

THE CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY TODAY

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This essay ought to be seen as part of an ongoing attempt to view America's recent and almost feverish struggle to redefine its literature in multicultural terms from a more distant European perspective.¹ Implied in this attempt is the observation that American literary critics—quite in contrast to their European counterparts—are increasingly faced with the need to consider the growing impact of literature on the academic politics of their nation. The very fact that Neil Postman in his latest study, *Technopoly*,² can once again argue the need for a renewed commitment to critical liberal education—to history and the philosophy of science—proves that point. However convincing, or unconvincing, Postman's claim may appear to technology-oriented America, it nevertheless underscores the unquestionably political dimension of any cultural development in America today. While the claim that literature and politics are interdependent is founded in the philosophical assumptions of the European enlightenment, and was further reinforced by the influence of the French revolution on American and European thought, the present-day effects of this claim visible in the United States come as a surprise to most European academics. To view current arguments pertaining to the justification of an American literary history from a European's perspective may therefore have an, albeit double-edged, advantage, joining a historically informed disinterestedness with a happy nostalgia for what to a European mind might appear as the lost cause of literature at large. American literary history being an heir to the respective academic genre which came into existence in Europe during the nineteenth century, its recent development suggests the renewed belief that a literary history is *the* path leading to the discovery of the mind of a nation.

In an article in the *New York Times Book Review* of February 23, 1992, entitled "Whose History Is Bunk?" Frank Kermode follows the historian Arthur Schlesinger's lead in claiming "that current academic arguments [on 'political correctness'] have urgent implications for society at large, that debates about what is taught, and in what academic dialect, are in the end,

¹ A first version of this essay was presented as response to Emory Elliott's endeavor, in Sacvan Bercovitch's 1987 Harvard Seminar "American Literature in International Perspective," to explain why the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* had no "coherent narrative" but rather relied on the principles of diversity, complexity, and contradiction. A second version was then used as "Introductory Statement" for Workshop 17: "Literary Historians' Shoptalk" at the EAAS London Conference in April 1990.

² Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

debates about what it is to be an American."³ To accept this point of view means that any literary history compiled in the United States today will have to be seen as a contribution to a larger political debate. This explains why someone like Elliott sought to subscribe to the principles of diversity, complexity, and contradiction in compiling the *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. He and his co-editors seem to have felt the need to enter into the controversial debate on multiculturalism without taking sides, when what is truly astonishing for a European about recent American attempts at writing literary history is their continued Americanness. Whereas contemporary European literary histories (perhaps most notably Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's history of Spanish literature)⁴ still celebrate a tradition, even in an age of multiculturalism and Euro-enthusiasm, any literary historian concerned with American literature obviously cannot help but synchronize literary events and turn into an image of progress what by European standards needs first and foremost to be related to the past.

In their "Address to the Reader," Robert E. Spiller and Willard Thorp, editors of the 1948 *Literary History of the United States*, still claim that "each generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms."⁵ Due to an increasing interest in area studies and a growing uneasiness about the tradition-oriented concept of literary history as such, Spiller's challenge was not met by the following generation. Therefore, it was all the more surprising when two more or less independently conceived projects, the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (General Editor: Sacvan Bercovitch) and the 1988 *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (General Editor: Emory Elliott) were suddenly announced—as if to make up for a neglect, or oversight, on the part of the preceding generation's literary historians. Indeed, one can almost detect a feeling of guilt in the manner in which the respective editors indicate their unorthodox approaches in departing from the principles that governed the *Literary History of the United States*. For not only do both the *Columbia Literary History* and the *Cambridge History* make their appearance belatedly (the *Columbia Literary History* somewhat less so than the *Cambridge History*), but their editors also seem to feel the need to attest to the lack of a unifying perspective, or even a fixed vantage point from which to view the literature of the United States

³ Frank Kermode, "Whose History Is Bunk?," *New York Times Book Review* (February 23, 1992), p. 3.

⁴ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Eine Geschichte der Spanischen Literatur* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

⁵ Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, et al., eds., *Literary History of the United States*, third rev. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. vii.

as a whole. Of course, both editors attempt to recast this deficiency as an advantage. Bercovitch understands literature as part of an ideological and thus a priori closed system that can never be transcended yet can still be deconstructed. And Emory Elliott and his co-editors compare their venture to the earlier *Literary History of the United States* in the following manner:

The *Literary History of the United States* of 1948 reflects the culture that produced a style that many critics of architecture have labeled "modern": streamlined, uniform, and confident in its aim of useful service. By contrast, the present project is modestly postmodern: it acknowledges diversity, complexity, and contradiction by making them structural principles, and it forgoes closure as well as consensus.⁶

In order to understand what the editors mean by foregoing closure as well as consensus, we should look more closely at two of the terms from the Spiller and Thorp quote: the historical shift here revealed appears at first decisive, but is in truth only slight. I mean the terms "United States" and "the past." Although both terms appear important enough by the lights of the *Columbia Literary History's* editors—they redefine the term "United States" and reject the "modern" past—the terms "United States" and "the past" reveal their conservative potential when seen in the light of former literary histories. A brief glance at just two of the numerous literary histories which precede the *Literary History of the United States* will help us grasp the significance of those terms for our present context. These are the 1900 *Literary History of America* written by another Harvard scholar, Barrett Wendell, and *American Literature, 1607-1885*, written by Charles F. Richardson and published in 1886, the centennial of the American Declaration of Independence. (I gather that the *Columbia History* was originally scheduled to appear in 1986, the bicentennial of this event.)

