

RUSSELL REISING

THE UNUSABLE

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THEORY & THE STUDY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

The Unusable Past

Theory and the Study of
American Literature

RUSSELL J. REISING

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General editor's preface

It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

New Accents is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change; to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest immediately present themselves. In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit. New concepts of literary forms and modes have been proposed; new notions of the nature of literature itself and of how it communicates are current; new views of literature's role in relation to society

flourish. *New Accents* will aim to expound and comment upon the most notable of these.

In the broad field of the study of human communication, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the nature and function of the new electronic media. *New Accents* will try to identify and discuss the challenge these offer to our traditional modes of critical response.

The same interest in communication suggests that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which have begun to involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life. And this will ultimately require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values involved and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Finally, as its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly located in contemporary approaches to language, and a continuing concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to rehearse the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And, while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them; one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

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Introduction

In a book on theories of American literature, it is prudent, perhaps, to clarify some difficult terms at the outset. The field is so large – conceivably all texts construable as American literature and all secondary texts, histories, reviews, critical studies, and more, taking American literature as their subjects – that the possibilities for analysis seem endless. This present work must admit of being tertiary – it is very obviously not a work of imaginative literature, no matter how broad I argue that term must be, and it purports to offer no new definition of what American literature means, what its Ur-theme(s) may be, or what makes it ‘American’ as distinct from any other geographic, political, social, or cultural category. My subject is a relatively small yet well-known and influential body of critical studies of American literature taking, in one way or another, the definition of American literature as their subjects. More specifically, my interest here is in how those theories define the canon of American literature and how those definitions influence our understanding and teaching of that canon. Some early figures such as V. L. Parrington, Yvor Winters, and Perry Miller enter into the discussion in a variety of ways – as precursors, as founders of traditions, and as antagonists against whom later critics defined their field – but most of the critics I study wrote after World War II, in the midst of social crises from the

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McCarthy era through Vietnam and the social rebellions of the sixties and up to the present.

I am using the phrase 'theories of American literature' to refer to a specific group and type of texts – book-length studies of American literature by such critics as Sacvan Bercovitch, Richard Chase, Charles Feidelson, Jr, Leslie Fiedler, John T. Irwin, R. W. B. Lewis, Leo Marx, F. O. Matthiessen, Richard Poirier, Lionel Trilling, and Yvor Winters. While the methods and scopes of their works vary, these theorists have taken up the task either of describing what makes American literature distinctively 'American' or of defining what *the American tradition* is, what the 'best' American literature is or does. Some critics are more ambitious, others more modest in their claims, but they tend to advance essentialist theses about what American literature is all about. Richard Chase, for example, sets out to identify 'the *originality* and "*Americanness*" of the novel' and 'to define some of [its] leading qualities' (Chase 1957, 7, 12). Leslie Fiedler argues that 'the quest which has distinguished our fiction from Brockden Brown and Cooper, through Poe and Melville and Twain, to Faulkner and Hemingway is the search for an innocent substitute for adulterous passion and marriage alike' and that a 'bargain with the Devil' is '*the essence of American experience*' (Fiedler 1960, 339, 433). Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* addresses 'the *classical canon* of our literature,' 'our *best writers*,' and defines its theme as 'a great – in many ways *the greatest – event in our history*' (Marx 1964, 10, 11, 27). For Lionel Trilling, 'the fact is that *American writers of genius* have not turned their minds to society' (Trilling 1950, 212). R. W. B. Lewis claims that his thesis accounts for '*the best of our fiction*' and suggests that 'the future of American literature depends in some real part upon the durability of the image of the hero as Adam' (Lewis 1955, 90, 152). Yvor Winters asserts that 'the Puritan view of life was allegorical, and the allegorical vision seems to have been strongly impressed upon the New England literary mind,' a claim he argues influences subsequent American literature (Winters 1938, 4). Sacvan Bercovitch's readings of Puritan rhetoric and the rhetorical constitution of the 'American self' assume that 'the myth of America is the creation of the New England Way' (Bercovitch 1975, 143). F. O. Matthiessen argued that the '*one common*

denominator' among writers of the American Renaissance 'was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy' (Matthiessen 1941, ix); Charles Feidelson later replaced Matthiessen's thesis with the claim that 'it is more likely that the *really vital common denominator* is precisely their attitude toward their medium – that their distinctive quality is a devotion to the possibilities of symbolism' (Feidelson 1953, 4). For Richard Poirier, 'the *great*,' the '*most exciting*,' and the '*most interesting*' American books, those which 'constitute a *distinctive American tradition* within English literature . . . resist within their pages the forces of environment that otherwise dominate the world' (Poirier 1966, 36; all italics added). This is, of course, only a sampling of such grand statements, but it communicates the totalizing impulse behind these studies.

