

Sacvan Bercovitch (ed), *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Vol. II: Prose Writing 1820-1865* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 907 pages, ISBN: 0-521-30106-8, \$74.95 cloth

One might perhaps have thought, in this day and age of post-consensus squabbles and post-modernist fragmentation, that the writing of a national American literary history would no longer be possible. And not surprisingly, the General Editor of *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Sacvan Bercovitch, in his Introduction to the second volume of the projected eight-volume series, *Prose Writing 1820-1865*, starts off by problematizing the nature of both 'history,' 'Ainerican,' and 'literature.' Fortunately for the reader, however, he decides to take the cacophony of competing and opposing voices that have defined literary criticism in the United States in recent years as a challenge rather than as a barrier to the construction of another narrative of American writing. And we are reminded how few such comprehensive narratives there have been in the history of American literature. Since the pioneering *Cambridge History of American Literature*, published during World War One, we have only had Robert Spiller's seminal *Literary History of the United States* from 1947, before the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988; General Editor Emory Elliott) – and now the new *Cambridge* makes an attempt to define our perception of the American literary terrain, old and new, at the end of the twentieth century.

The editorial strategies of these two new works, as well as their scope, differ greatly. The *Columbia* is a one-volume, 1200-page collection that tries to capture the multifariousness of our current critical climate through the contributions of some seventy sub-editors and contributors, while retaining a fairly conventional structure in terms of sub-divisions by periods, genres, and individual authors or groups of authors. The result is predictably uneven and fragmented, full of stimulating insights but without any overarching sense of national narrative or dialogic coherence.

The scope of the *Cambridge* is much wider in terms of pages, since Sacvan Bercovitch and his crew have eight volumes in which to accomplish what Emory Elliott et al. had to do in one. But an even more important difference lies in the decision of the *Cambridge* editors to limit their major chapter divisions and corresponding contributors to a handful. In the second volume, under review here, there are only four 'master narratives' that make up the almost 800 pages of text. Michael Davitt Bell writes about the 'Conditions of Literary Vocation,' Eric J. Sundquist is responsible for 'The Literature of Expansion and Race,' while Barbara L. Paclter taltes on 'The Transcendentalists,' and Jonathan Arac provides a formalist perspective in his chapter on 'Narrative Forms.' This way a deliberate attempt is made to develop a fourfold perspective on the period in question: social, cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic, with each narrative related to the others through

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common themes and concerns.

Even if one might be instinctively skeptical (to put it mildly) of the catalogue blurb that pronounces this to be 'an achievement that will remain authoritative for our time,' this reviewer must confess that he has found the polyphony of narrative voices that constitute this history to be a brilliantly successful way to retain the basic canon of writers of this period (those dead white males, so enthusiastically vilified in certain quarters), while at the same time introducing and taking seriously the achievements of a large group of writers who have not traditionally been accorded much space or respect in earlier chronicles of American literature.

This is not just a question of giving Native Americans and other minorities their due, but just as much an extension of the range of what kinds of writing will count as 'literary' in a history of this kind. Historians like Bancroft, Parkman, and Prescott loom large here, and a generous amount of space is given to that 'damned mob of scribbling women' whose best-selling success so exasperated Hawthorne at the beginning of the 1850s. The Southwestern humorists come alive in their particular contexts, and 'minor' Transcendentalists like Margaret Fuller and Bronson Alcott are shown to be much more significant and interesting than has commonly been assumed. Throughout, one is struck by how it is possible to preserve a canon and rewrite it at the same time.

Perhaps the most important common denominator for all four chapters is the theme of expansion. All the contributors, not just Sundquist who has it as his chosen topic, manage to suggest and adumbrate the uniquely exciting experience of unprecedented growth that characterized the United States during this period. The spirit of Manifest Destiny is seen to be not just a program for geopolitical expansion, but rather a master metaphor for developments in a variety of fields. It is certainly easy enough to see Emerson's Transcendentalism as one aspect of such an orientation, and Arac sees the development of the genre of personal narrative in the 1840s as another answer to the same spirit. Expansion created the crucial dilemmas of wilderness versus civilization, expansion made the Civil War unavoidable, expansion gave American literary history new games, new voices, new tensions.

For anyone interested in this seminar period in American life and letters, this book is a regular cornucopia of information and observation, both literary and non-literary. Its easy accessibility is another of its strengths, since the pretentious gobbledegook of much recent literary criticism is totally missing from its pages. If this is a harbinger of the other volumes to come, Americanists of all persuasions have a lot to look forward to.

The only shortcomings worth mentioning here seem to me to be unavoidable consequences of editorial policy. It is obviously a problem that Whitman's poetry cannot be treated as part of the Transcendentalist movement, since this is a volume reserved for prose. The treatment of Poe also suffers from this schizophrenia. Furthermore, the decision not to have separate chapters for even the most central names necessarily means that in-depth treatment of writers and texts becomes difficult to achieve. Still, seeing these authors from two to three different angles to a certain extent makes up for this, while more extended analyses are of course readily available elsewhere.

To this reviewer, reading the second volume of *The Cambridge History of American Literature* has been an exhilarating experience, and a timely reminder of how stimulating

and provocative a period we are here dealing with. In what other literary history would you find out that in the 1854 Massachusetts elections, the Know-Nothing Party received sixty-three per cent of the vote (and 377 out of 379 seats in the legislature)? Or that James Freeman Clarke tirelessly championed the Transcendentalists in *The Western Messenger* in St. Louis? Or that the symbolic haunted house of American Gothic fiction and the homes of the domestic novel can be seen as mirror images of each other? Finally, developing out of this wealth of facts and figures that configure this era of powerful progress, in and out of literature, there is a sense of the vitality and viability of the American mosaic, no matter how divisive and tragic many of the bits and pieces may be.