

An Introduction to American Studies for the Twenty-first Century

Orm Øverland. *A New Literary History of America* by Marcus Greil and Werner Sollors, eds.. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009. 1095 pages. ISBN 978-0-674-03594-2. Hardcover \$49.95.

Roll over Trent, Spiller, Bercovitch et alia (871).¹ After the Harvard University Press publication of Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors's *A New Literary History of America* American literary history may no longer be what it used to be. Except for accounts of its beginning, that is. Because all traditional American literary histories pay serious attention to genres such as sermons, political and legal documents, philosophical as well as ideological essays, journals, diaries and travel accounts in their chapters on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such genres are largely omitted for later periods, however, and these are almost exclusively focused on verse, prose fiction and drama. Thus students of American literature are expected to be able to discuss Jonathan Edwards but not William James on religious experience, Thomas Jefferson but not W. J. Cash on the South.² Concluding his chapter on Common Sense and the Declaration of Independence with the statement, "American literature starts with political tracts and philosophical treatises," Frank Kelleter adds that "the true American literature" may be the texts that followed: "fictions obsessed with their own provenance, mongrel genres, faux classicism, expatriate fantasies and regionalist tales, stories of migration and adventure, visions of deception and passing, raptures and conspiracies" (102-3). If we to this list of fictions add music, pictures (moving and still, painted and photographed), news, politics, cartography, religion, sports, and language we may have a vague idea of all that is included in this exciting as well as provoking new literary history. It is difficult to imagine yet another conventional literary history following in its wake.

I must at the outset dismiss any notion the reader may harbor that I am describing a hodgepodge of a book. Perhaps the first reason to praise the

1 All page references are to the reviewed book. The three major predecessors are William Petersfield Trent, John Erskine, Stuart P. Sherman, and Carl Van Doren, eds., *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (New York: The Macmillan Company and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918 and 1921), Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas J. Johnson, Henry Seidel Canby, and Richard M. Ludwig eds., *Literary History of the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947, revised 1963), and Sacvan Bercovitch, ed., *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, began publication with volume one in 1994).

2 Joseph Wilbur Cash (1900-1941), sadly, did not make it into the reviewed book either.

work of the two editors is that they have succeeded in making the two hundred and twenty chapters by two hundred and one authors read like a meaningful whole even though the volume does not have a unified or unifying ideological or theoretical point of view. It is all brought together in one extremely readable book by the uniformly excellent writing, explorative approach and impressive expertise of the authors. Needless to say, this could not come about without careful as well as creative editing. More than most edited books, *A New Literary History of America* bears the stamp of the active participation of the two editors in the planning, writing, and final editing of the volume.

In spite of the book's wide and liberal concept of what constitutes a literary history of the United States, there is no reason for the traditionally inclined to fear that the canon is not given ample treatment. Chapters on Taylor (Sollors, 64-9), Franklin (Joyce Chaplin, 74-9), Cooper (Richard Hutson, 182-7), Hawthorne (Bharati Mukherjee, 268-73; Clark Blaise, 278-83; Winfried Fluck, 292-7), Melville (Marcus, 283-7), Poe (Robert Clark, 254-9), Emerson (James Conant, 239-44; Herwig Friedl, 244-9), Fuller (Lawrence Buell, 273-7), Thoreau (Jonathan Arac, 263-8), Dickinson (Susan Stewart, 322-8), and the many others who are the standard fare of literary histories, would all by themselves make up a sizeable volume on the American literary canon that could conclude with the chapters on the two Roths (Henry by Mario Materassi, 1016-20, and Philip by Hana Wirth-Nesher, 1025-30) and Powers (Marcus, 1035-9). But it is not only the many chapters on unexpected works, genres, and events but also the chapters that may start out as chapters on canonized texts and writers but broaden in unexpected yet enlightening ways, as well as the chapters that may start out as chapters on, say, popular culture and develop as enlightening (yes, again) discussions of canonical texts, which make a reader question both the usefulness and indeed the value of a canon if it is allowed to limit our view of the wealth and magnitude of what may be included in a literary history of the United States—or of *America* as the editors have preferred to call this land of myths and beliefs as much as of facts and figures.

Most readers will surely miss chapters on some writers, books, or themes. There are quite a few that I missed and would have liked to see included. The necessary question, what should then be cut out, however, makes it rather difficult to suggest additions. Some readers may react to some selections of topics as somewhat offbeat, as when church history after "The Great Awakening" (Joanne van der Woude, 79-84) is represented not only

by chapters on Joseph Smith (Terryl L. Givens, 192-6) and *The Sacred Harp* (Sean Wilentz, 225-30) but also by a chapter on the revival on Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906 (R. J. Smith, 498-502), or when the presidential texts selected after Jefferson's first inaugural address (Jan Ellen Lewis, 136-41) include "Lincoln's second inaugural address" (Ted Widmer, 333-8), but neither his first nor the "Gettysburg," and two by Truman (Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, 780-6; Gerald Early, 786-90). However, the Pentecostal revival that was born in LA in 1906 has branched out and developed to become the fastest growing worldwide family of Christian churches today, and the presidency of Truman had a greater impact on post WWII United States than many may realize. Indeed, it is one of the strengths of this literary history that readers may begin reading a chapter with some degree of skepticism but find themselves nodding in either recognition or new understanding before it is concluded.

