

INTRODUCTION

This multi-volume *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. This *History* embodies the work of a generation of Americanists who have redrawn the boundaries of the field. 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 nationally and globally, in the scope of scholarly activity, and in the polemical intensity of debate. Significantly, American texts have come to provide a major 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 perhaps 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 often turned on American books.

However we situate ourselves in these debates, it seems clear that the activity they have generated has provided a source of intellectual revitalization and new research, involving a massive recovery of neglected and undervalued bodies of writing. We know far more than ever 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 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 should, but they proceed now within a climate of critical decentralization – of controversy, sectarianism, and, at best, dialogue among different schools of explanation.

This scene of conflict signals a shift in structures of academic authority. The practice of all 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. The study of American literary history now defines itself in the plural, as a multivocal, multifaceted scholarly, critical, and pedagogic enterprise. Authority in this context is a function of disparate but connected bodies of knowledge. We might call it the authority of difference. It resides in part in the energies of heterogeneity: a variety of contending constituencies, bodies of materials, and sets of authorities. In part the authority of difference lies in the critic's capacity to connect: to turn the particularity of his or her approach into a form of challenge and engagement, so that it actually gains 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, contentious and collaborative. In a sense, this makes it representative of the specialized, processual, marketplace culture it describes. Our *History* is fundamentally pluralist: a federated histories of American literatures. But it is worth noting that in large measure this representative quality is adversarial. Our *History* is an expression of ongoing debates within the profession about cultural patterns and values. Some of these narratives may be termed celebratory, insofar as they uncover correlations between social and aesthetic achievement. Others are explicitly oppositional, sometimes to the point of turning literary analysis into a critique of liberal pluralism. Oppositionalism, however, stands in a complex relation here to advocacy. Indeed it may be said to mark the *History's* most traditional aspect. The high moral stance that oppositional criticism assumes – literary analysis as the occasion for resistance and alternative vision – is grounded in the very definition of art we have inherited from the Romantic era. The earlier, genteel view of literature upheld the universality of ideals embodied in great books. By implication, therefore, as in the declared autonomy of art, and often by direct assault upon social norms and practices, especially those of Western capitalism, it fostered a broad ethical-aesthetic antinomianism – a celebration of literature (in Matthew Arnold's words) as the criticism of life. By midcentury that criticism had issued, on the one hand,

in the New Critics' assault on industrial society, and, on the other hand, in the neo-Marxist theories of praxis.

The relation here between oppositional and nonoppositional approaches makes for a problematic perspective on nationality. It is a problem that invites many sorts of resolution, including a post-national (or post-American) perspective. Some of these prospective revisions are implicit in these volumes, perhaps as shadows or images of literary histories to come. But by and large "America" here designates the United States, or the territories that were to become part of the United States. Although several of our contributors adopt a comparatist transatlantic or pan-American framework, and although several of them discuss works in other languages, mainly their concerns center upon writing in English in this country — "American literature" as it has been (and still is) commonly understood in its national implications. This restriction marks a deliberate choice on our part. To some extent, no doubt, it reflects limitations of time, space, training, and available materials; but it must be added that our contributors have made the most of their limitations. They have taken advantage of time, space, training, and newly available materials to turn nationality itself into a *question of literary* history. Precisely because of their focus on English-language literatures in the United States, the term "America" for them is neither a narrative *donnée* — an assumed or inevitable or natural premise — nor an objective background (*the* national history). Quite the contrary: it is the contested site of many sorts of literary-historical inquiry. What had presented itself as a neutral territory, hospitable to all authorized parties, turns out upon examination to be, and to have always been, a volatile combat-zone.

"America" in these volumes 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. "America" in these volumes is a shifting, many-sided focal point for exploring the historicity of the text and the textuality of history.

Not coincidentally, these are the two most vexed issues today in literary studies. At no time in literary studies has 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 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 if we acknowledge that great books, a few configurations of language raised to an extraordinary pitch of intensity, have transcended their time and place (and even if we believe that their enduring power offers a recurrent source of opposition), it is evident upon reflection that concepts of aesthetic transcendence are themselves timebound. Like other claims to the absolute, from the hermeneutics of faith to scientific objectivity, aesthetic claims about high art are shaped by history. We grasp their particular forms of beyondness (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 narrative conditioned by their historical moments. So are these. Our intention here is to make limitations a source of open-endedness. 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. Because the number of contributors is limited, each of them has the scope to elaborate distinctive views (premises, arguments, analyses); each of their narratives, therefore, is persuasive by demonstration, rather than by assertion; and each is related to the others (in spite of difference) through themes and concerns, anxieties and aspirations, that are common to *this* generation of Americanists.

