

Julia Straub, *The Rise of New Media, 1750-1850: Transatlantic Discourse and American Memory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. x + 193. £79.99. ISBN 9781137589788.

Julia Straub's book is about cultural memory in the colonies that then became the United States. Like a lot of interesting work in Romantic literary studies these days, it is about the category of literature itself. Its method is distant reading, not so much of the kind practised by digital humanists as the kind familiar to book historians. It has more in common with the sociologists of literature, especially Pierre Bourdieu, than it does with new ways of reading old texts; it is much more likely to discuss imprints than rhyme schemes; and is more interested in metaliterary texts such as prefaces, reviews, addresses and in the 'reprinting of texts, hack writing, and manuscript circulation' (18) than in canonical works: Charles Brockden Brown features not as novelist but as the editor of *The Literary Magazine, and American Register*, Edgar Allan Poe as the author of the essay 'The Literati of New York'. (Straub later remarks that 'Poe's literary New York, peopled as it is with players engaged in a continuous game, seems to be the most suitable equivalent to Bourdieu's Paris as a literary field' (138)). The book is about the way the new republic constituted itself as a culture.

That culture is transatlantic – a word that, Straub points out, had been in use since the early 1780s (72). Her book is concerned neither with Britain nor America exclusively but rather with how America drew on the cultural capital of Britain while also minting a new currency of its own (or, remembering that early scene of money-changing in Francis Spufford's *Golden Hill*, perhaps we should say rather currencies, plural). Anthologies might include American poets alongside British – both Augustan and 'Columbian' items – but not until the early nineteenth century were they more explicit in registering an independent tradition, presenting poems not as 'specimens' but documents of the past, 'carriers of memory' (99), while British anthologies of the same period could see America as a commercial culture inimical to poetry.

In an introduction and four chapters that are cogently written, but may rely on rather bland descriptions of some of its generic examples, Straub makes the case for magazines, anthologies and literary histories as the new media of the book's title. The book has interesting things to say about these related means of preservation and selection and hence about the formation of an American canon and the translation of literary into cultural memory.

Like its English counterpart, the American magazine had a memorial function and could function as repository or rather museum: it could be skimmed, did not differentiate high and low items and might aspire to an ontological status more permanent than the newspaper. Anthologies and literary histories were not distinct, though the model for both was still biographical. Early literary histories tended to assume that, Puritans aside, there was no 'American Literature' until the 1830s, an assumption that was itself the product of a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century desire to commemorate and systematize the past and to identify a national canon. The book therefore finishes at the point in time where many others begin – a point at which histories of American literature could be advertised as being no longer for college libraries but as 'Splendid Gift Books' for the middle-class home (148-49).

Two issues in particular are hinted at from this context which registered both autonomy from and allusion to, if not dependence on, Europe. The first is secularization – suggested by the early use of the term 'sanctuary' for the library (9) – and familiar from the notion of the transfer of the term 'canon' from a reference exclusively to sacred works. If the work of book historians (such as Robert Darnton or Simon Burrows) shows how religious works kept a tenacious hold in Europe, such works seem to have figured less in the

print culture of America in the long eighteenth century. The second is the element of nationalism itself – which, as Straub points out, is necessarily a complicated business at a time when the term nation itself is one among several malleable but ‘handy categories’ which also include ‘the author, ownership, or the novel’ (17).

Literary culture in the United States was not a blank slate so much as it was an anthology, and the product of what is called here, in a somewhat uncertain conclusion, ‘old “new media”’ (155). The bold analogy implied by the sub-title of Straub’s book is most strongly made in its closing speculation: ‘The Internet – which facilitates learning, connects people, erodes traditional boundaries between texts, changes epistemological hierarchies, invites cooperation and shared authorship, threatens ownership, and converges with old media – comes across as an equivalent to the heterogeneous, polyphonic world of eighteenth-century periodical publishing’ (154).

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