The Elsewhere of Citizenship

Literary Autonomy and the Fabrication of Allegiance

Politics is a serious study,—serious as our lives and liberties. . . .
But, strange as it may seem, some of the best thinkers whom the world has ever seen, have encircled political abstractions with the zone of beauty, and clothed sober experience with the many-colored roblings of romance. Every age has been enriched by some figment of a commonwealth.

—J. Sullivan Cox, “Imaginary Commonwealths” (1846)

I am a citizen of somewhere else.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Custom-House” (1850)

In the “higher law” traditions of political critique examined in Part II, the cultural authority for citizenship is not located in the law, but in the transcendent sources of political legitimation that ostensibly underwrite it: divine law and natural law, or, to recall Jefferson’s phraseology, “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.”1 As we have seen, abolitionists used the otherworldly kingdom of heaven and the unadulterated wilds of nature to theorize extralegal models of citizenship that placed enslaved people, fugitives, and freeborn blacks firmly within the narrative limits of a morally constituted civic order. To the “ought” of the moral discourses that governed citizenship, this chapter adds an examination of another, less prescriptive dimension of the political subjunctive: its possibilistic scope, which concerns the thinkable as much as the true. Since the authors discussed in the foregoing chapters frame their arguments and plots in relationship to a set of transcendent truths, fictionality—the epistemic mode and problem of the fictive—has not itself been a primary object of consideration. This chapter examines the civic importance of fiction as a differential mode of expression by showing how the romantic reconceptualization of the “literary” as a separate, autonomous realm facilitated the emergence of a secular form of political
critique—one that was structured by the comparative logic of the possible, rather than the moral imperatives of righteousness. Extending scholarship by M. H. Abrams and others who identify the detached contemplations of Christian theology as an important precursor to the disinterested ethos of aesthetic autonomy, I argue that the romantic conceit of literature’s separation from everyday politics made the newly differentiated literary realm an ideal arena for the continued development of the higher law traditions of citizenship.²

In a limited sense, we already are accustomed to thinking about literature as a resource for citizenship. One of the central tenets of liberal education philosophy is the notion that studying literature helps prepare students to be active and discerning citizens. The position, as political philosopher Martha Nussbaum polemically articulates it in Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education (1997), is that “it is essential to put the study of literature at the heart of a curriculum for citizenship, because it develops arts of interpretation that are essential for civic participation and awareness.” Drawing on Ralph Ellison and Walt Whitman, Nussbaum argues that “narrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest—with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society’s refusals of visibility.”³

Literature, in this model, serves a substitutionary function; it is a textual prosthesis for the people and problems otherwise unseen and unknown. Within this optimistic but also commonplace view, literature does not simply prepare readers for civic participation, it is an essentially participatory medium; it involves us in the lives of others, from whom we are otherwise divided both socioeconomically and cognitively.

The political significance of literature in the humanistic paradigm resides in the power of fiction to develop and deepen the social consciousness of its readers. As a result, the efficacy of the “narrative imagination” depends on recognizable parallels between the worlds of fiction and the empirical world we occupy—and, in particular, between the characters of fiction and the actual personages who make up the various subsets of society. Without the premise of this proximate substitutability, characters remain merely fantastical, without any obvious applicability to the world in which we live. The referential analogies that underwrite this literalistic approach to the politics of literature place a premium on the sociological accuracy of literature and the basic verisimilitude that makes this social typology legible to discerning readers.

