THE FERMENT OF REALISM
THE

FERMENT OF REALISM

American Literature, 1884-1919

Warner Berthoff

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TO LIBERALISM AND DEMOCRACY,
the good old causes, in whose ambiguous service the
work surveyed in this volume was mostly written
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Preface to the First Edition

Chesterton, introducing his study of the Victorian age in literature, wrote that he felt wholly incompetent for the “delicate and entangled task” at hand, but that it was “rather reassuring than otherwise” to have undertaken “something that nobody could do properly.” His remarks, I have come to appreciate, merely state the literal truth: literary history is an impossible genre. How is one to reconcile, in consecutive discourse, the requirements of historical accuracy and the just claims of the anthology; the multiplicity of events in sequence and the single-minded enterprise of a principled and discriminating critical order? Recently, moreover, Professor Northrop Frye has put it down as self-evident that evaluative criticism, on an objective basis, also is impossible. That hardly simplifies practical problems of organization and emphasis, but it does somewhat ease one’s anxieties about the effort to keep both
responsible in view—the effort, that is, to write a specifically literary history.

I should like to suggest briefly what the present volume undertakes and what it does not. It is designed primarily as a survey of good work done, with regard to the formal motives and characteristics that define it, rather than as a comprehensive record of individual histories and careers or of battles and schools of opinion. There is no attempt to duplicate what is better done by essential aids like the Dictionary of American Biography or The Oxford Companion to American Literature. Neither has it been my concern to chart any great evolutionary tendency in the national ethos. A survey of this kind, even when covering only thirty-five years, probably cannot take shape around a single main theme without serious wrenching of the basic materials, which are likely—in their actual historical emergence—to be irreducibly miscellaneous and discrete. It can, however, have an interpretive or a methodological center, to which the chronicler’s judgment continually refers itself back for certification. With the present volume this center is a certain view of literature and a certain view of history, and thus also a view of the special amalgam that ought to result from doing justice to the claims of both. Literary history is coextensive with social history, cultural history, intellectual history but is not identical with any of them, even the last, nor strictly determined by them. This is because literature itself has its own purposes and determinants. Though never wholly autonomous it is always more accidental and eccentric than people think, whether they choose to read it for symptoms or, going the other way, to define it as an independent “institution.” It draws its prime motives from deep within the common culture, the life-experience of its producers in their time (and can be in turn a conspicuous agent in the formation of new motives and new experiences), but it never speaks for the totality of that
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culture. You cannot write intellectual, or cultural, history without reference to literature; neither can you write it solely on the basis of literature. Literary history, not less than literary criticism, is determined finally by the distinctive nature of the forms it examines, and these forms are unique in being at the same time, in varying proportion: (1) works of art, seeking self-completion; (2) documents in testimony, relating to the common consciousness of truths and probabilities; (3) acts of expression, more or less sustained and pitched at different intensities, in which we may see, among other things, how language, the genetic code-matrix of historical culture, is being “kept up.” This uniqueness is the fact, at once formal and historical, before which every other consideration must finally give way. All lives and actions are symptomatic of the forms life takes, and all, ideally, deserve inspection; but very few transcend themselves to the point of defining concretely these life forms and making them intelligible, perhaps even reaching through them—in rare cases—to a projection of new forms. Literary history, as here conceived, is a record of such transcendences, according to the chances of a particular period and province.

The reader I have had in mind is one who already knows or will remember having read a good part of the writing here surveyed, who is already committed to an interest in literature in general and in modern American literature in particular. Specialists in the period treated will doubtless find matter to quarrel with, in the choice of names and titles, the pattern of emphasis, the critical judgments suggested. I have said too little about magazines, which throughout the period played a complex and shifting role in the promotion of new talents and new trends. I have said almost nothing about drama, since despite some worthy efforts in the right direction American drama did not effectively emerge from the morass of popular entertainment until the appearance at the very
end of our period of playwrights like Eugene O'Neill and Elmer Rice. And though I have organized this survey loosely enough, I still have not managed to find a place for a considerable number of readable and accomplished works we should be the poorer for losing sight of. A random selection of these works—the Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant (1885–1886), Thomas Sergeant Perry’s The Evolution of the Snob (1886), Andrew Carnegie’s The Gospel of Wealth (1889), Whistler’s The Gentle Art of Making Enemies (1890), George Kennan’s Siberia and the Exile System (1891), John Muir’s The Mountains of California (1894), Walter A. Wyckoff’s two-volume The Workers: A Study in Reality (1897, 1898), Charles W. Chesnutt’s The Conjure Woman (1899), Captain Joshua Slocum’s Sailing Alone Around the World (1900), Henry Adams’s “Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres” (1901, 1920), Louis Sullivan’s Kindergarten Chats (1901–1902), W. E. B. Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk (1903), Andy Adams’s The Log of a Cowboy (1903), Lincoln Steffens’s The Shame of the Cities (1904), Josiah Strong’s Our Country (1907), Zona Gale’s Friendship Village (1908), Jane Addams’s Twenty Years at Hull House (1910), Horace B. Kephart’s Our Southern Highlanders (1913), Walter Lippmann’s Drift and Mastery (1914), Louis D. Brandeis’s Other People’s Money (1914), Logan Pearsall Smith’s Trivia (1917), William Beebe’s Jungle Peace (1918), John Reed’s Ten Days That Shook the World (1919), Charles Ives’s Essays Before a Sonata (1920)—may serve not only as a sort of blanket apology for all such omissions but also as a preliminary sampling of literary types and underlying historical changes characteristic of the period as a whole.

