
THE
CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF
AMERICAN
LITERATURE

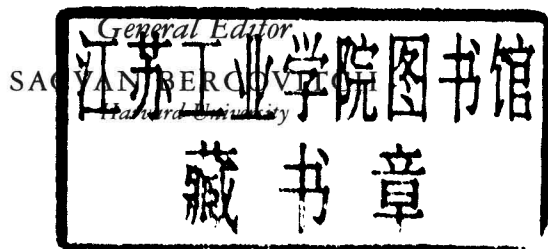
GENERAL EDITOR, SACVAN BERCOVITCH



VOLUME EIGHT:
POETRY AND CRITICISM, 1940-1995

THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

Volume 8
Poetry and Criticism
1940–1995



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FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR

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Sacvan Bercovitch

POETRY, POLITICS, AND INTELLECTUALS

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Robert von Hallberg

CRITICISM SINCE 1940

We have worked over all materials collaboratively, rather than dividing them into separately authored chapters. At times we have inscribed our own dialogues and debates into the text.

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Evan Carton
Gerald Graff

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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 *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 narratives 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.



Every volume in this *History* displays these strengths in its own way. This volume is perhaps especially notable for the parallels between two altogether different sets of materials and narrative forms. The first is aesthetic: the course of American poetry since World War II, which Robert von Hallberg explores, appropriately, through close readings and detailed evaluation. The second is institutional: the growth during this period of the profession of literary criticism, which Evan Carton and Gerald Graff describe through analyses of intellectual movements and debates. It would seem to make for a familiar set of dichotomies: creative and critical, aesthetic and cognitive, bohemia and academia. Instead, the narrative in each case builds on the interactions between both sets of terms. Von Hallberg's account of the poetry is the story of a *cultural* achievement, a process of aesthetic development which connects directly to developments in the society at large, and one of whose strong themes is the academicization of poetry. That is also a main theme for Carton and Graff, and they, too, tell of a singular cultural achievement, bridging art and politics (in the broad sense of that term). Indeed, they show how American literary criticism since 1940 has steadily, if turbulently, enlarged the scope of the "literary" to include the entire spectrum of cultural concerns, from philosophy to mass culture. And in both cases, the authors tell their stories by way of an inside narrative: an account from within unfolding processes, rather than a synoptic overview of established major figures.

Their choice of approach is not necessarily a function of the contemporaneity of their materials. In fact, histories of the present have tended self-consciously towards monumentalization: an Olympian overview designed to counterbalance the immediacy of judgments by separating the masterpieces from the passing spectacle. Such judgments are implicit in this volume as well, and here, too, there are major figures and central works, but their importance emerges from historical narrative. Biographical data on these figures are documented separately – in appendices which (among other

things) provide authoritative bibliographical guides. But the narrative focus is on cultural moments and events, so that the reader's view is simultaneously processual and contextual: poetry in the making, decade by decade, sometimes year by year, as the poets experienced it; critics at work, from one controversy to the next, one set of issues to another, as the profession expanded and changed.

Von Hallberg's inside narrative is a testament of faith in poetry as a discourse. His premise is that the health of a literary culture is established by the level of excellence attained by many poets – the forty influential ones rather than the classic three. And from this perspective he demonstrates the “truly exceptional” achievement of contemporary American poetry as a whole, a social–political–aesthetic organism sustained by a diversity of poems that continue to live in the writing of successive generations of young poets. His demonstration comes by virtually every historical venue: journals, networks, and enclaves; the relation between poetry and other arts (from abstract expressionism to the jazz of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis); the growing involvement of poets in civic and academic institutions (and the consequences for poetry of this professionalization of literary life); the effect upon poetry of political events (from regional economics to international war); and a variety of intellectual communities and social movements: the shift during the forties and fifties from public protest to radical (eventually radically self-doubting) subjectivity; the anxieties of belatedness through the sixties and seventies that followed in the wake of the Great Modernists; the changing face of the avant-garde from the Beats and the Black Mountain Poets to the poststructuralist Language Poets of New York and San Francisco.

This variegated cultural history is conveyed, strikingly, through a narrative of and *by* the poetry itself. Von Hallberg writes as though the New Criticism had been absorbed, not transcended. His organizing categories (politics, avant- and rear-guardism, formality, sincerity, etc.) are those that divide the living poets of the United States; his selection from poets in every camp is guided by considerations of aesthetic (not doctrinaire) value; and quotations from the poetry are ample enough to allow readers to evaluate for themselves. The result is a remarkable blend of tradition and innovation: poetic analysis as cultural history; cultural history as aesthetic criticism.

The work by Carton and Graff might be described in similar terms, with literary criticism substituted for poetry. The conjunction itself is no surprise, since poets in the past have so often shaped the course of criticism. But that conjunction was a form of symbiosis: criticism nourished by poetry, the critic as the keeper of the sacred flame. What distinguishes our period, as the bulk of Carton and Graff's work is meant to suggest, is the rise of a new institutional reality, a vast secular scholasticism grounded in

the conceptual elasticity of "literature," as extending (in Emerson's words) beyond "the courtly muses" to include the entire range of human concerns: that which has been negligently trodden underfoot, "the literature of the poor, the familiar, and the low," "the philosophy of the street," "the meaning of household life."

This shift towards a democratic aesthetics has issued in an equally significant shift in the profession of letters. The key to the hermeneutic transition from theology to literature was the Romantic substitution of poet for priest. The current transformations in literary academia have been labelled the substitution of critic for poet. As Carton and Graff tell the story, it is somewhat different: a transition from the well-made poem, the old "verbal icon," to the cultural "text," the verbal configuration whose "depth" consists not so much in hierarchies of meaning as it does in the multiple layers of experience it reaches down to, the range of common problems it raises, and the vistas of ordinary life it brings into focus. To paraphrase Whitman: the divine literatus departs, the democratic poet arrives, accompanied by professors of literature and culture.

