INTRODUCTION

The Objects of Recovery

> The analyst who only knows about those authors from the past who have been recognized by literary history as worthy of being conserved is embracing an intrinsically vicious form of understanding and explanation. Such an analyst can only register, unwittingly, the way the ignored authors have affected, by the logic of action and reaction, the authors to be interpreted—the ones who, by their active rejection, have contributed to the others' disappearance from history. This is to preclude a true understanding of everything in the work of the survivors themselves that is, like their rejections, the indirect product of the existence and action of the vanished authors.
>
> —PIERRE BOURDIEU, "The Conquest of Autonomy"

THIS BOOK, like so many others in American literary scholarship of the past twenty-five years, is fundamentally a recovery project, aimed in the first place at delineating some part of "the existence and action," in Bourdieu's words, of a set of authors who had all but vanished from literary history for most of the past one hundred years: American women poets of the nineteenth century.

Since the early 1990s, however, nineteenth-century American women poets have been well on their way to recovery. Nineteenth-century American poetry generally and especially poetry by American women have seen a minor publishing boom recently: John Hollander's two-volume Library of America collection of nineteenth-century American poetry came out to much fanfare in 1993, preceded by Cheryl Walker's 1992 anthology of nineteenth-century American women poets and Jane R. Sherman's *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century*, and followed in 1997 by Janet Grey's anthology *She Wields a Pen: American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century* and, a year later, by Paula Bennett's massive *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology*.[1] General pedagogical anthologies like the Heath and Norton anthologies of American literature soon began to follow suit by expanding their offerings in poetry, and other presses have followed the first wave of dedicated poetry anthologies with still other compilations.

These anthologies clearly indicate a revival of professional interest in nineteenth-century American poetry beyond Dickinson and Whitman, but what is striking about this revival are the specific professional forms this interest has so far taken—and not taken.

Popular nineteenth-century American poets, male and female, are today being copiously anthologized; but the relative dearth of scholarly essays and, even more, of full-length books on these poets suggests that criticism is only just beginning to confer scholarly significance on them.[2] Furthermore, with some recent exceptions, very few general works in American literary and cultural studies have turned to poetry, especially nineteenth-century poetry beyond Whitman and Dickinson, in the course of explicating U.S. cultural histories of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and other national thematics. The new American studies in this respect has so far differed surprisingly little from the old; as Joseph Harrington observed in 1996, American literary studies from the 1950s onward, for all the energies of canon expansion and new historicisms, has generally gone about its business as if "American poetry is not American literature."[3]

What has made this now widely anthologized body of poetry so slow to develop a body of interpretive criticism, by contrast with the wealth of literary-critical and cultural work on "recovered" nineteenth-century American fiction? One answer is surely that recovery efforts in nineteenth-century American writing have tended to privilege social themes as a principle of selection and as their central critical means of understanding literature's embeddedness in history. Lyric poetry's traditional foregrounding of formal artifice and individual emotion over thematic social realism is unlikely, on these principles, to seem significant to read and teach as a genre, even if some individual poems can be enlisted within thematic categories already granted professional salience—as literature of the Civil War or of abolition, for example. In Harrington's related analysis, this current division of labor between poetry and fiction in American literary studies is an artifact of critics (whatever their intellectual genealogies otherwise) having "[bought] into a New Critical ideology of poetry": "In the professional imaginary, the corollary of poetry's hypostatization is the notion that fiction provides a privileged access to history" ("Why Poetry Is Not American Literature," 508). Exercising its historicist commitments almost exclusively on fiction and nonfictional prose, the new American studies, like the old, tacitly preserves poetry in its unexamined New Critical role as apolitical and asocial aesthetic object.

And yet the generic particularity of poetry surely preceded the New Criticism, even if it did not take New Critical forms in the nineteenth century. Karen Sánchez-Eppler assumes the historical, not retrospec-

tively New Critical, particularity of poetry when she suggests in her *Touching Liberty* (1993), which draws on nineteenth-century American poetry, fiction, and prose in analyzing abolition's rhetoric of the body and literary reactions to that rhetoric, that "analyzing lyric poetry . . . disables an emphasis on thematic political content and instead reveals how aesthetic, stylistic, and formal mechanisms come to accrue ideological significance."[4] This is not to issue an ahistorical brief for the unique formal apartness of poetry. Rather, along with Sánchez-Eppler, I argue here that analyzing poetry can under some circumstances make evident with special force what is true of literature more broadly, that its social effects and its embeddedness in history lie not only in thematic political content, through which fiction enjoys its "privileged access to history," but also in the politics of genre, which makes "aesthetic, stylistic, and formal mechanisms" available to authors. Beyond that, literature's social effects lie in the changing politics and circumstances of the cultural field itself, in Pierre Bourdieu's famous coinage, which makes authorship itself possible in different ways, at different times, for different social agents. In the current disciplinary circumstances of American literary studies, the study of poetry underlines with special force Tony Bennett's observation, entirely in the spirit of Bourdieu's sociology of culture, that literature "is not something whose social underpinnings must be sought elsewhere; it *is* a set of social conditions and its analysis consists in identifying the effects of these conditions."[5]

