Review of
Literature, American Style: The Originality of Imitation in the Early Republic (Penn Press, 2019)
by Ezra Tawil

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Critical conversations about the birth, development, or zenith of American literature often begin with the vexing question J. Hector St. John de Crèveouer posed in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782): What is an American? Remove the "an" and the question takes on a different tenor: What is American about American literature? What are American letters, if not sad derivations of their English and European superiors? The very term "American" is often in quotations to signal its invented, parodic, or even ironic status. Indeed, Ezra Tawil writes in a clarifying note, "American Literature" refers less to a "set of cultural objects than to the manner in which they wrapped themselves in the mantle of Americanness."[1] And early American style, in turn, is both "national" and "notional," an idea advanced rhetorically in order to actualize the as-yet-undetermined style of the new nation.[2]

In *Literature, American Style*, Tawil's subject matter is, itself, a crucial intervention in the field of American literary studies because it foregrounds something—the "choice of words and the manner of arranging them"—that is often ignored. By choosing "style" as the focal point, Tawil's work responds to recent calls in the field to attend to literary aesthetics. In a 2016 special issue of *Early American Literature* on the topic, to which Tawil contributed, the editors begin with the blunt observation, "Our field has always had a vexed relationship to aesthetics."[3] The vexation, they argue, lies in the field's heavy historicist and archival bent; reading texts for the ideological work they perform or the evidence they contain. We instrumentalize the text, thinking of it as a lens, a light, a clue; the text is only meaningful when it points to other phenomena outside of it. Tawil's book instead aims to recover "the particularity of the literary," as the journal editors put it, and its aesthetic, affective, and rhetorical registers. "I believe that the question of linguistic style takes on a gravity and seriousness all its own, particularly in the literature of the early United States—or at least that it rewards semiautonomous treatment as a cultural question unto itself," he writes toward the end of his study.[4]

What are some of these rewards? Tawil helps us see them in his intricate readings of the linguistic and literary styles of several canonical works of the early national period, but also in their authors' metacritical commentary on style. It is in these authors' insistence on their style being pure or plain or American or artless or indigenous or absent that we find the American style struggling to emerge. American style, Tawil submits, is deeply self-conscious and conflicted. But it is not enough to state this and move on. How this style emerges discursively and dialectically has wide-ranging implications for how we understand the early national period's political and literary preoccupations and their legacies in twentieth-century criticism. The impulse toward "reflexive romanticism" has meant only tacitly treating late eighteenth-century literary style on its own terms and presuming that it was naturally more cosmopolitan simply because the nation hadn't yet severed its European ties. Tawil's book places a check on

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[1] Tawil, 198, n.52.
[2] Ibid., 193, n. 17.
[3] Edward Cahill and Edward Larkin, "Aesthetics, Feeling, and Form in Early American Literary Studies," *Early American Literature* 51, no. 2 (2016): 235.
[4] Tawil, 169.

the field's anachronistic leanings toward the nineteenth century when making claims about literary style, claims first advanced in the work of Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch in the field's nascence.

Tawil takes issue with the two competing claims that have been critically reworked over the last century of American literary criticism: American literature is derivative; American literature is distinctive. In the introduction, Tawil reorients the debate by advancing a both/and thesis about European influence on late eighteenth-century American writing. Embracing the paradoxical notion of American style as an "original imitation," Tawil poses more compelling analytical questions than whether American style is exceptional or not: What did late eighteenth-century American writers, identified as cis-Atlantic in Thomas Jefferson's term, think they were doing that was stylistically distinct from their European peers? And how did these writers' claims echo in the strains of exceptionalist criticism that reigned in the twentieth century and beyond? Tawil usefully adapts the concepts of autochthonous (indigenous) and allochthonous (diasporic) cultural development from anthropology to consider how late eighteenth-century writers made claims to American literary distinction within the obvious context of cultural adaptation. Here, Tawil's formulation of both/and is helpful in setting up the book's central claim: "We must grasp how Anglo-American literary culture sutured the fantasy of autochthony to the reality of cultural allochthony."[5]

