

INTRODUCTION

THIS MULTIVOLUME *History* marks a new beginning in the study of American literature. The first *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917) helped introduce a new branch of English writing. *The Literary History of the United States*, assembled thirty years later under the aegis of Robert E. Spiller, helped establish a new field of academic study. Our *History* embodies the work of a generation of Americanists who have redrawn the boundaries of the field and redefined the terms of its development. Trained in the 1960s and early 1970s, representing the broad spectrum of both new and established directions in all branches of American writing, these scholars and critics have shaped, and continue to shape, what has become a major area of modern literary scholarship.

Over the past three decades, Americanist literary criticism has expanded from a border province into a center of humanist studies. The vitality of the field is reflected in the rising interest in American literature everywhere, nationally and internationally, and at every level – in high schools and colleges, in graduate programs, in publications, conferences, and public events. It is expressed in the sheer scope of scholarly activity and in the polemical intensity of debate. Virtually every recent school of criticism has found not just its followers here but many of its leading exponents. And increasingly over the past three decades, American texts have provided the focus for inter- and cross-disciplinary investigation. Gender studies, ethnic studies, and popular-culture studies, among others, have penetrated to all corners of the profession, but their single largest base is American literature. The same is true with regard to controversies over multiculturalism and canon formation: the issues are transhistorical and transcultural, but the debates themselves have turned mainly on American books.

We need not endorse all of these movements, or any one of them entirely, to see in the activity they have generated the dynamics of intellectual growth. Nor need we obscure the hard facts of intellectual growth – startling disparities in quality, a proliferation of jargons, and the mixed blessings of the new, innovation and mere trendiness entwined – to recognize the benefits in this case for literary and cultural study. However we situate ourselves in current

polemics, it seems clear that Americanist literary criticism has proved to be a forerunner of developments in other humanistic disciplines, precisely through its openness to diversity and debate. And for much the same reason, American literature has become something of a new-found-land for teaching and research. In addition to publishing massive new editions of the nation's literary classics, scholars have undertaken an unprecedented recovery of neglected and undervalued bodies of writing. We know far more now than ever before about what some have termed (in the plural) American literatures, a term grounded in the persistence in the United States of different traditions, different kinds of aesthetics, even different notions of the literary.

These developments have substantially enlarged the meanings as well as the materials of American literature. For this generation of critics and scholars, American literary history is no longer the history of a certain, agreed-upon group of American masterworks. Nor is it any longer based upon a certain, agreed-upon historical perspective on American writing. The quests for certainty and agreement continue, as they must, but they proceed now within a climate of critical decentralization – of controversy, competition, and, at best, dialogue among different voices, different frames of explanation.

This scene of conflict has been variously described in terms of liberal-democratic process, of the marketplace, and of professionalization. In any case it signals a shift in structures of academic authority. The practice of literary history hitherto, from its inception in the eighteenth century, has depended upon an established consensus about the essence or nature of its subject. Today the invocation of consensus sounds rather like an appeal for compromise, or like nostalgia. What used to be a relatively clear division between criticism and scholarship, aesthetic and historical analysis, has blurred and then subdivided over and over again (in various combinations) into a spectrum of special interests: special branches of expertise, special kinds of investment in the materials, and special modes of argument and strategies of persuasion.

In our times, in short, the study of American literary history defines itself in the plural, through volatile focal points of a multifaceted scholarly, critical, and pedagogic enterprise. Authority in this context is a function of different but connected bodies of knowledge. The authority of difference, if it may be so termed, resides in the critic's appeal to a particular constituency, in his or her command over a particular range of materials (with their distinctive set of authorities), and in the integrative force of his or her approach. The authority of connection lies in the capacity of a particular explanation or approach to engage with, challenge, or reinforce others – in its capacity, that is, to gain substance and depth in relation to other, sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting modes of explanation.

This new *Cambridge History of American Literature* claims authority on both counts, individual and collaborative. In a sense, this makes it representative not only of the profession it speaks for but of the culture it describes. Our *History* is fundamentally pluralist: a federated histories of American literatures. It is also an expression of ongoing debates within the profession about cultural patterns and values, including those of liberal pluralism. Accordingly, an adversarial thread runs through a number of these narratives, and it marks the *History's* most traditional aspect. The high moral stance it assumes – literary analysis as the grounds for resistance, alternative vision, or relative detachment – is implicit in the very definition of art we have inherited from the Romantic era through the genteel critics. The earlier, consensual view of literature upheld the universality of ideals embodied in great books. By implication, therefore, and often by direct assault upon social norms and practices, it fostered a broad aesthetic oppositionalism – a celebration of literature (in Matthew Arnold's words) as the criticism of life, whether in formalist terms, as in the New Critics' assault on industrial society, or in the utopian forms of left-wing cultural critique.

