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Making American Literature: Poetry With Footnotes

What constitutes literary merit? Today most scholars would agree that such merit does not simply reside “in” works themselves. Poems, novels, paintings, symphonies—these artworks are *made* human objects and their quality is always tied to the material and social conditions of their production. And yet some artworks *do* transcend their origins, if only in the mundane sense that people and institutions carry them forward, physically and figuratively, into successively new present moments. Interlocking networks of human and non-human actors—professors, anthologies, classrooms, universities, critical editions, libraries, websites, et cetera—keep certain works in lively circulation, while others lose momentum and become obscure. A given work’s canonicity (what some might consider its merit) is precisely this capacity for material longevity within a particular social and institutional horizon. So: if literary quality shouldn’t be located *within* the work itself, it nonetheless seems to aggregate *around* works, as they chart courses through time and encounter new audiences.

I want to explore these questions of literary merit and canonicity through a *via negativa* of sorts—that is, by examining a work of literature that never made it anywhere near the canon, yet whose social and material investments in its own time are profound. The work I have in mind is a long poem called *Ontwa, The Son of the Forest*, written by an American soldier named Henry Whiting and published anonymously as a book in 1822. I discovered *Ontwa* by accident about a year ago, in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia. Though this poem is entirely forgotten today, it remains embedded in the historical

moment of its creation. How might studying a work such as *Ontwa*, which literary criticism suggests (by omission) is devoid of merit, reflect back productively on our present beliefs about literary quality? Could such an investigation help us recalibrate the critical tools we bring to bear on the material archive that is the humanist's laboratory?

In this essay I argue that making sense of a vanished work like *Ontwa* brings to the fore questions of historical documentation too often occluded when studying canonical works of literature. Reading *Ontwa*, for instance, illuminates a host of significant events in antebellum America. These include the discovery of the source of the Mississippi River, the founding of the University of Michigan, the first documented instance of "literary" writing by an American Indian, the activities of the Bread and Cheese Club headed by James Fennimore Cooper in New York, the publication in Scotland of the first European anthology of American poetry, the almost-successful 1848 presidential campaign of U.S. Secretary of State and Michigan governor Lewis Cass, and the publication of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's massively popular *Song of Hiawatha*. None of these events are described "in" Henry Whiting's poem, but they nonetheless hover just outside the edges of its dusty, forgotten pages. Put differently, because the canon of American literature has never included *Ontwa*, a modern reader seeking value in this particular text must do so by exploring the poem's *historical* embeddedness, rather than consulting its status within a more narrow history of literary criticism. My essay argues for the value of such defiantly forgotten works—not as data points in a vast constellation of distantly read books, but as material instances of literature, whose very obscurity underwrites our beliefs about the canon. I offer this position not despite but because of the fact that I have yet to meet another living person who has even heard of *Ontwa* or its author.

Before getting underway, though, a word about my title may help mark the parameters of

my essay. My title's second half, "Poetry With Footnotes," nods ironically toward a 1947 essay by Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History Without Footnotes," often considered a founding document of the New Criticism. For Brooks, the problem Keats's speaker faces in "Ode On a Grecian Urn" is one of insufficient historical documentation (it's the same problem I faced when I first encountered *Ontwa*). Brooks argues that as the speaker gazes at the urn he is forced to "[create] in his own imagination the town implied by the procession of worshippers."¹ In other words, the civic narrative he imagines is not "real" in an historical sense, but rather in an aesthetic sense. Or, as the urn itself puts it, beauty *is* truth. And as far as Brooks is concerned, that is all we need to know.

The historicist turn in the academy over the past forty years has been in large part a turn away from the New Critical paradigm encapsulated by Brooks's essay. The argument that Keats's urn cannot (or should not) offer historical truth, a New Historicist perspective would suggest, is in fact a repression of definite historical truth in need of scholarly excavation.² The critic's job is therefore one of literary archaeology. She digs beneath the surface claims of the text to uncover the sociohistorical engagements it chooses not to articulate. Broadly speaking, this orientation toward texts, sometimes dubbed a "hermeneutics of suspicion," has served as the rhetorical and ideological baseline for much criticism over the past few decades.³ As the historicist dust continues to settle, though, it seems that Keats's speaker deserves another look.

¹ Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), 148.

² For influential historicist readings of British Romantic poetry see, for instance, Jerome McGann, "Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism," *MLN* 94.5 (1979): 988-1032; Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

³ For a recent appraisal of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" in literary studies see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).

As I see it, he should hardly be accused of categorical inability (à la New Criticism) or culpable evasion (à la New Historicism) when faced with the demands of history. The perennially fraught issue of the urn's origin, it is true, is not resolved over the course of the poem—perhaps it never will be. But Keats's speaker seems at least to be asking the right questions:

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?⁴

Most basically, “Ode On a Grecian Urn” organizes itself around a simple question: How did this *particular* art object end up in England in 1819? The question may ultimately tease us out of thought. But isn't it the asking that counts?

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My own project begins not in England in 1819, but during that same year in what was then known as the Old Northwest Territory of the United States. That fall, the ex-general and war hero Lewis Cass proposed to the War Department that he lead an expedition into the far northwest reaches of U.S. land. Cass had been governor of Michigan Territory since midway through the War of 1812, and his request was granted by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun in January of 1820. The expedition, writes historian Willard Klunder, was meant to “tie the Indian tribes of the far Northwest to the federal government and lessen British influence on the fur

⁴ John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. E. de Selincourt (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1905), 194.

trade.”⁵ Among others sent to Detroit to join the Cass expedition was the geologist and ethnographer Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who would keep a detailed journal of the excursion.