Many of the chapters question conventional chronologies, as when the chapter "Up from Invisibility" on Ellison is placed in "1939; 1981" with the headline "Ralph Ellison rehearses the 'Sweet-the-Monkey' tale in a Harlem bar and starts brooding over the metaphors of 'not being seen' and 'making himself invisible'; a Czech translation of *Invisible Man* is published in Prague" (Josef Jařab, 732-7), thus not only questioning the a-novel-of-the-1950s approach but also making us see that American novels have an international literary history, not merely an American one. Others may make us see other players than those who usually are given the main roles, as when Mathew Brady is given a bit part in the chapter on Alexander Gardner (Robin Kelsey, 338-44). Yet other chapters make us see how the histories of culture and technology are intertwined as in the chapters on the Winchester Rifle (Merritt Roe Smith, "Manufacturing Technology," 353-8) and "The Art of Telephony" (Avital Ronell, 362-6). Just one more example: the chapter on *The Grapes of Wrath* serves to remind us how literature may live in our minds through the images of other artists and genres, in this case not only John Ford but primarily Thomas Hart Benton (Erika Doss, 737-42).

My review has been dropping quite a few of the names of the two hundred and one authors and this may already have achieved a purpose: some names have been recognized by some readers, but many of the authors — if this reviewer is at all a representative reader — will for most readers be new acquaintances that may invite to deeper reading relationships in the years to come. Side by side with established scholars are scholars at the beginning of their careers, both untenured scholars and students. Indeed, the selection

of authors is refreshing, not the least because many are brought in from outside of traditional academia. Thus Richard Powers is both author (on the St. Gaudens monument in Boston Commons, 434-40) and the topic for another author (see above). Some might—nodding their heads—note that ten per cent of the authors have a Harvard affiliation, but to this I would note—with a smile of approval—that another ten per cent are from outside the United States, a fact that contributes significantly to the non-parochial qualities of the volume. It is both difficult and tricky to select any authors rather than any others for this review but I will nevertheless point to the excellent but very different essays on the two Roths by Mario Materassi (1016-20) and Hana Wirth-Nescher (1025-30). As this pointing has brought us close to the end of the volume, I will comment briefly on the eleven concluding chapters as a way of making some observations on the volume as a whole. The chapters are themselves obviously brief, ranging from four to five large pages. These short chapters invite readers to dip into the book as they may be tempted, but I would advise an initial cover-to-cover reading: it is, after all, a literary history of America.

Most chapters take a defining moment in American history as their point of departure, but a chapter may then move on from this point in time going to the past as well as to the future. The chapter on Edmund White's 1982 novel *A Boy's Own Story* (Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum, 997-1002) thus gives a fine reading of the novel, appreciating "the sheer beauty of the language," and discusses its "political meaning" in the context of changing perceptions of gay life as well as the early years of the AIDS epidemic. The next chapter, "1982: Hip-hop travels the world" (Hua Hsu, 1002-6) begins with the film *Wild Style* and graffiti, discusses the origins of hip-hop and rap, and concludes with remarks on Sean Combs and Jay Gatsby. At some point the editors evidently decided that each chapter should take a specific event as its point of departure. This works very well for most chapters, while for some it may be a straitjacket. For the chapter on "Maya Lin's Wall" (Anne M. Wagner, 1006-11) the 1982 event of "The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial" in Washington, DC, is certainly at the center of this narrative of the proposal, the controversy and the counter-monument, as well as the analysis and appreciation of Maya Lin's monument. It may be more surprising that the discussion of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, published in 1859 and the first known work of fiction by a black woman in the United States, is tied to an event with the date "1982, November 8," the day when the *New York Times* published the story of Henry Louis Gates's purchase of the forgotten novel

from a rare-book dealer (Saidiya V. Hartman, 1012-6). As Wilson's book was not reviewed or noticed in any way when she published it in 1859, it may make sense to place it chronologically at the time when it first entered and thus adjusted the literary history of America. The chapter, however, focuses—as it should—on the writer and her book and not on the finder and editor. “1985, April 24,” the date of a visit Materassi made in the home of Henry Roth, the author of *Call It Sleep*, one of the most remarkable novels of the 1930's, may at first seem a disturbing approach to some readers: Who are this “I” and this “you” in the opening sentences? But Materassi carries off his autobiographical approach to literary history as do the few other contributors to the volume who attempt this demanding genre in literary criticism.