What distinguishes our *History* in this respect is its variety of adversarial approaches and, more strikingly, the presence throughout of revisionary, nonoppositional ways of relating text and context. One result is the emphasis on nationality as a problem. "America" in these volumes designates the United States, or the territories that were to become part of the United States; and although several of our authors adopt a comparatist framework, by and large their concerns center upon the writing in English in this country – "American literature" as it is commonly understood here and abroad in its national implications. Nonetheless, the term "American" is neither a narrative premise in these volumes nor an objective background. Quite the reverse: it is the complex subject of a series of literary–historical inquiries. "America" is a historical entity, the United States of America. It is also a declaration of community, a people constituted and sustained by verbal fiat, a set of universal principles, a strategy of social cohesion, a summons to social protest, a prophecy, a dream, an aesthetic ideal, a trope of the modern ("progress," "opportunity," "the new"), a semiotics of inclusion ("melting pot," "patchwork quilt," "nation of nations"), and a semiotics of exclusion, closing out not only the Old World but all other countries of the Americas, north and south, as well as large groups within the United States. A nationality so conceived is a rhetorical battleground.

Precisely, then, by retaining the full range of its familiar meanings, these volumes make "America" intrinsic to the *literary* history of the United States. The matter of nationhood here becomes a focal point for exploring the two

most vexed issues today in literary studies: the historicity of the text and the textuality of history.

Another result of narrative diversity is the emphasis on history as the vehicle of critical revision. This is the emphasis, too, not coincidentally, of our cultural moment. At no time in literary studies has awareness of history – or more accurately, theorizing about history – been more acute and pervasive. It is hardly too much to say that what joins all the special interests in the field, all factions in our current critical dissensus, is an overriding interest in history: as the ground and texture of ideas, metaphors, and myths; as the substance of the texts we read and the spirit in which we interpret them. Even as we acknowledge that great books, a few configurations of language raised to an extraordinary pitch of intensity, transcend their time and place (and even if we believe that their enduring power offers a recurrent source of oppositionalism), it is evident upon reflection that concepts of aesthetic transcendence are themselves time-bound. Like other claims to the absolute, from ancient religion to modern science, the claims of aesthetics are shaped by history. We grasp their particular forms of transcendence (the aesthetics of divine inspiration, the aesthetics of ambiguity, subversion, and indeterminacy) through an identifiably historical consciousness.

The same recognition of contingency extends to the writing of history. Some histories are truer than others; a few histories are invested for a time with the grandeur of being “definitive” and “comprehensive”; but all are narratives conditioned by their historical moments. The claims for total description harden (because they conceal) the limitations of history: local biases, temporal assumptions, and vested interests that at once compel and circumscribe our search for absolutes. The interplay of narratives enables us to make use of such limitations in ways that open both literature and history to further and fuller inquiry. One way leads through the discovery of difference: the interruptions and discontinuities through which literary history unfolds. Another way leads through the acknowledgment of connection: the shared anxieties, interests, and aspirations that underlie our perceptions of those conflicts and so impose a certain cohesion (professional, intellectual, and generational) upon difference itself.

These considerations have guided the choice of the particular format for this *History*. All previous histories of American literature have been either totalizing or encyclopedic. They have offered either the magisterial sweep of a single vision or a multitude of terse accounts that come to seem just as totalizing, if only because the genre of the brief, expert synthesis precludes the development of authorial voice. Here, in contrast, American literary history unfolds through a polyphony of large-scale narratives. Each of them is ample enough in scope and detail to allow for the elaboration of distinc-

tive views (premises, arguments, analyses); each of them, therefore, is persuasive by demonstration (rather than by assertion) and hence authoritative in its own right; and each is related to the others through common themes and concerns.

The authors were selected first for the excellence of their scholarship and then for the significance of the critical communities informing their work. Together, they demonstrate the achievements of Americanist literary criticism over the past three decades. Their contributions to these volumes speak to continuities as well as disruptions between generations. They give voice to the wide range of materials now subsumed under the heading of American literature. They express the distinctive sorts of excitement and commitment that have led to the extraordinary expansion of the field. And they reflect the diversity of interests that constitutes literary studies in our time and that may be attributed in part to the ethnographic diversity (class background, ethnic group, and racial origin) that has come to characterize literature faculties since World War II, and especially since the 1960s.