Cass, anticipating a May departure, began assembling supplies, including three 35-foot birch canoes purchased from the Ojibwa of Saginaw Bay. A crew was assembled consisting of ten French-Canadian fur traders, ten U.S. soldiers serving as escorts, and ten American Indians from the Ottawa, Ojibwa, and Shawnee tribes. The party embarked on May 24, traveling north up the Detroit River before traversing Lakes Huron and Superior and arriving at the Falls of St. Anthony (modern Minneapolis) on July 30. From here the expedition traveled inland to Prairie du Chien, then made its way up the Wisconsin River to Green Bay. Cass would finally arrive home in Detroit on September 10, 1820. During the three-and-a-half month journey, Cass and his party secured possession of an old French fort at Sault Ste. Marie after negotiating with Ojibwas bearing British medals and guns, brokered a peace accord between the warring Ojibwa and Sioux tribes, and misidentified Upper Red Cedar Lake (thereafter renamed Cass Lake) as the source of the Mississippi River.⁶ (The correct location would be identified, by Schoolcraft, during an 1833 expedition.)

During the journey or shortly before it—the historical record is inconclusive on this front—Cass and Schoolcraft encountered a man named Henry Whiting, a captain in the U.S. army and the unlikely poet-protagonist of my own essay.⁷ Whiting’s poem *Ontwa* is set in the

⁵ Willard C. Klunder, *Lewis Cass and the Politics of Moderation* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1996), 34.

⁶ *Ibid*, 35-8.

⁷ A sentence from Schoolcraft’s *Narrative Journal of Travels Through the Northwestern Regions of the United States* places Whiting in Green Bay in 1819, but leaves ambiguous the circumstances of any interaction of the 1820 Cass expedition with Whiting: “In 1819, Captain Henry Whiting, of the United States army, made a series of observations during seven or eight days upon these oceanic appearances, which serve to show that the water at Green Bay has a rise and fall daily, but that it is irregular as to the precise period of flux and reflux and also as to the

mid-seventeenth century and centers on a doomed love affair between its titular protagonist, described as the “last of his race” of Erie Indians, and a half Iroquois, half French woman named Oneyda. Ontwa himself narrates the final four sections of Whiting’s five-section poem. The first section, however, is narrated by a French missionary to North America, whose perspective establishes the poem’s frame narrative, effectively distancing readers from the “actual” words of Ontwa that come later. It is this Frenchman to whom the poem’s opening stanza refers:

PILGRIM from transatlantic climes,
 Of elder race and elder times,
 Where age on age had roll’d around
 In hemispheric circle bound,
 Unconscious that a sister sphere,
 Revolving through the same career
 And glowing ’neath the same bright sun,
 Had still concurrent ages run,—⁸

height it attains” (374-5). More clear is a footnote in Alice Smith’s 1973 study *From Exploration to Statehood: History of Wisconsin*, which suggests that Whiting was a member of the 1819 expedition led by Henry Leavenworth across Wisconsin and up the Mississippi River that established a U.S. outpost at Fort Saint Anthony (later Fort Snelling): “A journal of the 1819 Leavenworth expedition, kept by Captain Henry Whiting, has not appeared in print, although Whiting gave a series of lectures on the expedition, based in part on his journal, before the Detroit Lyceum. They appear in the Detroit (weekly) *Gazette*, October 1, December 17, 24, 1819; January 7, 21, February 4, 1820.” It is certainly possible that the sentence in Schoolcraft’s journal is based purely on Whiting’s publications in the *Gazette* and not a personal encounter. Equally likely, though, is that Schoolcraft and Cass encountered Whiting in person when their party arrived at the Falls of St. Anthony on July 30, 1820. Alternatively, Schoolcraft and/or Cass may have been present at one the lectures Whiting gave at the Detroit Lyceum. Some combination of all these scenarios seems most likely, given the close relationship the three men would maintain in the coming decades.

⁸ Henry Whiting, *Ontwa, the Son of the Forest: A Poem* (New York: Wiley and Halsted, 1822), 7.

What initially reads as an omniscient description of a European character “unconscious” of the indigenous peoples of the Americas is, in the next stanza, revealed to be a self-reflective description in the first person: “I launch’d before the western gales.”⁹ The story that follows records the French narrator’s personal experience traveling in lands that would later become the Old Northwest Territory of the United States. The first stanza’s rather modern-sounding “transatlantic” and “hemispheric” signal the poem’s concern with geographic and cultural difference, difference that, the framing device underscores, is necessarily filtered through the consciousness of the French narrator. Indeed, as the narrator goes on to explain, his project—contra Columbus (“th’ immortal Genoese”), Magellan, and de Gama—is not global, but regional and ethnographic:

I sought the Indian of the wild,
 Nature’s forlorn and roving child—
 Already driven, from shores afar
 Where once he bore the chase and war,
 To Western Lakes¹⁰

The remainder of Part I of *Ontwa* describes in detail how the narrator is taken by an Indian guide by boat through the “liquid chain” of America’s Great Lakes and rivers—Erie, Huron, Michigan, Ouisconsin, Michi-sipi—until they reach the Falls of St. Anthony. It is here that they meet Ontwa, who delivers an extended monologue about his sad fate that comprises the remaining four parts of the poem.

