine art in particular and to the arts in general.<sup>25</sup> Allston’s “painter’s block” was a cause célèbre in his own day, in part because of the Boston community’s high hopes for the returning painter and their attempt to compensate for the paucity of arts organizations and aristocratic patrons in the new nation. Eleven members of Boston’s elite, along with one of Allston’s acquaintances from South Carolina, contributed a total of \$10,000 to purchase the painting in advance, providing Allston the funds he would need for living expenses while he worked to finish it.<sup>26</sup> There

25. There is a long tradition of taking Allston’s failure to finish this painting as a reflection on antebellum America’s disregard for or outright antagonism to art. For the history of Allston’s reputation, see Edgar Preston Richardson, *Washington Allston: A Study of the Romantic Artist in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 1–9 and 153–36.

26. Kasson describes Allston’s financial predicament in illuminating detail (*Artistic Voyagers*, 67–70), dating the “Tripartite Agreement” to May 1827. Wright provides

are numerous psychological and formal explanations for Allston's decades-long failure to deliver the painting, which underwent at least two major renovations, one reportedly at the behest of Gilbert Stuart. But I want to invoke "Belshazzar's Feast" not as a personal or cultural failure—a symptom of antebellum America's inability to produce world-class art—but as a representation of the problem of European art for Americans and a canny depiction of what the collapse of European monarchy looks like from the perspective of the postcolonial periphery.

If the source-text for this painting was biblical, its contemporary resonance was clearly political. As David Bjelajac has detailed in his definitive study of the painting, *Millennial Desire and the Apocalyptic Vision of Washington Allston* (1988), the arrogance, sensual excess, imperial ambition, and tyrannical rule of Belshazzar could not help but recall Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 2. James Gillray, *The Hand-writing Upon the Wall*, 1803, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

the names and subscription amounts of each of the signatories in *The Correspondence of Washington Allston* (102–3), but dates the initial agreement to 1820.

27. By the mid-nineteenth century, "the writing on the wall" had clearly become a convenient shorthand in the United States for the fall of Empire. See for instance, Thomas Buchanan Read's 1848 poem "France is Free!" celebrating the overthrow of King Phillippe, which includes the lines "'Upharsin' is writ on the Orleans wall / And it needs no prophet to read the word." Reprinted in the *Liberator* from the *North American and United States Gazette* (April 7, 1848): 5.

In considering the painting as itself a prophecy I want to emphasize three peculiar and telling choices that the painter made: to make the writing on the wall unavailable to the viewer; to include a representation of an idol, eye-height to the prophet Daniel; and to include a cluster of enslaved Jews, preemptively giving thanks for their emancipation.

The missing writing on the wall is one of the most conspicuous aspects of Allston's painting, particularly since previous painters of this scene had emphasized the pyrotechnic appearance of God's exacting judgment in the form of illuminated letters (see for example Rembrandt's *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1635) or puffs of smoke (see Allston's teacher, Benjamin West's *Daniel Interpreting to Belshazzar the Handwriting on the Wall*, 1775). In Allston's painting, however, the panel where the writing ought to be is left blank, devoid of inscription and of secondary effects. It is the primary source of light for the figures in the foreground, traversing the canvas diagonally, illuminating the faces of the Chaldean soothsayers, Daniel, the king and queen, and, at Daniel's feet, one of the enslaved Jews. But Allston either hadn't gotten around to using his own hand to paint God's ghostly one, or deliberately left the mottled panel blank. I'm tempted to conclude that the omission is deliberate, if chiefly because comparing this painting with that of Allston's contemporary John Martin, with whom Allston corresponded about their different approaches to this biblical episode, suggests that the question of who in the scene gets to see the writing on the wall was integral to both painters' thinking.



Figure 3. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1820. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Andrew Hemingway has argued that Martin's depiction of vast architectural spaces and panicked crowds was modeled on popular panoramas and battle scenes. He notes that, in the wake of the painting's spectacular success at exhibition, Charles Lamb complained that Martin had democratized prophecy, assuming (without biblical authority) that the crowds at the banquet had also seen the writing on the wall, presenting in Lamb's words a "needless multiplication of the miracle."<sup>28</sup> Allston's "Belshazzar," by contrast, makes the mystery of the writing and its translation for the king a matter for the figures in the foreground; the painting's viewer, like the audience in the balcony, can only interpret the reactions of the chosen few. Allston displays a Calvinist rigor in his representation of the writing on the wall: God's judgment is both absolute and unavailable to us as viewers. His Daniel—stolid, ascetic, impassive, disappearing into the pillar behind him—is torn between two temptations: the light glinting off the courtly riches in the foreground (stolen from the Jewish temple) and the radiant Babylonian idol in the background, which continues to attract members of the crowd. Daniel can deliver the news of the collapse of empire and the emancipation of the enslaved, but he himself is frozen, immobile, at the pivot point of intersecting forces he does not command.

