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Call him an American and
have done, for you cannot
say a nobler thing of him.
HERMAN MELVILLE (1850)

Culture is a system of exclusions.
EDWARD SAID (1984)

AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE POSTNATIONAL CONTEXT

In the contemporary critical climate, when the very possibility of the academic discipline called American Studies is put into question (Jay, Heller, Shumway), when it is feared that "American studies runs the risk of functioning as just another technology of nationalism" (Radway),[1] any description of the so-called nationalist project in American literary and cultural criticism must be viewed with suspicion. The influence of nationalism on the formation of American literature and criticism is undeniable, yet it is argued that the construction of American identity entails appropriation, a biased regime of representation, a feeble attempt at suppressing cultural differences at the subnational and supranational level, a cowardly neglect of those counter-discourses that undermine just such a view of identity.[2] Furthermore, the nationalist discourse is accused of reflecting obsolete, conservative notions, which are untenable in view of the universal ideals propagated by the American Left, such as democratic humanism or egalitarianism.

The aim of this study is to present some contemporary approaches to the idea of the so-called American cultural nationalism. There are two points to

[1] Janice Radway – "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association," 20 November, 1998. In: *American Quarterly* 51.1 (1999), p.12.

[2] Neil Campbell, Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies. An Introduction to American Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p.21.

be made in this respect. Firstly, it should be emphasized that the roots of the long-standing controversy are in the 19th century, a crucial period in the development of mature literary and cultural criticism in the U.S.A. Secondly, many issues discussed by the 19th century critics, such as American identity or the cosmopolitanism of literature, continue to provoke a bitter controversy in our times, different context notwithstanding.

In her comment on the civil society in the U.S.A. Gertrude Himmelfarb aptly summarizes the unfavorable conditions for nationalist sentiments in contemporary America:

> Paradoxically, the collapse of Communism, so far from invigorating us a nation triumphant over an "evil empire," seems to have left us demoralized and purposeless. The absence of any external threat to the country, a welfare state woefully deficient in soulcraft, a multiculturalism that has fragmented society, and a postmodernism that has deconstructed the culture – the combination is proving nearly fatal to our sense of national identity and pride.[3]

From the postmodern and post-structuralist standpoint nationalist thinking in literary and cultural theory, a conviction that there exists a core of typically American values, should be resisted and put into question as it constitutes a totalizing story, a 'grand narrative'. Lee E. Heller postulates

> recovering difference from the totalizing erasures of nationalist ideology in a variety of locations, resisting nationalist constructions of "difference from," and acknowledging long-suppressed differences within. Hopefully, Americanists will then come to accept a multilayered, dialogic model of culture-as-cultures, rethink and restructure what it is they do, and surrender a unitary national identity as the endpoint of their scholarly pursuits.[4]

The doubtful status of American nationalism should also be considered on a more general plane, as a reflection of a twofold procedure assessing particularisms. On the one hand, Americanness is said to be a threat to other nations' identities, a tool of cultural imperialism, inevitably leading to the world's macdonaldization or coca-colonization. On the other hand, there is a tendency to perceive nations as aberration, as "limited imaginings," to use Benedict Anderson's widely known expression.[5] More importantly, in the era of globalization and supranational corporations national identity is often considered passé or even embarrassing. For example Ulf Hannerz gives examples of how national sentiments give way to corporate identity and are losing cultural resonance, only to ask provocatively: "what can your nation do

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[3] Gertrude Himmelfarb. "For the Love of Country." <<http://www.commentarymagazine.com/9705/himmelfarb.html: 6 pp.

[4] Lee E. Heller, "Made in the U.S.A.: The Construction of Academic Knowledge and the Limits of National Culture." In: *Poetics Today* 19:3, Fall 1998, p.335.

