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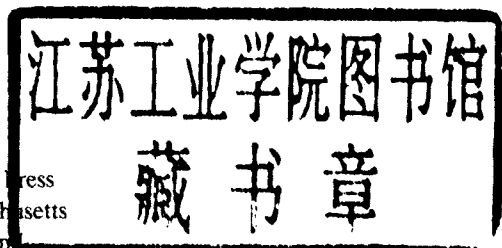
RECON- STRUCTING AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY

**Edited by
Sacvan Bercovitch**

Reconstructing American Literary History

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Preface

The need for a new American literary history seems clear and unexceptionable. A lot has happened, critically and creatively, since Robert Spiller and his colleagues issued their monumental *Literary History of the United States* (1948). Besides, as Spiller then pointed out, every generation should produce its own literary history. That revisionist challenge has special resonance for Americanists. It recalls Jefferson's appeal for social renewal with every generation. It echoes the summons of Emerson's *American Scholar*: "Each age must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this." There are new insights, new outlooks, new texts. Why should we grope among the monuments of the past?

An unexceptionable demand, in the American grain—and compounded in our time by certain un-American developments. I refer to the political-academic upheavals of the late sixties and to the recent impact of European critical theories. From both these perspectives, we have become increasingly aware of the shortcomings of traditional methods of analysis: on the one hand, the narrow textuality of the New Criticism; and on the other hand, the naiveté of the old historicism as "background" or "context." We have also become increasingly uncomfortable about the restrictions inherent in the consensus that shaped our concept of American literary history: specifically, the consensus on the meaning of the term *literary* that involved the legitimation of a certain canon, and the consensus on the term *history* that was legitimated by a certain vision of America. During the past two decades, consensus of all sorts has broken down—left and right, political and aesthetic—broken down, worn out, or at best opened up. It was the achievement of the Spiller *History*

to consolidate a powerful literary-historical movement. It will be the task of the present generation to reconstruct American literary history by making a virtue of dissensus.

That is the burden of the essays in this volume. The contributors are Americanists trained in the sixties and early seventies. They represent no particular approach, school, or set of principles, except the principles of excellence and balance. They were chosen for the quality of their work and for their diversity of views and interests. Those views do not necessarily entail a rift between generations. Some of these young scholars may be seen as traditionalists; others are clearly building upon the work of teachers and predecessors. But all of them express a distinctive generational experience of discontinuity and disruption. In one form or another, that is, their essays convey the self-reflexiveness that characterizes this period of critical interregnum. And to some extent they share similar convictions about the *problematics* of literary history: for example, that race, class, and gender are formal principles of art and therefore integral to textual analysis; that language has the capacity to break free of social restrictions and through its own dynamics to undermine the power structures it seems to reflect; that political norms are inscribed in aesthetic judgment and therefore inherent in the process of interpretation; that aesthetic structures shape the way we understand history, so that tropes and narrative devices may be said to use historians to enforce certain views of the past; that the task of literary historians is not just to show how art transcends culture, but also to identify and explore the ideological limits of their time, and then to bring these to bear upon literary analysis in such a way as to make use of the categories of culture, rather than being used by them.

These convictions stem from contending approaches in contemporary critical discourse. But as they are applied or developed here they point to a certain coherence in the enterprise at large. In particular, these essays suggest two main directions, methodological and practical, in American literary scholarship. The methodological direction may be described as a return to history. For all their diversity, these essays find a common ground in their attempt, *through* the insights of recent theories, to ground

textual analysis in history; and more than that, to make history a central category of aesthetic criticism. And they do so, let me add, not because the authors happen to be engaged in writing literary history, but because they are convinced (correctly, I believe) that the tendency of literary theory, in all its current varieties—from deconstruction and semiotics to feminism, ethnicity, and reader-response theory—lies in that direction. In practical terms, the common ground of these essays is their dialogic mode of analysis. I mean dialogic as distinct from eclectic, synthetic, or indeterminate. These essays are remarkably open and flexible because they engage the conflicts at issue, rather than seeking either to resolve them or to rest in irreconcilability. Characteristically, it is not the assumed relation between text and context but the problems raised by such assumptions which give substance and texture to the argument. All the contributors have a marked resistance to closure, including the forms of closure implicit in pluralism. All of them show an instinctive distrust of totalizing answers, especially those dictated by parochial themes of the past, such as the American-ness of American literature.