Whiting’s entire poem deserves further attention as a U.S. soldier’s imagined account of interactions between Native Americans and non-English colonists of North America. My interest

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

in this essay, however, is less in the poetic text of *Ontwa* than in the poem's "extra-literary" attachments. I want to examine how *Ontwa* is materially engaged with regional and national events in America, and then to think about how these engagements affect our sense of *Ontwa* as a literary object. To this end, we might begin by noting what is probably the most obvious extra-literary feature of Whiting's work: a series of discursive footnotes appended to the poem itself, presumably based on the author's personal experience. Three pages into the poem, for instance, we find a footnote glossing the "linked isles" found on Lake Michigan: "Now called the Beaver Islands—in Lake Michi-egan, (or Great Lake,) as named by the natives."¹¹ Further footnotes describe other geological and hydrological features of the region and provide brief ethnographic observations about Indian customs of hunting, trading, religion, and language. For a critic like Cleanth Brooks, these literal footnotes would signal the non-self-sufficiency of the literary-textual space, and can therefore only weaken the poem. Brooks likely would have read Whiting's attempt to preserve contemporary cultural history within *Ontwa*'s literary space as a doomed, if not generically treasonous enterprise. For Whiting, however, his is necessarily a poetry with footnotes.

Whiting's attempt at cultural preservation can be seen, too, in a series of prose "Illustrations" following the poetic text of *Ontwa*. These, we are told in an introductory headnote, "have been extracted from the private MSS. of LEWIS CASS, Esq. Governor of the Territory of Michigan. It is scarcely necessary to inform the public, that he has been for several years, ex officio, the superintendent of numerous tribes of Indians; or to recall to mind his recent extensive tour to the sources of the Mississippi; in order to give a value and interest to his

¹¹ *Ibid*, 11.

observations.”¹² In these “Illustrations,” each roughly one to six pages long, Cass’s material is used to explain, at greater length, Indian customs described or alluded to in the poetic body of *Ontwa*. The headnote introducing Cass’s material, we can note, points not to the governor’s literary abilities but to his credentials as a statesman. By suggesting that it is “scarcely necessary” to rehearse Cass’s résumé (and then doing just that), the author makes clear the degree to which this particular reading public in 1822 expects *Ontwa* to have some basis in an authoritative lived reality. The final introductory sentence makes this explicit: “if [the “Illustrations”]...show, that the work to which they are appended—in the descriptive parts at least—has received its impressions from realities rather than imagination, they may give to it a character higher than that of a mere work of fiction.”¹³ *Ontwa*’s claim to literary value, then, depends on the book’s ability to accurately capture the first-hand experiences of its multiple authors (Whiting and Cass), who are themselves considered accurate narrators of the ongoing story of westward American expansion.

But *were* men such as Whiting and Cass the most representative persons of this time and place? In an important sense, no. They cannot speak accurately to perspectives other than their own, most obviously that of the imagined native speaker *Ontwa* whom Whiting ventriloquizes. At the same time, these men, Cass in particular, *did* occupy roles of power in the Northwest Territory of the United States, and in this sense were indeed representative of the American sociopolitical establishment in the region. The records we have of Cass’s actions as governor offer a striking illustration of how his personal interactions with Indian tribes, for instance, underwrote concurrent narratives of cultural development among whites in Detroit and Michigan, still highly provincial geographies at the time. Consider, for instance, the following

¹² *Ibid*, 95.

¹³ *Ibid*.

passage from the Treaty of Fort Meigs, an agreement Cass brokered in September of 1817 between the United States and seven regional Indian tribes:

ART. 16. Some of the Ottawa, Chippewa, and Potawatomy tribes, being attached to the Catholick religion, and believing they may wish some of their children hereafter educated, do grant to the rector of the Catholick church of St. Anne of Detroit, for the use of the said church, and to the corporation of the college at Detroit, for the use of the said college, to be retained or sold, as the said rector and corporation may judge expedient, each, one half of three sections of land, to contain six hundred and forty acres¹⁴

The “college at Detroit” is the fledgling University of Michigan, founded in 1817 on the 640 acres ceded by the Ottawa, Chippewa, and Potawatomy. As Michigan governor, Cass was de facto head of the University’s Board of Trustees until 1831, when he became U.S. Secretary of War. In 1837, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Cass’s companion from the 1820 expedition, would become one of the inaugural “regents” of the University, when it moved from Detroit to Ann Arbor and its board was restructured into its modern format.¹⁵ The soldier-poet Henry Whiting seems not to have gotten the nod for board membership, but during this period he does crop up, along with both Cass and Schoolcraft, in leadership roles with the Historical Society of Michigan and the short-lived Michigan Lyceum.¹⁶ Tracing Whiting’s first-hand connections to these civic power structures helps delineate the cultural authority that, according to the pages of *Ontwa*, is “scarcely necessary” to mention in the case of someone like Lewis Cass. Whiting’s poem,

¹⁴ “Treaty of Fort Meigs.” Treaty of Sept. 29, 1817. Article 16. Retrieved online at memory.loc.gov.

¹⁵ Details about this early history of the University of Michigan can be found in chapters 1 and 2 of Howard Peckham, *The Making of the University of Michigan, 1817-1992* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Bentley Historical Library, 1994.)

