INTRODUCTION

Politics and Literary History

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In order to prepare readers of this *Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Politics* to recognize and appreciate the mode of literary history practiced across the twenty chapters assembled here, this Introduction examines a key moment from a well-known sequence of events in nineteenth-century US political history, the seven debates staged across the state of Illinois in the fall of 1858 between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas as Lincoln sought to unseat the incumbent Douglas as an Illinois US senator. Though Douglas won reelection (with the state's legislators, not the people, casting the votes), media attention to the debates gave Lincoln a notoriety that launched his successful bid for the presidency two years later. The key moment I examine, taken from the first of these Lincoln–Douglas debates, which was held in Ottawa, Illinois on August 21, 1858, will provide the occasion to consider competing approaches to politics and rival understandings of how – and indeed whether – we might convincingly account for literature's relationship to such historical moments, political or otherwise. My discussion will yield a set of terms that specify the approach to politics and the mode of literary history that the chapters in this volume employ.

One of these terms is the "history of political thought" (also termed "political theory"), which I will distinguish from both "political philosophy" and "political science." Another term is "pragmatism," which I will distinguish not only from foundationalism (which is sometimes called positivism or objectivism, in association with the "hard" sciences) but also from two modes of analysis that purport to be, as does pragmatism, committed to antifoundationalism. The first of these is a "discourse" mode whose structuralist assumptions and commitments extend principles first outlined in the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. The second is the mode of "standpoint epistemology," which adapts Marxist accounts of class consciousness in order to learn from the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups situated in delimited material and social locations.

I will suggest that both the discourse and the standpoint epistemology modes of analysis founder due to the incompleteness of their antifoundationalism – that is, due to their sense that foundationalism, or objectivity, is simultaneously unavailable to those who would make truth claims about, for instance, US literary and political history and, at the same time, essential to the validity of those truth claims. This combination – embracing objectivity's impossibility and its necessity – commits both the discourse and the standpoint epistemology modes of literary history to an antifoundationalism that, in depriving them ("anti-") of necessary support ("foundations"), undermines, in the minds of these modes' practitioners, any and all pretensions that either mode may have to offer true statements about literary history. Pragmatism, by contrast, understands antifoundationalism differently, seeing foundations or objectivity as neither available *nor necessary* in order for literary historians (or, for that matter, anyone else) to offer claims that are convincing, persuasive, and warrant believing. By distinguishing in this way among approaches to politics and modes of literary history, this Introduction sets the stage for readers of this volume to be persuaded by each of its chapters' convincing accounts of literature's consequential participation in the history of political thought.

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During the first of his now-classic debates with incumbent Illinois US senator Stephen A. Douglas, Abraham Lincoln chooses an unusual method – reading aloud – to rebut Douglas's accusation that Lincoln and his allies in the new "Black Republican party" support an "abolition platform."[1] To contest being labeled an abolitionist, Lincoln offers to "read a part of a printed speech" that he had delivered four years earlier, in Peoria, Illinois, in which he had condemned "the monstrous injustice of slavery itself" but had stopped short of endorsing full equality for enslaved persons once they have been freed.[2] "Now, gentlemen," Lincoln states to the crowd assembled for the debate,

> I hate to waste my time on such things, but in regard to that general Abolition tilt that Judge Douglas makes, when he says that I was engaged at that time in selling out and Abolitionizing the Old Whig party, I hope you will permit me to read a part of a printed speech that I made then at Peoria, which will show altogether a different view of the position I took in the contest of 1854.
>
> [*Voice from the Crowd*:] Put on your specs.
>
> [*Lincoln's Reply*:] Yes, sir, I am obliged to do so. I am no longer a young man.

[1] *The Lincoln–Douglas Debates*, ed. Rodney O. Davis and Douglas L. Wilson (University of Illinois Press, 2008), 8.
[2] *The Lincoln–Douglas Debates*, 18, 19.

> [*Lincoln Reading*:] . . . If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution [of slavery]. My first impulse would be to free all of the slaves, and send them to Liberia, – to their own native land. But . . . [this plan's] sudden execution is impossible . . . What then? Free them all, and keep them among us as underlings? Is it quite certain that this betters their condition? . . . What next? Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals?
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> [*Lincoln here breaks from reading to address Douglas*:] Let the Judge note this. I am now among men who have some abolition tendencies.
>
> [*Lincoln resumes reading*:] Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded. We can not, then, make them equals . . .
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> [*Lincoln, having finished reading, now addressing the crowd*:] Now, gentlemen, I don't want to read at any great length, but this is the true complexion of all I have ever said in regard to the institution of slavery and the black race. This is the whole of it, and anything that argues me into his idea of perfect social and political equality with the negro is but a specious and fantastic arrangement of words, by which a man can prove a horse-chestnut to be a chestnut horse. [*Laughter, applause*][3]