That the notion of literature as means of “social understanding” implicitly privileges realist fiction—which lends itself to direct social analogies and political extrapolations—should hardly come as a surprise. Realism
has long been a dividing line in debates about the political power and limitations of literature. At the heart of Georg Lukács’s influential critique of surrealism, as “an openly anti-realist or pseudo-realist literature” that “provides an apologia for, and a defense of, the existing system,” is the conviction that the only way “to achieve a critical distance from [dominant] prejudices” is “by a deeper probing of the real world.” Aesthetic distance does not translate into “critical distance,” for Lukács. The political efficacy of art depends on its transparency—on its exposure of the real, not its difference from it. This loosely referential approach to fiction privileges the mimetic capacity of literature as both the precondition and the measure of its political significance. Lukács’s heir, Fredric Jameson, turned this realist drive into a method, by understanding interpretation as the work of “restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of [its] fundamental history.” For Lukács and Jameson, as for Nussbaum, the political force of a literary text depends on a moment of recognition, when we see through it (and back into) the social and historical struggles of our own world—the moment, in other words, when we cease to perceive it in the non-referential terms of fiction. These influential accounts have given us powerful ways of understanding the politics of individual works of literature, but their abiding epistemic investment in realism and the real also preserves a long-standing ambivalence toward the “fictionality” of fiction—a term that I use in a restricted sense to specify the elements of literature that highlight and occasionally flaunt the otherwise merely descriptive fact of fiction.

The assumption that the political force of literature depends on a degree of realism—and the interpretative investment in restoring this lost “reality” through referential interpretative paradigms like historical contextualization—can be understood as a methodological extension of the classic Enlightenment anxiety about the deleterious effects of the imagination. The entanglement of empiricism (as ontology), realism (as genre), and historicism (as method) is profound and persistent. Yet my concern here is not the genealogy of their interrelationship, but the alternative ways of understanding fiction’s importance for citizenship that we can glean from another epistemic trio that gained prominence during the era of citizenship’s formative conceptualization in the nineteenth century: Idealism, romance, and “romantic fictionality”—a defensive theory of fiction that reclaimed the non-referential prerogatives of fictional license as a “right.” I will return to the relatively familiar, humanist model of civic education in Chapter 5, which traces the emergence of a specifically nationalist political imaginary. This chapter offers a new account of the interrelated development of fiction and citizenship in the nineteenth century by rethinking the political stakes of a term and concept that long has provided realism’s
symbolic counterpoint in Americanist literary criticism: “romance.” Whereas the humanist model of the lettered citizen hinges on literalistic analogies between text and world that allow us to understand character identification as a precedent for social empathy and a more capacious category of the human, this chapter considers the importance of fiction as a differential episteme by showing how the romantic trope of literary autonomy contributed to higher law critiques of the artificial and imposed character of political allegiance.

The trope of literary autonomy might seem like a distinctly unpromising point of reference for discussing literature’s historical role in shaping citizenship. After all, writers and critics alike alternately have celebrated and censured the doctrine of literary autonomy as quintessentially apolitical. However, it was (and is) a politically charged doctrine—and it has carried a host of different meanings over time. What meanings did the trope of literary autonomy hold in an era in which the nature and perpetuity of political allegiance was still deeply contested in U.S. law? And how might the little-known debates about the right to expatriate discussed in Chapter 1 help us better understand the ambivalently localized political currency that formulations of literary autonomy took on in the early United States? The trope of literature’s separation from everyday politics, needless to say, is not a distinctively U.S. aesthetic doctrine—nor can it be fully periodized. It is a cosmopolitan ideal, born of German and English Romanticism and infused by Christian thought. However, as we will see, the trope of literary autonomy assumed deeply political and often regional import in a country still polarized by debates about the defeasible (voluntary and so relinquishable) nature of political allegiance. I argue that mistaken assumptions about the consensual character of citizenship in the early United States—and an overreliance on the American Revolution as the master trope of U.S. literature and politics—have led critics to take for granted and misconstrue the cultural meaning of romantic formulations of literary autonomy: theories of the liberty of the imagination and the trope of fictional license, what Edward Everett Hale aptly termed the “rights of the writer of fiction.” As we saw in Chapter 1, the organic model of natural and perpetual allegiance typically associated with British subjection held significant staying power in early U.S. law. And as the fraught history of nullification and secession should remind us, those who invoked this right were often seen as traitors—not as the inheritors of an untroubled principle of voluntary allegiance. As such, the politicized terms in which the literary imagination was censured tells us as much (if not more) about fiction’s historical power as a medium of political critique, as do the most celebratory defenses of fictional license.
Fiction’s epistemic distance from (and figurative denaturalization of) everyday historical and political realities is central to the romantic theory of fiction, and the civic importance of this particular theory of fiction can only be appreciated if we recognize fiction’s difference from institutionally delimited communities as an integral aspect of its distinctive political power. Critics sometimes discuss the overblown unreality of the romantic aesthetic as a kind of “aesthetic dissent,” wherein the imagination’s departure from history is itself a form of radical protest or revolt.11 The theory of literature’s importance for early U.S. citizenship that I explore here overlaps with this model, insofar as it emphasizes forms of political subjectivity defined apart from (and often in opposition to) the terra firma. However, I do not read romantic fictionality within the redemptive, revolutionary teleology of utopian critique. Fiction may hold out the promise of perfectibility somewhere else, but it is arguably fiction’s failure to provide an inhabitable alternative to the political present that redirects an impulse that might otherwise be merely escapist into a dynamic episteme for political refashioning.

