American Studies, XVIII, No. 4 (December 1988), 49-94.
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SPILLING THE CYCLE:
REAPPRAISING ROBERT E. SPILLER'S
CYCLICAL THEORY OF AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY

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I

Ever since the appearance of Samuel L. Knapp's Lectures on American Literature, with Remarks on Some Passages of American History in 1829, the interest in American literary history has been long cultivated. Toward the beginning of the twentieth century, works of this kind appeared one after another, such as Rufus Wilmot Griswold's Prose Writers of America (1847), Evert A. and George L. Duyckinck's Cyclopaedia of American Literature (1855), Moses Coit Tyler's A History of American Literature, 1607-1765 (1878), Charles F. Richardson's American Literature, 1607-1885 (1886-88), and Barrett Wendell's Literary History of America (1900). In their preface to The Cambridge History of American Literature (1917, hereafter abbreviated as CHAL), the four editors referred to "the characteristic merits and defects of previous works in this field" and to their own work as the first collaborative history of American literature (iii). The editors of the next work, Literary History of the United States (1948,

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1 For convenience' sake, "American literary history" and "the literary history of the United States" are used interchangeably in this paper. For a definition of these two terms, see Spiller, Milestones 116 and Elliott, Columbia Literary History of the United States xix-xx respectively.
hereafter abbreviated as \textit{LHUS}), went one step further by producing not only a collaborative work, but also "a coherent narrative" (viii).\footnote{Up to now, there have been four editions of \textit{LHUS}, published in 1948, 1953, 1963, and 1974 respectively. Further references will be to the 1974 edition.} As a result, writing in the late 1960s on the progress of American literary history over more than a century, an Indian scholar observed that "the practice of American literary history has developed a genre and also attained an excellence which have few parallels outside that country" (Mukherjee 317).

The 1980s have witnessed the publication of such books as \textit{Toward a New American Literary History} (1980), \textit{Reconstructing American Literary History} (1986), and \textit{The Unusable Past} (1986). Furthermore, starting from May 1985, "The Extra" of \textit{American Literature} quarterly has focused on the problems or "problematics" (Bercovitch, \textit{Reconstructing} viii) of American literary history, especially with the urgent call for the redefinition of American literary tradition.\footnote{On the one hand, we have revisionists like Annette Kolodny, Emory Elliott, and Sacvan Bercovitch. On the other hand, we have Peter Carafiol who criticizes the revisionists as the supporters of "New Historicism" and "New Orthodoxy" (see esp. "New" 626-27) as well as William Spengemann whose proposal of "a literary history based on language" (475) once again threatens to reduce American literature to a branch of English literature and is severely questioned by James H. Maquire (644-45) and implicitly criticized by Elliott ("Politics" 275). One of the recent products of the so-called New Historicism is Jane Tompkins's \textit{Sensational Designs} which, as the critic herself conceives, is on the basis of "a new kind of historical criticism" and attempts "to see them [the neglected texts], insofar as possible, as they were seen in the moment of their emergence" (xii-xiii). In full realization of the fact that her position is not devoid of "a 'presentist' bias" and that her assumptions "are of course no more free than theirs [other critics'] from the constraints of a particular historical situation" (xiii), she believes that her interest-laden readings "provide a more satisfactory way of understanding the texts in question than the current critical consensus has" (xiii-xiv). The tendency of this approach can also be seen in Fredric Jameson's remark that "I have tried to maintain an essentially historicist perspective, in which our readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience of the present" (11). For a general criticism of the New Historicism in literary studies, see Pechter, esp. 301-02.} With the publication of \textit{Columbia Literary History}
of the United States (hereafter abbreviated as CLHUS) in 1988 as well as the announcement of the forthcoming American Literary History quarterly and New Cambridge History of American Literature (hereafter abbreviated as NCHAL), it is fitting and proper to reconsider the concept of American literary history of Robert E. Spiller, the main designer of LHUS—the immediate predecessor of CLHUS and NCHAL.4

Spiller's brief note in "The Extra" appears, quite significantly, above an article authored by Sacvan Bercovitch, the general editor of NCHAL advocating the rewriting of American literary history in a time of dissensus. This headnote-like passage expresses the mentality of a lifelong devotee to the construction of a single, unified American literary history. The full text reads:

I have often wondered why my books on American literary history, the Cycle [The Cycle of American Literature, 1955] and LHUS, have received such wide acceptance here and abroad, and yet the ideas underlying them and forming a comprehensive theory of literary history have not. Nobody speaks of Spiller as the father of a theory of history, such as those of Turner and Toynbee. My only explanation of this difference is the realization that Turner and Toynbee base their ideas on essentially Darwinian and Horizontal views of the universe whereas my theory of history is based on a circular view like that of Einstein. Maybe some day this difference will be understood, and my theory of history will come into its own as a dynamic process (emphasis added).5

4 Spiller with his "monumental" LHUS has become one of the main sources of the revisionists' "anxiety of influence" in their critical re-examination of American literary history. Portales rightly observes, "Whether we credit it [LHUS] or not, however, this book has visibly and invisibly directed many of our scholarly and critical activities since the end of World War II and this is the volume chiefly responsible for establishing the bifurcated 'mainstream' and 'ethnic' canons under which we labor" (100). See Fokkema 13 and Elliott, CLHUS xiii for the significance of "monument" and Bloom for the meaning of "anxiety of influence."

5 The Father of the "Frontier Thesis," Frederick Jackson Turner first delivered
In addition to conveying the complaint of a senior American literary historian, this passage also suggests something of interest, such as Spiller’s self-proclaimed “father-image,” the academic/commercial phenomena created by the popularity of his books, the “bewildering” or “undue” neglect of the underlying ideas of “a comprehensive theory of literary history,” the discrepancy between Spiller’s self-image and the Spiller imaged by others, his explanation or “rationalization” of this neglect, the paralleling of his conceptual scheme and discovery to those of Turner and Toynbee, the anticipation of

“The Significance of the Frontier in American History” in 1893. His Frontier in American History appeared in 1920. One of the earliest followers of the “Turner Thesis” in the field of American literature was Lucy Lockwood Hazard, who in 1927 witnessed that “[w]ithin the last quarter of a century we have had a re-definition of the significance of American history” (xv). Regarding that Turner’s address had “revolutionized the treatment of United States History,” she urged that “[t]he time is ripe for a similar re-definition and interpretation of American literature” (xvi). Edwin Fussell’s Frontier: American Literature and the American West (1965) was but one more book-length addition. In this respect, Henry Nash Smith’s changing concept of “Virgin Land” provides “a significant shift in American studies” (Bercovitch, “Afterword” 422). In his recent essay on “Myth and Ideology in Virgin Land,” Smith confesses that “[t]he very choice of the subject of Virgin Land [subtitled The American West as Symbol and Myth, 1950] may well have been suggested by the pervasive interest in the frontier generated by his [Turner’s] work” and that in Virgin Land “[l]ike my teachers and academic colleagues, I had . . . lost the capacity for facing up to the tragic dimensions of the Westward Movement” (28). In this confessional piece, Smith addresses the charge brought against his book as “an example of ‘consensus history’ ” (21). In Bercovitch’s opinion, Smith’s essay is “eloquent and exemplary in its recognition of the ideological dimensions of scholarship” and his case, “[p]erhaps the most dramatic testimony in this respect [representing ‘an ideological awareness that may reshape our views not only of our literary tradition but, in time, of our culture at large’]” (“Afterword” 420-21). Toynbee, like Spengler, attempted at a speculative system-building on the basis of biological analogy. In his chapter on “Literary History,” Rene Wellek rejected “the biological analogy between the development of literature and the closed evolutionary process from birth to death—an idea by no means extinct and recently revived by Spengler and Toynbee” (256) and contended that “despite the brilliant speculations of Spengler and Toynbee, such predictable changes have never been discovered in any historical process” (255). Spiller’s hypothesis is totally different from the idea Wellek attempted to set up (“the evolution of literature is different from that of biology, and that it has nothing to do with the idea of a uniform progress model” 257) and will be discussed in detail.
an ideal reader to come . . . Meanwhile, some of Spiller's familiar ideas, such as "comprehensive," "circular," "dynamic," do not fail to appear.

This paper attempts to examine Spiller's theory of the literary history of the United States as it develops in his various works and to describe some of the main features of his theory, with the awareness that my interpretation, as subject to my historicity, is a "refraction" of my own "problematic situation—as a person of particular race, class, and gender who also tries . . . to transcend the bias this entails" (Jehlen, "Introduction" 14-15). David Couzens Hoy's observation thus fits the present case properly: "understanding of the text [here, my understanding of Spiller's literary-historical text] is also self-understanding. But such self-understanding is always interpretive, since one can never completely objectify oneself" (166). One of the corollaries of that observation is, "just as understanding is self-understanding, criticism must also imply self-criticism" (166).