As debate practice, this rebuttal is remarkable for its evasiveness as a rhetorical maneuver (since Lincoln replaces the question of abolition with the question of political and social equality) and for its weakness as a counter to Douglas's charge of abolitionism (since the section of his Peoria speech that Lincoln reads aloud calls slavery a "monstrous injustice"). As a historical event, this rebuttal is remarkable for its challenge to viewing Lincoln as having been, at least at this early stage of his political career, the "Great Emancipator" (since Lincoln clearly demonstrates "feelings" against making freed slaves his political and social equals). For our purposes here, however, in this Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Politics*, this passage is most notable for its potential to shed light on two of the volume's central concerns: understanding what Lincoln and his contemporaries understood politics, itself, to entail and understanding whether, how, and to what effect literature participates in politics.

The answer to the first question is implicit in the question being addressed: whether or not a current state of politics, or "the social exercise of power," ought to be altered such that some persons currently held in bondage would

[3] *The Lincoln–Douglas Debates*, 19–20.

instead be set free.[4] Taking this understanding of politics for granted, Lincoln makes explicit a further question about how proposed changes in the social exercise of power ought to be assessed, whether by reference to "justice and sound judgment" or to "universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded," and his clear answer to this question is to reject sound judgment in favor of universal feeling. Regarded from our own historical moment, Lincoln's distinction between sound judgment and universal feeling as modes of assessing proposed changes in the social exercise of power aligns with a boundary between what are now independent fields of study, political philosophy and political science: Political philosophy engages in normative debates about how people ought to formulate and institute social policy (Lincoln's "accord[ance] with justice and sound judgment"), while political science provides empirical descriptions of what people actually do when they produce and enact such policy (Lincoln's regard for "universal feeling").[5] And again, from our contemporary vantage, since he describes "justice" as "not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it," siding instead with regard for "universal feeling" (including his own), Lincoln's speech might appear to be best explained by the discipline of political science, its concern with describing political activity within social contexts being better suited than political philosophy for the study of Lincoln's practical effort to win a US Senate seat for the state of Illinois in the nineteenth-century United States.

While this disciplinary choice (political science rather than political philosophy) may seem clear as a way of understanding Lincoln's performance in the Ottawa, Illinois debate, the fact that Lincoln's own views – not only his feeling but also his decision to privilege it over a sense of justice – seem to us in retrospect to be deeply flawed and indeed unjust might give us pause in favoring the descriptive project of political science over the normative project of political philosophy in accounting for Lincoln's approach to politics. Shouldn't we condemn him morally in addition to, or in preference to, merely describing

[4] This definition of politics as "the social exercise of power" appears in Nigel A. Jackson and Stephen D. Tansey, *Politics: The Basics*, 5th ed. (Routledge, 2015), 6. Offering a similar definition, Adrian Leftwich argues that "There is one overriding concern of those who study politics and that is a concern with *power*, political power – and its effects"; see Adrian Leftwich, "Thinking Politically: On the Politics of Politics," in Adrian Leftwich, ed., *What Is Politics? The Activity and Its Study*, new ed. (Polity, 2004), 1–22, 19. Adam Swift's "Introduction," in *Political Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide for Students and Politicians*, 4th ed. (Polity, 2019), similarly argues that "what politics really is . . . is a process by which some people get the state to back up, with its coercive apparatus, their preferred ways of doing things – to compel obedience from those who might not want to do things that way" (4).

[5] According to Adam Swift, "The fact that it asks – and answers – moral questions makes political philosophy a different kind of enterprise from political science. Political scientists tell us what happens and why it does. Political philosophers tell us what ought to happen and why it should"; see Adam Swift, "Political Philosophy and Politics," in Leftwich, *What Is Politics?*, 135–146, 139.

him factually? According to scholars who study yet another discipline, the history of political thought, we ought to do neither, since to read him in terms of our present disciplinary modalities like political science or political philosophy is to risk practicing what Richard Whatmore calls "presentism" and "prolepsis":

> The history of political thought as an academic discipline . . . emerged in the 1960s as a rebellion against what might be termed hero and villain studies. Historians of political thought were critical of "presentism," the reading into the past of contemporary debates on the assumption that the same questions were being studied over and over through history. They equally sought to avoid "prolepsis," the anachronistic reading of historic books as if they were taking a stand on issues that in fact would have made no sense to their authors . . . In rejecting such approaches, the history of political thought provides an account of past ideas that is more accurate and more revealing because it is less judgmental.[6]

