THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

GENERAL EDITOR, SACVAN BERCOVITCH

VOLUME THREE: PROSE WRITING, 1860–1920

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Volume 3
Prose Writing
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General Editors
SACVAN BERCOVITCH
Harvard University

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Sacvan Bercovitch

THE AMERICAN LITERARY FIELD, 1860–1890

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Richard H. Brodhead

LITERARY FORMS AND MASS CULTURE, 1870–1920

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Nancy Bentley

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BECOMING MULTICULTURAL: CULTURE, ECONOMY, AND THE NOVEL, 1860–1929

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Susan L. Mizruchi

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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 decades between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, 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 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 inquity. 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 largescale 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.

Sacvan Bercovitch

Every volume in the *History* displays these strengths in its own way. This volume does so by providing a multilayered analysis of a pivotal era in the formation of American cultural identity. Like the writers of that time, all four contributors – Richard Brodhead, Nancy Bentley, Walter Benn Michaels, and Susan Mizruchi – foreground race and gender as the best available lenses for investigating the industrial and demographic changes then underway, along with anxieties arising from new Darwinist and social scientific conceptions of human nature. This volume may therefore be read as an exploration of difference itself, here manifested in the typologies of Naturalist novels, in the embattled domesticities of sentimental fiction, and in the nearly universal dependence on racialized language. It may also be read as a study of the totalizing forces bearing down on American individuality. Throughout, these contributors treat the relationship between culture and economy as decisive, for writers in particular, and in general for both producers and consumers in an age of marketing and advertising. Indeed, all four contributors recognize the market as a central locus of cultural interaction at a time when the dynamics of identity and the dynamics of commerce became inextricably entwined.

The result is a remarkably coherent portrait of the era, one that is enriched by a variety of critical approaches. Brodhead focuses on the emergent literary genres of the era. He depicts an anxious writer class as it was being shaped by, and was in turn shaping, the commercial interests of publishers. These writers, he shows, succeeded in manipulating both the supply and the demand of the literary market to their own ends, and they gained recognition by writing to and for specific literary niches. Bentley's narrative yields a different kind of cultural dialectic. In her account, Realism becomes the point of conflict

between an entrenched cultural establishment and an upstart mass market, with important consequences for the both high literature and popular culture. Realism is also a main focus of Michaels's narrative. However, he emphasizes the social functions of literature, stressing the incorporation of literature into broad institutional hierarchies. That process of incorporation, he argues, became the site of conflicts that could no longer be contained by the nation's political structures. Mizruchi's perspective might best be termed anthropological: she demonstrates how literature defined the ways in which the nation addressed the costs and benefits of its growing cultural diversity – and how, in doing so, it helped redefine America itself as a modern nation, the land of multicultural modernity.

For Richard Brodhead, the story of postbellum American literature becomes a study in cultural stratification. His overview of the professional literary field follows a loose chronological structure, introducing new modes of writing in the order in which they were accessed by successive emergent social groups: women in sentimental fiction, the working class in its "books for the million," immigrants in the urban theater, the middle class in "high literature," provincials and African Americans in "local color." In effect, Brodhead describes the foundation of a permanent literary culture in America – featuring hierarchical, profit-driven systems of production and distribution – as well as the subsequent fragmentation of American literature into plural literatures of diverse styles, thematics, intentions, and social significances. Stressing the importance of publication as a public act, subject to the needs and desires of a reading (and paying) audience, Brodhead defines the professional spaces, or the "cultures of letters," within which writers as diverse as Horatio Alger, Charles Chesnutt, and Sarah Orne Jewett operated, both acceding to and resisting professional demands. These cultures of letters often served to limit the creative possibilities of the writers who worked within them. Yet just as often, we learn, they provided opportunities for writers who had been excluded previously from the literary field.

Nancy Bentley locates the origins of nineteenth-century Realism in an elite culture's responses – both affirmative and antagonistic – to an emergent mass culture. Her narrative embraces high literary practitioners like William Dean Howells, whose dispassionate, analytical work created a new aesthetic of social-scientific types, and Henry James, who turned his analytical gaze inward to explore the impact of a potentially chaotic modernity on matters of mind and taste. More broadly, her narrative traces a shift in American methods of "seeing," from the early postwar years, dominated by the claims of objectivity inherent in museum culture, through the crucible of modernization, to an intensely subjective relation between writer and culture. In all cases, she

argues, Realism was a strategic rejoinder to the sentimentality, sensationalism, and publicity of popular culture. Yet as Bentley also shows, it turned out to be a surprisingly permeable category, creating a space in elite culture for socially marginal figures, and a surprisingly brittle category as well, susceptible to the excesses of mass culture. Realism provided an opportunity for outsiders like Charles Chesnutt to address social concerns in a context of artistic respectability, and it invited the passionate provocations of intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois. This deployment of Realist methods by the very types they were designed to contain – African Americans, women, Native Americans – gradually forced literary elites to abandon Realism for more self-conscious modes of writing. By the end of the century, Realism had led them into the radical ironies of American Modernism.

In Walter Benn Michaels's narrative, turn-of-the-century fiction assumes the functions of well-established cultural institutions; it becomes the contained space within which American society fights its social and political battles. Moving beyond the standard contrast between Naturalism and Realism – Naturalism as an obsessive engagement with biological and social determinism; Realism as the translation into fiction of a new journalistic ethos – Michaels uncovers their institutional value by arguing for their functional similarities. His Naturalist and Realist texts are allied insofar as they defined the terms according to which "new forms of social existence were imagined and articulated." In particular, he emphasizes the critical role that fiction played in the re-evaluation of the American individual at the advent of modern bureaucracy. Organizing his study around three basic tropes – visibility and race, desire and capitalism, work and careers – Michaels chronicles the gradual blurring of the distinction between social dependence and social independence in literary representations (as well as in the society at large). In his readings, Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee, Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier, and Owen Wister's Virginian all self-consciously facilitate the transition from the idealism of Emerson's heroic Individual to the hard realism of the mid-twentieth-century Organization Man.

Susan Mizruchi dramatizes the social fragmentation of the era. She presents the decades following the Civil War as the time when "the specific stakes of this diversity [were] widely conceptualized and debated," and proceeds to display the literary responses to a new national heterogeneity – social, ethnic, racial, aesthetic, religious, economic. Beginning with an analysis of the fragmentary, insistently personal evocations of the Civil War, she examines each successive crisis of dissociation – emancipation and Reconstruction, the influx of immigrants, the extermination of Native Americans, the ubiquitous influence of advertising in the creation of a consumer nation, the reappraisal of