Methodologically, then, a shared concern with history and, practically, a dialogic open-endedness: the force of these essays lies in their capacity to make these directions mutually sustaining. They are flexible precisely because of their concern with the problematics of history; and their flexibility in exploring conflict enriches their engagement with the problematics of history. It amounts to an exemplary venture in revaluation. Considered as a whole, this volume is no less significant for the issues it raises than for the answers it suggests. The essays succeed in using literary techniques to illuminate the dynamics of culture, and historical analysis to open up literary interpretation. They provide fresh perspectives on the major points of current debate, concerning canon-formation, intentionality, evaluation, and influence, “popular” vis-à-vis “classic” literature, the import of modernism (and postmodernism), the connections between myth and ideology, American and European developments, rhetoric and social action. They offer persuasive new readings of particular texts, and wholesale reformulations of cultural

continuities and disjunctions. To judge by this volume, the reconstruction of American literary history is not only a project to be urged, but a process already well under way. Dissensus may yield a rich harvest after all, in due time.

S. B.

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“We Hold These Truths”:
Strategies of Control in
the Literature of the Founders

There are new and compelling reasons for studying the writings of the Founding Fathers as literature. We are in a better position than previous generations to understand how these texts actually work. The recent stress upon ideological perceptions in American historiography has encouraged the examination of ideas in context—a crucial advantage in approaching documents that have been given such timeless significance. The same history of ideas also has increased literary scholars' access to the debate about early American culture by making the text as text a more strategic consideration for all concerned. Critic and historian have come to share the enterprise of textual interpretation as never before. They do so because ideological concerns necessarily privilege the printed word as a source of investigation and confirmation. Bernard Bailyn, to take only the most obvious example, is an editor of texts when he announces “the ‘interior’ view” that guides a generation of historians in American studies. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, arguing that perceptions controlled realities in 1776, takes shape as an introduction to pamphlets from the period. It tells us not what those pamphlets mean now but what they meant then and why. We are halfway to the literary critic's own questions about how a text accomplishes its purposes.

The method is peculiarly valuable in dealing with the literature of the Founders. It counters what Quentin Skinner has called "the mythology of doctrines." Texts, to use Bailyn's terms, return a reader to "the unpredictable reality" of history, where they are worth the confusion they reintroduce because they are also "to an unusual degree, *explanatory*." They represent the irreducible artifacts that challenge received history. At issue are "the assumptions, beliefs, and ideas—the articulated world view—that lay behind the manifest events of the time."¹ Ideally, the historian recognizes a heightened validity in the text while the critic sacrifices the autonomy of interpretation, and the two meet over the text as an intended act of communication for a specific readership.

A textual approach to the Founders also recovers one of their few forgotten virtues—their very conscious sense of themselves as men of letters. No generation has looked more carefully to the written word for identity. In eighteenth-century America, the accomplished man demonstrates his worthiness for place and influence by writing about the world around him. The young Thomas Jefferson makes himself a prominent figure overnight with one essay, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* in 1774. The same can be said of Thomas Paine two years later with *Common Sense*. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison also prosper in part through their works on government and the Constitution. Compare the more limited success of those peers who leave no comparable body of works, John Hancock and Patrick Henry for example. Even George Washington looms larger for his writings, his circular to the states on leaving the army in 1783 and his presidential farewell address in 1796. Benjamin Franklin, of course, makes his fortune as printer and author. "[P]rose writing," he notes in something of an understatement, "has been of great use to me in the course

1. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. v–vii. See also Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1776*, vol. 1, 1750–1765 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965). See also Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 3–53.

of my life, and was a principal means of my advancement."²

This regard for the text does not stop with reputation. Ultimately, the Founders lend themselves to textual study because they expect so much from what they write. The eighteenth-century American work invariably alludes to its own importance as historical and intellectual event. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* begins not with tales of British oppression but with the grave errors that other writers have foisted upon the world. Correcting those errors, the task of the author, will in itself change history. The careful reader of *Common Sense* becomes another Noah in the process. "We have it in our power," Paine contends, "to begin the world over again." This magniloquence is intrinsic. *The Federalist* papers claim to be the best discussion of the most important question of the age. Franklin's autobiography assumes the praise of posterity, the attention of all future great men, and a niche somewhere above the writings of Caesar and Tacitus. All three texts share an important premise about writing: anything is possible with the proper word, which is desperately needed for a crisis at hand. Always the same, that crisis is best summarized in *Common Sense*. "The present state of America," writes Paine, "is truly alarming to every man who is capable of reflection . . . The instance is without a precedent, the case never existed before, and who can tell what may be the event?"³

The tensions here between assurance and uncertainty, plan and chaos, imposition and effacement, gladness and gloom are central to Revolutionary and early national writings. The point, however, is not just to catalogue a juxtaposition of opposites but rather to understand the way these manic-depressive tendencies come together in a unified aesthetic. The great statements of the period set the dichotomy on edge. When Franklin delivers his witticism over the Declaration of Independence ("we must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang

2. Benjamin Franklin, *Memoirs*, parallel text edition, ed. Max Farrand (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), p. 32.

3. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 2 vols. (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), I, 4, 8, 24, 45, 43, and Benjamin Franklin, *Memoirs*, pp. 2-4, 186-198.

separately"), a realistic fear balances the statement of policy.⁴

The fear itself is not only realistic but enduring. In the 1770s the Founders are competing propagandists who trade in treason for an uncertain cause and a mixed audience. Confused and divided, they face enormous problems in deciding what to say to whom and when. Neither the British nor the French but factionalism is and remains their clearest enemy. Indeed, the possibility of collapse through internal dissension continues to haunt both political considerations and the literary imagination for generations. Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787), Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792–1815), Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), and Washington Irving's *A History of New York* (1809) are all dominated by voices locked in ideological conflict and mutual misapprehension. Each plays off of an inveterate acrimony and a fear that have at least as much to do with eighteenth-century America as do the more familiar chronicles of heroism and statesmanship.⁵

The Founders use their faith in the text to stabilize the uncertain world in which they live. They either invest given anxieties, problems, and unknowns on the page, to be subsumed in the substances of print, proof, style, and form, or they rigorously exclude them from what still pretends to be "a comprehensive" treatment of the subject. Jefferson's debate with the rest of the Continental Congress over slavery in the Declaration of Independence offers a clear case in point. The alternatives are either to make the horror of slavery a major grievance and then to blame it on the King of England or to remove all mention of it from Jefferson's draft as the final document, in fact, does. Both strategies, investment and exclusion, effectively put the reality of the text above experience in the world. Neither Jefferson nor his opponents want to deal with

4. Jared Sparks, ed., *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, 10 vols. (Boston: Tappan & Whittemore, 1840), I, 408. For a seminal study of "pronounced manic-depressive tendencies" in the literature of the period, see William Hedges, "Charles Brockden Brown and the Culture of Contradictions," *Early American Literature*, 9 (Fall 1974), 107–142.

5. For one of the best descriptions of this general acrimony, see John R. Howe, Jr., "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s," *American Quarterly*, 19 (Summer 1969), 147–165.

the fact of slavery as such, and their glosses should give us pause. On the one hand, the way lies open for a more creative study of writers who have been treated more as scribes than as originators of language and thought. On the other, the accusation of an imposed history takes on new meaning. What standing should manipulated and manipulative texts have in a larger understanding of the period?

Imposing the text as a higher reality solves a number of problems for the Founders. On a basic level, it minimizes the dangers of an unknown world. These dangers, in ascending order, include the Indian threat compounded by European interventionism, the more general fear of a contaminating wildness or barbarism (best captured in Crèvecoeur's "What is an American?"), and the anxiety that a vast and still mysterious continent will somehow swallow the promise of representative government in America. Typically, *Notes on the State of Virginia* presides over the extinction of the Indians while preserving a touch of their presence in conveniently static outline form. "I will reduce within the form of a Catalogue," Jefferson explains, "all those [tribes] within, and circumjacent to, the United States, whose names and numbers have come to my notice." The one Indian spokesman in Jefferson's treatment, Chief Logan, appears only to announce his own departure: "Who is there to mourn for Logan?—Not one."⁶ Similar ploys assimilate Nature's unknowns into the evolving patterns of American civilization. "It has often given me pleasure to observe," writes Publius in "Federalist No. 2," "that independent America was not composed of detached and distant territories, but that one connected, fertile, wide-spreading country was the portion of our western sons of liberty. . . . A succession of navigable waters forms a kind of chain round its borders, as if to bind it together; while the most noble rivers in the world, running at convenient distances, present them with highways for the easy communication of friendly aids."

6. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1972), pp. 102, 63.

These devices are important because so obvious to all concerned; they are conscious fabrications in the writer's search for a higher truth, and, as such, they betray a willingness, even an eagerness, to reshape and gild the cruder facts with which they contend. As devices, they are also the counterparts of far more subtle stratagems in the literature of republican idealism, and the homology points directly to the largest problem that writing poses for the Founders. Demystifying a superficially compliant natural world is one thing, forging artificial unities amidst active competitors and a contentious, far-flung populace is quite another. The Founders lead a deeply divided people in the Revolution and after. Their assumed task is to extract consensus at all costs, and they write with a paradoxical brand of creativity in mind—a creativity of agreement. Thomas Jefferson's summary of the Declaration of Independence speaks for every major work of the period:

Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent . . . Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind.⁷