While it is inevitable that we all have our own present judgments of Lincoln and his nineteenth-century contemporaries for their participation in abuses and atrocities like slavery, genocide, imperialism, sexism, racism, and a host of other exploitative social and political practices, Whatmore asserts that "Historians of political thought interrogate the social lives of historic communities in their own terms, studying their cultural practices, languages, and discourse to recover as far as possible people's own conversations about their lives," and they do so "by looking at what was said, either directly in written form or through significant artefacts from surviving art and buildings to objects of everyday life."[7] This volume features literary works as "significant artefacts" enabling us to recover the political life and thought of the nineteenth-century United States; it presents the history of political thought, revealed via the analysis of literature, rather than either political philosophy or political science.[8] Whatmore's emphasis

[6] Richard Whatmore, *The History of Political Thought: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 15. Using the label "political theory" rather than "the history of political thought," John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips similarly distinguish this approach to politics from both political science and political philosophy: "Political theory is located at one remove from this quantitative vs. qualitative debate, sitting somewhere between the distanced universals of normative philosophy and the empirical world of politics"; see their "Introduction" in John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (Oxford University Press), 2006, 3–41, 5.

[7] Whatmore, *The History of Political Thought*, 19.

[8] For thorough accounts of each of these approaches to politics, see, for the history of political thought (here termed "political theory"), Dryzek, Honig, and Phillips, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*; for political philosophy, George Klosko, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2011); and for political science, Robert E. Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, eds., *A New Handbook of Political Science* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

here on "the social lives of historic communities" gestures, further, to an expansion of the history of political thought beyond a focus on institutions like Congress or the presidency and events like elections and impeachments, which remain the focus of political science. Political historians, by contrast, as Frank Towers observes, have been "redefining the subject matter of political history beyond the confines of voters, parties, and legislatures. Building on work already underway in the 1980s, historians have developed a much more complete understanding of how disenfranchised Americans acted politically and how their history redefines the boundaries of the political."[9]

But if politics embraces social as well as political history, involving poems and plays as well as debates and elections, what is its relation to literary history – and indeed, recalling the second question prompted by the above-cited Lincoln passage, what is and is not political in literature? One way of thinking about this, again in light of Lincoln's debate performance, is to consider the mixed media of that event – oratory, drama between antagonists (Lincoln and Douglas) on a stage, and reading from a prepared and indeed printed text. Literature is irreducible to any of these modes, so we should not hastily distinguish the oratory from the plot of the political horserace or the language that is, unlike either, "printed" on a page and then try to privilege any one mode as emphatically literary. Indeed, in Lincoln's speech, the language in print is serving an evidentiary function more than a literary one, using the institution of printing to affirm, as Allen Grossman asserts, his "rational style of discourse of unfailing adequacy and persuasiveness. He was a *novus homo*, a man impersonated by his language."[10] At the same time, this ethos of consistency underscored by the material continuity of print (even more than the material continuity of his own body across that same space of time since the 1854 Peoria speech) is something Lincoln can resist in this live event, the printed speech serving as a kind of theatrical prop enabling a back-and-forth between his prior printed self as a persistent entity (one constructed by print) and a present, embodied self who can break from that print self to offer spontaneous, unscripted asides – as in the playful banter with the crowd

[9] Frank Towers, "Party Politics and the Sectional Crisis: A Twenty-Year Renaissance in the Study of Antebellum Political History," in Jonathan Daniel Wells, ed., *The Routledge History of Nineteenth-Century America* (Taylor & Francis, 2018), 109–130, 116. For a related discussion concerning political history and gender, see Jean Harvey Baker, "Public Women and Partisan Politics, 1840–1860," in Gary W. Gallagher and Rachel A. Shelden, eds., *A Political Nation: New Directions in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Political History* (University of Virginia Press, 2012), 64–81.

[10] Allen Grossman, "The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln: An Inquiry toward the Relationship of Art and Policy," in *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 60.

about needing his "specs," or his later turn away from the printed speech to address the Judge (Douglas) directly, as if the two of them could not be overheard by those very "abolitionists" referenced in the audience, or finally, once he has finished reading aloud from the print, offering a summary dismissal of clever wordplay as the "specious and fantastic arrangement of words" only, then, to indulge fully in precisely such wordplay himself – "by which a man can prove a horse-chestnut to be a chestnut horse" – to the effect of generating laughter and applause, which respond as much if not more to his actual use of wordplay than to his dismissal of it – or perhaps to the enactment of the one by means of the other. Politics is thus, here, fully imbricated in the modalities (oratory, drama, and print) of literature, its techniques both of revealing character – both as continuous in its commitments and as charismatically spontaneous in context – and of "arrangement of words" for comedic support of his persuasive effort: As Horace writes of poetry, Lincoln's purpose and effect are both to instruct and to delight.