[5] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1983, p.15.

for you that a good credit cannot do?"[6] This point of view is subverted, in a somewhat ironic fashion, by Treanor who claims that "there is no erosion of the national by the global, but only because there is nothing to erode. Nationalism is 100% global: a world order cannot logically be further globalized."[7]

However, in reality the new supranational restructuring predicted by Hobsbawm is far from complete.[8] Snyder convinces us that in the post Cold War order nationalism:

> persists and flourishes at the center level, while the peripheries – the larger macro-nationalisms and the smaller mini-nationalisms – are either in decline or enjoy strictly limited success. The nation-state and the consciousness of nationalism stay in focus as historical phenomena, while efforts to combine nationalisms in a larger state, or to break them down into smaller regional nationalisms, remain blurred and indistinct.[9]

The astonishing persistence and power of nationalisms all over the world, including the U.S.A., somehow challenges the notion of hybridity and fluidity of US conceptual and geographical borders, which is not to say that American nationalism is capable of annihilating multiculturalists' aspirations. Rather, we have to deal with a wide variety of approaches ranging from almost uncritical celebration of American unity (Michael Lind, whose "nationalism soils every element of his book"[10]) to lamenting over nativist movements or blatant condemnation (where the words 'nationalism', 'patriotism', and 'chauvinism' are used interchangeably).

The problematic nature of American nationalism, both as a cultural and a political phenomenon, is hardly a novelty. However, if the tension in 19th century literary and cultural criticism resulted primarily from the debate between nationalists and cosmopolitans, the contemporary response to the nationalist idea is to a large degree conditioned by the policy of distrust and demystification, by the tendency to see literary works as masquerades of power. As Gregory S. Jay reminds us in American Literature & the Culture Wars:

> The urgency to invent an American nation and urgency to invent a uniquely American literature were historically coincident. So long as we use "American" as an adjective, we may be reinforcing the illusion that there is a transcendental core of values and experiences that is essentially "American". This illusion

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[6] Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p.88.

[7] Paul Treanor, "Structures of Nationalism". In: *Sociological Research Online*, vol.2, no.1, p. 4.1. http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/2/1/8.html

[8] Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Routledge, London 1990, p.182.

[9] Louis L. Snyder, *Macronationalisms: a History of the Pan-movements*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1984, p.13.

[10] Thaddeus Russell, "The Limitations of a Neo-Nationalist." In: *New Politics*, vol. 6, no. 3, Summer 1997, p.12.

> of the "American" in turn fosters the delusion that literary or cultural studies may be properly shaped by selecting objects and authors according to how well they express this essence.[11]

A more radical view has been expressed by Janice Radway in her 1998 address to the American Studies Association:

> American nationalism is neither autonomously defined – which is to say, exceptional – nor is it internally homogenous. Rather, it is relationally defined and historically and situationally variable because it is dependent upon and therefore intertwined with those affiliations, identities, and communities it must actively subordinate in order to press the privileged claims of the nation upon individuals and groups.[12]

Commendably enough, Radway's address is an interesting attempt at reconceptualizing the field of American Studies and at positioning the organization in a larger social and political context. On the brink of a new century, she analyzes the very name of the organization and the possible transformations of American Studies, and promotes multi-lingualism within AS curricula. She even comes up with several suggestions, for example US Studies, Inter-American Studies, Intercultural Studies, only to discard them and admit that the name American Studies will have to be retained. This is not the only contradiction one can spot in the address, for having amassed arguments against the idea of American nationalism, Radway asks, rather desperately: "What is the value of local specificity in an age of global capital?" And she provides an answer: it would be particularly dangerous to do away with the respect for local contexts.[13]

If Radway's line of reasoning strikes the reader as incongruous, then it should be stressed that the tension between pro-nationalist and anti-nationalist sentiments has always been present in the history of American literary criticism. To be sure, the very concept of American nationality has been treated as "purely ideological" and peculiar. As Arthur Mann observes:

> the self-assertive patriotism of reflection... a peculiar brand of nationalism... locked the American people into a two-centuries-long dialogue with themselves about the meaning and implementation of their distinguishing idea. The history of the United States has therefore been a history, in large measure, of continuing self-examination, with periods of self-adulation mixed with bouts of self-criticism and even self-flagellation, and of recurring appeals for self-renewal.[14]

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[11] Gregory S. Jay, *American Literature and the Culture Wars*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1997, p.177.

