

African novel in Spanish, as “American” texts. And in an epilogue he claims that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), set in Switzerland and the Arctic, is, despite its English author, “the great American novel.” Second, several of Lifshy’s readings are based on impressive textual or archival scholarship – his accounts of the literature surrounding the explorer Álar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, for example – and offer fresh insights, some of them profound. I learnt much from his knowledgeable and sensitive handling of the great Mayan “bible” the Popul Vuh. Third, *Specters of Conquest* is thematically organized to strike sparks by linking texts from very disparate historical periods and geographical contexts. Thus Columbus’s logbooks are seen alongside *In the American Grain*; the ancient Popul Vuh is paired with a twentieth-century text, the autobiographical *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*; and Thomas Pynchon’s historical novel *Mason & Dixon*, about the two eighteenth-century British surveyors who mapped what was to become the North–South divide in the US, is juxtaposed with Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in a Time of Cholera* (1985), set in Colombia in the fifty years from 1880 onwards.

These disjunctions are, of course, deliberate, and constitute part of Lifshy’s claim that all of his texts participate in a continuous process – the making of “America” – that arises from specific historical acts but subsumes and, ultimately, transcends them. He is not cavalier. For example, in discussing *Frankenstein* he is at pains to acknowledge the book’s Europeaness, its ideological point of origin in Romanticism, and as he alerts his readers to contemporary New World sources he also admits their peripheral status. But, at bottom, he is not really interested in the specificities of tracing a genealogy; he is ahistorical and his “America” is a myth or archetype.

This stance provides an explanation for some of the idiosyncrasies of his close readings. I accept that it is not possible, or even desirable, to read any text in its entirety, and on occasion it may be enriching to restrict discussion to choice extracts, but Lifshy sometimes chooses so selectively as to strain credibility. The discussion of the lengthy García Márquez novel, for instance, concentrates almost exclusively on just two short river journeys, and that of *Frankenstein* hangs on the novel’s couple of very brief references to “the New World.” True, there are latent riches in such selections, and Lifshy exploits them with a grace and erudition that almost makes us miss the sleight of hand involved. But his powerful and provocative thesis would have been all the stronger if he had granted more attention to the problematics of his chronology, disciplined his explanations, and exercised more restraint in his claims.

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Andrew Taylor, *Thinking America: New England Intellectuals and the Varieties of American Identity* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010, \$55.00). Pp. ix + 226. ISBN 978 1 58465 862 7.

More than half a century after Perry Miller explored the traditions of the “New England mind,” intellectual historians and literary scholars are still preoccupied with this somewhat nebulous entity, although it now appears in a less homogeneous form. In this suggestive study, Andrew Taylor interrogates five major figures: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, William James, and George Santayana. The stated aim is to think “about the location and responsibilities” of this

“specific strand of American intellectual life,” against a backdrop of cultural change in which the concept of the intellectual as a social type itself emerged (4). In doing so, Taylor reexamines the problems of identification faced not only by these New England thinkers and writers, but by intellectuals at large. This lends a contemporary slant to the analysis, with lines drawn between Emerson’s self-liberating transcendentalism and such recent examples as Edward Said’s conception of the alienated intellectual, outside any national culture. Taylor stops short of claiming a simple intellectual genealogy between Emerson and the present, however. Instead, he seeks to unravel recurring, problematic, questions: how can ideas be translated into actions? How should thinkers preoccupied with universal truths relate to entities such as the community, or the nation? The careful choice of writers, texts, and biographical episodes amply justifies this intervention in the long-running conversation about the status of the intellectual. In Thoreau’s complex engagement with John Brown as a visionary radical a provocative model of the transgressive intellectual-as-terrorist emerges. Engaging in thoughtful ways with Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1843), Taylor allows her infectious cosmopolitanism and social engagement to come to the fore; if any New England intellectual managed to make the leap from thought to action, surely it was Fuller. James, despite his reputation for a hearty pluralism, is shown to insist upon the *limits* of cosmopolitanism, wary of America’s lapse into cultural incoherence. Thus, against many competing characterizations, James is recast by Taylor in a more conventionally Victorian mould, as “a gentleman reformer whose idea of modest hierarchy is always in danger of slipping into cultural elitism” (157). The Spanish-born Harvard philosopher Santayana, who abandoned the United States in 1911, provides a final critical perspective on the intellectual life of New England, ultimately dismissing Emerson’s transcendentalism as “a belated romanticism” (173). Throughout the book Taylor sets these five figures into conversations with a parade of more recent thinkers who have covered similar terrain, from Gramsci and Arendt to Bourdieu and (especially) Cavell, among many others. This gives *Thinking America* the feel of a particularly high-powered seminar: sometimes prone to digression, but with a superabundance of critical opinions and insightful interpretations on offer. Some of Taylor’s suggestions could have been developed further, particularly about the embedding of intellectual life in a professionalizing university culture which formed the increasingly dominant “scene of instruction.” Yet the overall effect is impressive and energizing, and serves as a persuasive reminder of the continued relevance to contemporary concerns of these largely familiar figures in American intellectual history.

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Justine S. Murison, *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, \$90.00). Pp. 215. ISBN 978 1 10700 791 8.

As literary scholars navigate a neuroscientific turn, it’s worth remembering that we’ve been down that path before. Now that readers’ brains can be imaged by MRIs, new models of neural activity seem to hold out the promise of explaining the processes of literary production and readers’ responses. How do we construct narratives or metaphors or images? What mechanisms allow us to “see” verbal worlds, to feel emotionally attached to fictional characters, and to be excited or scandalized by a work of art?