Here is the key to the greatest achievement in writing of the age: namely, the literature of public documents in all of its forgotten subtlety. These documents are routinely viewed as distillations of what already had been said at the time, but the many negatives in Jefferson's comment—"Not to find out new principles . . . not merely to say things which had never been said . . . Neither aiming at originality . . . nor yet copied"—these negatives convey a lost distilling process and its frustrations. The deft business of securing assent through language must be understood against the Founders' frequent despair in the attempt. Franklin, for one, comes to accept division as the inescapable norm of human affairs. "Men . . . are generally

7. Jefferson to Henry Lee, 8 May 1825, in Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Random House, 1944), p. 719.

more easily provok'd than reconcil'd," he writes near the end of the Revolution, "more disposed to do Mischief to each other than to make Reparation, much more easily deceiv'd than undeceiv'd, and having more Pride and even Pleasure in killing than in begetting one another."⁸ John Adams agrees. "[N]either Philosophy, nor Religion, nor Morality, nor Wisdom, nor Interest," he warns Jefferson in 1787, "will ever govern nations or Parties against their Vanity, their Pride, their Resentment or Revenge, or their Avarice or Ambition."⁹ Idealistic in their assertions, the Founders put pen to paper with shabbier needs in mind. The truth may indeed be self evident, but people must be humored, duped, coaxed, and provoked into accepting it.

The fact of acrimony, the need to impose a truth upon it, and the major strategies for so doing all come to life in a noted aside between Jefferson and Franklin during congressional debate over the Declaration of Independence. When Jefferson complains against the "depredations" and "mutilations" of his draft, Franklin responds with an anecdote that catches the essence of the writer's problem:

"I have made it a rule," said [Franklin], "whenever in my power, to avoid becoming the draughtsmen [sic] of papers to be reviewed by a public body. I took my lesson from an incident which I will relate to you. When I was a journeyman printer, one of my companions, an apprentice hatter, having served out his time, was about to open shop for himself. His first concern was to have a handsome signboard, with a proper inscription. He composed it in these words, 'John Thompson, *Hatter, makes and sells hats* for ready money,' with a figure of a hat subjoined; but he thought he would submit it to his friends for their amendments. The first he showed it to thought the word '*Hatter*' tautologous, because followed by the words '*makes hats*,' which show he was a hatter. It was struck out. The next observed that the word '*makes*' might as well be omitted, because his customers would not care who made the hats. . . . He struck it out. A third said he thought the words

8. Franklin to Joseph Priestly, 7 June 1782, in Frank Luther Mott and Chester E. Jorgenson, eds., *Benjamin Franklin: Representative Selections* (New York: American Book Company, 1936), p. 444.

9. Adams to Jefferson, 9 October, 1787, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), I, 202-203.

'for ready money' were useless, as it was not the custom of the place to sell on credit . . . [The words] were parted with, and the inscription now stood, 'John Thompson sells hats.' 'Sells hats!' says his next friend. Why nobody will expect you to give them away, what then is the use of that word? It was stricken out, and 'hats' followed it, the rather as there was one painted on the board. So the inscription was reduced ultimately to 'John Thompson' with the figure of a hat subjoined."¹⁰

The parallels to founding a nation are deliberate and amusingly apt. The apprentice who opens his own shop is like the colonies that declare their independence. Both have embarked on a risky enterprise that may fail. The success of a step already taken now depends upon how others respond to the signification of that event. Accordingly, the written representation, whether signboard or Declaration of Independence, appears as a symbol of vulnerability; this is where others enter into the success or failure of the enterprise, this is where opinions are crucial. The hatter will lose his shop if friends do not act upon his advertisement. The Revolution will be for naught without a united front behind the claim for independence. Humor flows from the thankless role of the writer or sign-maker, who must stoop to the lowest common denominator to find agreement. Unchecked debate, Franklin is telling us, produces a negative result in matters large and small.

Of more immediate interest, however, is the actual making of a text within a consensual setting. The anecdote leaves the beleaguered writer four alternatives. Most obviously, from the perspective of modern authorship, one can simply impose a private writing on a public audience. The hatter can hang his sign without consulting anyone, hoping that the fait accompli will minimize conflict. This, in effect, is the strategy of Jefferson's *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* and Paine's *Common Sense*, both of which captivate in their daring. But the risk of discord from unilateral assertion is also great, particularly for writers with a paramount sense of community. Second, one can draw up a text in the marketplace of debate

10. "Anecdotes of Benjamin Franklin" in Thomas Jefferson to Robert Walsh, 4 December 1818, in *The Life and Selected Writings of Jefferson*, pp. 178-179.