There are many ways to understand the painting's depiction of divine authority without the visible presence of the divine. The idea of decontextualized authority represented by writing on the wall held powerful appeal for Allston, who adorned his painting studio in Cambridgeport with maxims mostly of his own composition, posthumously published as "Aphorisms."<sup>29</sup> Describing a visit to his studio, Anna Jameson noted that "around the walls of his room were scratched a variety of sentences, some on fragments of paper stuck up with a wafer or a pin,—some on the wall itself. They were to serve, he said, as 'texts for reflection before he began his day's work.'"<sup>30</sup> If this writing on the wall seems like a bathetic shift from sublimity to the everyday, from the power of God to determine the course of history to motivational self-talk, it helps to recall that Allston was projecting the kind of social surround—rules for artistic practice and for camaraderie that he could participate in only in imagination and at a distance.<sup>31</sup> The blankness of the panel where God's judgment ought

28. Lamb, quoted in Hemingway, "The Politics of Style: Allston's and Martin's Belshazzars Compared," in *Transatlantic Romanticism: British and American Art and Literature, 1790–1860*, ed. Hemingway and Alan Wallach (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 130.

29. Richard Henry Dana, ed., *Lectures on Art, and Poems by Washington Allston* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), 167–77.

30. James, "Washington Allston," in her *Memoirs*, 117.

31. Longfellow would take this figure one step further in his novel *Kavanagh* (1849), where his hapless schoolmaster antihero purchases an old pulpit, brings it into his study, and makes use of it "as a note-book, recording his many meditations with a pencil on the white panels" (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1849), 59.

to be inscribed opens out to the idea of a standard of judgment independent of divine authority. Joseph Rezek has argued that provincial conditions are particularly fertile ground for ideas about the autonomy of art. Dislocated from cultural centers, provincial artists are forced to proceed as if art is animated and directed by its own internal laws.<sup>32</sup> In his fascination with the authority of de-contextualized “writing on the wall,” Allston offers particularly good evidence for Rezek’s theory. The maxims pinned to his studio walls include numerous pronouncements on loving and producing art “for its own sake,” eschewing competition with other artists, and managing the social consequences of devoting oneself to art with neither aristocratic patronage nor popular support.<sup>33</sup> But the bizarrely radiant, magnetic idol at the back of the frame, toward which tiny figures like the ones in the deep background of Martin’s painting are running,<sup>34</sup> also suggests considerable wariness about alternatives to the scene of judgment that is being played out in the foreground. Allston may be confident about the end of empire, but seems frighteningly unsure about what will take its place.

Finally, Allston’s unusual decision to include in the painting a cluster of soon-to-be-emancipated Jews, one conspicuously darkened by being cast into shadow, seems an oblique nod both to the ongoing struggle over slavery that was intensified by Napoleon’s sale of the Louisiana territory, and to the economic conditions of his painting career itself, leveraged as it was by the sale of the family plantation, a patrimony that failed utterly to distinguish between property in land and property in persons. Allston’s “Belshazzar” forces the viewer to consider the intimate relationship between the tyranny of monarchy and the tyranny of slavery.<sup>35</sup> Allston is too conflicted about the

32. Rezek, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature: Aesthetics and the Transatlantic Book Trade, 1800–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 14–20, and passim.

33. As reproduced in Jameson’s memoir and in the posthumously published *Lectures on Art* (1850), these aphorisms begin with a quotation from Henry Fuseli—“No genuine work of Art ever was, or ever can be, produced but for its own sake”—and are followed by forty-one anonymous meditations in a similar vein, presumably written by Allston himself (167–77).

34. In an 1821 letter to Charles Leslie, Allston identifies these figures as “principally Jews, exulting in the overthrow of the Idols and their own restoration, as prophesied by Jeremiah, Isaiah and others, which I think their actions sufficiently explain.” And yet he also describes his decision to add “two enormous flights of steps” to the painting as an attempt to enhance the uncertainty and confusion of the scene: “the first landing place is crowded with figures, which being just discernible in the darkness that will shroud that part of the composition, I think will have a powerful effect on the imagination” (quoted in Wright, *Correspondence of Washington Allston*, 184). Allston seems divided between confidence that biblical authority will guide viewers’ interpretation of this part of the painting and a desire to explore darker aspects of the overthrow of political authority.