II

At the outset, a few words concerning Spiller's general theory of American literary history are necessary before we formally engage in a study of the evolution of his idea.

Spiller conceives the role of a literary historian as "first and last one kind of historian rather than one kind of writer or reader or critic. His special joy is to record and interpret the course of past events as related to specific times and places and in terms of cause and effect. Literature is the idiom in which he writes history" (Third 3). In other words, American literary history is a branch of the whole American history, or, as he says of his own work, "LHUS is one kind of history of the United States" (LHUS ix). His then is the role of historical critic/literary artist (Third 240) or the trinity of

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6 For another discussion of the task of "the new race of American literary historians," see Third 25.
Spiller’s Cyclical Theory of American Literary History

“historian-critic-architect” (Third 32). The main emphasis of his theory is on American literary history (rather than American literary history) and on the cyclical/organic nature of literature and history.\(^7\) When applied to American literary history, it forms a “singleness of vision” (Cycle xii) and a coherence of narrative.

Metaphorically, American literary history is a plant, with its life cycle of “the root, the sprout, the trunk and branches, the leaves and flowers” (Late 72). To be more elaborate, Spiller’s theory of American culture is both horizontal and vertical. As he observes, “Throughout our history, the horizontal movements of migration have tended to come in waves or cycles of uprooting and rerooting of cultures, and the vertical growth of new cultures in a new land in each case reenacts the life cycle of growth from birth, through maturity, into decline” (Late 164).\(^8\) Elsewhere, he specifies some of the factors shaping literary cycles: “language and form,” “period and movement,” as well as “instruments and bibliography” (Third 235-37). American literary tradition, as construed by Spiller, has two, instead of one, cycles incorporating the two peaks (1835-1855 and 1915-1935, Milestones 141) and/or the four salient facts.\(^9\) And each cycle is composed of four stages.\(^10\) This “two-cycle theory of American literature”

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7 For a discussion of “organic” in etymological and intellectual terms, see Williams 189-92.

8 Spiller seems to imply that he attempts to combine Parrington's horizontal approach and Matthiessen’s vertical approach to American literary history. See his remark on Parrington and Matthiessen in Milestones 52-53.

9 According to Spiller, they were: “(1) American literature, before the nineteenth century, was written in the service of ends other than art, and the greatest minds were essentially unliterary; (2) the nineteenth century produced perhaps a dozen literary figures of major stature, most of them either born in, or closely associated with, the thirteen original colonies; (3) at the same time there was much writing, associated principally with westward expansion, which was primarily unliterary in purpose and effect; and (4) the twentieth century has produced a large group of vigorous and profound writers whose dominating motives are literary and who live in all parts of our present territory” (Third 26).

10 Spiller spoke of these four stages on several occasions, e.g., Cycle xi and Late
(Late 168) culminated in LHUS and Cycle and was concisely expressed, in a 1980 paper, by two images (the cycle and the roots), highlighting his thinking on American literary history over a period of five decades, to be more exact, from the publication of The Roots of National Culture in 1933 to the brief note on American Literature quarterly in 1986.

In this 1980 paper which "may be my last word on the subject" (Late 162), Spiller traced very briefly the development of his concept of American literary history:

These two images—the cycle and the roots—have been basic to my thinking throughout my whole career as a literary historian, and all that I have written about the evolution of culture and literature is related in some way to organic nature and the life cycle. I first used the analogy of the plant from roots to flowering as the title of my anthology of early American literature, The Roots of National Culture, in 1933 and I first developed what later came to be spoken of as "the two-cycle theory of American literature" in a 1941 address at Frodham University.

The Cycle of American Literature (1955) was an outgrowth of the years of planning and producing Literary History of the United States. (Late 168)

In his headnote to "The Roots of National Culture to 1830: The First Frontier," a seminal paper published in the early 1930s, Spiller specified the significance of this article in his whole career as an American literary historian and the basic assumption therein:

72-73. The following quotation is but one of them: "The first stage is a period of exploration and settlement, which produces narrative and descriptive journals and letters. In the second stage the new settlement creates its own society with instruments of culture . . . All of these lead to intellectual activity and even controversy on all subjects, but mainly on politics and religion . . . This second stage, taken as a whole, can therefore be described as one of Instruments and Ideas. When the time is ripe . . . all of this leads to a third stage, in which there is a demand for the 'leisure arts,' especially literature. . . . Finally, in the fourth stage, new literature steps out with its new experience wrapped about it in natural folds. Only then can the major writer find within him a mature creative power and outside of him an educated and receptive audience" (Late 169-70).
This was my first use of the organic image of cyclic growth in the study of literary history. It was also my first attempt to deal with literature as the expression of a people in a time and place. The four stages I found in the growth of the literature of the Atlantic seaboard colonies seemed reflected in the stages of natural growth: the root, the sprout, the trunk and branches, and the leaves and flowers. (Late 72)

He then applied his assumption to the early American literary context and grouped it under different categories:

By about 1760, the frontier had pretty much completed the settlement of the eastern seaboard and had begun to move west. There had been the first stage of confronting the native inhabitants and reporting in “letters home” the conditions of the new civilization; the second stage of political and religious controversy had followed with the issues of Puritanism and Rationalism and the establishment of Church and State in various forms in the individual colonies. The third stage of developing an imitative literature had appeared only sporadically by the time of the Revolution; a fully mature native literature was still to come. (Late 72-73)

In his headnote to “the second half of the introduction to The Roots of National Culture (1931 [1933?]),” that is, “The Awakening of Literary Consciousness, 1760-1830,” Spiller further pointed out that with this article “my theory of the development of a new literature on the western frontier of Europe began to take shape... The third stage of development—imitative ‘belles lettres’—lasted from the morning after the Revolution until about 1830-35, when suddenly such writers as Irving, Cooper, Bryant, and Poe appeared. The new nation had by then at least the beginnings of a great literature of its own” (Late 87).

Spiller’s own evaluation of his then new approach to American literary history smacked of self-compliment:

The novelty of this approach to our literary history was not fully appreciated at the time The Roots appeared, but uncon-
scious agreement is the surest form of flattery; and if what I have just explained seems now quite obvious, it was not so in 1930, a century after literary autonomy had been achieved. (Late 87)

His early conception of American literary history and literary historian can further be seen in “The Task of the Historian of American Literature” (1935), in which he reiterated that, “Literary history conceives of literature as one aspect of organic evolution, limited by time and space for the purpose of study, and determined by forces and factors both within and without the individual and collective experience of the writers who lived in that time and place” (Third 15, emphasis added). And his concept of the domain of the literary historian readily reminds us of French critic Taine’s triad of race, milieu, and moment in the study of literature: “The province of the literary historian is therefore limited to the forms and movements in literature in time and place and in the literary developments of individual writers. His fields of study are further restricted by race, nation, and period” (16). His discussion on these three factors revealed the then 39-year-old scholar’s view of the literary history of the United States:

The race with which we have to deal in American literary history is a composite of the Aryan races of Europe, with some admixture of the Indian, the Negro, the Mongol, and other strains. It was primarily Anglo-Saxon in its origins, but no longer is even thus far limited. The nation with which we have to deal is one which came into existence only a century and a half ago, but which has since gained a strong sense of organic and cultural unity. Our period is primarily the later eighteenth

11 In his autobiographical piece on the writing of LHUS, Spiller mentioned that “[a]lthough I was Group Chairman [the American literature group of the Modern Language Association] in 1930 and 1931, I first came actively into the history project with a paper on ‘The Task of the Historian of American Literature’ which I read to the Group in 1935, and in which I basically accepted the Foerster formulation but called for patience while much spadework was done to fill it out” (Milestones 117).
century, all of the nineteenth, and a part of the twentieth. (16)

Spiller's dissatisfaction with the former generation of the writers of the history of American literature and American literary historians can be observed both here and in his prefaces to LHUS and Cycle. He criticized Knapp's non-synthesis and treatment of American literature as a branch of English literature, whereas Knapp's successors, "attaining] to a greater degree of synthesis in terms of organic evolution, but for the most part they merely pushed his unrelated analyses further and confined themselves to fact-finding" (Third 16-17). Spiller then accused the wrong-headed assumption of Knapp's approach: "The fundamental fallacy that American is merely a department of English literary history persisted almost to our own day" (16-17).12