The contributors 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 show links as well as gaps between generations. They give voice to the extraordinary 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 remarkable expansion of the field. And they reflect the diversity of interests that constitutes literary studies in our time as well as the ethnographic diversity that has come to characterize our universities, faculty and students alike, 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: as pertaining, for example, to the margins as well as to the mainstream, or as being equally the culmination of one era and the beginning of another. Such overlap was not planned, but it was encouraged from the start, and the resulting diversity of perspectives corresponds to 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.

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Every volume in this *History* displays these strengths in its own ways. This volume does so by emphasizing the complex, conflicted engagement of nineteenth-century American poets with the governing patterns of thought and belief of the culture, among these the ideology of high culture. The achievement of many of these poets has been eclipsed by the success of literary modernism. When Pound and Eliot rejected the Romantic idiom of Wordsworth and Tennyson as sentimental, stilted, and rhetorically inflated, they implicitly passed negative judgment on most of the verse published in the US from 1800 to 1910. The authors of this volume provide a long-overdue corrective by giving close attention to a wide range of nineteenth-century poets, South as well as North, black as well as white, female as well as male. Their approach is both formalist and historical. They note the many pleasures still available in that body of poetry to contemporary readers – not just in the now-canonical works of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, but (among others) in the once-famous works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and John Greenleaf Whittier, and in such lesser but interesting figures as Lydia Sigourney and Emma Lazarus. They also detail the rich historical context within, through, and against which these poets wrote.

Barbara Packer takes on a formidable challenge in attempting to refresh our appreciation of the neoclassical poetry of the first half of the century. She contends not only against modernist aesthetic preferences, but equally against a Romantic-nationalist narrative according to which American literature only becomes mature when it ceases to imitate foreign models. American poets of

this period, Packer reminds us, tended to be anxious about their provincialism. Mastery of classical and English forms affirmed membership in a larger European tradition. In the early nineteenth century, even a politically radical poet like Joel Barlow employed decorous neoclassical couplets to proclaim the advent of an Enlightenment millennium in America. Packer finds both wit and lyrical beauty in his poetry, as well as in the Augustan-influenced satirical stanzas of John Trumbull, John Quincy Adams, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Philip Freneau, Joseph Rodman Drake, and Fitz-Greene Halleck. Even in the Romantically oriented lyrical poems of the era, which in most respects owe a large debt to Wordsworth, Packer finds a persistent effort to contain the wild American landscape within pre-Wordsworthian metrical and rhetorical structures.

Emerson's poetry provides the most intricate example of this tension between British forms and American materials. His discovery of Wordsworth and Coleridge in the early 1830s transformed his sensibility; and in a few fine poems such as "Hamtreya" and "Musketaquid" he successfully adopts the blank verse of (say) "Tintern Abbey." But most of his poems, Packer shows, take shape as idiosyncratic hybrids of Romantic themes articulated in neoclassical couplets and seventeenth-century quatrains, derived from Herbert, Milton, Jonson, and Marvell. The Sage of Concord could celebrate Walt Whitman's free verse, but retained his own commitment to regular verbal patterning. His influence on Whitman was philosophical and inspirational, not formal. In this sense, his most direct heir was Emily Dickinson, whose poems display not only the Transcendentalist preoccupation with the boundaries of the self, but also something of Emerson's gnomic, compressed, almost abrasive rhyming style. Never has this period of American literary history, from the Federalist poets through Emerson and Whittier, been more vividly evoked or more authoritatively analyzed.

Packer's literary focus reveals historical continuity and change. Shira Wolosky illuminates the poetry of the second half of the century through an emphasis on broad matters of social engagement. She sees her poets as everywhere involved in rhetorical negotiation with prevailing cultural norms. Especially important in this regard are the efforts of women poets in this period to recast feminine obligations to modesty and the private sphere. In the work of a broad range of now-forgotten or under-appreciated female poets — Julia Ward Howe, Frances Harper, Helen Hunt Jackson, Ellen Wheeler Wilcox, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Lucy Larcom, Alice and Phoebe Cary, and others — Wolosky traces a subtle dialectic of self-assertion through revisionary submission. Authority in the private sphere, she points out, was nonetheless a form of authority, and the assertion of modesty was nonetheless an assertion. These

poets managed to achieve a public voice in the paradoxical act of publicly avowing the private-sphere values of domesticity and modesty. None exploited this paradox more fiercely than Emily Dickinson. Wolosky finds in the histrionic privacy of her life and her poems an infinitely volatile enactment of “explosive compliance.”