35. In a comprehensive review of Allston’s use of gothic imagery across his career, Sarah Burns explores his conflicted relation to his Southern heritage, arguing that his childhood experience of slavery and the “fears that underlay white mastery” (84) are

scene he paints for the inclusion of the Jews to stand as clear proxy for Africans enslaved by Americans, but his painting lays out clearly three challenges for the post-Napoleonic order as seen from the post-colony: the challenge of moral authority under democracy, the vulnerability of the masses to superstition, and the problem of slavery—the last all-too-conveniently occluded or offloaded from European accounts of the end of empire.

Allston's *Belshazzar's Feast* gives us insight into what European authority and culture in the wake of the Napoleonic war looked like from a distance; some things are more clear from the ragged edge of empire. The rapid, barely regulated, and violent growth of the antebellum United States laid bare the repressed underside of European imperialism and projected its future in the form of mass culture, an uneasy secularism, and a reckoning over slavery. At the edges of empire, history converges with prophecy: like Daniel, Allston can divine the future, but he cannot keep it from happening.

Across the twenty-five years Allston worked on his *Belshazzar*, American post-war enthusiasm gave way to bitter contests over imperial expansion with the question of slavery as its ever-present subtext. And yet Allston's painting resists simple historicist reading not only because of its perpetually unfinished state—the allegorical resonances of the painting would have shifted markedly between the fall of 1820, when he decided to revise the painting's perspective, the spring of 1828, when he reportedly blotted out four years' labor, and the summer of 1839, when the financial success of an exhibition of forty-seven of his paintings allowed him to return to work on his "Belshazzar" in earnest—but also because of the complex layering of temporal orders in the painting itself. In an 1817 letter to Washington Irving, Allston identified the painting's focal points as the anticipatory horror of the king ("the terrific suspense that animates [his heart] during the interpretation of his mysterious sentence") and the "calm, solemn contrast of the Prophet . . . breathing forth the oracular destruction of the empire."<sup>36</sup> Allston dramatizes the king's terrified perception of a future that has yet to arrive and the prophet's confidence in divine punishment to come. Neither figure fully occupies the narrative present, while the grateful Jews at Daniel's feet react as if imperial power, still being celebrated at

---

the sources of his investment in the gothic mode and a primary reason for his inability to complete "Belshazzar's Feast." For Burns, however, these are public signs of a largely personal struggle, "a private language . . . that unlike conventional symbolic systems . . . did not function as a mode of public, readable, decodable visual speech" (88). I would argue that the connection between political tyranny and the slave system was legible to both Allston and his public, although like his Daniel, Allston likely felt that the implications of this connection were not something he could master. See Burns, *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 75–100.

36. Allston to Washington Irving, May 9, 1817, in Wright, *Correspondence of Washington Allston*, 100–101.

the banquet tables behind them, has already been destroyed. Allston's interest in untimeliness in this scene, his toggling between anticipation and retrospection, reflects both the painting's conditions of production (celebrated before it was seen, purchased before it was finished, the sum providing financial sustenance that would be exhausted in the course of its making) and Allston's general predicament as a provincial artist. From the perspective of London, the provincial painter is hopelessly behind the times and racing to catch up, at best a token of what American art might someday achieve. From the perspective of Boston, the foreign-trained artist is troublingly ahead of his time, unsupported by American society, staking a claim to a European inheritance that alienates him from local histories and identities. In "Belshazzar's Feast," Allston is hopelessly divided between celebrating and condemning the opulence of European courts, with which his medium is allied. The sense of inertia produced in and around this painting may read, then as now, as indolence, stuckness, or failure, but it is richly expressive both of the crises attending the collapse of European monarchies and the difficulty of imagining a space for art outside of the national imaginaries that will succeed them.

### 3. This Bank-note World

Allston's contemporaries also struggled with the place of art in the new nation, finding different solutions to the challenge of grafting new world experience onto European precedent. New York poet Fitz-Greene Halleck wrote with a particularly strong sense of the American artist's provincial-prophetic role. Halleck leverages the American poet's position just outside British culture to reflect on shared fantasies of cultural continuity; he is considerably more pessimistic than Allston about the future of art in a post-feudal age. For instance, in the title poem of his *Alnwick Castle* (1827) Halleck offers a sardonic account of British romance under conditions of modernity. Alnwick Castle is the Percy family's estate; it is redolent with "the lore of centuries," recalling legends of British heroism stretching back at least as far as the Crusades and the Norman Conquest. But it is the job of the visiting American tourist to sound the death-knell of this fantasy. For Halleck, American independence breaks the charm of British romance. Tracing "upon the chapel walls / Each high, heroic name" of an unbroken chain of Percy soldiers, the poet is arrested by the name of a "younger son" who "fought for King George at Lexington." With this realization, the poet's reverie (and the stanza itself) breaks and the poem's tone shifts sharply:

That last half stanza—it has dashed  
 From my warm lip the sparkling cup;  
 The light that o'er my eye-beam flashed,  
 The power that bore my spirit up

Above this bank-note world—is gone;  
 And Alnwick's but a market town,  
 And this, alas! its market day,  
 And beasts and borderers throng the way.<sup>37</sup>

Modern Alnwick no longer suggests the timeless pastoral of the English countryside and untroubled, aristocratic succession; it is “but a market town” after all, full of the noise and the chaos of commerce. For Halleck, the war of American independence makes the disenchantments of modernity impossible to ignore; the American poet is both witness to and token of the hopeless commercialization of British culture. Despite their storied history, modern British aristocrats—merchants and debtors all—have lost interest in acts of heroism. Unwilling to rise to the cause of Greek independence, what Halleck derides as “Europe’s craven chivalry” is content instead to take tourists through landmarks such as Alnwick for “ten-and-sixpence sterling” (*Alnwick*, 9, line 92).

Halleck assumes that his position as an American poet gives him leverage on the willful self-delusions of British culture and the Americans who venerate it; American poetry operates as a principle of rupture within the British tradition that ushers in a shared, if disenchanting, modernity. By contrast, Allston remains fiercely committed to the idea that American art might retain a connection to Europe despite political and geographical detachment. In his early poetry Allston struggles to come up with a figure for transatlantic relations that would honor cultural continuities while respecting political differences. For instance, in the last stanza of “America to Great Britain,” Allston’s America declares:

While the manners, while the arts  
 That mould a nation’s soul,  
 Still cling around our hearts,  
 Between let oceans roll,  
 Our bright communion breaking with the sun;  
 Yet still from either beach,  
 The voice of blood shall reach,  
 More audible than speech—  
 “WE ARE ONE.”<sup>38</sup>

Who or what can speak the truth of Anglo-American solidarity? Only a dislocated “voice of blood” positioned on neither shore can speak across this national divide. Poetry is the site and occasion for an imaginary kinship that draws its

37. Halleck, *Alnwick Castle, with Other Poems* (New York: G. & C. Carvill, 1827), 6, lines 31–38. Henceforth cited parenthetically as *Alnwick*.

38. S. T. Coleridge, *Sibylline Leaves: A Collection of Poems* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), 278, lines 37–45.

strength from the idea of an unconscious but immutable racial heritage. British “manners” and “arts” may cling to American hearts and “mould” the “nation’s soul” in its formative decades, but the enduring mode of connection that Allston imagines will survive geographic distance is something close to whiteness.

Later in his career, Allston turned to art itself—in particular, its capacity to produce moments of transcendence across temporal and geographic divides—to assert an ongoing, if intermittent, connection with British and European culture. The poem that so impressed Emerson, “To the Author of ‘The Diary of an Ennuyée,’” can be read as a provincial recasting of William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” with Anna Jameson in Dorothy Wordsworth’s role as addressee, and her Italian travel narrative playing the part of the English landscape, awakening in Allston “not the memory” of his Italian sojourn, but “e’en the breathing, bounding, *present* youth.”<sup>39</sup> This poem of transatlantic address is full of scattered echoes of British Romantic poetry, but it puts its faith not in the experience or the memory of native soil, but in the multiply mediated representation of Italian scenes, a landscape that signifies the power of art to generate portable, iterable affects.<sup>40</sup> Whereas Wordsworth is reassured by the memory of perception—what he calls “the picture of the mind”—Allston’s spirit is revived from its torpor by a picture of a picture of a picture.

Allston’s insistence on the mediation of art in recalling the self to itself made him a provocative foil for Emerson as he developed his account of self-reliance. It has also contributed to Allston’s disappearance from nationally-framed literary study: his poetry and painting are neither here nor there, proper to neither American nor British culture. It is difficult to perceive how antebellum American poets insistently raise the question of whether poetry has a future if one approaches their work from a literary nationalist perspective, one that either banks on or champions their work as part of an independent, self-sufficient tradition. Likewise, it is difficult to take antebellum American poetry seriously if cherished ideas about the continuity of British culture depend on its marginalization. Provincial-prophetic American poets have much to tell us about our unequally twinned, mutually revelatory literatures; perhaps it is time we listened to them.

Rutgers University

39. Dana, ed., *Lectures on Art*, 377.

40. Some of Allston’s most interesting poems are ecphrastic sonnets that anatomize his experience of viewing classic works of art by Michelangelo, Raphael, Rembrandt, and others. For an excellent treatment of these poems, see Lorin Stein, “Washington Allston,” in Eric L. Haralson, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 15–20.