On the other hand, although Vernon L. Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought (1927) successfully called people's attention to things American and, to Spiller, was "[t]he epoch-making work of this transition period [between English causes and American literature]," it nevertheless fell into another trap—"an examination primarily of the Jeffersonian theory of democracy, in its application to our agrarian and industrial development, and in its expression in our writings" (17). The result is "not literary history, but . . . prerequisite to the new literary history, and only a literary historian could have done it successfully" (17). In other words, what Parrington and his followers produced is "a history of documentation" (Cycle x), rather than American literary history per se. Consequently, "[a]lthough this theory made possible an American literary history, it threatened to

12 This "fallacy" actually persists to 1980s and probably will go on. See Spengemann in n. 2 above. Wellek's observation on this matter in a sense is a mere commonplace, "In the case of American literature, where there is no linguistic distinction from another national literature, the difficulties become manifold, since the development of the art of literature in America must be necessarily incomplete and partly dependent on an older and stronger tradition" (268).
make literary history as such an anomaly” (Cycle x).\footnote{See \textit{Milestones} 9-11 for Spiller’s 1927 review of Parrington’s book. In his headnote written in the 1970s for this review, Spiller acknowledged Parrington’s historical achievement: “But the younger scholars in American literature who were already deserting the field of English literature with its marriage to Anglo-Saxon philology immediately recognized it [Parrington’s book] as an invitation to join forces with the new and progressive scholarship in American history represented by such innovators as Turner, Beard, and Becker. The die was cast” (\textit{Milestones} 9).}

In his “Blueprint for American Literary History” (1941), Spiller carried his cycle image one step further in his attempt to “sketch a working plan for a new literary history of the United States” (\textit{Third} 26) to account for what to him are four dominant facts of the American literary past. In his picture of a two-cycle theory of American literary history, Spiller declared,

\begin{quote}
We cannot chart our literary history in a single curve, rising and falling in terms of romantic vs. neoclassical or other reactionary movements; we must have two such curves, the one reaching its apex in the middle years of the nineteenth century, the other at or near its highest point today. The two cross and, to a degree, merge somewhere between 1870 and 1890. (\textit{Third} 28)
\end{quote}

What was implied here, actually, was a revolt against the traditional English concept of literary history as reactionary, at least in the case of romantic vs. neoclassical. And in its place was the cyclical concept of literary history or, to set it down to the American context, the two crossing and merging cycles in the literary history of the United States. To be more specific, “What we used to call ‘The First National Period’ is in fact a romantic movement with a beginning, middle, and end, with a cycle that required almost a century to run, and with a background in the individualistic agrarian eastern seaboard states” (\textit{Third} 30).

In his description of the second curve, Spiller could only point out some of its characteristics and was yet unable to
define it exactly. He was shrewd enough to take note of the significance of the Westward Movement and its inherent romanticism, but in the same time he emphasized the similarity, rather than contradiction, between these two cycles ("A new period of national expansion was in full swing, and expansion fosters romanticism rather than its contrary in literature" *Third* 31). He also thought that "the rise of realism," a phrase provided by Parrington and others, was illuminating only to a certain extent, for "[i]t was a rise, as well as a decline, but it involved far more than realism. The descriptive terms for this new literature of the whole nation are as yet to be devised" (*Third* 32). Spiller found an easy way out by saying, "Whether the second curve of our literary history has reached its apex or not, we need not finally proclaim. All we need to discover is a living and mature literature in the past quarter century of our history" (*Third* 32).

More than a decade later, the second cycle seemed to come full circle. The 1953 preface to the second edition of *LHUS* remarked, "The brief 'Postscript' chapter has been added, not to provide a full literary history of the period 1945-1953 as a thing apart, but to carry some of the themes and motives of the larger story, already developed in the earlier chapters, forward past the century's mid-point and in this way to round out the account of the second literary 'renaissance'" (ix-x).

Among the four prefaces to different editions of *LHUS*, the second one is of particular significance in that it declared openly Spiller's organic theory of American literary history which brought into existence "a single and unified story" (*LHUS* ix). As Spiller put it, "[t]he master plan of the work may thus be seen more clearly, it is hoped, as a literary history of the United States rather than as a history of American literature" (*LHUS* ix, emphasis added). Following this line of argument, the Editorial Board of *LHUS* had their own view of literature and history:

The view of literature as the aesthetic expression of the general culture of a people in a given time and place was, from
the start, an axiom in the thinking of the editors and their associates. Rejecting the theory that history of any kind is merely a chronological record of objective facts, they adopted an organic view of literature as the record of human experience and of its history as the portrait of a people, designed from the curves of its cultural cycles and the colors of its rich and unique life. LHUS is one kind of history of the United States. (LHUS ix, emphasis added)

Seven years after the publication of LHUS, Spiller produced his own compact version of American literary history, The Cycle of American Literature—the inevitable "by-product of the shared experience of editing the Literary History of the United States" (Cycle xii) and "the distillation in one mind of the knowledge and wisdom of the fifty-five scholar-contributors to that larger work" (vii). Working single-handedly on this "condensation" (Milestones 116), Spiller was free to develop his "[i]deas and methods" (Cycle xii) as well as "[v]ision and tack" (Milestones 122) to the fullest.

This compact volume demonstrated Spiller's belief in "the continuity of life and the organic principle of its expression in art" and treated literature "not as documentation, but as symbolic illumination [of social and intellectual history]" (Cycle x). The role of the literary historian this time was more definite, namely, "to discover the cycle, or cycles, by which his literature is determined both in general scheme and in detail" (xi). Once again appeared the idea of literature as expressive of "some phase of American experience" (xi). Once again appeared the familiar two-cycle theory of American literature: "the literary movement which developed from the Eastern seaboard as a center, and culminated with the great romantic writers of the mid-nineteenth century; and that which grew out of the conquest of the continent and is now rounding its full cycle in the twentieth century" (xi). Once again appeared the observation of four stages within one single cycle: "[t]he letter home comes first, then the debate on religion or philosophy, then the imitative work of art, and finally the original and organic expression of the new life"
(xi). And once again was the affirmation of the endless repetition and thus predictability of cultural and art history: "the process of cultural growth into art is endlessly repeated as a civilization moves forward in time" (xi).

In *Cycle*, Spiller unequivocally combined Turner's "Frontier Thesis" with the "Major Author Approach" ("the first task of the new American literary historian was to discover which were or are the major American authors..." *Cycle* x) and subjected them to his cyclical framework or, to be precise, two secondary cycles, of American literary history. The division of sections and chapters showed it very clearly. "The First Frontier" covered twelve major authors (Ch. I: Edwards, Franklin, Jefferson; Ch. II: Irving, Bryant, Cooper; Ch. III: Emerson, Thoreau; Ch. IV: Poe, Hawthorne; Ch. V: Melville, Whitman) and "the Second Frontier," thirteen (Ch. VII: Howells, Mark Twain; Ch. VIII: Dickinson, James; Ch. IX: Adams, Norris, Robinson; Ch. X: Dreiser, Frost; Ch. XI: O'Neill, Hemingway; Ch. XII: Eliot, Faulkner). Although some other writers were discussed in passing, the main focus was placed on these twenty-five "major" writers according to Spiller's evaluation, among whom only one female writer (Dickinson) and no minority writer at all.14

The five-page "Epilogue" added to the 1967 edition of *Cycle* claimed to be an attempt "to round out the story already told rather than to venture into the alluring morass of prophecy" (vii). Second thoughts on it, however, reveal that it was not necessarily so. Emphasizing this time the importance of international and intercultural impact, Spiller said, "If there were to be a third cycle of American literature—or a fourth or fifth—it would be international, and the flow of influence would be circular and reciprocal" (228). Existential-

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14 See Tompkins's discussion of the "excisions and revisions" of the so-called major American writers in her examination of the history of American literary anthologies (esp. 187-90). A more extensive treatment can be found in Reising 18-31. For a contrast between *LHUS* and *CLHUS* with respect to female contributors and women writers, see Elliott, "Politics" 272-73.
ism was presumed to be the possible "philosophy underlying American literature" of the third cycle, playing the same role as "Transcendentalism and Naturalism served respectively the two major movements in nineteenth century American literature, the one based on new concepts of man's relationship to Deity and Moral Law, and the other on new concepts of his relationships to Nature and Natural Law" (229).15 Paralleling "Kierkegaard's and later forms of Existentialism" with "Emersonian Transcendentalism," Spiller ended his whole book with the affirmation that "that we are in the early stages of a new literary movement can hardly be doubted" and that "[f]rom this center there may well develop, in the foreseeable future, a third phase or cycle of American literature" (230). Here a literary historian turned himself into a literary prophet. Whereas Parrington was criticized by Spiller as "attempting to retell the record of the past in terms of economic and other forms of environmental determinism" (Cycle ix), Spiller himself was attempting not only to retell the record of the past but to prophesy the future in terms of cyclic determinism.

