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. 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 authors adopt a comparatist trans-Atlantic 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 *donnee* – 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 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 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 way. This volume does so by finding a common paradox at the heart of the projects of modernist American poets and critics: their determination to escape from history even as they passionately engaged it. In other words, these men and women championed the human potential for unfettered artistic genius, but they also believed that the strongest art makes an exacting response to the culture in which it arises. This paradox takes many forms. Andrew DuBois and Frank Lentricchia see it in the plight of the individual writer bereft of patrons. For them, the conditions of literary production in a democratic, market-driven society forced the boldest of the era's poets to try to reconcile their need for a remunerative career with the knowledge that their commitment to high art might never pay. Irene Ramalho Santos sees the paradox in the kinds of subjects and materials that were no longer available, or else were newly available, for poetry in the industrialized world. She describes the daunting prospect poets faced of preserving an authentic lyric voice in what Walter Benjamin called the age of mechanical reproduction. And William E. Cain writes about the effort of American scholars and critics to institute the study of a distinctively nationalistic literature even while they borrowed many of their literary terms and tastes from English predecessors.

Together, the narratives in this volume establish a tacit genealogy. It unfolds through the lives of four major figures – Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Ezra Pound – who came of age when the roles of poet and critic were still intertwined. These "philosopher-poets" were selective and self-contradictory in the building of their family tree. They looked back to classical Greece for aesthetic models as readily as they rejected their immediate predecessors, the genteel Fireside Poets, for keeping aloof from the hurly-burly nastiness of modern life. The social and cultural scope of the genealogy broadens

as the volume progresses. Santos's central figures – Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, H. D., Marianne Moore, and Langston Hughes – appear as proponents of a literary tradition who are less conflicted about the celebration of demotic voices in their work. They understood the modernist imperative, "make it new," to apply not only to the best remnants of Western civilization but also to previously unrepresented aspects of the present, such as local vernaculars and the latest material goods.

DuBois and Lentricchia invoke the life stories of Ezra Pound and Robert Frost to personify the contrary cultural forces that gave rise to American modernist poetry. Pound represents the rebel in exile, a self-expatriated gadfly who saw no way forward in the mainstream culture of the United States. Disgusted with what he considered the pabulum that passed as poetry in such popular publications as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Scribner's*, he worked tirelessly to promote the cause of *Poetry* and *Little Review*, magazines where avant-garde poets like himself could find an outlet if not a broad audience. Frost represents the high-minded careerist. Rather than reject the dominant commercial system of literary production, he aimed to take it over. He eschewed fractured poetic forms and overt political content, typified by *The Cantos*, in favor of a deliberately homespun, democratically open poetry that could be read for pleasure as well as plumbed for its subtler (often darker) themes. DuBois and Lentricchia see in this pairing an epitome of the conditions driving the writing and reception of all the major poetry of the period, including the variously conservative but popular anthologies of then contemporary verse. Thus a reaction against consumer culture was basic to the formation of the modernist literary imagination. But DuBois and Lentricchia are far from being cultural determinists. They carefully differentiate Frost, Eliot, Stevens, and Pound by temperament and style. They discuss "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, for example, within the context of Eliot's mandarin interest in ancient literary narratives, French symbolism, and his brooding disaffection from the masses. And they read the self-conscious play with gender roles and poetic form in *Harmonium* in the light both of Stevens's epicurean indulgences and of his lament for a bygone America. Throughout the narrative, key letters from the personal correspondence of the poets serve as *artes poeticae* in prose, further shaping the account of the relationship between their lives and works.

Santos surveys a more diverse coterie of poets. In some cases, her analysis implicitly touches upon the opposition outlined by DuBois and Lentricchia. She notes the profound but negative influence that *The Waste Land* had on Williams and Crane; like Frost, they thought it effete. Her account of Moore's fascination with commercial advertising recalls the example of Pound. So too does H. D.'s classicism. But Santos's explicit focus is on a crisis in literary form.

She unites the six poets she treats through their efforts to reinvent poetry for the modern, mechanical age. Stein experimented with complex repetitions to estrange her readers from the language they thought they knew. Williams introduced simple material objects, and previously marginal American vernaculars, into the realm of high art. H. D. renovated Greek myths in search of an analogue to her experience as a self-possessed woman and lover in a man's world. Moore insisted upon a scientific rigor in her art, endlessly researching and revising (in one case, she reduced a well-known thirty-line poem to three lines and a footnote). Crane pushed the epic form to its limits in an effort to capture the fragmentary experience of modern life. And Hughes brought the formal innovations and structures of the blues into the poetic mainstream. In general, Santos shows how the increasingly dizzying circulation of people, objects, and money imbued the work of all six poets – and beyond them, the poetry of the period as a whole (for her analysis ranges to include virtually the entire spectrum of poetic production) – with a cosmopolitan challenge to the nation's faith in the concrete, the quotidian, and the traditional.