Chapter one continues in this spirit, looking closely at the relationship between Noah Webster's and Samuel Johnson's approaches to English standardization. Tawil helpfully distinguishes between standardizing the English language in an "already existing speech community," as Johnson did, and "[calling] a unique speech community into being," as was Webster's aim.[6] The term "speech community" is especially important to Webster who, as Tawil observes, focused on pronunciation over etymology (Johnson's preoccupation). To contextualize the importance of this distinction, Tawil goes back to the late sixteenth century, looking at how orthographic debates among language reformers may have influenced Webster's thinking. Specifically, Webster chose to privilege pronunciation because the etymological approach Latinized and Frenchified English spelling; a return to "earlier Anglo-Saxon primitives" was a way for Webster to claim a more correct, because unsullied, English standard.[7] By embracing and attempting to perfect earlier forms of English, Webster also challenged the degeneration thesis: that Americans' dislocation from the mother country would also degrade the mother tongue. Webster's view required a belief in Anglo-Saxonism as the "origin" to which his orthography would return and American English as *more English* than British English and, crucially, easier for immigrants to learn. Words should be spelled how they sound if all of the nation's inhabitants are to speak, read, and write the national language.

Tawil's discussion of Webster's desire for an autochthonous language might have benefited from a close engagement with Sarah Rivett's work on Native American linguistics and early national attitudes toward linguistic indigeneity. Rivett observes the early national period as a time of intense focus on preserving Native American languages (presumed to be vanishing), even formally so under the auspices of Thomas Jefferson's "Vocabulary Project."[8] There is room, here, to think of America-English linguistic style's "negative affiliation" with indigenous

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[5] Ibid., 17.

[6] Ibid., 47.

[7] Ibid., 65.

[8] Sarah Rivett, "Unruly Empiricisms and Linguistic Sovereignty in Thomas Jefferson's Indian Vocabulary Project," *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 87, no. 4 (2015): 674.

languages alongside Webster's claims to linguistic indigeneity. We might consider, for example, how Jefferson's "attempt to impose orthographic or taxonomic order" on indigenous languages reflected the nationalizing impulse behind Webster's standardizations. Further, as Tim Cassedy has recently argued in his study of American linguistics and identity, it is helpful to remember that "in the early United States, Noah Webster was regarded by Americans as a crackpot and buffoon."[9] Cassedy's entire chapter on Webster, adapted from a 2014 *William and Mary Quarterly* piece, serves to "debunk" the idea that "Noah Webster's writings are representative of early American thinking about American identity." While Tawil's focus remains on Webster's attitude toward linguistic style, Webster is nonetheless a curious figure through which to understand American linguistic nationalism because he was utterly *out* of style.

Picking up the thread of a transatlantic foil (as Johnson was to Webster in the first chapter), chapter two aptly situates J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer* alongside Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781) as two early examples of transatlantic correspondence. Here, Tawil importantly reminds readers that American independence never entailed cutting off contact with the continent, but instead remaining in constant dialogue. Both Jefferson and Crèvecoeur's works take the form of the epistolary as a model for geopolitical relations. But where Jefferson operates from a defensive position, particularly against charges of American degeneracy, Crèvecoeur engages in an affected self-abasement to (ironically) show the superiority of candor. Tawil links Crèvecoeur's style of narration, figured as simple and unadorned, with a long history of the vernacular tradition in medieval and early modern European literature. Borrowed heavily from Michel de Montaigne's development of "vernacular authority" in Renaissance France, Crèvecoeur's "natural" style of a farmer's modesty is not originally American but a transplantation of other cultures into a fertile field. Thus, Tawil rightly points to the irony of Crèvecoeur's being the mouthpiece of American cultural exceptionalism in the narratives of twentieth and twenty-first century critics.

In chapter three, Tawil expands the link between the American landscape and literary aesthetics with a new reading of novelist Charles Brockden Brown's "irregular" style, one sometimes figured as "clumsy and ill formed."[10] Tawil rehearses the well-established argument that Brown's gothic replaces the European castles with American caverns (he cites Leslie Fielder on this point). More striking, then, is the way that Tawil interprets Brown's rendering of the sublime American landscape as a legacy of early modern accounts of European colonization, a "New World aesthetic…acting out a philosophical script that had already been written in European thought."[11] Tawil wants to consider how Brown adapts the gothic romance to "announce his aesthetic goals" and thematize them with specific reference to the landscape. With emphasis on America's status as a "neotopia" (both old and new), Brown deploys the colonial rhetoric of America's "pure," "untouched," "untrodden," and "primitive" to make claims for an American-style gothic. Further, the landscape of caves, crags, nooks, caverns, pits, and hills allowed American-style plots to unfold. Brown didn't just transplant a Radcliffean gothic novel from a castle to a cave; the American cave itself authorizes and determines what kind of plots can unfold there and, Tawil further contends, determines the circuitous style in which Brown's narratives are told.