Between the appearance of the two editions of the Cycle were three articles addressing directly to the problem of American literary history: "A Letter to American Literary Historians" (1958), "Is Literary History Obsolete?" (1961), and "The Province of Literary History" (1963). Faced with "the old question of how to prepare for the time when, in its turn, Lhus would presumably be obsolete and a new kind

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15 In a headnote written more than a decade later, Spiller named these two major literary movements as "Transcendental Romanticism" and "Naturalistic Romanticism," with the latter based on "the new theories of evolution and depth psychology and on a modern resurgence of the human spirit" (Late 127). According to Spiller's definition, "Romanticism per se is an attitude toward life and literature, a spirit of adventure and experiment, and not merely a given set of themes or interests" (Cycle 84). Moreover, he had this to say about the third cycle: "it is essentially romantic in the sense of being exploratory, experimental and essentially anti-intellectual" (Cycle 230).
of literary history might evolve for a new generation” (Milestones 139), Spiller wrote this letter to Walter Blair, “then chairman of the American literature group of the Modern Language Association of America, and read by him at the annual luncheon of the group” (Third 217). Although feeling that “our interests were so very much at stake” (Milestones 139), the established American literary historian maintained his belief in the necessity of “the perennial reinterpretation of our literary past” (Third 217). In his opinion, LHUS attempted to challenge the limitations of its predecessors, such as “literary histories by Quinn, Boynton, Cairns, Van Doren, Foerster, and Parrington” in the following three aspects: “by a series of ‘instrument’ chapters, by emphasis on the masterwork and the major writer, and by examining the relationships of American to European as well as to English literatures and cultures” (Third 218). He went on to elaborate these three characteristics in terms of culture-literature relationship, the then canonical evaluation, and “the increasing interdependence of American and European literatures and cultures” (Third 220) other than English. At the end of this letter, he envisioned a new literary history which could be free from anti-historicism and anti-aestheticism and combine “judiciously the insights and methods of both the analytical critics and the behavioral scientists” (Third 221).

In “Is Literary History Obsolete?”—a paper read in 1961 and published in 1963—Spiller, contemplating the “sorry fate” of a literary historian, distinguished him from a critic and set down eight “basic assumptions that a literary historian must take in order to function as a literary historian” (Third 5). Among them were such familiar ideas as the emphasis on the spatial-temporal context, the concept of the work of art as expressive of the author’s “intellectual and emotional state” and as “a living organism with a life cycle of its own . . . as well as its own kind of immortality,” the stress on “literary history per se,” and the idea of the past as “an essential part of the living present” (5-6). All these stated once again the working hypothesis of the general editor of LHUS and writer of Cycle.
In "The Province of Literary History" (originally entitled "Literary History" and written for The Aims and Methods of Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures, edited by James Thorpe), Spiller started with a very brief definition of literary history as "concerned with describing and explaining the expression in literature of a people during a period of time, in a place, and usually in a specific language" and distinguished literary history, from the history of language, textual analysis, and literary criticism (Third 222-30). It followed naturally that a literary historian, though might be trained "as a linguist, a textual critic, and a literary critic, yet in his role as literary historian he has a separate and quite precise function. He must answer such questions as how? when? where? why? a work of literature exists or has existed and what its relationships are or were to other works of literature and to the whole history of man as a sentient and social being" (Third 223).

In his probably longest and most comprehensive theoretical statement on literary history, Spiller elaborated his thoughts on "the primary task of the literary historian" ("to record and explain the life histories of literary works," Third 228), the five "legitimate concerns of literary history" (ideas, cultures, political and social institutions, traditions and myth, and biography, 230-33), the factors shaping literary cycles (language and form, period and movement, instruments and bibliography, 240), and the ideal literary historian as historical critic/literary artist (240). Put in the context of the development of Spiller's concept of American literary history, this article was indeed, as he himself later claimed, "the mature statement of my position" (Milestones 128, n. 5).

Nearly thirty years after the publication of LHUS, Spiller observed in a brief passage "Literary History and Literary Criticism" (1976) that "no new comprehensive literary history of the United States has as yet appeared" (Milestones 143). Works like Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land and phenomenology as well as structuralism, in his opinion, failed to provide "a historical philosophy and structure sound and comprehensive enough to contain the whole story" (143). His
conclusion then rang with delight: "It would seem, therefore, that the socio-aesthetic philosophy and the evolutionary structure posited by the editorial board of *Literary History of the United States* are as valid now as they were in 1948" (143).

With the publication of "The Cycle and the Roots: National Identity in American Literature" in the anthology *Toward a New American Literary History* in 1980, Spiller recapitulated his cyclical theory of American literary history with these two images and was still content with his position as a literary historian/prophet, "I am glad that what may be my last word on the subject looks to the future as well as to the past" (*Late* 162).

And then in 1986, the lifelong devotee to the construction of a comprehensive theory of the literary history of the United States expressed his feeling of loneliness of a "prophet," gaining no recognition as "the father of a theory of history" and anticipating his future ideal readers.

### III

One of the important consequences of Spiller's cyclical theory of American literary history is the production of a single and coherent narrative. Although *CHAL* claimed to be "the first history of American literature composed with the collaboration of a numerous body of scholars from every section of the United States and from Canada" (iii), Spiller perhaps is the very first person who not only recognized the necessity of collaboration in writing American literary history and the accompanying "risk of differences of perspective or opinion," but also attempted the herculean or procrustean task of absorbing all contributions "within a frame" (*LHUS* vii).

With respect to the conception of the second cycle and its entailing effect, Spiller had this to say, "Suddenly I realized that there was a second cycle, which rose out of the fin-de-siecle disillusionment to reach a crest about 1915 to 1945. My new course was laid out for me; all I had to do was to read and
read and read, and so fill in the picture" (*Late* 127). In his recounting of the writing of *LHUS*, that is, "History of a History: The Story Behind *Literary History of the United States*" (1973), Spiller told us that as the Chairman of the *LHUS* Editorial Board, he was charged with the "primary responsibility for general policy, planning, and final editing" (*Milestones* 123). And his central role in this monumental enterprise cannot be overemphasized, "For this book, and for the so-called 'cycle' theory which was derived from it [in fact, which gave birth to it], I alone take responsibility, even though that theory in its final form was not entirely original with me. I proposed it in outline in an early essay ['Blueprint'], but its final form grew out of our group discussions and became the core of our thinking for the big book" (*Milestones* 117).

In order to carry out this sacred mission of the production of "a flowing narrative and critical account of the making and shaping of the whole literature of the American people in its evolving cultural context," the editors assumed a rather authoritarian role, "No contributors were invited until the editors had worked through at least a half-dozen revisions of the outline and had developed precis and author lists for each chapter" (*Milestones* 125). Or, as he wrote elsewhere, "Each of the additional forty-eight contributors [other than the editors and their associates] had at hand a detailed outline of the entire work and a statement of basic principles before he agreed to write" (*LHUS* vii). More than the main designer of the whole project, Spiller also played the role of "a literary historian, who, as editor, was striving for harmony and continuity in the book as a whole" (*Milestones* 127). He recalled, "I spent the entire summer of 1945 weaving and shaping the finished manuscript into a single book. At the least, I usually altered or supplied opening and closing sentences, or even paragraphs, for each chapter, moved sections from one chapter to another, and even restyled to the point, in a few cases, of almost rewriting" (126). He prided himself on the fact that "[m]ost of the contributors accepted these revisions with only
mild whimper at the worst" (126) and even cited some concrete examples to prove it (126-28). As a result, we have four chapters (10, 17, 71, and 82) under the name of Spiller with original passages by other contributors (LHUS 1476-79).

So in the preface to the first edition, he specifically described the conception, collaboration, and editing of the whole book, emphasizing that "[a] genuine collaboration requires some sacrifice of the individual in the interest of the group.... The editors have themselves written many chapters and have supplied necessary links; but individual opinions and styles have not been altered in substance. The result is, they [editors] believe, a coherent narrative, with valuable differences on individual points" (viii). And in the preface to the second edition, Spiller was well pleased to announce that "[m]ost of the critics who read it consecutively have found that, whatever other faults it may have, it is a solid whole. More than perhaps in any similar undertaking, the collaborators in LHUS really collaborated. The book they have written tells a single and unified story" (ix).