One of my assumptions in this study is that these claims are *significant*, that they are not merely the posturings of critical imperialism or moments of critical bravado attempting to validate the worth of certain critical approaches. It is conceivable that they are nothing more, but the interconnections, the shared assumptions, and the mutually reinforcing inertia that link these works – even when they seem antagonistic – suggest otherwise. That the actual accomplishments of these works are less monumental (though no less important) than their *claims* does not detract from what they have revealed about certain themes in certain admittedly great books. Their expressed intentions, the implications of those intentions, and the strategies for supporting those intentions, however, pose some of the problems this inquiry will examine. I should also note that, though I use the term 'theorist' for convenience, I have focused only on certain works by these critics, those explicitly concerned with defining the American literary tradition, rather than on the critics' entire range of criticism. Theorists such as Trilling, Miller, Matthiessen, and Fiedler have obviously worked on American literature in much broader terms than those by which they are represented here, some of which – especially in the cases of Trilling and Miller – are eminently compatible with my own preferences. This study in no way claims to exhaust the significance of any of its subjects.

The theorists I will examine have been instrumental in defining the field of American literature and in generating a

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dazzling array of studies of individual writers, texts, and genres. Though other critics, notably Henry Nash Smith, Joel Porte, Harry Levin, and Richard Slotkin, have also offered major theses on American writing, I discuss them only briefly. Nor do I discuss extensively critics from 'the great tradition' of Granville Hicks, Maxwell Geismar, V. L. Calverton, and V. L. Parrington, though they are important to my account. It was, after all, *against* the politicized criticism of Parrington and the others that more recent theorists of American literature have written, and a thorough history of American criticism would need to address their work. They are, however, marginalized by the group of critics I do discuss, and I regard that act of exclusion as the primary ideological brace for the prevailing theories. These early Marxist scholars are no less important for contemporary Americanists than are Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler, or Leo Marx.

Also conspicuously absent are theories written by women and minorities. The recent work of Annette Kolodny may well have a positive impact on subsequent theorists of American literature, but it is too early to tell. The fact is that the most influential theories have all been written by white males. Of course, literally hundreds of other scholars and critics have been involved in the enterprise of describing, defining, and criticizing American literature and culture, and I in no way mean to ignore their contributions. The American studies work being conducted in Japan, the GDR, the USSR, France, and Italy, as well as that done by the MELUS group here in the US, is rich and diverse. I have narrowed the field on the assumption that the twelve or fifteen theories I do examine not only constitute a representative selection but are also the most widely read and assigned, most often praised as pioneering insights or lambasted as narrow, provincial, or ineffectual shots in the dark at an invisible, perhaps nonexistent, subject. Whether they are praised or ridiculed, the influence of such texts as Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, Lewis's *The American Adam*, Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, and Bercovitch's recent work is undeniable, an assertion partly substantiated by the prominent place they occupy in the Kartiganer and Griffith anthology *Theories of American Literature*. Even more remarkable

a testimony to their enduring power is the fact that, with the single exception of Yvor Winters's *Maule's Curse*, all of these critical theories of American literature are still in print, ten, twenty, thirty, and even forty years after their first publication. Their leads have been followed, disputed, and expanded, but whether one agrees or disagrees with their insights, the fact remains that they have pushed the study of American literature in new, provocative, and often exciting directions. Perry Miller's work on Puritanism has been often attacked since his death, but where would American literary and cultural studies be without his lifetime of research? One may be (or have been) scandalized by Leslie Fiedler's daring thesis on homoeroticism in American novels, but Fiedler is a crucial figure in the history of American literary studies. So are most of the critics in this study.

I have chosen to classify these theorists according to their methods and assumptions. They have frequently been discussed in reviews, prefaces, and critical discussions of the canon (see, for example, Nina Baym's 'Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors'). I believe, however, that this is the first extended study and categorization of their works. The three 'schools' I posit are 'Puritan origins' or historical theories, including the work of Miller, Winters, and Bercovitch; cultural theories, including studies by Lionel Trilling, R. W. B. Lewis, Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler, and Leo Marx; and self-reflexive theories by critics such as Charles Feidelson, Jr, Richard Poirier, and John Irwin. I have not granted separate categories to frontier theses or to psychological theories, primarily because while insights gained from both approaches have influenced all other 'schools,' they have not generated a tradition of studies. Such a division is meant to suggest a particular theorist's *primary* theoretical orientation (whether historical, cultural, or linguistic), and is not meant as either absolute or exhaustive. Several of these critics could have been discussed under each category, as in fact a few here are. For instance, I discuss Richard Chase and Leslie Fiedler at length as cultural theorists and briefly as historical theorists. Charles Feidelson, Jr, anchoring his theory in Puritan Ramistic rhetoric, could have been addressed as a historical critic, but I place him in the self-reflexive chapter

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because of his emphasis on the self-referentiality of American symbolism. On the other hand, I situate Bercovitch (conceivably a linguistic theorist) as a historical critic partly because of his scholarly lineage as a student of Perry Miller, but primarily because of his own stress on the historical continuities from Puritan rhetoric to contemporary ideology. Within each category, I also posit an early figure as the 'founding father' (the sexist terminology is unfortunately descriptive) of a tradition – Yvor Winters and Perry Miller of Puritan origins theories, Lionel Trilling of cultural theories, and F. O. Matthiessen of self-reflexive theories – and trace the influence of these seminal thinkers on later practitioners. This division reflects my own view of the traditions of American literary study and is offered as one of several possible schemes.