¹⁶ See Clarence M. Burton, ed., *The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701-1922*. vol 1. (Detroit: Clark Publishing Company, 1922), 836.

written by someone with far less cultural capital than the Michigan governor, nevertheless trades on its connection to these social networks in establishing its literary-historical authority.

It is by pursuing *Ontwa*'s extra-literary attachments, then, that we can flesh out these social networks and begin to illuminate a literary coterie of sorts, one that operated not in the eastern hubs of New York or Boston but in Michigan Territory. It was with such a coterie in mind that Schoolcraft—stationed in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan as a U.S. Indian Agent—began producing in late 1826 a handwritten journal titled *The Muzzeniegun, or Literary Voyager*, which he used to share writing with friends. Schoolcraft's journal featured primarily his own work, but also poetry by his wife Jane Johnston, a woman of mixed Ojibwa and Scots-Irish descent whose native name has been transliterated as Bamewawagezhikaquay ("woman of the sound the stars make rushing through the sky").¹⁷ Taught Ojibwa customs and stories by her mother and Anglo-European literary traditions by her father, Jane Johnston produced writing that blended both cultural heritages. It was in the pages of *The Muzzeniegun* (Ojibwa for "book") that Jane's poetry made its way into the hands of Whiting, Cass, and others living throughout Michigan. Yet during her lifetime, except for a few translations appearing in her husband's works, Jane published none of her own work in print.¹⁸

It is therefore notable that, when Whiting published in 1831 another book-length "Indian tale" entitled *Sannillac*, it included in its appended "Notes" a brief piece by Jane Johnston. Her contribution is nearly invisible, buried as it were within material provided by Cass and Schoolcraft, who again offer notes on Indian customs. Nonetheless, in this supplementary material following *Sannillac*'s poetic text can be found the following comment: "The song

¹⁷ Parker, Robert D. and Jane J. Schoolcraft, *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky: The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 33-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 35-6.

translated in the last note, is, we believe, from the pen of Mrs. Schoolcraft, whose perfect knowledge of the Chippewa [Ojibwa] language, gives us assurance that the sentiments and phraseology of the original have been faithfully rendered.”¹⁹ Turning to this note we find a brief love song, transliterated from the original Ojibwa into an English prose poem, which begins, “My lover is tall and handsome, as the mountain ash, when red with berries.”²⁰ It was only in 2007 that the scholar Robert Dale Parker, working from long-ignored autograph manuscripts, published the first critical edition of the work of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft. She is today considered the first known American Indian “literary” writer.

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If works like *Ontwa* and *Sannillac* help us index the literary-historical energies binding together this provincial Detroit coterie, the actual publication of Whiting’s book-length poems happened out East. *Ontwa* was published in New York in 1822 by Wiley & Halsted, the same firm that would publish the first installment of James Fennimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* the following year. Cooper of course ran in a literary circle that eclipsed that of Whiting, Cass, and the Schoolcrafts in Michigan. From 1822 until 1826, when he left for an extended stay in Europe, Cooper was the head of what became known as the Bread and Cheese Club, a fraternal organization that met in the back of publisher Charles Wiley’s bookstore to discuss literature and other topics.²¹ Whiting almost certainly had no personal involvement in the club. But James Lawson, an early literary agent who represented Whiting’s work, was a fixture of the New York scene, if not an official Bread and Cheese Club member. In addition to the obscure Whiting, Lawson represented such prominent writers as William Cullen Bryant, James Kirke Paulding,

¹⁹ Henry Whiting, *Sannillac: A Poem* (Boston: Carter & Babcock, 1831), 129.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 137.

²¹ See Nelson F. Adkins, “James Fennimore Cooper and the Bread and Cheese Club” *Modern Language Notes* 47.2 (1932): 71-9.

Edgar Allan Poe, William Gilmore Simms, and John Greenleaf Whittier.²² His work as an agent was visible enough that, by 1846, Lawson would show up, not entirely favorably, in Poe's series of articles titled "The Literati of New York City":

I mention Mr L., however, not on account of his literary labors [i.e. his own writing], but because, although a Scotchman, he has always professed to have greatly at heart the welfare of American letters. He is much in the society of authors and booksellers, converses fluently, tells a good story, is of social habits, and, with no taste whatever, is quite enthusiastic on all topics appertaining to Taste.²³

Poe's comments, despite their backhandedness, do acknowledge how connected Lawson was to the actual business of producing literature in the new American republic. This business, in the case of *Ontwa*, entailed bridging an obscure literary coterie in Detroit and the far more prestigious scene in New York.

Lawson's business also bridged the Atlantic. In a curious turn of events, his correspondence with a Scottish publisher named John Mennons resulted in Whiting's *Ontwa* being featured in the first collection of American poetry published in Europe. Edited by Mennons and published by Richard Griffin & Co. in Glasgow in 1828, *The Columbian Lyre: Or, Specimens of Transatlantic Poetry* includes Whiting's entire poem as its opening work, followed by poems by James Godwin Brooks, James G. Percival, and others.²⁴ It seems likely that *Ontwa*

²² James L. West, *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace Since 1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 81. See also Thomas L. McHaney, "An Early 19th Century Literary Agent: James Lawson of New York" *Bibliographical Society of America* 64.2 (1970): 177-92.