To be sure, it was very difficult to absorb so many and varied contributions from fifty-five critics into Spiller's self-proclaimed "single definitive work in its field—the true story of American literature" (Milestones 133). Later on, in his attempt "to make explicit the cyclical theory of organic relationship between the work of art and the experience that prompted it" (133), Spiller produced The Cycle of American Literature, subtitled An Essay in Historical Criticism, as "an essay toward such a singleness of vision" (Cycle xii). And his various articles and notes written in 1970s and 1980s still maintained this emphasis on or obsession with singleness, continuity, coherence, synthesis, and consensus, which is both a reaction to the loosely-organized CHAL and "the Age of Analysis" (Third 10-12) and is, in turn, reacted by CLHUS and NCHAL with their shared emphasis on difference, discontinuity, diversity, diffusion, and dissensus.16

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16 Here I will just mention two general editors of the now new American literary
Moreover, Spiller’s philosophy of history is worth discussing. History is generally taken to be things which happened in the past, our present understanding of them, as well as a discipline (namely, historiography). In contrast to the historicist approach which endeavors to understand the past in its own terms, the presentist one seeks to reconstruct the past according to the investigator’s historicity and position and inevitably reads present meanings into the past. Or as Fokkema defines it, “historical phenomena are described and judged by means of present conceptions and norms, in particular, present conceptions of rationality and truth” (7-8). As a matter of fact, absolute historicism or presentism is impossible, for neither can the observer of the past completely get rid of his own historicity, nor can his understanding of the past be attainable without the functioning of memory and experience, that is, without the functioning of history, per-

histories. Bercovitch has this to say about CHAI and LHUS: “The eclectic mode of the old Cambridge History assumes comprehensiveness and objectivity. The cyclical design of the Spiller History expresses a single-minded attempt at synthesis,” whereas the present generation’s “experience of (discontinuity, disruption, dissensus) requires its distinctive form of expression” (“America” 101). Elliott in re-reading LHUS detects “[t]he concern with unity—both narrative and nation” (“New” 613). Designing an American literary history in the 1980s, Elliott regards his primary goals as “pluralism of method and diversity of material” (614) as well as the representation of “the diversity of the literature and the variety of current critical opinion. The result should be to unsettle rather than reassure the book’s reader” (“Politics” 269). He therefore recommends his readers to make good use of indexing and cross-referencing so as to “always be involved in an act of creating his or her own interpretations of the literary history of the United States by combining related essays” (CLHUS xxi). This view of American literary history as on-going and open-ending has been criticized by one reviewer as “[a] literary history for fast times” (Gura 461). Bercovitch’s preface to Reconstructing succinctly sums up the delicate relationship between Spiller and his successors: “It was the achievement of the Spiller History to consolidate a powerful literary-historical moment. It will be the task of the present generation to reconstruct American literary history by making a virtue of dissensus” (xii-xiii). I would venture to add that what the 1980s revisionists share is actually a paradoxical “consensus on dissensus.” The dialogic relationship among different American literary histories, therefore, deserves a detailed investigation.
sonal or otherwise. It seems to be a matter of emphasis under different circumstances or different conceptual schemes.

Spiller’s presentist position can be clearly seen from the very beginning paragraph of the 1948 preface to *LHUS*:

Each generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms. A redefinition of our literary past was needed at the time of the First World War, when the *Cambridge History of American Literature* was produced by a group of scholars. It is now needed again; and it will be needed still again. (*LHUS* vii)

The same note was expressed repeatedly in the very beginning paragraphs of the three following prefaces in 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (*LHUS* ix, xi, and xiii). And one of its finest expressions appeared in his preface to *Cycle*: “[T]ak[ing] his position in the present and look[ing] backward over the past” as well as executing “the task of reorganizing experience so that its larger meanings are revealed, rather than that of repeating history in all its details,” a literary historian “must select, omit, and reorganize from the great mass of available data so that a coherent view of the total literary culture can emerge” (xi-xii). Even when *LHUS* was faced with the danger of being made obsolete in 1958 by “a new kind of literary history,” Spiller still insisted on “the perennial re-interpretation of our literary past” (*Milestones* 139). He stated firmly,

Not only must each generation write its own literary history, as the editors of the 1948 *Literary History of the United States* assumed, but each group and each individual who develops a hypothesis and a method must be allowed to make his own contribution in his own way; for the writing of history is never done as long as anyone can read new meanings into his own life by studying the reflection of the present in the mirror of the past. As long as we are vitally concerned with the problems of the relationship of the now to the then, the work of art to the artist, and literature to its society, our historical
scholarship will be alive; as soon as we feel that we have answered all such questions, we will become moribund. (139-40)

This presentist position or, as Bercovitch calls it, "revisionist challenge" (Reconstructing vii), has a long history in the United States. It has been expressed by political figures like Thomas Jefferson in his "appeal for social renewal with every generation" (Reconstructing vii), cultural figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson in his urge that "[e]ach age... must write its own book; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding" (56-57) in "The American Scholar," literary figures like T. S. Eliot in his emphasis on the "simultaneous order" and the readjustment and "conformity between the old and the new" (14-15) in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and historians like Turner in his belief that "each generation had to reinterpret the past to fit its own needs" (Lamar 76). And the wide acceptance of LHUS has surely confirmed the value of presentism in "communicating the results of these investigations [in knowledge of present-day language, logic, and science] to the historian's contemporaries" (Hull 4).

One of Spiller's most significant contributions to the interpretation of American literary past is the use of two images—the cycle and the roots—as his whole conceptual scheme. In his attempt to produce a single and coherent narrative on the basis of these two metaphors, Spiller inevitably underwent the process of selection and combination (Cycle xii). The narrativity of his American literary history and its relationship with these two dominating metaphors are therefore more than evident. In short, these two metaphors provide a perspective for understanding American literary history and facilitate a particular historical narrative.

Applying Mandelbaum's and Stambovsky's observation of the relationship between metaphor and historical knowledge to LHUS and Cycle, we may find that there appear two, rather than one, types of historiographic discourse and two kinds of functioning metaphors. To be more precise, Spiller's books demonstrate (1) the characteristic of "explanatory history" in
that Spiller "always knows (or believes that he knows) what has in fact happened, and seeks an explanation of why it happened" (Mandelbaum 26) and "heuristic metaphor" which functions as "a means of inquiry (both into the details of the historian's explanation as such and into his data as he incorporates it in his explanation)" (Stambovsky 126), and (2) the characteristic of "sequential history" in that it "seems to possess a single dominant story line—as narratives generally do—rather than being an analysis of independent factors that, together, bring about a particular result" (Mandelbaum 27) and "depictive metaphor" which "communicates meaning with all the dramatic force and economy of a visual depiction" (Stambovsky 128).17

Seeing in this way, we can bring into play Hayden White's concept of narrative discourse and historical understanding. The problem of the narrativity and fictionality of history has been the focus of White's three books—Metahistory (1973), The Tropics of Discourse (1978), and The Content of the Form (1987)—which "constantly emphasiz[e] the supposedly poetic rather than factual nature of narrative emplotment in history" (Dray 286). Spiller's coherent narrative of the American literary history justifies White's "extreme constructionist view of narrative in historical writing" (Dray 282-83) and the very significance of what White names as "the content of the form."

In his most recent book, White continues his argument that the relationship between narrative discourse and historical representation becomes "a problem for historical theory with the realization that narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in distinct ideological and even specifically political implications" (ix). A further elaboration readily connects White's idea with Spiller's concept of a coherent narrative explaining the relationship among the literary masters, their masterworks, and the

17 The literature on metaphor is massive. Here the reader is also referred to Cohen's Historical Culture 49-57 which, taking Vico as an example, discusses metaphor as a model of academic discourse.
experience as well as the context that produced them:

Many modern historians hold that narrative discourse, far from being a neutral medium for the representation of historical events and processes, is the very stuff of a mythical view of reality, a conceptual or pseudoconceptual "content" which, when used to represent real events, endows them with an illusory coherence and charges them with the kinds of meanings more characteristic of oneiric than of waking thought. (ix)

In other words, subject to narrativization, history not only is an interpretive construct but also, as a constructed narrative, contains much fictionality or even verges on being fictionality itself. This is partially in keeping with Spiller’s presentist position in viewing history not only as an account of what really happened, but, more importantly, as a (re)construction by and from a particular interpretive stance and conceptual scheme—partially because White regards history as construction, yet insists that its “real function” be “moral and political, not epistemological, and certainly not representational” (Dray 283).

In order to construct his narrative of American literature, Spiller has to fulfill the first task he himself assigns to a literary historian, that is, the determination of the major authors (Cycle 10 and Milestones 121). The Major Author approach unavoidably upgrades some writers and downgrades others on the basis of his working hypothesis. This brings in the complicated problem of literary canon and canon-formation which, being so complicated, cannot be adequately dealt with here.\(^\text{18}\)

In short, the question arises as to decide what the canon is and who the canon-fulfilling authors are. Spiller’s own revolt against Knapp, Parrington, and CHAL is a pertinent example of the shift in the literary canon, critical stance, and value judgment of American literary heritage. To our present concern, we may say that (1) to some extent each writing (“re-

\(^{18}\) For a collection of various studies on literary canon, see Hallberg.
writing” is perhaps more proper) of literary history is a shift in literary canon, be it ever so small; and (2) canon is the product of a then dominant “interpretive community” and is subject to the challenge and subversion of other dissident “interpretive communities.”