Cain tells the other half of the story. He traces the rise of the profession that would take charge of transmitting modernist literary values to subsequent generations. His approach combines social and intellectual history with literary biography; and in doing so it reveals the many influences, indigenous and foreign, highbrow and reactionary, that shaped the increasingly specialized role of the literary critic in the United States. His narrative begins with the invention of the idea of a distinctively American literature, a revolution in scholarship that accompanied the revolution in American poetry. The parallels between the two projects are as numerous as are the ironies. The same scientific, technological, and economic advances which Pound saw as a challenge, an obstacle to the future of high art, emboldened men like Van Wyck Brooks to discover in the national past a cultural heritage worthy of a new world power. Cain builds from this insight to extended readings of the progressive politics of Jane Addams and Randolph Bourne and the cultural aesthetics of Alain Locke. He also places V. L. Parrington, F. O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, Emma Goldman, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Edmund Wilson, among others, within a larger institutional context: in effect, the consolidation of a field of scholars dedicated to the study of American literature. Here Cain makes a significant recovery of his own. The self-conscious nationalism of the critical project, he shows, obscured how profoundly indebted many of these critics were to the work of Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold. Finally, Cain turns to the rise of New Criticism, again finding English antecedents, and offering a lucid explanation of the success of the New Critics in the setting of the university. That pedagogic triumph, which marked the rout of the genteel tradition in

America, may be seen as the culmination of the aesthetic movement that began with Pound's "Patria Mia."

In a sense that triumph also marked the limits of the modernist achievement. For the effort to free the poem from its context risked making it irrelevant to future readers, and, with the advent of a new generation of critics, feminists, Marxists, post-structuralists, and others assailed the New Criticism for its narrow aesthetic preferences: lyric over epic, poetry over prose, white males over everyone else. The modernist poets themselves ran the same risk. Pound and Eliot took great pride in the obscurity of their poetry. They meant to inspire their readers to rediscover the density of human existence that they believed had been vitiated by modernity. But their exclusiveness could be seen to have robbed their work of its vitality. The result is a troubled legacy. The three narratives in this volume provide a rich overview of its implications. They capture the historical arc of the modernist project, from its bold swerve away from the genteel tradition to its apotheosis at mid-century in the university classroom. They interrogate and re-evaluate its successes and failures (reflecting the poets' and critics' own self-awareness in this regard). And they delineate its abiding achievements of the mind and imagination. Considered together, they convey the aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural complexities embedded in the "modernism" we have inherited.

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MODERNIST LYRIC IN THE CULTURE OF CAPITAL

Andrew DuBois and Frank Lentricchia

PROLOGUE

The American literary culture that Frost, Stevens, Eliot, and Pound grew to know, and despise, as young men of great literary ambition was dominated by values that hostile commentators characterize as "genteel." The names of the genteel literary powers are now mostly forgotten: R. H. Stoddard, Bayard Taylor, G. H. Boker, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, E. C. Stedman, Richard Watson Gilder (Boston, Philadelphia, but mainly New York); at Columbia, Harvard, and Princeton, the academic reflectors G. E. Woodberry, Barrett Wendell, Henry Van Dyke. These were the men who shaped and ruled the literary culture of modernism's American scene of emergence. They represented, in their prime, the idea of poetry and true literary value. What Willard Thorp said about them more than forty years ago still cuts to the heart of this matter of literary politics: "As the years went by, connections which the group formed with magazines and publishing houses multiplied until their names were spoken and seen everywhere, and they formed a kind of literary interlocking directorate." In other words, they policed Parnassus by capturing and controlling the modes of literary publication. And not only did they "represent" the idea of poetry ("represent" is too weak, and they would have said the *ideal* of poetry): they enforced that representation from the 1880s through the first decade or so of the twentieth century; in particular, they enforced it by editing, in those pre-little magazine times, the period's dominant magazines of culture – *Scribner's*, the *Atlantic*, and *Century*.

America's looming genteel directorate unleashed a culture-saturating wave of literature and criticism: appreciations, recollections, histories of English and American poetry, numerous volumes of their own verse, some novels, one major translation (Taylor's of Goethe), travel books of considerable popularity, social reflections and criticism, decisive taste-making anthologies of American literature, coffee-table books of photos, illustrations, and light essays on great American writers "at home," including one such volume featuring one of the group's own, E. C. Stedman. The volume on Stedman ensured that his face, as well as his name, would be seen everywhere. And when his poems, like