The strongest male poets of the period were no less complexly engaged with the culture at large. The era’s deepest cultural conflict, between South and North, was reflected in Poe’s morbid hostility towards Longfellow’s complacent moral didacticism. Both poets, Wolosky points out, convey profound disappointment with the marginal place of poetry in a commercial society, but they do so in regionally distinctive ways. A gentle tone of elegiac patrician futility pervades Longfellow’s evocations of dead or dying cultures of the past, while Poe’s tortured social and intellectual marginality finds expression in a poetics of negation. Wolosky brilliantly identifies several variants of these opposed strategies – nostalgic and proto-modernist – in the subsequent figures she treats. Where “genteel” writers such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, and George Santayana attempted to dissociate poetic language from the surging pluralism of an emerging mass society, Herman Melville, Stephen Crane, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar fashioned lastingly painful poems out of stark confrontations with this society’s fractures, paradoxes, dualities, and alienations. The collective folk authors of the Negro spirituals voiced resistance to the cruelest form of capitalist exploitation in a poetry of apocalyptic hope. And in Whitman, Wolosky finds a sustained effort to figuratively overcome what was (and remains) perhaps the central conflict of social and political life in America – the conflict between “negative” individualist liberty on one hand, and the felt need for communal bonds on the other. At his best, she suggests, Whitman, like many of the women poets treated earlier in the volume, finds a kind of civic-communal counterbalance to liberal individualism in a poetry of intimate sentiment, including (as in the elegy to Lincoln) the socially binding sentiment of mourning.

Both critics and champions of liberal-individualist principles have often worried about the affective sustenance of societies governed by them. Both sides should find much to reflect upon here. If poetry is, as Wordsworth suggested, “the history of feeling,” we have here an elucidation of human feeling as it formally confronts the conditions of experience in an ever-increasingly liberal-individualistic society. The ambivalent post-colonial relationship to the cultural parent; the difficult negotiation of the highly charged boundary between the public and the private spheres; the self-discovery and self-assertion of minorities and women; the exhilarations of nationalism; the alienations of capitalism and the search for countervailing values; the multiple

identifications of pluralism and the accompanying nostalgia for more easily knowable communities: these and other problematics of what might be called social feeling are richly and accessibly articulated in nineteenth-century American poetry, and they are richly and accessibly commented upon in this volume. Packer locates these principally in her poets' choices of genre and form, whereas Wolosky finds them principally in her poets' accommodations of prevailing cultural rhetorics. But both agree in seeing the poetry as everywhere engaged in its historical settings, and in doing so they recover and elucidate American poetry of the nineteenth century for our twenty-first century pleasure, profit, and renewed study.

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American verse traditions, 1800–1855

Barbara Packer

PREFACE: REVERENCE AND AMBITION

In an 1854 lecture entitled “Poetry and English Poetry,” Ralph Waldo Emerson introduced a familiar subject. “The question is often asked, Why no poet appears in America? Other nations in their early, expanding periods, in their war for existence, have shot forth the flowers of verse, and created mythology which continued to charm the imagination of after-men. But we have all manner of ability, except this: we are brave, victorious; we legislate, trade, plant, build, sail, and combine as well as any others, but we have no imagination, no constructive mind, no affirmative books.” Seventeen years earlier, in “The American Scholar,” his criticism had sounded more hopeful. “Perhaps the time is already come . . . when the sluggish intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill.” But the iron lids of the continent had stayed closed, despite the best efforts of Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, Poe, and Emerson himself (whose *Poems* had appeared in 1846) to pry them open.

The complaint was freely sounded even in books meant to appeal to national pride. When the New York editor Rufus Griswold (1815–57) published *The Poets and Poetry of America* in 1842, he cautioned that the United States could be said to have only the beginnings of a national literature. He had chosen the best poems he could find from the five hundred volumes of “rhythmical compositions” that had been published in America since the earliest days of European settlement. But he warned his readers not to expect too much. “A high degree of excellence, especially in poetry, is attained only by constant and quiet study and cultivation,” he noted. “Our poets have generally written with too little preparation, and too hastily, to win enduring reputations.” There were several reasons for this haste. Lack of “a just system of copyright” in the United States made it more profitable for publishers to pirate the works of famous British poets than to publish American poems. Magazine and newspaper editors would sometimes pay for verses, but even then, Griswold noted, “the rewards of literary exertion are so precarious that but a small number can give their exclusive attention to literature.” American poets were ministers,