The twenty-five major authors in Cycle are judged as fulfilling not only Spiller’s canon, but also his cyclical construction of American literary past. LHUS is another embodiment of his canon and working hypothesis. Although Spiller was the first one who included Indians in his Roots (Late 72), the Indian heritage could hardly be seen in his fullest execution of the cyclical hypothesis Cycle. So was the case with the Afro-American writers. No black writer was admitted into the company of the twenty-five major writers of the Two-Frontier framework. It was only in the 1967 “Epilogue” that one black writer, Ralph Ellison, was mentioned in passing and that Spiller, recognizing the heterogeneity of American literature after 1950, began to value the minority groups (229)—whereas in his early discussion of the three requirements for the study of American literary history, he mentioned the Negro as an integral part of the race. This telling fact indicates that in order to produce a neat two-cycle picture of American literature, he had to decide who the major authors are and “requires some sacrifice of the individual [this time, the minority writers instead of the critics] in the interest of the group” (LHUS viii). In other words, to produce a single and unified narrative, Spiller had to make some then necessary sacrifice in his act of inclusion and exclusion and relegated the minority and women writers to “the unusable past.”

19 For a general description and definition of “interpretive communities,” see Fish 13-16.

20 The very title of Reising’s book, The Unusable Past, demonstrates a polemical pose against Van Wyck Brooks’s dictum “the usable past.” Although Spiller is not among the theorists of American literature discussed by Reising, it is somewhat difficult for him to be exempt from the charge of possessing sexist or racist bias. Kreiling endorses Kolodny’s opinion in saying that “Forty years after
Spiller's own position has not been so unaltering. The remarks in the later three prefaces to LHUS, especially the 1953 preface, showed that the editors successfully resisted the temptation to re-construct their literary history otherwise. It suggested that the canon forming this coherent literary history was not beyond doubt, not only to the readers but also to the editors themselves. But the popularity of LHUS and the editors' conquest of temptation helped to solidify the existent judgment. And the preface to the fourth and by now the last edition of the book expresses the combined feeling of happiness and sadness that LHUS is still beyond challenge—the rewriting of literary history seems not yet to come and their work still stands like a monument. This deceptively lasting value of their literary canon induces him to entertain the thinking that his aesthetic standard is perhaps the correct one.

As a matter of fact, Spiller's discussion of the American literary histories written by earlier scholars clearly expresses the shift of literary canon and the resultant major authors. The literary historians following Knapp's emphasis on Englishness produced their galaxy of major authors, such as

the publication of Spiller et al., *The [sic] Literary History of the United States*, we find the elder consensus too exclusive, too prone, in Annette Kolodny's words, to 'omissions and silences'” (84). Baker also speaks of Spiller's "exclusionist tendencies" (149). Portales even goes so far as to claim that "from the beginning American Literature has been exclusionary" (100). But Spiller is not necessarily a die-hard exclusionist. His awareness of the importance of comprehensiveness in telling the story of the literature of the United States can be seen from Miller's remark, "In 1973, upon the establishment of the Society for the study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, Professor Spiller commended the organization for undertaking 'systematic research and criticism in an area which is very close to my central concern for the link between literary history and its social and cultural contexts.' In addition, he said, 'The invention of the term "multi-ethnic" is, I think, an inspiration because it ... provides a better means of reaching an understanding of the complex evolution of the literature of the United States'" (7). We have observed that on other occasions he features diversity and multi-ethnicity as the traits of American literature. Therefore, his act of exclusion, to a certain extent, is a mere expediency.
Irving, Longfellow, Lowell, and Howells (Cycle viii). Stressing on Americanness, Parrington and his followers had rediscovered Freneau, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, and Mark Twain as their major authors (ix). Spiller’s emphasis on American literary history produces a different group of major American authors, without any writers from female and minority groups except Dickinson. This shift in emphasis also happens to Spiller himself who wrote in a note added to “Blueprint” more than twenty years later that “[h]indsight would, of course, suggest some changes in the names [of contemporary poets, novelists, dramatists, essayists, and critics] were the essay written today” (Third 36). All this demonstrates that the criteria for major/minor writers are not absolute and transcendent. While reacting to the confines of his predecessors, Spiller has established a system—a product of the act of inclusion and exclusion—which, though gradually reified as time goes by, invites challenges from the dissident groups. Fortunately or unfortunately, Spiller lives to see his theory challenged by scholars from a younger generation brought up on LHUS and his belief in presentism confirmed.

Something remains to be said about his organic concept of literature and history. His emphasis on the organic can be consistently seen from his various writings at different periods. In fact, Spiller here adopts Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s concept of the organic form, especially in the latter’s lectures in 1812 in defense of the seeming formlessness of Shakespeare’s work which, like a living organism, develops from within, rather than committing itself to a preconceived mode (II, 32-155). Therefore, we have such binary oppositions as organic vs. inorganic, life-like vs. mechanical, natural vs. artificial, innate vs. superimposed, germinative vs. pre-determined. New Critics somehow inherit this biological analogy in their discussion of the structure of the literary text. For example, Cleanth Brooks says that, “the parts of a poem have an organic relation to each other . . . The parts of a poem are related as
are the parts of a growing plant."21 Two clarifications are necessary. First, both Coleridge and New Critics apply the metaphor of the growing plant mainly to the form or structure of the literary text, whereas Spiller broadens it so as to incorporate not only the explication and understanding of an individual work or the corpus of an individual author but, more ambitiously, to the construction of a historical narrative of American literature. Just as M. H. Abrams puts it, "By transplanting the seed-idea from the mind of the poet to the collective mind of a nation or era, theorists were enabled to apply organic categories to the phylogeny, as well as the ontogeny of art: an artistic genre or a national literature, such as a Gesamttorganismus, was conceived to grow in time as a single work grows in the imagination of the individual artist" (218). And second, these theorists, with their organicist preoccupation, seem to by-pass or even reverse the causal relationship. That is, in dealing with the texts, literary or historical, they paradoxically superimpose their pre-conceived organicist obsession upon the raw materials and, worse still, regard their superimposed interpretation as the natural and universal truth. The same can be said of Spiller. The immediate goal of coherence and synthesis is bought at the expense of diversity and multi-ethnicity which he on other occasions hails as the main features of American culture.

IV

I venture to produce a picture of Spiller's development as an American literary historian, which is in close connection with his changing position. In his earlier writings, we see a young scholar entering the academic world whose anxiety of influence can be seen in his acceptance and rejection of his predecessors, most evidently in his dissatisfaction with CHAL

21 See also Brooks's emphasis on "the poem as an organic thing" (75) and "the structure of the poem as an organism" (218).
and Parrington. The anxiety of a young scholar to overthrow his immediate academic predecessor by proposing and, hopefully, writing a new literary history gained its clear expression in such articles as "Task" and "Blueprint."

After a strenuous effort, he was fortunate to have a group of scholars working together with him and a chance to produce a new American literary history. Years of hard-working, especially in his capacity as the Chairman of the Editorial Board of LHUS in charge of the "policy and planning" (LHUS xi), produced a huge book. He was by then creating a literary phenomenon and cultural enterprise. The wide acceptance of his work more fully established his position and affirmed his influence.

He was therefore among the established and institutionalized. His achievement was, however, accompanied by a sense of insecurity which surfaced not only in various prefaces to LHUS, the preface to the second edition (1953) in particular, but also in "A Letter to American Literary Historians" (1958), when he heard that a group of scholars were attempting to write another American literary history.

The preface to the fourth edition in 1974, however, expressed his mixed feeling of pleasure and worry, "At the close of its first quarter century, LHUS has belied its editors' original pronouncement that 'each generation must define the past in its own terms'" (xiii). As no similar task had been completed in the field of American literary history for almost three decades, he was both happy about the persisting value of LHUS, and perhaps wondered why his work had not been substantially challenged. "The Cycle and the Roots," published in 1980, did nothing but reaffirm his long-standing theory of the literary history of the United States.

His brief note appearing in American Literature quarterly in 1986 expressed his sense of bewilderment and disappointment. Since by then various redefinitions of American literary heritage challenged his LHUS and the preparation for CLHUS and NCHAL was well under way, Spiller, faced with his
immediate successors’ emphasis on dissensus, could not but have the “anxiety of being overthrown.” Moreover, he expressed his doubt why nobody had ever acknowledged him as the father of a theory of literary history.