If the passage from Lincoln's first senate debate with Douglas invites us to view literature and politics in these terms, as mutually imbricated or intertwined, that mutual involvement might in turn invite us to approach the literature of the nineteenth century in the manner outlined by Jacques Rancière, who has written extensively and influentially on aesthetics and politics, most notably *The Politics of Aesthetics*. As Rancière's translator, Gabriel Rockhill, observes,

> Rancière has forcefully argued that the emergence of literature in the nineteenth century as distinct from *les belles-lettres* was a central catalyst in the development of the aesthetic regime of art. By rejecting the representative regime's poetics of *mimêsis*, modern literature contributed to a general reconfiguration of the sensible order linked to the contradiction inherent in what Rancière calls *literarity*, i.e. the status of a written word that freely circulates outside any system of legitimation. On the one hand, literarity is a necessary condition for the appearance of modern literature as such and its emancipation from the representative regime of art. However, it simultaneously acts as the contradictory limit at which the specificity of literature itself disappears due to the fact that it no longer has [as it did in the prior, representative regime of art] any clearly identifiable characteristics that would distinguish it from any other mode of discourse. This partially explains the other major form of writing that has been in constant struggle with democratic literarity throughout the modern age: the idea of a "true writing" that would incorporate language in such a way as to exclude the free-floating, disembodied discourse of literarity.[11]

[11] Gabriel Rockhill, "Editor's Introduction: Jacques Rancière's Politics of Perception," in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill (Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), viii–xvii, xvi.

Rockhill continues that it is in this "constant struggle" that Rancière's "central argument is discernible: . . . the contradictory relationship between elements of the representative and aesthetic regimes of art" produces "the historical conditions of possibility for the appearances of these practices" – that is, for "the appearance of modern literature as such" in the nineteenth century.[12] Lincoln, in Rancière's view, might then be understood as setting "true writing," the print record of his 1854 speech in Peoria, which he reads aloud to the assembled crowd, against the accusations of Douglas (that Lincoln is an abolitionist), which Lincoln reduces to mere "literarity" – that is, to Rancière's aesthetics rather than to mimetic representation – in an effort to align himself with the earlier, representative regime of mimesis and conformity to rules while relegating Douglas to an artist's role of producing the "free-floating, disembodied discourse of literarity," which Lincoln then mocks in his line about proving a horse-chestnut to be a chestnut horse.

While Rancière's approach, as outlined by Rockhill, appears to favor the kind of engagement between literature and politics that I have associated with the discipline of the history of political thought, it also has liabilities that are apparent in prioritizing what Rockhill calls "a *necessary condition* for the appearance" or "the historical *conditions of possibility* for the appearance": By giving priority to a historical sequence of aesthetic "regimes" (the "ethical" and "representative" regimes dominating in Western antiquity and pre-modernity until, Rancière argues, the "aesthetic" regime of modernity rose to dominance in the nineteenth century), Rancière proposes a mode of analysis in which legibility of the world as such is itself *made possible* only by reference to, and only in terms of, a prior, necessary, and *enabling system* of intelligibility, which Rancière calls "the distribution of the sensible."[13] While initially abstract, this notion becomes clear when we recognize its indebtedness to the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, who asserted the conditions of possibility for the legibility of any given instance of speech, or *parole*, to be its prior implication in a broader system, or *langue*.[14] Just as, for Saussure, only speakers competent in that *langue* or system at a given synchronic moment can make legible an instance of that synchronic moment's *parole* or speech (i.e. only those

[12] Rockhill, "Editor's Introduction," xvii, xvi.
[13] For Rancière's definition of this idea, see his *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 7–8; see also Rockhill's note that the distribution of the sensible should be understood as "what *makes or produces* a community and not simply an attribute shared by all of its members" (109n5; my italics).
[14] For a thorough exposition of Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, see Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, rev. ed. (Cornell University Press, 1986), 39–45.

who already know medieval or Elizabethan *English* can interpret instances of medieval or Elizabethan *speech*), so too, for Rancière, only the competency of historical perceivers in an era's given "distribution of the sensible," or its enabling conceptual system of rending the sensible world intelligible, makes it possible for the broader world to become legible to those perceivers, a legibility that changes with time as the larger system of intelligibility (Rancière's "distribution of the sensible") undergoes – as do languages, for Saussure (medieval and Elizabethan English becoming modern English) – alterations in its grammar and structure.

