

tion that “the borders drawn around” nations and other communities are “ideological fictions.” To speak of “‘early modern English culture,’” for instance, Greenfield says, is to treat “a political phantasm as if it were a fact,” and to slight the various “groups, classes, and regions” on which the nationalist fiction is imposed.

“The third objection to the culture concept,” writes Greenfield, “is that it leads investigation toward abstract generalizations and away from the insights, choices, and idiosyncrasies of individuals.” It’s not enough to describe cultural “tool kits,” he maintains. Critics must tell “how the tools are used by individuals.”

Ironically, as literary critics have turned to anthropology for ideas and (as they hope) the prestige of science, many anthropologists,

Greenfield observes, have been moving away from science and remaking their discipline “in the image of literary criticism—as an interpretive practice.”

Prominent anthropologists, he says, now suggest that the concept of culture “may have outlived its usefulness.” Many, conscious of how imperialist powers and other outside forces have influenced the supposedly isolated, coherent, and stable “cultures,” have begun, he says, “to accuse themselves of a blindness to politics that amounts to a complicity” with European colonialism.

Although elsewhere in academe, the prestige of “culture” seems still on the rise, this is deceptive, Greenfield suggests. More and more literary critics will find out, as the anthropologists have, that the concept “no longer does the work that [they] want it to.”

In Deepest Beethoven

“The Sublime Beethoven” by Dmitri Tymoczko, in *Boston Review* (Dec. 1999–Jan. 2000), E53-407, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass. 02139.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) moved music far beyond the beautiful, into “the sphere of the Sublime,” declared composer Richard Wagner on the 100th anniversary of Beethoven’s birth. But what precisely makes his music sublime? asks Tymoczko, a doctoral student in music composition at the University of California, Berkeley.

“Is it that we are simply overwhelmed by Beethoven’s musicianship, the way that we are dazzled by Michael Jordan’s athleticism? Or is it the music’s passionate emotional content, the way it seems to access our darkest or most powerful feelings? . . . Is it the way Beethoven crosses boundaries, daring to do things—repeating a single melodic figure a dozen or more times, or writing 20-minute sonata movements—that, we imagined, no right-minded composer would ever think of doing? Or is it more a matter of content: the way the audacity seems to be *spiritually* motivated. . . ?”

As “a catch-all term for Beethoven’s ferocity,” *sublimity* can refer to all of the above, Tymoczko says. However, Wagner



Beethoven at the piano

and, a half-century before him, music critic E. T. A. Hoffmann had in mind something much more specific when they described Beethoven's music as sublime: namely, both certain musical features (e.g., the extreme length and insistent dissonances of the compositions) and "the spiritual effect that the music is supposed to produce in listeners." But the Wagner-Hoffmann view, Tymoczko contends, is little more than a watered-down version of an aesthetic principle propounded in the previous century by the philosopher Immanuel Kant.

Favoring "a kind of artistic self-abnegation," says Tymoczko, Kant suggested "that the arts might present the sublime *negatively*, by expressing their own inadequacy. . . . By portraying human limitations, and [implying] that there is some-

thing beyond them, these works inspire a kind of religious awe."

In Beethoven's works, Tymoczko finds "a number of curious passages where [his] music seems to question itself, as if challenging the demands placed upon it." The composer was prone, especially in his later works, to write music that was difficult, if not impossible, to play. But in the *Tempest* Sonata, op. 1, no. 2, he wrote music "in conflict with itself," dramatically emphasizing, at one point, the inability of his five-octave piano to reach the B-flat required, and producing "a jarringly beautiful sequence of dissonant seventh chords." At such brief, paradoxical moments, Tymoczko believes, Beethoven seems to reveal "something like a Kantian sense of art's ultimate inadequacy"--and his music reaches the truly sublime.

Mencken's Masterwork

"Babylonian Frolics: H. L. Mencken and *The American Language*" by Raymond Nelson, in *American Literary History* (Winter 1999), Oxford Univ. Press, 2001 Evans Rd., Cary, N.C. 27513-2009.

"A gaudy piece of buncombe, rather neatly done." So H. L. Mencken once described his monumental tome *The American Language* (1919). Written as America was drawn into, then engaged in, the Great War against his beloved Germany, the work was a declaration of America's linguistic independence from England. It also was "the first attempt since Noah Webster's at an overview of the national language," writes Nelson, a professor of American literature and literary history at the University of Virginia.

American and British English, argued Mencken (1880-1956), were on the verge of becoming separate languages, thanks mainly to the vigorous, vulgar expressions that America's "yokelry" kept turning out. By Mencken's account, Nelson says, the American vocabulary had begun to evolve in colonial times, "when the awakening language brought to the New World by English settlers and adventurers was redefined by the first Americanisms and expanded by loanwords from Indian, French, Dutch, Spanish, and African residents. Mencken then traces the lexicon through alternate cycles of growth and stasis," concluding in the 20th century's early

decades, "with vulgar impulses once again unleashed," to produce such welcome neologisms as *joy-ride*, *high-brow*, and *sob-sister*.

In Mencken's history of the development of American English, Nelson writes, there is ceaseless comic conflict between the demotic schoolboy, "doomed to the quality of the vulgate to which he is born," and the eternal schoolmarm, who, thanks to her own birth and upbringing, "is cursed to recite her rules and declensions through thousands of drowsy afternoons, never to any discernible effect." Mencken scorned the yokels as well as the schoolmarm, but he identified "linguistic energy with American loutish ingenuity while assigning linguistic form to the British and their ill-fitting Latin grammars." The hardly profound implication was: energy good, form bad. Not for Mencken, says Nelson, the more subtle "dialectical interplay of description and prescription, usage and sanction."

The American Language, first published in an edition of only 1,500 copies, played little role in the literary and cultural upheavals of the 1920s, Nelson says. But it did have an impact on academics and students of lan-