Then, why isn’t Spiller considered the father of a theory of literary history? Or why didn’t or couldn’t he establish a paradigm as Turner did? I would venture some conjectures. First of all, his concept of American literary history, so far as we know, is not so original. The frontier hypothesis comes from Turner; the cycle hypothesis bears resemblance to Vico; his idea of literature is similar to that of Foerster (Late 126) and Matthiessen; and the emphasis on organism readily reminds us of Coleridge and New Critics (Late 126). And from Spiller’s own discussion of different trends of the history of ideas, we can observe that his organic and dynamic concept of history is in line with Vico’s Scienza Nuova (1725), Herder’s “idea of creative culture as an evolving process,” and the nineteenth-century romantic philosophers who defined history in terms of “the birth, growth, maturity, decline, decay, and rebirth of living and constantly changing cultural elements” (Third 11). Spiller’s account of the evolution of this literary

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22 See Burke 54-57 for a discussion of Vico’s view of history as three ages (the ages of the gods, heroes, and men) moving in cycles (in the sense of sequence corso and recurrence ricorso) and the appearance of the cyclical view of history in ancient Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the eighteenth century (56-57). Interestingly, Vico also shares Spiller’s idea of biological analogy, albeit with some difference—“the parallel . . . between the life of an individual and that of the human race in its three ages” (59).

23 Bercovitch hails Matthiessen’s American Renaissance (1941) as “a classic work of revisionist criticism” (“Problem” 631) and thinks that it helped establish a consensus about the terms “literary” and “history” in the American context (632). To this literary historian writing in the 1980s, both Matthiessen and Spiller had a consensus on American, literary, and history (637). Likewise, Spiller recognized Matthiessen as “perhaps the most original and dynamic leader of the movement for the restudy of American literary history” and talked about their shared ambition to reconstruct American literary history on the basis of Parrington’s approach (Milestones 52). For Spiller’s two reviews on American Renaissance, see Milestones 55-59. Also see Miller 5 for their similarity.
history of evolution and its connection with American literary history is worth quoting:

Literary evolution became a tenable concept in the thought of Schlegel, Hegel, Comte, Cousin, and Taine, and was taken up by Coleridge and Emerson, but literary history as a national, cultural, and linguistic process did not fully mature until almost the end of the nineteenth century in such men as Frazer, Brandes, Tyler, Saintsbury, and others of the great day of historical philology and cultural history which most of us can remember because we took part in it. (Third 11-12)

Furthermore, speaking of "the ancestry" of his cyclical theory, Spiller once clearly enumerated quite a number of candidates by saying that it "could very easily be traced back to Vico, Herder, Hegel, Darwin, Marx, Taine, and perhaps Freud, but it came to me through Franklin's pragmatism, Emerson's transcendental theory of values, and the theory of Henry Adams that 'man as a force must be measured by motion from a fixed point'" (Late 52).

Of course, one may argue that originality is only one prerequisite for the establishment of a paradigm and that one may combine several unoriginal concepts into an original one. If we regard Spiller's phrase "the father of a theory of history" as hinting at his self-ordained role as a paradigm-estisher, one question immediately arises. For a paradigm-estisher usually is not supposed to develop his concept too fully so as to leave no space for others to follow. Take Turner's Frontier Hypothesis for instance. Its maddening "vagueness" and "imprecise, evanescent, and sometimes contradictory" insights (Lamar 85) endow others with the potential and freedom to develop it completely and flexibly, thus following and reinforcing his paradigm. The "trouble" with Spiller's

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24 For a criticism of the idea of "the organic society" and "[1]iterature [which] was in a sense an organic society all of its own," see Eagleton, esp. 36-37.
25 For a recent case of this kind of "originality-in-synthesis," see Dowling's comment on Jameson (14).
attempt to set up a paradigm is that he not only brings out a hypothesis, but also has the "fortune" to develop it fully, both in his single-handed product *Cycle* and in the collaborative work *LHUS*.

Another reason is that people do not necessarily endorse the unified narrative and cyclical pattern produced by his synthetizing effort. That pattern is presumed to be an interpretive construct and, worse still, the superimposition of a particular critical stance. The doubtfulness of his two cyclical regularities and his prediction of the third and further cycles in the "Epilogue" of *Cycle* is an evident case at hand. Here the Goodman paradox in scientific inductive logic provides us with some useful notions. As Nelson Goodman puts it, "To say that valid predictions are those based on past regularities, without being able to say which regularities, is thus quite pointless. Regularities are where you find them, and you can find them anywhere" (82). In his discussion of regularities and projection, Brian Skyrms concludes temporarily that "[s]cientific inductive logic does project observed regularities into the future, but only projectible regularities. It does assume that nature is uniform and that the future will resemble the past, but only in certain respects. It does assume that observed patterns in nature will be repeated, but only certain types of patterns" (60). Yet Skyrms further argues that "projectibility is not simply a 'yes or no' affair but rather a matter of degree" (61). After a discussion of the Goodman paradox, Skyrms comes to three conclusions:

1. Whether we find change or not in a certain situation may depend on the linguistic machinery we use to describe that situation.

2. What regularities we find in a sequence of occurrences may depend on the linguistic machinery used to describe that sequence.

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26 I want to thank Dr. Wan-Chuan Fang, my colleague at the Institute of American Culture, Academia Sinica, for calling my attention to the Goodman paradox and Skyrms's discussion.
3. We may find two regularities in a sequence of occurrences, one projectible and one unprojectible, such that the predictions that arise from projecting them both are in conflict. (65)

These observations are applicable to Spiller’s case. The first observation has to do with the redefinition and reevaluation of the writer, the work, and literary history. To put simply, the change or not of the status of a so-called master writer or masterwork depends on the linguistic machinery, in this case, the then dominant critical discourse. This partly accounts for the fact why, say, the status of “the same” literary writers and works change according to different literary value systems at work. Even the word “literary” itself is called into question when the very “literariness” is subject to the functioning of changing linguistic machineries or critical terms. The recent vogue in autobiography (at most a sub-genre according to former critical terms) and the prominence conferred on such works as Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave are illuminating examples. This change in literary evaluation not only is the result of the challenge launched by the revisionists, but also in return serves to reinforce and justify the call for further revisions.

The second observation fits more properly into Spiller’s theory of American literary history. The two metaphors, the cycle and the roots, are the dominant “linguistic machinery” conceived and employed by Spiller to describe the sequence of literary occurrences in American history and produce regularities of that sequence, namely, the two cycles incorporating the four dominant facts in American literary history around Transcendental Romanticism and Naturalistic Romanticism.

The third observation is relevant to Spiller’s prediction of the third and further cycles. His emphasis on the international and intercultural impact and the specification of the Existentialism hint at characterizing the third cycle as centering around what may be named as “Existential Romanticism” (Cycle 228-30). However, we can adopt Spiller’s cycle-and-root hypothesis developed from American literary past and generate at least
another prediction, say, Postmodern Romanticism, which is in conflict with his third cycle of Existential Romanticism. Actually, if we are ingenious enough, theoretically infinite predictions based on Spiller's hypothesis could be produced.

Moreover, we readily notice that so far as projectibility is concerned, the three examples given by Skyrms to illustrate the Goodman paradox are rather fixed and determinate and therefore much more projectible than the intricate literary-historical phenomena with which generations of American literary historians have been trying hard to tackle. Nonetheless, the three examples are already unprojectible—as Skyrms speaks of the second example of the population graph, "There are indeed an infinite number of curves that pass through all the points and thus an infinite number of regularities in the data. Whatever prediction you wish to make, a regularity can be found whose projection will license that prediction" (69-70). In other words, the relative determinacy of the three examples highlights the inherently much more indeterminate status of the deceptively "fixed" "literary" masters and masterpieces whose change of position is at the mercy of the linguistic machinery then at work.

Skyrms's discussion of interpolation and extrapolation is also relevant both to Spiller's first two cycles which have to do with the past and to the third and further cycles projected into the future. Using the population graph with definite figures as his example, Skyrms defines interpolation as "estimating the position of the point that lies between the points representing the date" and extrapolation, "estimating the position that lies outside the points representing the date" (69). And his conclusion that infinite regularities are theoretically possible proves that the cyclical regularities of American literary history are, paradoxically, "at least" infinite.

Of course, Spiller is not without his reason and the cyclical theory he has developed over several decades is his "generating function" (Skyrms 70) in his consideration of American literary history. What I want to reiterate is that just as Skyrms observes, "[f]or any finite string of numbers which begins a
series, there are generating functions that fit that string of given numbers and yield whatever next number is desired” (71), Spiller’s third and more cycles are the same. That is to say, even if we accepted his first two cycles as valid, different generating functions will still produce a theoretically infinite number of the next cycles—not to mention that we do not necessarily accept his cyclical theory, his major authors and masterpieces, his dominant facts in American literary tradition, and so on. And there are at least three reasons: (1) as Skyrms puts it, “in any sequence of observations, no matter how chaotic the data may seem, there are always regularities” (72); (2) the so-called literary masters and masterpieces are subject to change according to different evaluation; and (3) the dominant facts in the literary expression of American history are not natural but artificial in the sense that they are selected and explained by Spiller himself. In one word, Spiller’s specification of the four dominant facts and twenty-five literary masters, his conception of two metaphors, and his construction of two cycles and the resultant one single and unified narrative of the literary history of the United States are inevitably interpretive constructs.