Despite the enormous professional energies devoted in the last two decades to reviving a broader canon of nineteenth-century American writing, a great deal of the poetry written by nineteenth-century American women other than Emily Dickinson has yet to be analyzed along the lines laid out by Sánchez-Eppler and Tony Bennett. My aim in this book is to demonstrate that this body of poetry can be not only anthologized but also read critically today. Reading the poetry written by nineteenth-century American women, I argue here, entails not only understanding how a given poem's "aesthetic, stylistic, and formal mechanisms come to accrue ideological significance" but also understanding how particular social contexts or sites of poetry's production and consumption supplied nineteenth-century American women poets with aesthetic and formal possibilities already endowed with social significance. As the book's title schematically implies, my reading of nineteenth-century American women's poetry is embedded in the larger story of the nineteenth-century rise and elaboration of the cultural field in the United States: the emergence of modern forms of cultural hierarchy, including an autonomous realm of aesthetic "high culture," in the United States, and of poetry's movement within that field from the sites of didacticism to those of aestheticism. *From School to Salon* attempts to

trace a broad shift in the social locations in which American women gained access to authorship in the genre of poetry: a shift from reading, reciting, writing, and publishing poetry in the didactic context of primary and secondary schooling to reading, reciting, and publishing poetry in the emergent later nineteenth-century venues of autonomous high culture, like the salon.

Versions of this larger story have been told about nineteenth-century American culture by Lawrence Levine, in his *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988), and by Richard Brodhead, in his *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993), among other critics.[6] Like Brodhead in *Cultures of Letters*, I approach this larger cultural history through close readings of exemplary literary works and exemplary authors' careers. My aim is to perform for these poets the kind of reading Brodhead offers of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, a reading that "shows how little the social situation of Alcott's authorship is external to her work" and argues that indeed "one project of *Little Women* is charting the field of specifically artistic spaces that have opened up at the time of its writing" (*Cultures of Letters*, 102, 98–99). *From School to Salon* undertakes to read a set of nineteenth-century American women poets with a view not only to the social situations in which they wrote and were read but also with the assumption that these women's poetic works themselves always formally embody, and sometimes self-consciously chart, the differential possibilities for authorship within the cultural fields they inhabit. The project thus asserts and attempts to demonstrate that this body of poetry can and should be read in ways that bridge the gap between "internal" formalism and "external" historicism, between close readings of works and analysis of their historical conditions of possibility.[7]

I open by pairing two early nineteenth-century poets whose access to authorship was rooted in schooling: Lucretia Maria Davidson, a posthumously published child prodigy, the poetess as exemplary beautiful dead student, with her complement in Lydia Sigourney, the sometime Hartford schoolmistress who became the United States' best-selling antebellum author of didactic sentimental poetry. Dead at seventeen of tuberculosis, Lucretia Davidson would live on in the afterlife of elocution textbooks aimed at molding other young ladies of her class; her life, writing, and death became exemplary of early nineteenth-century American transitions in women's education. Lydia Sigourney, by contrast, actively managed her own transition from schoolmistress to didactic poet over the course of her long career, and in doing so became a central fashioner of the domestic-tutelary complex that enabled Davidson's posthumous career as a prodigy-poetess. These chapters juxtapose

extended readings of long poems written by Davidson and Sigourney, Davidson's "Amir Khan" (the title poem of her posthumous collection of 1829) and Sigourney's "Connecticut River" (first published in Samuel G. Goodrich's 1828 gift book, *The Token*), with readings of exemplary scenes of instruction in posthumous biographies of Davidson and in Sigourney's autobiographical prose. Davidson's and Sigourney's long poems, I argue, in their quite different ways both perform and critique early nineteenth-century relations between poetry and ambitious middle-class women's schooling. For both Davidson and Sigourney, the cultural field surveyed is transatlantic as well as intra-American: Davidson's "Amir Khan" displays its young author's learning in the transatlantic idiom of romantic orientalism, and Sigourney's prospect poem, centered on the American village with its schoolhouse, enters into a transatlantic dialogue of village poems that includes her American precursor Timothy Dwight's *Greenfield Hill* (1794) and stretches back to Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" (1770) and Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751).