²³ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison. vol. 15. (New York: Crowell & Company, 1902), 270-1.

²⁴ Some of James Lawson's papers are held in Special Collections at the University of Virginia. They include correspondence from Mennons to Lawson from the 1820s discussing the compilation of *The Columbian Lyre* and naming Whiting's poem "Ontwa" among its contents.

is given this prominent position due to its first line (“Pilgrim from transatlantic climes”), which introduces the edited collection’s own “transatlantic” aspirations. These aspirations are elaborated by Mennons in *The Columbian Lyre*’s introduction, and are followed by a gloss of *Ontwa*:

IT may not be superfluous to premise that the present Volume is not a mere reprint of an American Work, but a Selection from the Poetical Writings of several Authors who have won distinction in their own country, though hitherto little known in Europe.

The Poem of “ONTWA” was originally published in a separate form. The Author, who does not avow himself [i.e. appears anonymously], is evidently an admirer of our countryman, Sir Walter Scott, whose style he has closely imitated. In itself an interesting tale, it is rendered more so, by the valuable information contained in the Notes which are appended.²⁵

Like the producers of the 1822 American first edition, Mennons suggests that *Ontwa* is particularly valuable for the “Illustrations” of Indian customs provided by Cass, which indeed appear in full in the Scottish republication. The comparison to Walter Scott further suggests that Whiting’s poem may be of interest to an Anglo-European audience for its ethnographic ambitions. While employing Scott’s characteristic meter—rhyming couplets in iambic tetrameter—*Ontwa* shifts its mythopoeic gaze from Scotland’s moors and glens to the rivers and woods of the American Northwest. *Ontwa*’s distinctly American “native” concerns, Mennons suggests, are what make this particular transatlantic “specimen” valuable.

Not everyone shared this opinion. A review of *The Columbian Lyre* by the American

²⁵ John Mennons, ed., *The Columbian Lyre: Or, Specimens of Transatlantic Poetry* (Glasgow: R. Griffin, 1828), 3.

critic William Leggett in the January 31, 1829 issue of *The Critic* vehemently impugns John Mennons' editorial motives along with the book he produced. Leggett had come into possession of the book, he explains, through "the kindness of a literary friend, to whom a presentation copy of the work above named has been forwarded by the editor"²⁶; the "literary friend" is almost certainly Lawson, who corresponded with the editor Mennons throughout the 1820s and served as his transatlantic pipeline for American verse. But if Lawson had hoped that giving Leggett a review copy of *The Columbian Lyre* would improve the book's sales, he was sorely mistaken. After acknowledging that the poet James Percival's works "possess a degree of excellence that would shed a lustre on the literature of any land," Leggett proceeds to demolish each remaining poet in the collection, growing increasingly venomous as he goes, exclaiming at one point, "Who, in the name of common sense and all the muses! are Henry Denison and George Robertson, Junior, of Savannah, Georgia?"²⁷ Leggett's final flourish is worth quoting at length:

We will not dwell longer on the volume before us. That it does not...afford a fair specimen of the poetry of this country must be evident to every reader. Where were Bryant, and Halleck, and Hillhouse, and Pinkney, and Brainard, and a dozen more, if the compiler had been really desirous of doing justice to the literature of America? But doubtless his object was to make a book of transatlantic poetry, thinking that the title would cause it to sell, however poor might be its contents. If such were the case, the only censure which it lies with us to pronounce upon him, is for the disingenuousness he has been guilty of in putting forth this volume as a fair sample of the poetry of our country.

As to "Ontwa," which occupies the first place in the collection, we candidly

²⁶ Review of "*The Columbian Lyre: Or, Specimens of Transatlantic Poetry*," *The Critic* 31 Jan. (1829): 214.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 214-5.

acknowledge that we have not read it, not being inclined to believe from the other evidence of want of discernment and taste with which the book abounds, that we shall have to go to Scotland to learn what American poem is the best specimen of the genius and talents of our native bards.²⁸

For all the scorn Leggett inflicts on the works he read and disliked, *Ontwa* receives an even crueler fate—that of being consciously and casually ignored. *The Columbian Lyre*, Leggett suggests, is simply a marketing ploy capitalizing on a collective desire for the transatlantic—already, apparently, an exotic commodity among the would-be literati of the day. And while the poem *Ontwa* actually *does* engage the concept of the transatlantic with some thematic depth, its unread pages are painted with the same brush as the rest of *The Columbian Lyre*. We might note that the first three names Leggett cites as the collection’s most glaring omissions (Bryant, Halleck, Hillhouse) were all, in fact, members of Cooper’s Bread and Cheese Club, as was Leggett himself. America’s best native bards, Leggett suggests, are known quantities living and working in New York.

I make these observations not to suggest that Leggett would have considered *Ontwa* a “good” poem, if only he had read it. Nor that Leggett’s positive opinions are excessively biased and therefore invalid. Nor even that *The Columbian Lyre* was anything more than a brazen attempt to make money for its creators James Lawson and John Mennons. I simply want to highlight Leggett’s review as an explicit attempt at national canon formation by an influential American critic, who either highlights or downplays a given work/author’s socio-material attachments to support his claims for aesthetic merit. Percival’s poetry transcends national origins and is thus, paradoxically, most truly American. George Robertson, Junior, of Savannah,

²⁸ *Ibid*, 216.