Skyrms concludes that at present the rules for projectability are still beyond our reach and names this impasse as “the new riddle of induction” (74). Spiller obviously faces the same problem with an inherently much more complicated nature.

The last but not the least, Skyrms’s discussion of the uniformity of nature can be applied to Spiller’s case and explain his image as a forlorn father of a theory of literary history. Skyrms says,

Just as we say that the naive characterization of scientific inductive logic as a system that projects observed regularities into the future was pointless unless we can say which regularities it projects, so we shall see that the statement that scientific inductive logic presupposes the uniformity of nature is equally pointless unless we are able to say in what respects nature is presupposed to be uniform. For it is self-contradictory to say
that nature is uniform in all respects, and trivial to say it is
uniform in some respects. (72)

Spiller’s cyclical theory actually faces the same dilemma. Its
idea toward the past and the future presupposes one of the
two things: the future resembles the past either in all or in
some respects. Yet Skyrms ably argues that the conflicts of
predictions "can be multiplied ad infinitum. The future
cannot resemble the past in all respects. It is self-contradic-
tory to say that nature is uniform in all respects" (72). From
our discussion above, Spiller obviously is to be accused of self-
contradiction.

On the other hand, the claim that nature is uniform in
some respects is "so weak as to be no claim at all. . . . no
matter how nature might behave, there would always be some
uniformity, 'natural' or 'artificial,' simple or complex. It is
therefore trivial to say that nature is uniform in some re-
spects" (72). Spiller’s prediction of future cycles are based on
the assumptions "that nature is uniform and that the future
will resemble the past" (Skyrms 56). Consequently, his pro-
jection and prediction are either self-contradictory or trivial.

To make the situation worse, the idea of interpolation,
when applied to the discussion of the literary past, creates a
more complicated problem. The literary past is not static for
the very reason that it is always subject to the changes of work-
ing hypotheses and conceptual schemes. In other words, not
only "the past should be altered by the present as much as the
present is directed by the past" (Eliot 15)—the familiar pre-
sentist position—but also the infinitely projected futures also
alter our conception of the past and present. If Spiller's
prediction (extrapolation) is either self-contradictory or trivial,
his presentist interpretation of the American literary past
(interpolation, or the perennial dialogue between past and
present) is also obviously so. In short, his cyclical theory of
American literary history is characterized either by triviality
(the cycle metaphor can be applied so indiscriminately as to
produce theoretically infinite number of cycles and thus lose
its attraction) or by self-contradiction (we follow his cyclical
hypothesis and produce different regularities within and with-
out the existing context of American literary history).

As a matter of fact, Spiller himself is not unaware of the
danger of a strict application of the biological analogy of the
life cycle to the study of history:

History is a process that deals with events, as we have seen—
it is not the mere record of fact—and process moves in curved
lines following the cycles of birth, growth, and decline of
organisms, with constant variations in speed, density, quality,
and direction. This is not to say that the biological analogy of
the life cycle can be strictly applied as a scientific measurement
to the histories of such larger units of human experience as cul-
tures, institutions, or nations, which in themselves have no indi-
vidual biological existence. This is one of the fallacies of the
nineteenth-century philosophers of history such as Spencer,
Marx, and Spengler, who were immediately influenced by
Darwinism and other forms of evolutionary theory, and it led to
disastrous racist and national ambitions which were based on
the false logic of the inevitability of any single life cycle. (Third
233-34)

Yet he is unable to resist the temptation of the apparent
validity of the cyclical theory on a limited basis and tries to
maintain an appearance of the middle way: “But to take the
next step and to deny all relationship between the biological
and the literary process is to deny the possibility of seeing
literature at all in its historical dimension and thereby to reduce
the work of art to a static and causeless existence, an equally
serious error” (234). As a result, Spiller’s insistence on a
dynamic, comprehensive, cyclical interpretation of American
literary history among a sea of possibilities is an act of ex-
clusion and reduction in that it excludes all other possible
estimations of American literary past and future and reduces
them to cyclical determinism and one single and coherent nar-
native.

It is this self-contradiction and triviality that account for,
to a certain degree, his failure to establish a common poetics for literary history in general and American literary history in particular.

V

Following Jauss’s question-and-answer process (esp. 29-30), Fokkema suggests a “concept of a literary history that answers specific questions” (9). To Spiller’s mind, a literary historian “must answer such questions as how? when? where? why? a work of literature exists or has existed and what its relationships are or were to other works of literature and to the whole history of man as a sentient and social being” (Third 223). With his questions addressed mainly in “The Task of the Historian of American Literature” and “Blueprint for American Literary History” and answers provided in LHUS and Cycle, Spiller serves as an illuminating example. In Spiller’s own opinion, LHUS not only incorporated the academic achievements of “the so-called renaissance of the second and third decades of this century,” but also answered, in due course, the questions “by a series of ‘instrument’ chapters [relating the work of art to the factors of environment which immediately conditioned it], by emphasis on the masterwork and the major writer, and by examining the relationships of American to European as well as to English literatures and cultures” (Milestones 140).

Here Spiller assumes a significant role in the study of American literary history of the twentieth century. For the re-writing of American literary history features each generation—CHAL, Parrington, Spiller, Elliott, Bercovitch, and so on—as a transitional figure both to their predecessors and successors and, different from and dissatisfied with their predecessors, as answering different questions. And the significance

27 For its discussion, see de Man xiii-xiv and Fokkema 4-5.
28 For a discussion of the study of American literary history as one of revolt and reaction, see Sukherjee as well as Carafiol, “Constraints” esp. 609.
of each generation’s reinventing literary history by way of canon-formation/deformation/reformation is clearly marked by Kolodny, “the success of these projects [of creating literary history anew] will be measured not by their finality but by their success in offering information and cognitive skills that enable readers to appreciate a fuller variety of texts than those which now comprise our standard canon” (301). This renunciation of the sense of finality is by no means a new one. Spiller observed very early with acute self-awareness that “[t]he danger in a work like The Cambridge History of American Literature or the Literary History of the United States, or any such massive synthesis, is that it can act as a deterrent to intellectual curiosity by giving a false sense of a false finality. Of the making of histories there is no end, and much scholarship of the right kind is the very lifeblood of a culture” (Milestones 140). For Spiller’s presentist position, the belated appearance of CLHUS, after all, has been long anticipated and is welcome.

Spiller’s LHUS and Cycle, in fine, are a transition between CHAL and CLHUS/NCHAL, the very existence of which evidences the similarity/difference, continuity/discontinuity between predecessors and successors. Northrop Frye’s “conception of recreation” in “the historical sequence of literary works” therefore also strikes a resounding note in the context of American literary historiography:

In all recreation there is a son/father relationship which has a double aspect: an Oedipus relation where the son kills the father and a Christian relation where the son identifies with the father. (225)

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重估羅伯特·史畢樂的
美國文學史觀

肇德興

摘 要

本文旨在探討二十世紀美國文學史家羅伯特·史畢樂（Robert E. Spiller）的美國文學史觀。史畢樂自稱其一生的美國文學史理念可用「週期」與「根」（the cycle and the roots）兩個意象來表示。他以這兩個比喻貫穿整個美國文學史，發展出「美國文學的二週期論」（the two-cycle theory of American literature）。此見解歷五十年而不變，在其一九三三年的專文便見端倪，至一九四八年主編的美國文學史（Literary History of the United States）和一九五五年撰寫的美國文學的週期（The Cycle of American Literature）達到巔峰，而一九八○年的專文仍具體而微地綜述，一九八六年的短文也依然堅持。

全文分為五部分：第一部分結論，略述美國文學史的研究；第二部分依年代順序，整理史畢樂的美國文學史觀；第三部分檢討與史畢樂有關的若干重要觀點，如統一的敘事（a single and unified narrative）、現代主義的立場（the presentist position）、「週期」與「根」比喻與對美國文學史理解的關係，歷史的敘事性（narrativity）、文學典律與主要作家（literary canon and major authors）的關係，以及有機理論（the organic theory）；第四部分敘述史畢樂身為美國文學史家的歷程並予評價；第五部分結論，引用數位文學理論家有關文學史的觀念，來闡釋史畢樂在美国文學史研究中的意義。