

What the heck is this “Transatlantic” thing?

For our “Special Topic” this semester, we’re studying the Transatlantic Novel. This term – “transatlantic” or “transatlanticism” – is likely new to you, as it’s not something that seems to have trickled down to undergraduate English studies (yet). This is clear from the fact that our own department has a course on “American Literary Traditions,” and one on “British Literary Traditions,” which would pretty clearly indicate that these are very separate traditions. But as you’ve likely already figured out, there are big areas of overlap and lots of ways that a national divide between British and American literature is limited and limiting.

Transatlanticism (or “the transatlantic”) has been on the minds of literary scholars for quite some time. During our first class meeting, we’ll talk lots more about this and why it matters, but prior to class, it would be helpful if you could read these two brief excerpts that discuss a significant text in transatlantic literary studies: Robert Weisbuch’s 1986 book, *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson*. We’re not going to read Weisbuch (in fact we will mostly be reading primary texts, i.e., novels and not literary criticism), but I think these two discussions – the first a review from 1987 and the second an article from 2008 – will help you get a sense of what literary scholars are saying (and have been saying) about this concept.

EXCERPT FROM: “American writers and the British muse” by [James Tuttleton](#) A review of *Atlantic Double-Cross* by Robert Weisbuch. April 1987

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/American-writers-and-the-British-muse-6180>

The literary relationship between England and America has been a source of continuous tension since the era of colonial Puritanism. Until quite recently, nearly every American memoir, history, sermon, novel, poem, or play that came under the scrutiny of comparative English criticism tended to suffer by the comparison—if it came under English scrutiny at all. Two centuries after the original settlement of our country, the common English view was that provincial America had produced nothing of genuine importance. “The Americans have no national literature,” *The British Critic* observed in 1818, “and no learned men.” “In the four quarters of the globe,” Sydney Smith asked in 1820, “who reads an American book?” *The Athenaeum* predicted in 1831 that “this want of originality in American literature is, we think, likely long to continue.” Even as late as 1860, *The Westminster Review* remarked that “For almost every work of note which has been produced there, the mother nation can show a better counterpart.” The formidable and chilling effect of English criticism on the reputation and sales of our books was an obstacle for nearly every American writer until the turn of this century. Even when an American writer produced a masterpiece, the English somehow managed to take credit. Washington Irving was excluded from Mary Russell Mitford’s *Stories of American Life* (London, 1830) because “his writings are essentially European and must be content to take their station amongst the Spectators and Tatlers of the mother country.”

Of course there was much to be said for the English position: the early literature of our country reflects all the limitations of a provincial society in the process of building a nation and a literature to reflect it. But few early American writers wished to grant our provincial inferiority. And whatever affection American writers may have felt for “Our Old Home,” as Hawthorne called England, it is worth remembering that English criticism was not always completely disinterested: the long history of political conflict prior to 1776, the American Revolution itself, the War of 1812, the cultivation of the Confederacy by the English during the Civil War, and like political strains had an implicit effect on much British criticism. And then there were the masters of English literature themselves—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Tennyson, Arnold, Dickens, and the rest—who made it easy for the English to justify their scorn.

The American response to the manifestly superior art of English literature during most of this period took a variety of forms: gestures of conciliation, assumed indifference, feigned humility, visible anger, and exaggerated claims of superiority. There was a good deal of Yankee strutting and posturing. Melville admonished: “let America first praise mediocrity even, in her children, before she praises . . . the best excellence in the children of any other land.” Such attitudes clearly express the most decisive response of Americans to the power of English literature. This response was a literary nationalism, which began before the era of the Revolution and culminated in Emerson’s declaration of literary independence in “The American Scholar”: “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.” There was a good deal of the Westerner’s swagger in this, and something of the tall tale in our praise of local mediocrity. Hence, toward the end of the nineteenth century, Henry James could famously list the elements of high civilization necessary to the writer but still absent in America:

No state, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot!

Patriotic Americans like Howells retorted that our democratic institutions had produced a new social order and a greater emphasis on the individual in his personal mystery and grandeur, but neither the English Victorians nor literary internationalists like James and Longfellow were likely to be convinced.

Excerpt from

Claybaugh, Amanda. 2008. "[New Fields, Conventional Habits, and the Legacy of "atlantic Double-Cross"](http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/claybaugh/files/claybaugh_alh_new_fields_old_habits.pdf)." *American Literary History* 20 (3).

http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/claybaugh/files/claybaugh_alh_new_fields_old_habits.pdf

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Twenty years after *Atlantic Double-Cross*, it is time for us to confront this resistance in earnest. It is time for us to have the debates that we have so far been evading. For far too long, British and US literary studies have been shielded from the provocation of the trans-Atlantic, and for far too long trans-Atlanticists have not had to grapple with the strong defenses of the national fields that might very well be made. Twenty years after *Atlantic Double-Cross*, it is time for us to see our "conventional habits" for what they are and to begin thinking seriously about what the study of literature in English should be.

So the 1987 excerpt is longer, mostly because it gives you the background you need to understand the concerns of transatlantic literary studies. But in 2008, scholars are still seeing that things haven't changed: we still have the British v. American divide in literary studies. Based on your own reading – in high school, here at college, or elsewhere – what are your impressions of the differences between British and American literature? Does it matter whether a book is British or American (or of some other nationality)? Why and how?