Georgia is from, well, Georgia, so he obviously won't do. The Scottish editor Mennons is economically motivated and therefore cannot maintain artistic standards. But New York City—*that's* where genius flourishes, unhindered by undue financial considerations or geographical obscurity. As to *Ontwa*, appearing anonymously in *The Columbian Lyre* as in its first 1822 printing, Leggett simply doesn't know where to start—and so he doesn't.

Ontwa would appear only once more in print, in an extremely abridged form, in Samuel Kettell's three-volume *Specimens of American Poetry*, published in Boston in 1829 by Samuel Goodrich. Kettell was criticized for including numerous "minor" poets in the anthology, and Goodrich lost \$1,500 on the project. Insult was added to injury when the two men learned that the anthology had become known as "Goodrich's Kettle of Poetry."²⁹ It was in this kettle of poetry that a mere three pages of *Ontwa* were published for the last time. Ironically, it is this printing in *Specimens of American Poetry* that finally names Henry Whiting as the poem's author:

Henry Whiting, a native of Lancaster, Massachusetts, is now a Major in the army of the United States. He is the author of *Ontwa, the Son of the Forest*, an Indian tale, published in 1822. It was written in the wilderness, and in the huts of the savages, during the military service of the author on the western frontier. It contains many interesting and spirited descriptions of Indian manners, and fine sketches of local scenery.³⁰

The years since 1822 may have seen Whiting promoted from captain to major, but by this point a career in poetry seems out of reach, and Whiting disappears from literary history. Multiple indexes of American literature published since 1829, if they mention *Ontwa* at all, misidentify its

²⁹ Daniel S. Burt, *The Chronology of American Literature: America's Literary Achievements from the Colonial Era to Modern Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 143.

³⁰ Samuel Kettell, *Specimens of American Poetry, with Critical and Biography Notices*. vol 3. (Boston: Goodrich, 1829), 295.

author as James Lawson.³¹ University libraries that hold a copy of the book often similarly misidentify Lawson as author in their catalogue metadata. If literature is a slaughterhouse, as Franco Moretti has suggested, *Ontwa* is an exemplary victim.³²

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Whiting's Michigan compatriots Lewis Cass and Henry Schoolcraft fared better in the coming decades. Cass resigned his Michigan governorship in 1831 to become Secretary of War under Andrew Jackson. After this he served as Ambassador to France and, beginning in 1845, as United States Senator from Michigan. In 1848, Cass left the Senate to run for president, ultimately losing to the Whig candidate Zachary Taylor by just five points in the popular vote. Cass returned to the Senate the following year and, in 1857, was made Secretary of State by James Buchanan. As both senator and Secretary of State, Cass was a leading proponent of the controversial doctrine of popular sovereignty, which held that the residents of U.S. territories should decide whether or not to allow slavery in that territory. In the years leading to the Civil War, Cass was, with Stephen A. Douglas, one of the most visible spokespersons for the pro-slavery faction of the Democratic Party, a party whose political and historical importance has crystalized around such events as the Kansas-Nebraska Act, "Bleeding Kansas," and the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

Back in 1822, it was Cass who appointed his friend Henry Schoolcraft as the first U.S. Indian agent of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. Shortly after taking up this post, Schoolcraft married the Ojibwa-Scots-Irish woman Jane Johnston, forming a partnership that sparked his literary and scholarly interest in Ojibwa language and customs for years to come. During the late 1820s and

³¹ See for instance Burt, *Chronology of American Literature and Index to the Catalogue of a Portion of the Public Library of the City of Boston*.

³² Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature." *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (2000): 207-27.

1830s, with help from Jane and the Johnston family, Schoolcraft compiled hundreds of Native folktales and legends, ultimately publishing them in 1839 in a two-volume collection entitled *Algic Researches*.³³ This work would have a profound, if oblique, impact on the American literary imagination, for it was *Algic Researches* that served as the primary source text for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's incredibly popular epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*. Longfellow published his work in late 1855, and by 1857 he estimated it had sold 50,000 copies.³⁴

Schoolcraft's reaction to Longfellow's success was understandably bittersweet. He was flattered that *Algic Researches* had helped inspire the famous poet's work, but chagrined that his own collection had never sold well. Trying to capitalize on Longfellow's success, in 1856 Schoolcraft in fact reissued his *Algic Researches* as "*The Myth of Hiawatha, and Other Oral Legends*." At the front of this reissued collection was a glowing dedication to "Prof. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow":

SIR:—

Permit me to dedicate to you, this volume of Indian myths and legends, derived from the story-telling circle of the native wigwams. That they indicate the possession, by the Vesperic tribes, of mental resources of a very characteristic kind—furnishing, in fact, a new point from which to judge the race, and to excite intellectual sympathies, you have most felicitously shown in your poem of Hiawatha. Not only so, but you have demonstrated, by this pleasing series of pictures of Indian life, sentiment, and invention, that the theme of the native lore reveals one of the true sources of our literary independence. Greece and Rome, England and Italy, have so long furnished, if they have

³³ "Algic" is a neologism of Schoolcraft's combining "Algonquin" and "Atlantic." See Curtis Hinsley, introduction to Henry Schoolcraft, *Algic Researches: North American Indian Folktales and Legends* (New York: Dover, 1999), xi.

³⁴ Charles C. Calhoun, *Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 199.

not exhausted, the field of poetic culture, that it is, at least, refreshing to find both in theme and metre, something new.