Or perhaps the other way around: the professors arrive accompanied by the poet. For the fact is that this transition, like the one before it, has been deeply conflictual. One merit of Carton and Graff's narrative is that they address these conflicts, rather than evading or trivializing them. Another merit is that they present the issues on all sides sympathetically. In effect, they revise familiar dichotomies between creator and critic in terms that allow for variable reciprocities between the two. It is fitting that the transformation of the literary profession should be charted so comprehensively for the first time alongside an equally comprehensive account of the vitality of contemporary poetry.

It is fitting, too, in view of earlier transformations, that the story which Carton and Graff tell – the dramatic changes they record in pedagogy and scholarship – should so often take the form of continuities. They open with a skirmish in our current "culture wars," and proceed to show how it characterizes (rather than threatens) the modern discipline of literary study. That is, they seek to understand our past by contextualizing our present. From the start, it turns out, the academicization of criticism was a source of anxiety. Throughout the process of academicization some groups of critics denounced the "jargon" of other groups. Consistently, the denunciations have been directed against the encroachments of the vulgar, the not-yet-dead (or not dead enough), and the merely popular – the menacing small-c "cultural" infiltrating the walled-in sanctuaries of Culture. And consistently, in Carton and Graff's account, this immemorial struggle between "high" and "low" opens out to engage the novel challenges embedded in a democratic aesthetics:

disciplinary interchange versus disciplinary autonomy, fluid versus fixed categories, negotiation versus separate spheres, layers versus levels of meaning.

Chronologically, the narrative moves from the critical–scholarly battles of the forties to the nineties debates within and about literary and cultural studies. Along the way Carton and Graff trace the New Critics' problematization of textual meanings; the influx of theory during the fifties and sixties; and, during the seventies and eighties, following the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and the Anti-war Movement, the influx into the literary academy of women, minorities, and social activists. The narrative plot-structure, however, is conceptual: synchronic, self-reflexive, and issue-oriented. One section includes a comparison between this *History* and others that preceded it. The chapter headings name the major sites on the critical map of our time: deconstruction, new historicism, feminism, postcolonialism, and so on. In Carton and Graff's account, these formidable structures (and the reaction against them) provide the setting for a cumulative series of dialogues, so that similar issues are reassessed as it were in a variety of critical languages.

There is a strong integrative thrust to these dialogues, connecting critical movements and critical moments, and subjecting each mode of discourse to critiques that are inscribed in the others. This is complemented by a strong particularist emphasis. Because Carton and Graff self-consciously enter into the debates, they are self-consciously judicial and balanced in their analyses. They are at once participants, advocates, and explicators, clarifying the intricacies of deconstruction, evaluating the uses of relativism, and contextualizing the theoretical and often absolutist conjunctions of art, power, and criticism (conservative and radical) within institutional practices.

Considered together, these two narratives offer an extraordinary bi-polar view of their subject. They illuminate the dual meanings of *literary*, as poetic language and as literary study. They convey the visionary and institutional meanings of *American*, as these are manifest (1) in a history of literary criticism set in the context of the making of an American literature; and (2) in a history of American literature-in-the-making set over against (complementary to, parallel with) a history of the criticism that established what it is we mean by American literature. Finally, these histories are exemplary for the methods they deploy. The writing of history is always, for any period, a mediation between stories we tell and truths we seek, between what it seems like to us and what it's like (or was like) for them, out there. These inside narratives by Carton, Graff, and von Hallberg are models of how to make the process work as a history of the present. Each of their narratives, in its own way, testifies to the advantages of learning from American literary history as *process* – not as memorial or as essence or as telos, but as a project in the making – open to making again, to making over, and to making anew.

POETRY, POLITICS, AND
INTELLECTUALS

Robert von Hallberg

INTRODUCTION

A HISTORY of American poetry since 1945 is uncomfortably like a history of the present. To what sense of the present should such a history conform? I imagine that this book will be read by those with more curiosity than knowledge of its subject – a general reader, as we say, meaning students. A student may well try to find a path that passes between professors and poets, and so have I. Professors read poetry in order to discern patterns of significance that persist from year to year, poet to poet, and from one field of inquiry to another. For them, the important poems are the representative ones, those that allow one to draw out general claims about continuity and so on. But poets read for poems, looking for gold wherever it may be found. Pound said that the history of art is the history of masterpieces, not mediocrity.

Continuity is not exactly the concern of poets; discontinuity is. A poet rather fears writing a poem that has already been written. As Eliot said, poets learn the literary tradition in order to know what is already alive, what has already been achieved. Poets read literary criticism and history in order to find out what does not need to be done again. Poems that have achieved their effects perfectly – those are the ones that young poets shouldn't try to repeat. And the readers of contemporary poetry? They too read looking for the gold. They want to know what's been done perfectly so that they can enjoy those poems. I imagine my readers to be looking for pleasure, driven by passion, and ambition too.

Professors, when they write about the formation of literary canons, tend to think, not surprisingly, that professional literary historians determine which poems count for literary history. But the more traditional way of understanding literary history is as the record of the poems that have continued to live in the writing of young poets.

I have tried to read with two goals. The test of one reading is the coherence of the narrative in terms of the themes that connect intellectual disciplines. Now political and social theory and history provide the terms for bringing literature together with other fields of inquiry, whereas in the late 1940s and the 1950s theology would have been a plausible neighbor field for literary history, and in the 1960s it would have been psychology. In order to read as a