Each theory of fiction entails a different set of cultural and aesthetic assumptions. In an effort to take these differences seriously, this chapter grounds its reassessment of the politics of literary autonomy in an extended reexamination of an author who played an exceptionally prominent role in cultivating the romantic conception of fiction in the early United States and in the scholarship on it: Nathaniel Hawthorne, who, as Jonathan Arac observes, “was the writer of prose narrative most important in establishing the kind of writing recognized as literary.”12 Hawthorne, to the fascination and occasional frustration of critics, insisted on the basic incompatibility of political and artistic enterprises, even though his own rise to prominence in antebellum letters was structured by the political appointments he held in the Boston and Salem Custom Houses in the 1840s and as U.S. consul in England in the 1850s. It is easy to turn career narratives into allegories, but Hawthorne’s influential and much debated definitions of “romance” offer us something more conceptually substantive. Taking Hawthorne’s formulation of romance as the site of unexpected political discernment, and paying special attention to his changing characterizations of the political character of the hermitic retreats of romance—as “neutral,” a chosen “right,” and, finally, in his essay on the Civil War, “a kind of treason”—I argue that the romantic idealization of fiction’s separation from everyday politics allowed U.S. writers to engage and reconfigure contemporaneous arguments about the right to choose not to belong, which sought to denaturalize nativity (jus soli, right of the soil) as the basis of citizenship.13
Far from evincing literature’s separation from politics, antebellum theorizations of literary autonomy invited politicized defenses and critiques of fiction that were both metaphorically and conceptually entangled in contemporaneous debates about the right to refuse allegiance—which came to a head in debates about the right to expatriate, struggles over state sovereignty, and finally Confederate secession. The analogies between literary autonomy and political defection were not always as direct as Hawthorne’s figurative characterization of romance as “a kind of treason,” but the more explicitly politicized condemnations of literary autonomy help illuminate the unfinished cultural work of which it was a part: namely, the belated and contentious idealization of the voluntary form of political allegiance that eventually came to be seen as a distinguishing feature of citizenship.

By attending to the fraught political contests that informed the way writers understood the political stakes of their writing, we can also better understand why—as with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s characterization of the transcendentalists as “bad citizens”—they often ended up condemning the very form of imaginative license that they sought to reclaim. The charged (and often denigrated) analogy between literary and political autonomy, I argue, threatened to undercut the moral authority of the literary, but it also situated the realm of letters as a cultural precedent and epistemic resource for developing the newly voluntary (and so defeasible) form of allegiance that was colloquially associated with the language of “citizenship,” long before the 1868 Expatriation Act belatedly recognized the “natural and inherent rights of all people” to dissolve the formal connection that tied citizens to the state.

Rights of Romance

The era of citizenship’s formative emergence in the United States was an era in which literature was itself undergoing a dramatic reconceptualization. Over the course of the nineteenth century, an older use of the term “literature,” which broadly designated an “acquaintance with letters or books,” gave way to the specialized romantic conception of “the literary” as an elevated, aesthetic mode set apart from the norms of everyday expression. This terminological shift went hand in hand with the romantic idealization of the artist’s separation from (and transcendence of) the age in which she lived. As M. H. Abrams and others have shown, the rise of the theory of “art-as-such” over the course of the eighteenth century drew on Christian theology’s long-established concern with “disinterested” contemplation. By idealizing fiction’s distance from the everyday world, the