The following two chapters pair Maria Lowell's aesthetically ambitious abolitionist poetry with the Reconstruction-era poetry of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Nineteenth-century American women like Lowell and Harper found in the abolitionist movement and in the postwar struggle for African American civil existence important occasions for writing poetry conspicuous for its political themes; at the same time, however, this body of poetry conducts its political arguments in the context of both implicit and explicit questions about cultural capital and aesthetic, as well as moral, education. Like Lucretia Davidson's and Lydia Sigourney's most ambitious poems, Maria Lowell's and Frances Harper's writings both incorporate and revise familiar nineteenth-century scenes of instruction. Chapter 3 centers on Maria Lowell's long poem "Africa," written and published in the culturally elite precincts of the abolitionist movement (it appeared in the Boston Female Antislavery Society's annual gift book, *The Liberty Bell*, in 1849), which trades both on the cultural capital of imported high British and European romanticism and on popular educational rhetorics and images of race for its poetic and political strategies. Like Maria Lowell's abolitionist poetry, the poetry Frances Harper published after the Civil War functions simultaneously in different cultural registers—popular and elite, written and oral, religious and secular. As Frances Smith Foster observes, Harper's mission in this poetry is "mediating between cultures," speaking to African American audiences of enormously mixed literacies as well as back to white readers; it both represents and performs reconstructed models of education for African Americans.[8] Chapter 4 reads Harper's postwar poetry, then, both against works like Lowell's "Africa" and

Oliver Wendell Holmes's "The Chambered Nautilus" (1858) and for its rich internal mediations between different forms of literacy and cultural capital, culminating in Harper's great postwar diptych of *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869) and the "Aunt Chloe" sequence (published in *Sketches of Southern Life* in 1872). The chapter concludes with a look forward to Harper's fate in American literary canon formation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contrasting her absence from the Modern Language Association's hardening college-level canon with Harper's afterlife at the turn of the century in what was by then the more popular and heterogeneous discipline of elocution.

Chapter 5 treats Emily Dickinson and Helen Hunt Jackson, and chapter 6 the poet Annie Fields, better known as a Boston salon hostess and wife of James Fields, publisher of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Jackson and Fields, these chapters argue, made their careers within a later nineteenth-century American literary field increasingly structured by emergent formal and informal institutions of high culture and the ever-finer gradations their burgeoning made possible. For both Jackson and Fields, taking up these new positions entailed rejecting or modifying earlier nineteenth-century modes of becoming a woman poet, modes rooted in the domestic-tutelary complex and its instrumental, didactic understanding of women's writing, in favor of a more autonomous sense of the aesthetic. Identified not with the women's domain of primary or secondary schooling but with the great publishing organs of later nineteenth-century American high culture and their complementary performance space, the salon, Annie Fields preserved the memory of earlier generations of women writers (she was a biographer, for example, of her friend Harriet Beecher Stowe) but at the same time differentiated her generation from theirs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fields wrote, regarded "books as a medium of the ideas of the age, and as the promulgators of morals and religion"; what Stowe and her sister writers lacked, in Fields's view, was "a study of the literature of the past as the only true foundation for a literature of the present"—that is, a sense of literature as an autonomous, self-generating, self-referential field of culture, the sense of high culture that had emerged in the United States by the nineteenth century's end. Fields overtly laid claim to this elite territory in her classicizing poetry, replacing the domestic-tutelary complex's scenes of instruction with scenes of high-cultural transmission; Jackson fashioned a more popular niche, closer to the middlebrow realm claimed by her editor and friend Josiah Holland but still informed by high culture's refusal of didacticism. Understanding this later nineteenth-century cultural field in finer grain, I argue, illuminates Emily Dickinson's much-disputed historical location—illuminates the refusals, to use Bourdieu's term, around which she ordered her life and work.

One of the Gilded Age elite cultural institutions Annie Fields had a hand in founding was the Harvard "Annex," which would eventually become Radcliffe College, Adrienne Rich's alma mater. Fields always regretted her lack of formal higher education, and with the exception of Emily Dickinson's famous nine months at Mount Holyoke, none of the poets explored in *From School to Salon* attended college. To name the canonical women poets of twentieth-century American literature in connection with their college affiliations—Marianne Moore and H.D. at Bryn Mawr, Elizabeth Bishop at Vassar, and so on—against the popular women poets of the nineteenth century is to realize how decisively the sites of women's poetry have shifted from the school to the university, with Annie Fields's generation at the historical pivot point. Modernist women writers, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Suzanne Clark, and other literary historians have argued, lived and wrote this shift as part of their complex drama of affiliation with and disaffiliation from women writers of the nineteenth century.[9] *From School to Salon* will bring its narrative of women, poetry, and schooling forward to close with a glance at the career of Adrienne Rich, whose work has been consistently but tensely allied with the modern university, from her early education at Radcliffe through her literacy work at the City College of New York in the sixties and her later affiliations with Douglass College (of Rutgers University) and Stanford University. What are the consequences for Rich's poetry, when later twentieth-century feminist scholarship in the university begins to make the women's nineteenth century available as an object of knowledge or cultural capital? On or about 1978, Adrienne Rich—along with many other feminist writers and academics—"discovered" the nineteenth century, and particularly nineteenth-century women's history. Rich's 1981 volume, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, significantly departs from her 1978 book *The Dream of a Common Language* in the degree to which it locates precursors for Rich's twentieth-century feminist identity in women writers and activists of the nineteenth century. No sooner does nineteenth-century women's culture become available for Rich as an object of identification, however, than it provokes a crisis of identification, as the race and class fissures of twentieth-century feminism mirror and replicate those of the nineteenth century, and indeed those of Rich's own personal life and poetic career.