The same qualities inform this *History's* organizational principles. Its flexibility of structure is meant to accommodate the varieties of American literary history. Some major writers appear in more than one volume, because they belong to more than one age. Some texts are discussed in several narratives within a volume, because they are important to different realms of cultural experience. Sometimes the story of a certain movement is retold from different perspectives, because the story requires a plural focus: from the margins as well as from the mainstream, for example, or as being equally the culmination of one era and the beginning of another. In all such instances, overlap is a strategy of multivocal description. The diversity of perspectives this yields corresponds to, as it draws upon, the sheer plenitude of literary and historical materials. It also makes for a richer, more intricate account of particulars (writers, texts, movements) than that available in any previous history of American literature.



Every volume in this *History* displays these different strengths in its own way. This volume is perhaps especially notable for its diversity of historical and cultural contexts.* Together the narratives span three centuries and an extraordinary variety of authors: Renaissance explorers, Puritan theocrats, Enlighten-

* These include various national and linguistic contexts: e.g., exploration narratives written in Spanish, in French, and in Portuguese, as well as in English. Some of these texts are known by their original titles (e.g., the *Diario* of Christopher Columbus), and in all such cases we have preserved the original. As a rule, however, titles have been translated, and the spelling, both in titles and quotations, has been modernized. We have also modernized the spelling in all colonial texts written in English.

ment naturalists, southern women of letters, revolutionary pamphleteers, and poets and novelists of the young Republic. Myra Jehlen draws upon the multilingual literature of exploration and colonization to tell the story of how America was invented, territorially, culturally, and figuratively – a story simultaneously of imperial expansion and imaginative appropriation. Emory Elliott traces the explosive, conflict-ridden development of the New England Way from its fractious beginnings through the tumultuous mid-eighteenth-century revivals. David S. Shields's focus is relatively narrow in time but rich in the materials it brings to light: newly uncovered collections of poems, essays, and letters that reveal a cosmopolitan network of neoclassical belles lettres extending from Philadelphia and New York to the salons of the Old South and Barbados. Robert A. Ferguson examines the interconnections between the many forms of discourse, popular and elite, secular and religious, private and public, that constituted the American Enlightenment and eventuated as the rhetoric of nationhood. Michael T. Gilmore describes a series of broad social and economic transformations – from republican to free-market ideology, oral to print culture, communal to individualist values – in the course of detailing the emergence of a national literary tradition.

All five narratives place the literature in international perspective; all five speak of its distinctively American characteristics, whether colonial, provincial, or national; and (in different ways) all of them demonstrate the centrality of language to the course of Americanization. This volume might be titled “A Key to the Languages of America.” Jehlen treats the languages of discovery, exploration, and settlement. Significantly, these do not include the languages of indigenous peoples,* except by proxy – through Bible translations, ethnographic reports, and dictionaries for immigrants (as in Roger Williams's *Key to the Narraganset language*) – or indirectly, through what the fact of their silence implies. Jehlen discusses the implications in both cases, but mainly she focuses on the process by which the culture that triumphed arrogated the symbology of America to itself. Her narrative unfolds in a series of cross-cultural debates – each a hybrid of fact and metaphor, encounter and interpretation – from the European invention of America to the various colonial constructions of a New World identity and thence to the aesthetic–ideological strategies that transformed the discovery of otherness into a journey toward self-knowledge and cosmic origins. Her sources are as diverse as the colonial experience: commercial, scientific, historical, cartographical, epistolary, military, agricultural. Her method is a blend of ethnographic and stylistic analysis: a cultural close reading of a procession of

* The proper designation for these peoples has been a matter of controversy. We have adopted the terms “Indian,” “American Indian,” and “Native American” as alternative designations.

representative books, from Thomas Harriot's illustrated travelogue of 1590 through major works by William Bartram and William Byrd, which (she shows) deserve to be studied as founding texts of the American imagination.

The terms of Elliott's approach are implicit in his opening scene. He begins with the confused Salem trials, rather than with the mythic Great Migration. His Puritans are not Founding Fathers but a community in crisis, internally splintered over the meaning of witchcraft — rich against poor, men against women, insider against outsider, one generation against the next, laypeople against clergy, and one clerical group against another — each faction aspiring to political power through the ritual control of language. Elliott traces the zigzag "errand" of a would-be utopia that was fragmented from the start and recurrently in danger of disintegration but that held together, and flourished, through the capacity of its leaders to negotiate between a changing set of realities and a dominant discourse they developed of covenant and destiny. That development is manifest in different, sometimes contradictory ways in Puritan writing. As Elliott proceeds through the generic forms — history, personal narrative, poetry, public exhortation — he draws out the complexities of a literature designed for crisis, nourished by anxiety and doubt, and alternately challenging the status quo and reinforcing social structures. His narrative covers the wide spectrum of literary, theological, and political issues this entailed, including issues of race and gender in early New England (for the first time in a literary history) and issues of current scholarly debate. The result is a double perspective on the period: first, a guide to the interpretation of American Puritanism; and then, more largely, an analysis of the interpretive processes through which the Puritans forged their vision of America out of the discordant (and finally uncontrollable) materials of colonial experience.