Richardson's 1886 study *American Literature, 1607-1885*, springs from the impulse to celebrate an emerging American literature that no longer needs to avoid comparison with the long tradition of European literature. He warns critics and—since he himself is undertaking to write a literary history—probably himself as well, not to be distracted either by "foreign blame" or "foreign praise."⁷ In contrast, Wendell's *A Literary History of America* betrays a traditional, Europe-oriented attitude. Whereas Richardson, who wanted to raise the international standard of American literature, had insisted that any "view of American literature *must* include living

⁶ Emory Elliott, ed., *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. xiii.

⁷ Charles F. Richardson, *American Literature, 1607-1885* (New York: Haskell House, 1970 [1886-8]), p. x.

authors⁸ (he could thus treat the works of Whitman, James, and Emerson, for example), Wendell states in his "Introduction" that "contemporary life is never quite ripe for history."⁹ His noncommittal point of view also demands that he arrive at his task, the writing of a literary history of *America*, via a rather devious route. Comparing literature, the one art that employs language, to the "lines and colours which embody architecture, sculpture, and painting," he arrives at the conclusion that "literature is of all fine arts the most ineradicably national."¹⁰ "National" then means: rooted in a specific language. For Wendell, a literary history of America should concern itself "with what America has contributed to the literature of the English language."¹¹

This concept of a national literature seems to stand in stark contrast to that of the editors of the *Columbia Literary History* who plainly state that "for the sake of clarity and consistency in this volume, we have concluded that by the 'literature of the United States' we mean all written and oral literary works produced in that part of the world that has become the United States of America."¹² Since some of that literature is *not* written (or told) in English, and since the percentage of foreign-language American literature will, in all likelihood, increase, the question arises whether a literary history of "that part of the world that has become the United States of America" should be written at all these days. Elliott and his co-editors ask this question without explicitly answering it. They answer it by having compiled the *Columbia Literary History*. But Wendell was certainly right in pointing to the close relationship between literature and language. In other words, if the *Columbia Literary History* shies away from stressing the fact that Americans have indeed privileged the English language to the exclusion of other languages transported to the United States by various groups of immigrants, they actually follow a traditional American practice as it is outlined by Richardson: to demonstrate the Americanness of American literature by referring to its geographical origins.

Interestingly enough, Spiller's "Address to the Reader" contains no definition of the geographical, or rather political, entity alluded to in the title of the *Literary History of the United States*. Rather, it proceeds from the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

⁹ Barrett Wendell, *Literary History of America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² *Columbia Literary History*, p. xix.

assumption that American literature derives from a "transported" European culture that was gradually "transformed"—just as British English was "transformed" into American English—into an expression of specifically American values. The reason the denotation "United States" is used at all seems to be the result of national pride. But the basis of this national pride is brittle. The United States as the country representing "an articulate racial mixture" is interesting to foreigners, particularly Europeans, because nothing like it has been known since the Roman empire.¹³ That is, the nature of the pride in the Americanness of American literature has changed significantly since Richardson, and a closer look reveals disturbing aspects of this change, which Spiller and Thorp unfortunately seem not to have noticed, although they were deducible from certain contradictions within their own argument. While Richardson was proud of the expansion of American literature and wanted to demonstrate its high qualities to the world, like a pupil who is beginning to overtake his master, the *Literary History of the United States* needs to call upon the *foreigner's* point of view in order to confer a sense of unity to American literature which the articulations of Whitman's "race of races" might otherwise lack.

The dilemma which the editors of any American literary history have to face, in other words, lies in their need to reject a heritage which demands that they retain a unifying perspective, since that demand was never quite justified and in retrospect appears to be part of the American dream. Yet the tradition of the academic genre called literary history nevertheless calls for such a unifying perspective in order to make plausible the effort to compile a national literary history in the first place. In keeping with the American tradition of individualism, earlier literary histories, like those of Richardson and Wendell, were the representative result of one author's heroic struggle with his nation's past. Today, when no comprehensive literary history of the United States could be compiled, much less "written," by a single individual, the unifying perspective formerly guaranteed by the personality of the author needs to be organized by the editor. Otherwise individualism, the typically American value, will have been lost in the process. The beginnings of such a loss were felt, if not acknowledged, by the editors of the *Literary History of the United States*. As a paradoxical celebration of the postmodern principles of diversity, complexity, and contradiction (which have, after all, always served to define American literature), it has lately been foregrounded by the editors of the *Columbia Literary History*. Given this predicament, it is not surprising that a) the general editor of the *Cambridge History* struggles to get rid of an American identity altogether by denouncing "America" as such, calling it nothing but an ideological concept; or that b) the editors of the *Columbia Literary History* not only underline, like Richardson, the *must* when including