[12] Janice Radway, p.10.

[13] Ibid., p.23.

[14] Arthur Mann, *The One and the Many. Reflections on the American Identity*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1979, p.47.

In his *History of Modern Criticism* René Wellek reminded us how dangerous it is "to trace the history of a national literature as an art, when the whole framework invites to references essentially unliterary, to speculations about national ethics and national characteristics which have little to do with the art of literature."[15] It seems that the history of American literature and criticism is ensnared in the web of ideological, political and geographical considerations. As early as 1783, Noah Webster expressed the view that "America must be as independent in *literature* as she is in *politics*.[16] Not surprisingly, America's cultural autonomy became the main issue in the literary manifestoes published in the 19th century.

William Ellery Channing's famous remarks on the importance of a national literature provide a useful point of departure for any discussion of the conflation of culture and nation. Interestingly enough, the 19th century critic's definitions and postulates give a strong justification for the necessity of preserving the national spirit in literary works, not to be surpassed in the following century. By national literature Channing means:

> the expression of a nation's mind in writing. We mean the production among a people of important works in philosophy, and in the departments of imagination and taste. We mean the contributions of new truths to the stock of human knowledge. We mean the thoughts of profound and original minds, elaborated by toil of the composition, and fixed and made immortal in books.[17]

Characteristically, Channing connects the importance of a National Literature with morals and religion, and with "our public interests". Literature helps nations "exercise sovereignty". Literature is

> plainly among the most powerful methods of exalting the character of a nation, of forming a better race of men; in truth, we apprehend that it may claim the first rank among the means of improvement.[18]

If Channing is unhappy about the lack of American literature it is because he thinks it pitiful that Americans do not contribute "to the interests of the intellect."[19] Thus, it is clear that he has a more general purpose in mind. American uniqueness makes sense only if it enriches human possibilities on a global scale. Truly national literature is neither parochial nor chauvinistic, its importance is asserted not merely within the nation but within the community of nations.

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[15] William C. Spengemann, "American Things/Literary Things: The Problem of American Literary History." In: *American Literature*, vol.57, Number 3, October 1985, p.458.

[16] Benjamin Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality. An American Literary Campaign*, Syracuse University Press, Syracyce, 1957, p.239.

[17] William E. Channing, "Nationality in Literature". In: *The Achievement of American Criticism. Representative Selections from Three Hundred Years of American Criticism*, The Ronald Press Company, New York, 1954, p.150.

[18] Ibidem, p.152.

[19] Ibidem, p.152.

An even more desperate link between the nation's well-being and its cultural autonomy can be found in O'Sullivan's manifesto entitled "The Great Nation of Futurity":

> And our literature! Oh, when will it breathe the spirit of our republican institutions? When will it be imbued with the Godlike aspiration of intellectual freedom – the elevating principle of equality? When will it assert its national independence and speak the soul, the heart of the American people?[20]

The subject of American identity was to haunt the minds of American literati for the next 150 years, provoking a variety of responses, boosting the national ego or, conversely, dampening Americans' collective pride. That it is a risky undertaking to analyze American identity, will be demonstrated by the following quotation:

> There isn't a single human characteristic that can be safely labeled "American". There isn't a single human ambition, or religious trend, or drift of thought, or peculiarity of education, or code of principles, or breed of folly, or style of conversation, or preference for a particular subject for discussion, or form of legs or trunk or head or face or expression or complexion, or gait, or dress, or manners, or disposition, or any other human detail, inside or outside, that can rationally be generalized as "American."[21]