Very truly yours,

HENRY R. SCHOOLCRAFT³⁵

The ironic subtext, of course, is that it was Schoolcraft who had provided Longfellow with the figure of Hiawatha, and not the other way around, although you wouldn't know it from this dedication. Sadly, Schoolcraft's rebranded collection of "oral legends" sold just as poorly the second time around.³⁶

The ironies of influence go deeper still: in Schoolcraft's original 1839 edition of *Algic Researches*, the dedication was not to Longfellow, but to another poet altogether. This earlier, abandoned dedication reads:

TO

Lieut. Col. HENRY WHITING,
OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY.

Sir,

The position taken by you in favour of the literary susceptibilities of the Indian character, and your tasteful and meritorious attempts in embodying their manners and customs, in the shape of poetic fiction, has directed my thoughts to you in submitting my collection of their oral fictions to the press. Few have given attention to the intellectual traits and distinctive opinions of these scattered branches of the human family, without finding the subject interesting and absorbing. But in an age of multifarious excitement, in which

³⁵ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *The Myth of Hiawatha: And Other Oral Legends, Mythologic and Allegoric, of the North American Indians* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1856), 1.

³⁶ Hinsley, *xiii*.

topic after topic, and invention after invention, have poured in upon us with an almost overwhelming rapidity, the interest felt on the subject, and the tribes themselves, and their strong claims to attention, have been thrown into the background and nearly lost sight of.

It is a pleasing coincidence, that, in addressing one whose feelings and sentiments, in relation to them, have preserved their equanimity, amid the din of the intellectual and moral novelties of the day, I can, at the same time, appeal to the ties of literary sympathy and of personal friendship. Accept these expressions of my respect, and believe me,

Most truly yours,

HENRY R. SCHOOLCRAFT³⁷

Before attempting to cash in with the East Coast tastemakers, Schoolcraft had named the actual inspiration of his collection of Indian legends: not the celebrity Longfellow, but the soldier-poet Henry Whiting—a true friend, if also a name lost already to literary history.

Perhaps there is some poetic justice, then, in the fact that we rarely read *The Song of Hiawatha* for its literary merit anymore. That said, Longfellow's poem does remain a kind of critical shorthand: *the* Indian epic by American's first internationally famous poet. Many factors contributed to *Hiawatha*'s popularity, but one was the ease with which Longfellow's poem blended literary and ethnographic modes. Consider its first two verse paragraphs:

SHOULD you ask me, whence these stories?

Whence these legends and traditions,

³⁷ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Algonquin Researches: Comprising Inquiries Respecting the Mental Characteristics of the North American Indians. First Series. Indian Tales and Legends* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1839), v-vi.

With the odors of the forest,
 With the dew and damp of meadows,
 With the curling smoke of wigwams,
 With the rushing of great rivers,
 With their frequent repetitions,
 And their wild reverberations,
 As of thunder in the mountains?

I should answer, I should tell you,
 “From the forests and the prairies,
 From the great lakes of the Northland,
 From the land of the Ojibways,
 From the land of the Dacotahs,
 From the mountains, moors, and fen-lands,
 Where the heron, the Shuh-shuh-gah,
 Feeds among the reeds and rushes.
 I repeat them as I heard them
 From the lips of Nawadaha,
 The musician, the sweet singer.”³⁸

The phrase “whence these stories” echoes across this introductory section, itself becoming one of the poem’s “frequent repetitions” amidst its incessant and intoxicating trochees. Longfellow’s rhetorical defensiveness about his poem’s provenance surely betrays anxiety over its authenticity, but his compulsive overcompensation is precisely the means by which he

³⁸ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1855), 3-4.

establishes his work *as* literature. In other words, each time the phrase “whence these stories” reappears, it gradually loses its interrogative semantic meaning and is woven deeper and deeper into the poem’s propulsive meter. It becomes, simply, a refrain. By troping his anxiety over his work’s ethnographic basis, Longfellow successfully annexes *Hiawatha* into the realm of the poetic.

Comparing Longfellow to his obscured predecessor Henry Whiting, one finds Whiting far less able—or simply more hesitant—to make this covert translation of history into literature. I have argued that, by including numerous “extra-literary” components in *Ontwa*—notably its footnotes and “Illustrations”—Whiting forces us to ground his work in the immediate material histories in which it participates, in a way *Hiawatha* does not. In fact, a prose “Advertisement” preceding *Ontwa*’s poetic text invokes explicitly these questions of historical documentation in the context of literary production. In this “Advertisement,” Whiting introduces his project by excerpting material from two works of history (“*Wynne’s General History of the British Empire in America*, Vol. I. p. 334” and “*Charlevoix, Histoire de la Nouvelle France*, Tom. I. p. 322”), which he describes as “the only historical traces of that tribe of Indians [the Eries], whose catastrophe [their destruction by the Iroquois] suggested the principal incidents of ONTWA.”³⁹ Whiting then comments on these historical works’ bearing on his own literary project:

Both of these accounts leave the residence of this tribe somewhat indeterminate.

Charlevoix, in his maps, places it on the south side of Lake Erie; other old French maps place it on the north side, and even indicate the spot where the fatal battle was fought.