W. B.
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When I began this book early in the 1960s and decided, a touch self-defensively, to open with a comment of G. K. Chesterton’s, my intention was not to announce a stand in some intensifying literary-critical war. At the time no book by Roland Barthes had yet appeared in English, no book by Jacques Derrida had appeared anywhere, and centers of literary study such as Ithaca, New York, and New Haven, Connecticut, were still chiefly notable for careful scholarship in subjects like Chaucer, the eighteenth century, and English Romanticism. Much has happened since then. It is now common wisdom—even in the graduate schools, if not with everyone offering instruction there—that in literature as in other modes of activity the individual produced unit is, as a locus of value, a cultural fiction of dubious intent; that the word literature itself, as a classifier, begs too many existential and hierarchical questions, so that it is preferable all

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round to speak only of writing (écriture) and of texts; and that since no discoursing subject can be wholly present either to itself or to another observer, the category author stands exposed as a sentimental obstruction to clear thinking.

Such transformations having occurred, I am now fairly charmed, re-reading these pages, to hear myself talking along about works and authors as if they really had existed and deserved commemoration as such, under their own putative names. I am also unrepentant. Admittedly, were one now to undertake a book of this kind, modes of judgment and categories of consideration might profitably be introduced which would wholly discount the curious illusion that did somehow bring this or that historical personage to a definable “scene of writing”: the illusion in the mind of writer and reader alike that what they were involved with was a single identifiable construct or form, a serial entity having a detectable beginning, a more or less extended middle, and some sort of end, or stop. It would be well worth trying, for example, to compose a history of literary activity over several decades as an account of one particular phase in language’s incessant suprapersonal struggle to maintain itself as a living system. As chickens are said to be mechanisms whereby eggs deliver themselves of other eggs, and any natural creature is merely an instrument through which the gene pool secures self-continuance, so it is reasonable enough to consider authors, readers, and the objects they assert these identities in relation to, as incidental relay stations in the immense drama of linguistic renewal. Nevertheless I find it on the whole easier—and not without homologic truthfulness—to go on naming individual names and sorting out single titles. It certainly facilitates looking things up.

There is more than one reason for leaving the text of the first printing unchanged, but a chief one is simply that our basic picture of the historical period in question—who was important, and what publishing events mattered most—remains largely as
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it was. Looking back, I can regret oversights and moments of excessive cursoriness. A place should have been found for H. L. Mencken’s A Book of Prefaces (1917), the appearance of which Edmund Wilson took to be “one of the cardinal events of the new American literature.” I would not now leave W. E. B. DuBois’s The Souls of Black Folk, with its rare blend of imaginative passion and disciplined sociological acumen, as an item on a supernumerary list, and I would at least record the existence of James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912). In the bibliography S. Foster Damon’s life of Amy Lowell should have been cited. But for the most part there seems little requiring revision. Many more titles from the period that were all but forgotten around 1960 have happily been revived, through a fresh concern for feminist literature, black literature, ethnic and special-interest literature generally; but (to cite a single instance) I have read nothing by the courageous Charlotte Perkins Gilman to convince me that omitting her from an extended essay in literary history was a more actionable oversight than omitting the Harvard bellettrist Charles Macomb Flandrau. In general, it still makes sense to me to cram the later Henry James into a mere twenty-three pages and allow Charles W. Chesnutt the luxury of almost a full line.

In support of a claim to have got the proportions basically right, the central evidence would be the secondary literature—biographies, critical studies, new editions, collections of letters and previously unpublished materials—that has accumulated since 1965. The mass of it is staggering, but when reduced to categories it fairly matches the allotment of space originally settled upon. James and Mark Twain, as before, lead by a sizeable margin, with Howells, Dreiser, Henry Adams, Edith Wharton, and Ezra Pound at the head of a strong second flight. The one kind of scholarly and critical production that has not kept pace is, interestingly, literary history itself. My disingenuous pro-
nouncement in the original preface about the impossibility of “a specifically literary history” has to a degree been endorsed in the aftermath. In the seven-volume series this book was originally designed for, only one other title ever appeared; and with the brave exception of David Perkins’s *A History of Modern Poetry* we have had long essays advancing some fruitful bias concerning the achievement of briefer periods (Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era*) or tracing the extended impact of a major historical event (Daniel Aaron’s *The Unwritten [American Civil War]*), but not comprehensive histories as such. Perhaps, with the measureless expansion of information-retrieval systems, literary and most other kinds of diachronic history have simply become impracticable.