If Mark Twain's statement strikes the 20th century reader as an exercise in irony rather than a profound distrust of clear-cut, ideologically motivated categories, it should be stressed that while some 19th century literary critics were keen on promoting Americanness, they were also conscious of mutual dependencies between aesthetics and politics. The stance adopted by Edgar A. Poe, a fervent proponent of beauty as the domain of art, might serve as a good example in this respect:

> That an American should confine himself to American themes, or even prefer them, is rather a political than a literary idea – and at best is a questionable point...
>
> But of the need of *that* nationality which defends our own literature, sustains our own men of letters, upholds our own dignity, and depends upon our own resources, there cannot be the shadow of a doubt.[22]

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[20] John O'Sullivan, "The Great Nation of Futurity." In: *The Achievement of American Criticism. Representative Selections from Three Hundred Years of American Criticism,* The Ronald Press Company, New York, 1954, p.180.

[21] Mark Twain, "What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us." In: *North American Review,* CLX (1895), 48-62.

[22] Edgar A. Poe, "Marginalia." In: *The Achievement of American Criticism. Representative Selections from Three Hundred Years of American Criticism,* The Ronald Press Company, New York, 1954, p. 214.

A thorough examination of 19th century American literary criticism unmistakably reveals its pro-nationalist, holistic assumptions. Yet to say that such critics as Simms, Griswold, Duyckinck were zealous proponents of cultural imperialism, aiming at defining and consolidating the cultural dominance of the U.S[23] is to create another myth, that of homogeneous, consistent nationalist poetics. Far from proclaiming the success of American literature, 19th century critics were keen on pointing out its deficiencies and obsessed with its alleged provinciality and dependence on the Great Britain.

This policy of distrust and self-doubt continued until World War I, fueled by the eternal, at times sterile debate over the value of cosmopolitanism and the failure of the "melting-pot". Of particular interest to the contemporary reader are the theories developed by Randolph Bourne, for whom nationalism is a necessary stage leading to a higher cosmopolitan ideal:

> As long as we thought of Americanism in terms of the melting-pot, our American cultural tradition lay in the past. It was something to which the new Americans were to be moulded. In the light of our changing ideal of Americanism, we must perpetrate the paradox that our American cultural tradition lies in the future. It will be what we all together make out of this incomparable opportunity of attacking the future in a new key.
>
> America is coming to be, not a nationality but a transnationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors.[24]

Bourne's open-minded vision is imbued with a sense of enthrallment and excitement. The constant influx of new groups of immigrants into America should not prevent them from expanding their specific cultures and modes of expression. The ultimate goal, however, is to enhance distinctive features of American culture. Paradoxically, the trans-nationality achieved on Bourne's terms is to become a real proof of America's uniqueness.

To a certain extent, Martha Nussbaum's recent project of educating people to belong to the worldwide community of human beings echoes Bourne's cosmopolitan ideal. However, Nussbaum considers nationalism to be "morally irrelevant and accidental" and claims that "at bottom nationalism and ethnocentric particularism are not alien to one another but akin."[25] Characteristically, her plea for cosmopolitanism, for the "possibility of a more international basis for political emotions and concern" where the "primary allegiance is to the community of human beings in the entire world"[26]

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[23] Russell J. Reising, *The Unusable Past. Theory and the Study of American Literature*, Methuen, New York and London, 1986, p.23.

[24] Randolph Bourne, "Transnational America". In: *Atlantic Monthly*, 118 (July 1916), 86-97.

[25] Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*. With Respondents. Edited by Joshua Cohen. Beacon, Boston, 1996, p.5.