In addition to classifying these works, I also debate them on several fronts. I am particularly concerned with the way they narrow the American canon and discourage us from viewing literature as a form of social knowledge or behavior. Literary study in the United States has been moving in the direction of social and ideological criticism, as any review of journal articles or Modern Language Association papers on 'The Politics of . . .' will testify. *The Unusable Past*, then, is an attempt to review and revise the major theories of American literature in light of these new directions in critical practice. Many other critics have called for a revision (sometimes revolution) of the canon of American literature. In chapter 1 I discuss some of these early critics, such as Van Wyck Brooks (whose well-known quest for 'a usable past' informs my own title), Norman Foerster (whose 1928 *The Reinterpretation of American Literature* triggered a renewal of critical interest in the status of American writings), F. O. Matthiessen, and Malcolm Cowley. More recently, critics have questioned the prevailing notions of American literature on any number of fronts, from Martin Green's eccentric *Re-Appraisals: Some Common Sense Readings in American Literature* to the charges of racism and sexism leveled by H. Bruce Franklin, Paul Lauter, Nina Baym, and the Feminist Press project *Reconstructing American Literature*. William C. Spengemann, too, has recently asked 'What Is American Literature?' and has challenged Americanists to expand their conceptions of both crucial terms in that question, 'American'

as well as 'literature.' Each of these attempts contributes to the project of revising, enlarging, and democratizing, if you will, our conception of American literature.

I am not sure that Green's suspicion of any literary criticism influenced by political, economic, historical, or psychological considerations or his 'common sense' attempt to replace Faulkner with J. D. Salinger points in very promising directions – in fact I argue antithetical positions throughout this study. Nor do I think, as Spengemann seems to, that a definition of American literature is possible (or desirable) if we only break through the geographical, cultural, and national provincialism limiting many theories of American literature. Lauter and Baym are, I think, more accurate in going directly to forms of political exclusion in the racist and sexist *practice* (if not theory) informing some of the reigning theorists' studies. But the problem as I describe it is at once larger and more deeply (if less obviously) ideological than these critics have presented it. Each of these critics, though, has influenced my own thinking, and I offer my own analysis of the state of American literary studies in the same spirit that motivates theirs.

One persistent shortcoming of many discussions of theorists of American literature is a harsh, often strident, tone. Some discussions are, of course, more virulent than others. See, for example, any of the numerous attacks on Perry Miller (Thomas 1952 is representative); also excessive attacks on Lionel Trilling (Hirsch 1966; Schwartz 1953); 'Radicalism for Rotarians' on Richard Chase (Green 1958); or, more recently, the criticism of Sacvan Bercovitch (Hirsch 1977); as well as the charge that Richard Poirier must have 'dropped' some 'mind expanding verbs' while writing *A World Elsewhere* (Trachtenberg 1967). Even the more modulated discussions by recent critics such as Nina Baym and Paul Lauter, though incisive and important, tend toward monolithic criticisms rather than more cautious analysis and exposition. While I often share the views, if not the impatience, of these critics, I have attempted to explore each theorist's method on its own terms and to grant the positive implications of a project first, only *then* going on to speculate on its shortcomings. I may not have been successful in all cases, and may be overly critical at times, but I have at least attempted to avoid an overly thesis-ridden and formulaic discussion.

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Something more also needs to be said about my relationship to my primary materials – American literary texts and the theories purporting to describe them as a cultural whole. As is most likely the case with other scholars educated during the sixties and seventies, my education in American literature owes a tremendous debt to the theorists I discuss in this study. I, like many, wrote my share of Millerian, Feidelsonian, Fiedlerian, and even Bercovitchian seminar papers. If I pay less attention to the strengths of these theorists than to what I perceive as their ideological biases or limitations, it is because their positive contributions are so well known, their insights more or less canonical. Having worked from the inside of their studies, I now step back and comment on their assumptions. I am more sympathetic with some, less tolerant of others, but my aim is to be part of a dialectical inquiry, a project of assessments, qualifications, and revisions that has been going on for most of this century and should continue to be pushed toward newer, more synthetic comprehension.

As many of my own insights were formulated during my debates with the critics I discuss, I claim no perspective immune from the same ideological blindness that I uncover, and I offer no panacea for further studies of American writing. I offer, in short, no new theory of American literature. I do offer a theory of the theories we now have, pointing to continuities linking theorists of otherwise opposing methods, and situating their theories in a historical and political context.

It might seem a blindness in my own method to use as test cases such canonical texts as the *Magnalia Christi Americana*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Huckleberry Finn* in a study so critical of the narrow canon of masterpieces most theorists endorse. Should I not read Phillis Wheatley, Black Elk, Jane Addams, and Richard Wright rather than Hawthorne and Twain? Probably. In fact such revisions are implicit in my method, as in chapters 5 and 6 when I read Melville in the light of Frederick Douglass (and vice versa) and Hawthorne through those 'scribbling women' (and vice versa). I resort (I think the term is penitent enough) to canonical test cases more out of necessity. Since the theorists I discuss themselves study a relatively small and homogeneous group of texts, I chose to argue with them using exactly those texts which they claim to have contained in a