¹³ *Literary History of the United States*, p. xvii.

contemporary literature, but go to great lengths in recognizing hitherto marginalized literatures. Defying the Americanness of American literature seems to allow for a re-evaluation of the past; and concentrating on marginalized literatures seems to allow for a redefinition of that very Americanness. The *Cambridge History* and the *Columbia Literary History* thus appear to complement one another: the former wants to reassess the past in terms of the present and thereby deconstruct the traditional concept of literary *history*; the latter assumes that *if* the point for another historical assessment has come, it should not be diachronic, but synchronic and multicultural. Neither concept gives enough attention to the fact that particularly those authors who belong to ethnic minorities are seeking at this point to participate in the construction of a fairly traditional, if not conservative, history of the literature of their people.

The editors of the *Columbia Literary History* maintain that "certainly, the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* is not a novel. But it is also not an authoritative proclamation."¹⁴ The opposition is Bakhtinian, and refers to the difference between history and the novel. To quote it in order to call it into question, seems to be missing at least Bakhtin's point. However, the editors' reason for claiming that the *Columbia Literary History* is neither a novel nor a history—which is consequently called an adherence to the structural principles of diversity, complexity, and contradiction—may consist precisely in the dim recognition that a present-day literary history of the United States needs to be *both* a critical fiction *and* an authoritative proclamation. Such a paradoxical compound might well be the true mirror of American identity today. Whereas the *diversity* which the *Columbia Literary History* professes as a principle derives in effect from an unexplained medley of categories. The *Columbia Literary History* contains chapters on the history of ideas, on genre, and on ethnic groups as well as on individual writers. And whereas Spiller asserts that the literature of the nation "began when the first settler from abroad of sensitive mind paused in his adventure long enough to feel that he was under a different sky,"¹⁵ the *Columbia Literary History's* design to encourage *contradiction* must be seen as merely a recognition of the contributors' differing points of view. It is illuminating (and amusing) to contrast, for example, Malcolm Bradbury's essay on "Neo-Realist Fiction" with Raymond Federman's essay on "Self-Reflexive Fiction." The two chapters virtually cancel each other out.

The foregoing criticism is not meant to be self-serving; it is only meant to show that the modestly postmodern approach of the *Columbia Literary*

¹⁴ *Columbia Literary History*, p. xxiii.

¹⁵ *Literary History of the United States*, p. xvii.

History to the literature of the United States fails because it evades the question of American identity. Comparing the structural approach to American literature contained in the *Columbia Literary History* with another, partly European, perspective, may serve to prove the point. This partly American, partly European, perspective is that of Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury in their 1991 history of American literature, entitled *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*. Ruland and Bradbury's thesis "that American literature was destined to become not only an expression of American identity but the great modern literature,"¹⁶ is captivating, because it shifts the responsibility for the construction of an American identity to the writers it deals with. Most American writers have been involved in constructing such an American identity. Understanding that their fictions contribute to an ongoing account of the greater and lesser projects of the mind within American culture, they have consciously attempted to contribute to this historical process and thus have created the conditions for their own literary history by supplying a usable past:

All literary histories are critical fictions. But because the needs of the American present have so often dictated the interpretations of the American literary past, to make it 'usable,' American literary history is more fictional than most—one reason, perhaps, why the modernist spirit with its own sense of being historyless in history found America such a natural home.¹⁷

Whether Ruland and Bradbury are right in calling American literature the great modern literature or not (they extend the term "modernism" to include "postmodernism" as well), and whether they are right in calling American literary history more fictional than most, is less important in this context than the fact that they manage to take into account the concept of a multicultural American identity without actually having to define it themselves: if *all* American writers can be seen as together weaving their own multicultural identity, then literature can be seen as a paradigm of that identity. Of course, in that case the literary critic's task in "writing" a literary history, as Ruland and Bradbury have done, becomes both more modest and more formidable. He or she is asked to organize, if not account for, a series of symbolic actions. For if American writers understand, and reflect upon, the challenge offered to them by their specific history—that they contribute to their nation's identity—then the manner in which they have taken up or rejected that challenge has to be characterized, *not* the notion of American identity as such. In other words, present-day American literary criticism, which has its deep roots in European culture but has in

¹⁶ Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 3.

¹⁷ *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, p. 5ff.

many ways left that culture behind, should be called upon to turn the various narratives of American identity into a critical analysis of the conditions of that identity.