This orientation's structuralist priorities would shift us away from studying individual instances of expression and toward, instead, studying the systemic conditions of possibility for those instances being rendered intelligible at all, a shift at the heart of Jonathan Culler's Saussure-inspired promotion of "poetics" over "hermeneutics" in an effort to understand "literary competence" by analogy to the Saussurean linguist's effort to understand "linguistic competence."[15] This same privileging of the study of enabling systems of intelligibility over the various objects that those systems are necessary to render intelligible is apparent in the similarly Saussure-inspired efforts of theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to view persons (described as "subjects") as intelligible to themselves and each other only by means of mediating "discourses" that together, again like Saussure's *langue*, confer intelligibility to those "subjects" in the way, and only in the way, that these reigning discursive systems prescribe

[15] See Jonathan Culler's "Preface to the Routledge Classics Edition" of *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Cornell University Press, 1975), vii–viii, and the chapter "Literary Competence." While Culler employs linguistic competence as an analogy for literary competence, a further extension of Saussure's linguistics beyond literature to social life in general, an extension that equates social life with linguistic competence rather than merely drawing an analogy between them, is apparent in Jacques Rancière's claim about "literature as such" as it functions within – and indeed produces – what he calls the aesthetic regime of modernity: "It's not a matter here of the influence of this author on that. It's a matter of a poetic and metaphorical model put in place by literature as such and to which our human and social sciences largely owe their modes of interpretation," these human and social sciences corresponding to the "discourses" central to the work of Rancière's contemporary, Michel Foucault; see Rancière's "The Politics of Literature," in *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Polity Press, 2011), 22. This consistent approach across word, work, and world is enabled by the structuralist transformation of word into sign (Saussure), work into text (Culler [following Roland Barthes]), and self into subject (Rancière and Foucault), a transformation that enables each level – language, literature, and politics – to imagine the individual entity of central concern to it – a sign, text, or subject – to be, as Saussure writes of signs, "emanating from a linguistic system"; see Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), trans. Roy Harris, ed. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger (Open Court, 1972), 115. The result is a signomorphism of selves as political "subjects": Just as signs, for Saussure, emanate from the system that is *langue*, and texts, for Culler, emanate from a system that is poetics, subjects (for Rancière, Foucault, and as we will see, Judith Butler) emanate from a system that is "language as such" or "discourse."

for them.[16] If this volume, following in this structuralist tradition, were to prioritize descriptions of the enabling system of intelligibility (Rancière's "distribution of the sensible," Culler's "poetics," or Foucault's and Butler's "discourse") over particular instances rendered legible by it, it would look more like Rancière's recent *Aisthesis*, which devotes just one chapter to nineteenth-century US literature and politics in an effort to illustrate an artistic modernity enabled by an "aesthetic regime" that governs modern literary expression in Western capitals ranging from Moscow to Berlin to Paris to London to New York and finally Hollywood.[17] The priority in this volume, however, is less a social-scientific accounting of the enabling conditions of possibility for literature being legible to those competent in applying its systemic rules than it is a demonstration of literary practice in action, featuring events like Lincoln's speech and its use of many types of mediating strategies to effect the practical result of defeating the incumbent US senator from Illinois.

If the mix of politics and literature in the Lincoln example is not, as it will be in this volume, a priority for Rancière's structuralist approach to the politics of aesthetics, it is an opportune target for a competing approach to literary history, standpoint epistemology. This approach would urge us to observe two key features of Lincoln's speech: first, his acknowledgment that competing standpoints exist and are present – which he does in his aside to Douglas to note that "I am now among men who have some abolition tendencies" even as he is about to deny (disingenuously) being one of them – and second, Lincoln's failure to acknowledge that other relevant standpoints, in particular that of the black race, are absent – no black "voice" speaks from Lincoln's and Douglas's shared podium, so it is

[16] Judith Butler invokes Saussure's linguistics in her assertion that "to understand identity as a *practice*, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life. Abstractly considered, language refers to an open system of signs by which intelligibility is insistently created and contested," and "discourses" are "historically specific organizations of language" understood in these same Saussurean terms; see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), 145. Butler underscores the antifoundationalism of her account by rejecting "the foundationalist reasoning of identity politics [which] tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interest to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken. My argument is that there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (142). On Saussurean linguistics as the "first step" toward this "culture as semiosis" mode of literary history, a mode that tends to yield "debilitating methodological practices," see Lee Patterson, "Literary History," in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 250–262, 256, 261.

[17] See Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (Verso, 2013); only the fourth chapter considers literature from the nineteenth-century United States.