Each chapter has two headings, one, the more or less formal chapter title, the other, which always includes a date or year, is in the style of a newspaper headline. Actually, I think readers will find a consecutive reading of all the headlines quite enjoyable even though they all do not function equally well as openings (in at least two senses) to the chapters. Seo-Young Chu's chapter “Dystopian Surface, Utopian Dream” has the suggestive and helpful headline “1987 Wittman Ah Sing foresees postethnic humanity” (1020-5). This chapter may serve as an illustration of the method and style of so many of the excellent chapters of the volume. A discussion of this main character of Maxime Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* (1987) and his vision of the future of humanity leads into a critical discussion of the post-human visions of two central but perhaps not so often linked science fiction writers, Octavia Butler and Isaac Asimov, and then takes us back not to Wittman Ah Sing but to the Walt Whitman who has inspired his full name as well as foreseen (foresung?) his vision. The link between the headline (“1995 President Clinton tells the families of victims of the Oklahoma City bombing, ‘You have lost too much, but you have not lost everything. And you have certainly not lost America’”) and the chapter on “Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*” is less obvious. Indeed, this reviewer fails to see it, at least not in any interesting or enlightening manner. But the chapter is a fine illustration of how some chapters, rather than throwing light on their subject by ranging historically between genres, periods, cultural expressions and themes, simply (well, really not so simply) settle for a reading of the text or group of texts at hand. It may be a little early for a definitive account of “Twenty-First Century Free Verse” or, indeed, any other twenty-first century literary genre, but Stephen Burt (1030-4) has written a thoughtful and

thought-provoking account of the situation of American poetry of the present (in readings of C. D. Wright, Rae Armantrout and Yusef Komunyakaa), both anchored in and reacting to the poetry of preceding generations, as it raises expectations of what poetry may follow.

In the concluding two chapters the editors are the authors, Marcus in his lovely (!) reading of what must surely be one of the greatest American novels of the new century, Richard Powers, *The Time of Our Singing* (1035-9), and both Marcus and Sollors on one of the more dismal illustrations of social and political failure of this century in "New Orleans Is Lost in the Flood" (1039-44). By beginning their new literary history with a chapter on geography and cartography (Toby Lester, 1-6) and concluding it with responses to a natural disaster, Marcus and Sollors are signaling that their *A New Literary History of America* is no mere collection of essays on a variety of topics but a large collective project to change our view of the concepts of literature, of history and, not least, of America. In approaching the flood through Faulkner's "The Old Man," Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Newman's "Louisiana 1927," Paine's *Common Sense*, Melville's *White Jacket*, the 1909 Baedeker's *United States with Excursions to Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Alaska*, John Adam's *Discourses on Davila*, and Dave Robicheaux's *Tin Roof Blowdown* they are surely not showing off their erudition (which as a matter of fact carries the whole volume) but both illustrating the method and approach of the volume as a whole and, more importantly, demonstrating how the closing texts, statements made by U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu, are as much literature as the foregoing texts are history: "It was the saddest thing I have ever seen in my life," she says of the failure of the federal government to take meaningful action. "At that moment I knew what was going on and I've been a changed woman ever since." Marcus and Sollors's reading of the senator's text, which concludes not only their wide-ranging chapter but the entire literary history project involving two hundred and one authors, is: "She had seen the country, the United States of America in all its power, seen it plain, read its symbols, saw its history, her history, playing out before her eyes, past and present. She had seen the country, and saw it disappear." Well, no, not quite the conclusion yet. Among the wide variety of the authors of this volume is the artist Kara Walker, and her images of the tragedies of America as well as of the hope of America inspired by "2008, November 4 Barack Obama is elected 44th President of the United States" conclude the volume, wordlessly but not silently.

I am obviously recommending this book. Not quite so obvious is the answer to the question: Who am I recommending it to? I cannot imagine that my European colleagues will make *A New Literary History of America* required reading in their undergraduate courses in American literature, American history or American Studies. For one thing, most chapters are clearly written for readers who have read more widely and are far better informed about the history, political as well as cultural and social, of the United States than most of our BA students. The many names and titles and other references would not be met with the necessary recognition by European undergraduates and the more than thousand pages would probably be more than the average undergraduate may be expected to handle in one course. A fair selection of chapters, however, may be well suited to give the intelligent undergraduate an appetite for courses that may follow.

For European graduate students at both the MA and the Ph.D. level, however, Marcus and Sollors have made a book that should be required reading whatever their disciplinary specialization in American Studies might be. Indeed, *A New Literary History of America* is a manifestation of a redefinition of both literary history and American Studies that has taken place over the last few decades. Had Marcus and Sollors's idea of what constitutes a literary history been new in the sense of having been born in the minds of the editors, it could surely not have been executed through the collective efforts of two hundred and one authors. The vision of Marcus and Sollors is clearly shared by many of their colleagues. A carefully read copy of their *A New Literary History of America* should have a place on the shelves of any scholar who claims American Studies as her or his field. The many general readers who are often surprisingly well informed about the literature and culture of the United States will certainly also find reading the book a most enjoyable and worthwhile activity. It may be a gift wrapped for cousins, aunts and friends.

Orm Øverland

University of Bergen