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[9] Tim Cassedy, *Figures of Speech: Six History of Language and Identity in the Age of Revolutions* (Iowa City, IA: 2019), 74.

[10] Tawil, 148.

[11] Ibid., 131.

Surprisingly, the Native Americans who populate the landscapes through which Brown's characters travail, are hardly mentioned in Tawil's discussion of *Edgar Huntly*'s gothic style. This absence raises questions about how New World sublimity accounts for the presence of indigenous people, also often figured in this period as terrifying and sublime, ethereal and ghostlike, primitive and untamed. As Renée Bergland writes in *The National Uncanny* (2000), "[*Edgar Huntly*'s] Americanness depends upon Indian wars and perilous frontier" and is "peopled with somnambulists and spectral Indians."[12] Or, more recently, Jason Richards has contended that Edgar himself "has long evinced a desire to appropriate and inhabit Native American culture," learning to wield a tomahawk, donning a blood-soaked indigenous garment.[13] In Richards's view, Edgar is eager to wear native "redface" to claim legitimacy (nativity) for the settler nation. Bergland and Richards importantly remind us that the discourse of stylistic "antiquity" or "primitivism" in the late eighteenth century had to contend with the land's first peoples, whose "style" Edgar literally adopts and whose "uncultivated" landscapes were only defined as such from the worldview of settler colonists.

Tawil's turn toward the "plain style" and sentimental literature in chapter four is a similarly enlightening example of how imaginative fiction would theorize and thematize style. Tawil frames this chapter as a reconsideration of the legacy of stylistic "plainness" from its Protestant European origins, through its Puritan instantiation, to its manifestation in the transatlantic sentimental novel. Taking Perry Miller's essay, "An American Language" as a starting point, Tawil first examines the critical impulse in twentieth-century criticism to continue the project of literary nationalism. Finding parity between the late eighteenth-century stylistic identity crises and those of Miller's generation, Tawil exposes at the rhetorical moves required to make a case for the uniqueness of the Puritan plain style. Looking for a point of origin for the eventual flourishing of American letters, Miller argues that the Puritan plain style operated distinctively in New England because of the land itself. Miller's essay "manages to defeat its own transatlantic orientation," Tawil observes, flattening the more multi-dimensional story of stylistic exchange that made the American sentimental novel possible.[14] Here, Tawil wants to disrupt the conventional teleology, considering how the sentimental novel of seduction actually contributes to Miller's reductive version of the Puritan "plain style," the apex giving rise to the origin. The most compelling portion of this chapter centers on the relationship between narrative style and thematic seduction in the typical sentimental plot. Sentimental novels, Tawil writes, turn "protagonist and reader into the twin subjects of a form of seduction that works in and through improper language use."[15] Specifically, the emphasis in sentimental novels on a rake's "artful" behavior or on his deceitful "artifices" functions not just as a warning against their wily ways but as a stylistic commentary on allegedly American virtues of humility, plainness, and sincerity—that is, alleged by the late eighteenth-century writers Tawil cites. Tawil himself is careful not to make these claims for an American style, but to be ever-mindful that "transnational facts keep getting in the way of a good national story." Ultimately, American sentimental fiction relies upon American readers recognizing its British references. The very qualities of sincerity or artlessness, Tawil keenly observes, are only defined "as the negation of certain ornamental

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[12] Renée Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 51.

[13] Jason Richards, *Imitation Nation: Red, White, and Blackface in Early and Antebellum US Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 38.

[14] Tawil, 154.

[15] Ibid., 165.

characteristics," just as the language of a distinctive American style necessarily emerges out of a "negative affiliation" with Britishness.