Elliott gives new drama and depth to a traditional scholarly subject; Shields's history of British-American belles lettres is the first of its kind. "Belles lettres" before 1760 denoted specific modes of writing, which Shields defines and delineates, drawing on largely unknown and often unpublished materials. In the process he re-creates the surprisingly varied, though highly ritualized, "polite" world of colonial clubs and salons. Shields introduces a number of significant writers (Dr. Alexander Hamilton, Archibald Home, Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, and many others); he outlines the transatlantic contexts of their "literature of social pleasure" (ease, wit, decorum, and agreeableness, as distinct from edification, revelation, or memorialization); and he traces the literature's wide-ranging political and institutional implications. The story that emerges tells of a particular group of men and women — exclusive in class and outlook, distinctive in their neoclassical style and their Loyalist sympathies — and so opens up a hitherto-neglected area of early Ameri-

can life and letters. Shields also sets their achievement in context and so provides a model of thematic continuity with other narratives in this volume through his discussion of regional differences, “feminine” and “masculine” modes, religious versus secular traditions, oral vis-à-vis print culture, and most broadly the ambiguities attendant upon a literature that was both colonial and colonizing, at once a “civilized” defense against a “savage” New World and a shaping instrument of American identity.

Ferguson’s subject is the multilayered language of Enlightenment and revolution. Interweaving aesthetic and cultural concerns – explication de texte with explications of broad patterns of thought and expression (intellectual, political, legal, religious) – he offers a sweeping reassessment of the country’s formative decades, from the Great Awakening through the constitutional debates, and from canonical works of the Founding Fathers (whose literary achievement he illuminates anew) to the writings of their muted Native American and African American “children.” His narrative does justice to the plenitude of its materials. Indeed, one of its contributions is to reveal their enormous volatility (as well as variety), so that even familiar documents reappear as the embattled statements they once were, within a dialectic of contending claims, part of a constant interplay among popular idiom, historical event, and crafted text. Yet Ferguson shows their coherence as well, through his sustained analysis of the dynamics of language and power. Historians have often noted the importance of the word, written and spoken, in the creation of the Republic. No one has demonstrated more cogently than Ferguson does here the crucial function of rhetoric in consolidating the era’s disparate traditions, influences, and impulses: the function of silence in formulating consensus; the verbal appositions of protest and containment, uncertainty and affirmation; and the rhetorical complexities of texture and tone through which diverse constituencies were mobilized and religion and politics were made to correspond. This is a story of disruption and change that builds upon the linguistic strategies connecting pre- and postrevolutionary America. Equally, it is a history of literary continuities that evokes the multifarious voices of a nation born in the act of revolt.

Gilmore’s narrative concerns the imaginative writing of the early Republic. The organization, appropriately, is by genre (magazines, drama, poetry, the novel) and major authors (Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, and James Fenimore Cooper). Within this traditional framework, Gilmore presents a radical reinterpretation of the literature, one that sets the mainstream in dialogue with the margins (women, minorities, dissidents) and that brings the dialogue to life by demonstrating its centrality to a momentous cultural transition. The nation’s first imaginative literature, he shows, was grounded in republican thought: an ideal of public service, an emphasis

on self-denial and the common good, a civic and communal ethos that stood opposed to the basic forms (as we have come to know them) of modern professional authorship. But republican culture also carried in it the tendencies of a new era: Romantic subjectivity, the values of laissez-faire, the self-interest of a market economy. Once independence was secured, the language of liberal individualism – stressing self-expression above public concerns, the novel over the drama, print rather than oral culture – gradually eclipsed the allegiances of the past. Gilmore not only records that transformation but uncovers and accounts for the literary–historical dynamics of change. His analysis recasts the very terms of early American aesthetics. It sets out the distinctive qualities of the literature, in its full range and vitality, clarifies its differences from the literature that followed, and suggests its abiding influence on the national imagination.

Gilmore's narrative is a model of critical and scholarly recovery. And the same may be said of the other four narratives in this volume. They restore for us the formative languages of what became the United States of America, the separate but interrelated discourses of colonization and figural prophecy, of Enlightenment, revolutionary, and republican letters. Together, they offer a compelling and, for our time, comprehensive re-vision of the literary importance of early American history and the historical value of early American literature.

THE LITERATURE OF COLONIZATION

Myra Jehlen