In any case, trying to update the bibliography would expand my text inordinately and still give offense, I fear, to the many scholars and critics excluded for reasons of space whose work has nevertheless increased understanding. Fortunately, bibliographic aids, reference guides, newsletters, “critical heritage” collections, have been multiplying at a comparable rate. In 1965 the first annual volume of the admirably edited *American Literary Scholarship* (covering the year 1963) had just appeared—and it is worth noting that the separate chapters listing work on James and Twain occupy, each year, between ten and twenty pages. In 1967 the journal *American Literary Realism* began publication, printing checklists and reviews of critical scholarship as well as interpretive essays. Both of these have become indispensable to students and researchers, as have—for other uses—Lyle N. Wright’s tabulative *American Fiction, 1876–1900* and Clayton L. Eichelberger’s *A Guide to Critical Reviews of United States Fiction, 1870–1930*.

On individual authors, certain outstanding titles deserve notice, at whatever risk of inequity. Leon Edel’s biography of Henry James has reached conclusion—to a rising chorus of critical dissatisfaction—while Maqbool Aziz’s “variant” edi-
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Rubin Jr.), Harold Frederic (Austin Briggs), Kate Chopin (Per Seyersted), Edith Wharton (R. W. B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolff), Henry Blake Fuller (Bernard R. Bowron Jr.), Robert Herrick (Louis Budd), Lincoln Steffens (Justin Kaplan), Jack London (Andrew Sinclair), Dreiser again (W. A. Swanson), Gertrude Stein (James R. Mellow), Robert Frost (Lawrence Thompson—to another chorus of dissents), Ezra Pound (Noel Stock), T. S. Eliot in his early life (Lyndall Gordon). A scattering of primarily critical volumes has done something more than confirm existing valuations, in particular Frank Bergon, Stephen Crane’s Artistry, and several introductions in the Virginia edition of Crane, especially those by J. C. Levenson; Richard Bridgman, Gertrude Stein in Pieces; Richard Poirier, Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing; Jules Chametzky, From the Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan; A. J. Ayer’s reconsideration of Peirce and William James in The Origins of Pragmatism; Olaf Hanson’s monograph-length introduction to The Radical Will: Randolph Bourne, Selected Writings.

Finally, it is worth remarking that some of the most valuable recent commentary has come in books cutting through the period (and beyond it) along one diagonal or another, reassessing different aspects of its literary and imaginative character. Again risking inequity, I offer the following short list: Edwin H. Cady’s reexamination of the idea of “realism” in The Light of Common Day; Jay Martin, Harvests of Change: American Literature, 1865–1914; Donald Pizer, Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction; Robert Falk, The Victorian Mode in American Fiction; James Tuttleton, The Novel of Manners in America; Richard Poirier, A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature; Richard Bridgman, The Colloquial Style in America; Gordon O. Taylor, The Passages of Thought: Psychological Representation in the American Novel, 1870–1900; several studies of American autobiography, in particular Thomas Cooley, Educated Lives, and Mutlu Konuk Blasing, The Art
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In the original preface I suggested that literary history (whatever else it does) ought to be a record of transcendences, in which—according to the chances of life in a particular period and province—certain acts of imaginative definition and origination took place within the shifting conventions of literary statement and found, somewhere, a responsive hearing. I am less sure now what "transcendence" means as a historiographic concept. But I should have added at the time that literary history is also, properly, a record of certain systematic uses of freedom. For this reason I am happy with the book’s original dedication and wish to renew it here.

W. B.
But let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportions . . . let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere. . . .

—Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*

I have disregarded all romantic traditions, and simply asked myself in every instance, not whether it was amusing but whether it was true to the logic of reality—true in color and tone to the American sky, the American soil, the American character.

—H. H. Boyesen, “Preface,”

*The Mammon of Unrighteousness*

Does the native novelist try to generalize the nation? No, he lays plainly before you the ways and speech and life of a few people grouped in a certain place—his own place—and that is one book. In time he and his brethren will report to you the life and people of a whole nation. . . .

—Mark Twain, “What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us”

Any point of view is interesting that is a direct impression of life.

—Henry James, “Deerfield Letter”

I would praise the work for its fine tone, its humanity, and its realism; for all good art is realism of one sort or another.

—Ezra Pound, review of

*Prufrock and Other Observations*