While Tawil's book deeply contextualizes the rhetorical uses of claiming an American style, it seems at times to be participating in an older conversation about American literary history. By anchoring his study in the work of Webster, Crevecoeur, Brown, and Rowson (very briefly), Tawil engages a conventional canon that has undergone profound expansion in recent decades. The author contends that he is reconstructing the 18th-century origins of a 20th-century critical phenomenon that privileged an exceptionalist and teleological view of American literary development. But in a field where Perry Miller's work has been exhaustively critiqued, temporal regimes are regularly scrutinized, transatlantic and hemispheric studies reign, and skepticism of the "nation" as an organizing principle is commonplace, the work of deconstructing American literary nationalism seems to be wrapping up, the myths debunked. In other words, it is increasingly difficult to make the claim that we must overturn the Millerian strain of literary criticism when its influence is only faintly detectable. It seems worth mentioning, here, that Tawil's book lacks a separate bibliography and, in some key instances, critical engagement with contemporary scholarship. His claim that the field's temporal frameworks have privileged the romantics is significant, for example, but does not cite new approaches to temporality and periodization by critics like Lloyd Pratt, Jeffery Insko, Michelle Sizemore, or Jordan Stein. More broadly, Tawil's book sometimes reifies the same conventional historical and authorial boundaries that he seems keen to deconstruct. Even the book jacket's synopsis cites "the romantic nationalism of [James Fenimore] Cooper, the transcendentalism of [Ralph Waldo] Emerson and [Henry David] Thoreau, and the iconoclastic poetics of [Walt] Whitman," not as categories up for scrutiny, per se, but as accepted epochs in literary history. This is a surprisingly orthodox formulation. We might ask, "Whose version of American literary aesthetics does this book capture?" If, in a genealogy of American literature, the offspring is Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, then of course the sires would be Jefferson, Crèvecouer, Brown, and Royall Tyler. But what about the romantic nationalism of Catherine Maria Sedgwick? The transcendentalism of Margaret Fuller? The iconoclastic poetics of Emily Dickinson? Or, more to the book's timeframe, what about the style of Judith Sergeant Murray's essays and fiction? The political writings, plays, and histories of Mercy Otis Warren? The poetry of Sarah Wentworth Morton? The oratory of Jupiter Hammon? The poetry of Phillis Wheatley? The slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano? In other words, how might we include in the scope of "American Style" those who, in the first three examples, were second-class citizens or, in the next three examples, were enslaved in a country that failed to acknowledge their humanity, let alone their language? It can be cheap to critique a book for those it doesn't include, but in the case of Tawil's book, the lack of attention to other forms and contributors to eighteenth-century literary culture is notable. In his introduction, Tawil writes that "Anglo-American literary artists did not, say, begin to write trickster tales as a way of asserting the indigeneity of their tradition; nor did they embrace African American literary forms like the slave narrative as the (arguably far stronger) basis of a culturally distinct tradition."[16] While he says this regretfully, his book tends to repeat these exclusions by still engaging the usual suspects. Even as he shows these "American" works to be derivations, stylistically defined through negative affiliation, they still function in his study as indispensable anchor texts in the theorization of American style. What is missed when critics position the "they" of Tawil's claim as the final word on the issue, the stylistic arbiters of their day? Perhaps we might contribute to the decolonizing of the field, in general, by acknowledging

[16] Ibid., 10.

those non-Anglo- or Euro-American voices who contributed to the dialectic of adoption and adaptation in this same period of post-Revolutionary flux.

What Tawil does remarkably well, and vitally so for the field, is to put a finer point on the intricacies of transatlantic exchange, literary style, and cultural nationalism that critics have too often painted with a broad brush. He invites critics to contextualize and theorize eighteenth-century writers' formal choices and those choices' aesthetic effects not just for their political or cultural significance or for what they tell us about later periods, but for their own sake. Tawil's book is not concerned, finally, with telling a new origin story or resolving the question, "What is American literary style?" For, whatever American style is, it is unexceptional. As Tawil argues in the book's coda, there is a "particular kind of illogic" to the formulation of American style, which he best describes as "negative emulation."[17] This is a necessary theory for not only studies of style, but also of American culture, religion, politics, and economics; it is a theory with which we might understand countless other expressions of "original imitation" in American life and letters.

[17] Ibid., 189.