The latter authority has been adopted in the following work—whether correctly or not, it is presumed to be of little consequence. The apparent anachronism of deciding its fate by

³⁹ Whiting, *Ontwa*, iii.

one single battle, when perhaps a series of actions were fought, may probably be likewise thought as unimportant. Such a supposition better subserved the purposes of poetry; and the obscurity of history seemed to admit of almost any latitude of conjecture.⁴⁰

Paradoxically, by openly acknowledging that he is attempting to translate the ambiguous European record of the Eries' destruction into a work of contemporary poetry, Whiting in fact throws into relief the radically different demands of history and literature. The historian, Whiting implies, uses written words in an attempt, never complete, to make less obscure the human events of the past. The poet, by contrast, seeks to shape language into a human event in and of itself. The nebulous terrain between these two disciplines is precisely that which Longfellow erases in *Song of Hiawatha*, but which Whiting, in *Ontwa*, tentatively attempts to chart.

I make this observation not to suggest that Whiting is somehow uniquely sympathetic to the conditions of American Indians in the early nineteenth-century. Though his writing often does evince genuine concern with Native experiences, much of it also draws on tropes and assumptions easily conforming to the contemporary "noble savage" mythos. Rather, what I have tried to show is that Whiting's *Ontwa* foregrounds a generic tension between literature and ethnography, one which manifests itself in the work's form. Making American literature means smoothing over this generic tension. That is, it means creating a work *of* literature, and not a work of history or ethnography. Today, if we locate the emergence of a modern American literary idiom in 1855, we are most likely referring to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, whose literary power derives clearly from its ability to transmute vast swaths of lived American history into equally expansive poetry. But we should also remember 1855 as the year that Longfellow, borrowing from predecessors including Henry Schoolcraft and Henry Whiting, created a

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, iv.

massively popular epic poem out of ethno-literary records of experiences between whites and Natives in the Old Northwest Territory.

Literature that is canonical has, by definition, sloughed off successive historical presents in order to arrive in our own contemporary moment. A work's literariness emerges as a function of this process. Such works reflect back *on* the various histories they emerge out of, but they do not function primarily, for modern readers, as documentary historical materials. Rather they function as what we call *works* or *texts*, terms denoting immaterial concepts rather than tangible objects. Studying defiantly forgotten works like *Ontwa* can productively flip the equation: because such works are materially remediated (shared, copied, republished, reviewed, anthologized, et cetera) within a relatively narrow historical period and then forgotten, reading them today means understanding them, initially, as *historical* documents. In other words, it is precisely because *Ontwa* never made it anywhere near the canon that it reveals, more immediately than canonical works, the necessarily material, historical basis of modern canonicity and, indeed, of literariness itself.

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In the fall of 1819, a thirty-one year old Henry Whiting, then still a captain in the fifth regiment U.S. infantry, began publishing short expository pieces in the weekly *Detroit Gazette*. Often taken from his journals, these pieces describe Whiting's investigations into the geological and hydrological features of the Great Lakes region. Yet the young soldier frequently indulges Romantic impulses, too, connecting his own experiences in nature with larger questions of American geography, language, and nationhood. In the *Gazette*'s October 1, 1819 issue, for instance, Whiting suggests that, "The imagination in its diverging flight, hovers over the extremes of the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi [sic], and sees a girdle of water encircling the

United States...Nature is there in her quiescent state, and all her productions appear to have been the result of some of her slowest and most indolent operations.”⁴¹ A couple months later, in the December 17 issue, Whiting takes on a more philological tone, criticizing those who have sought to Anglicize the written names of Indian tribes that had been first transliterated by the French in the seventeenth century: “When the country fell, into the hands of the English, in 1763, either through an ignorance of the names which had been given to them, or a desire to change them because they were French, the names of the rivers, bays, and tribes of Indians became so altered, as to create great confusion in its subsequent geography and history.”⁴² Whiting continues: “Perhaps there is no mental property more settled and indisputable than the right to a name which has been bestowed upon a newly discovered country...Our own travellers and voyagers are not free from the charge of having violated it; and it is to be regretted that we should be found imitating an example which is productive of so much confusion and injustice.”⁴³

Whiting’s most profound contribution to this series of local homilies comes in his last piece, published in the *Gazette*’s February 4, 1820 issue: “Could an ancient inhabitant of this western world, who once stood upon the heights of Queenston, and saw Niagara pour its mass of waters down the precipice there, now revisit the altered scene, *his* thoughts, perhaps, might span the mighty revolutions of nature; but he who witnesses only those scarcely perceptible changes which take place in the short career of human life, must borrow his faint conceptions of their magnitude from the light of reason and science.”⁴⁴ One month after “Ode on a Grecian Urn” appeared a continent away in the *Annals of the Fine Arts*, Whiting momentarily imagines, in his provincial Detroit newspaper, an historical perspective that contains and exceeds Keats’

⁴¹ Henry Whiting, column in the *Detroit Gazette* 1 Oct. (1819): 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17 Dec. (1819): 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4 Feb. (1820): 4.

inscrutable Urn. He imagines a new American history calibrated not to human time or even bibliographical time, but to geologic time. What Whiting realizes is that the stories we tell about where we're from go back only so far. Reason and science offer tools for thinking outside ourselves, and we can write down our findings in books. But even this isn't permanent.

There is a book called *Ontwa* that I stumbled upon in Special Collections a year ago. Since then, I've found only one other thing by that name: Ontwa Township, population 6,549, in southwest Michigan. It's in a place called Cass County, some one hundred fifty miles west of Lake Erie.

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