The question my conclusion brings to Rich's poetry—What are the consequences of recovery?—is a question, of course, for the whole of *From School to Salon*. Why recover obscure nineteenth-century women poets at all? In Mary Poovey's provocative words, "Is there any point in recovering a writer's work, just because the author belongs to a category—in this case, the woman writer—that we and our students con-

sider important?"[10] Poovey deduces from her own experiment in recovery (a virtuoso reading of Ellen Pickering's obscure 1839 novel *Nan Darrell*) that "[a]s important to canonization as some universalist assessment of 'quality' is the ability of certain texts to tell us something about the imaginary wholes our discipline has been devised to illuminate: literary history, the history of gendered writing, the history of cultural ideas" ("Recovering Ellen Pickering," 449). And yet she does not find her recovery of Pickering finally worth the trouble; "these novels," Poovey concludes, "may help us recover the qualities that enabled a writer to subsist at the margins of popularity in the early nineteenth century, but they do not enhance our understanding of the early-nineteenth-century novel, of women writers, or even of something as amorphous as ideology" (448). The hermeneutic circle formed in the relation between the discipline's "imaginary wholes" and its already-canonized individual works need not and perhaps should not expand to include more Ellen Pickerings.

Pierre Bourdieu, however, would reply to Poovey not only that this circular mode of understanding is "intrinsically vicious" but that it is bound despite itself to "register, unwittingly, the way the ignored authors have affected, by the logic of action and reaction, the authors to be interpreted—the ones who, by their active rejection, have contributed to the others' disappearance from history."[11] In Bourdieu's argument, the discipline's "imaginary wholes" drawn around familiarly canonized authors are always already structured by forgotten authors, without being able to reflect on that structuring. Describing somewhat different "imaginary wholes" would allow the discipline to include the objects of recovery—in both senses of "object," the artifact and the aim with which it is sought—in critical understanding. As one reply to Poovey's question, *From School to Salon* argues among other things for enlarging the objects of recovery projects—from individual authors and poems or themes to cultures of poetic literacy or cultural capital as embodied in poems and poets. What I ultimately want this book on nineteenth-century American women's poetry to yield is not only a series of detailed readings of particular poems and poets but also a map of the changing cultural field of possibilities, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, in which these women poets emerged and which they helped shape. To borrow Patricia Crain's formulation, reading these poets is an occasion "to witness the small change of cultural capital at work."[12]

Beyond the sheerly antiquarian pleasures of delving into the archives, then, I hope this book will contribute to the emerging larger history of women's relationship to literacy or literacies, as exemplified by Crain's work and that of other scholars.[13] The women poets and their readers who figure in *From School to Salon* played an important role in the

institutionalization of an Anglo-American vernacular literary canon. At the nineteenth century's beginning, these American women poets translated to the United States much of the ethos and the curriculum of the British dissenting academies that helped birth a vernacular English literary canon as the specific cultural capital of the rising bourgeoisie, distinct from the classical Greek and Latin literary curricula of Oxford and Cambridge.[14] At the century's end, Annie Fields participated in stratifying the (by then well-established) Anglo-American literary canon and helped rejoin that canon to the classical curriculum at its highest social and educational levels, both by insisting on the importance of classical languages in elite women's higher education and through her poetic translations and imitations of Greek and Latin texts. The history of how nineteenth-century American women wrote poetry is part of a wider history of women's access to particular forms of cultural capital.

This is my own history as well, of course, as a college-educated woman writing from the literary precincts of the present-day university, a century after Annie Fields longed to enter Harvard. But it is also the history of educated men and of common readers, because the nature of cultural capital changed historically for everyone when women began to have broader access to it. In Nancy Armstrong's words, "Today few of us realize that many features of our standard humanities curriculum came from a curriculum designed specifically for educating polite young women who were not of the ruling class, or that the teaching of native British literature developed as a means of socializing children, the poor, and foreigners before we became a masculine profession."[15] We all inherit the cultural world that obscure nineteenth-century American women poets helped to make.