[26] Ibidem, p.4.

has been contested by the proponents of multiculturalism and accused of going far beyond the boundaries of reality. It has even been argued that Nussbaum's critique of nationalism and the nation-state is but a facade hiding "the specific political agenda of an influential group of progressive activists. Instead of philosophy we find ideology, instead of cosmopolitanism we find parochialism of the Western progressive elite."[27]

Nussbaum openly admits that her essay was written in response to Richard Rorty's article, in which the great exponent of postmodernist sensibility appealed to the emotion of national pride and, in a highly pragmatic tone, argued that the Left should embrace patriotism if it wanted to achieve something and to mobilize Americans. Rorty's stance, together with the ideas presented by such progressive intellectuals as Charles Taylor, Sheldon Hackney and Todd Gitlin, provided rather unexpected support for the resurgent national spirit in the post-Reagan America, adding color to the war between the multiculturalists and conservatives. In the end, however, this pro-nationalist rhetoric is to serve highly utilitarian purposes. As Fonte argues, by removing the conflict between national citizenship and world citizenship, the representatives of the leftist establishment in the United States simply facilitate the "major transfer of power from elected national legislatures to unelected transnational bureaucracies."[28]

By contrast, the idea of American nationalism, both as a principle organizing the life of American society and the works of Americanists, has been defended by T. Alexander Aleinikoff. What he refers to as progressive American nationalism need not be exclusionary:

> What the *unum* has a right to ask of the *pluribus*, to use Lawrence Fuchs's figure, is that groups identify themselves as American. To be sure, there may be significant disagreement over what it means to see oneself as an »American«. But the central idea is that a person be committed to this country's continued flourishing and see himself or herself as part of that ongoing project. The allegiance, the common identification, need not be exclusive, but it must be paramount.[29]

Aleinikoff also challenges the argument that a weakening of nationalism and state boundaries would promote a cosmopolitan spirit:

> It is hardly clear that a weakening of national identity and state boundaries would foster a cosmopolitan spirit. In a discussion of the morality of immigration control, Michael Walzer writes that »Neighborhoods can be open only if countries are at least potentially closed... To tear down the walls of the state is

[27] John Fonte, "Post-West Syndrome". In: *National Review* (October 27, 1997), p.2. http://www.aei.org/oti/oti8396.htm

[28] Ibidem, p.4.

[29] T. Alexander Aleinikoff, "A Multicultural Nationalism?" In: *The American Prospect*, vol. 36 (January-February 1998), p 85. (http://epn.org/prospect/36/36aleifs.html).

> not... to create a world without walls, but rather to create a thousand petty fortresses«. As national identity encourages us to look beyond those petty fortresses, so too it encourages us to look beyond the immediate demands of those alive today to the interests of future generations.[30]

Understandably, a single language helps sustain a common nationality, encourages mutual understanding, and makes markets national in scope. This is a sobering view, even if it might be seen as an imperial gesture, an act of containment, erasure, or even co-optation, to use Janice Radway's rhetoric.[31]

The denigration of nationalism is based on the slightly naive assumption that globalism will demolish the nation-state. The plausibility of such a notion was undermined by Richard Pells. In the book provocatively entitled *Not Like Us. How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* he observes:

> people in the future might have to maintain a dual set of allegiances – one, to their local or national traditions and institutions and the other, to an international culture and a global economy.[32]

While it is true that nationalism constitutes but one variety of the experience of belonging, a consistent promotion of postnationalism must, logically, lead to the exclusion of all local cultures and literatures. One thing is certain. René Wellek was wrong claiming the debate on American literary nationalism was of great local importance, but did not matter in a general history of criticism.[33] The nationalist framework provided a sense of continuity in the critical battles fought over the meaning of American culture and, ironically, prepared the ground for contemporary 'dissensus'. Furthermore, it inspired questions that are bound to be confronted by the humanities and the social sciences all over the world. All Americanists who are ready to do away with the old paradigm of unity will have to take it into account.

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[30] Ibidem, p.86.

[31] Radway, p.21.

[32] Richard Pells: *Not Like Us. How Europeans Have Loved. Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II,* Basic Books, New York, 1997, p.333.

[33] René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism (1750-1950).* Vol. 5, *The Age of Transition,* Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1955, p.151.