

A BROADER FRAMEWORK FOR AMERICAN STUDIES

ELLIOT, Emory, ed., *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, Columbia University Press, 1988, XXVIII + 1263 pp.

This brand new survey of American literature constitutes one of the most important editorial releases of the last few years. Its main interest resides in its being the first book of similar comprehensiveness and rigor to appear since the publication in 1948 of *Literary History of the United States* by Spiller, Thorp, Johnson, and Canby.

Prof. Elliot and the large group of scholars who participate here celebrate with this *History* the 50th anniversary of the creation of autonomous Programs of American Studies in the U.S.A. The achievement of the separation of American Literature from English Literature constituted a new independence that occurred with no little struggle.

This book responds to a need for the revision of the canon of American Literature. The patterns of study in literature and history that became dominant in the nineteenth century have lost their power and alternative views are being offered now. Revision is carried on by historians in books such as Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble's *The Free and the Unfree: A New History of the United States*, which concentrates on redefining America, not as a frontier of Europe, that constitutes a reduced perception of Americans as descendants of Europeans and nothing else, but as dwellers within a country shared by Afro-Americans, Jews, Catholics, Native American. That is, not America as frontier but America as home.

As for the literary field, this ambitious volume brings the reader up to date on the recent directions American Literature is now taking. The continuous search—since the 1930s—for a consensus in the critical approach to national literature is here reflected in a pluralistic representation of the various viewpoints now current: “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”. It adds to the canon a broad new space to those critical trends more widely developed in this decade: Women Writers, American Indian Writers, Chicano Writers, Asian American Writers, And other minorities as well as Postmodernist Writers, etc.

American Studies Programs are attempting in this decade to overcome that period of loose confederation of disciplines to achieve a new more, defined object of study. The *Columbia Literary History of the United States* takes into account these problems, especially the attempt to broaden the boundaries of the study of literature, in a search for a new method that would encompass all academic disciplines converging upon the same topic (anthropology, history, sociology, semiotics, comparative literature, etc.)

With this book we have a new title to add to the pioneering works of autonomous Americanists like Parrington's 1927 publication of *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-30) where American culture entered a new era with the premise that an "American Mind" as a single entity had a characteristic place in the "New World" that was peculiarly hopeful, innocent, individualistic, pragmatic and idealistic. This view was also maintained in F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941), H. N. Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). Later, universities such as Columbia, George Washington, Harvard, Minnesota, Princeton, Amherst, etc., concentrated an enormous effort on improving and developing a new version of what should be a national multidisciplinary study.

It is refreshing to see that for once American Literature existed before the Pilgrims. This reversion to the origins of oral literature has never occurred in a text book of American Literature. But the pre-literate expression of art in America is very important in this history or survey as the influential author N. Scott Momaday beautifully explains that "the native voice of American Literature is indispensable" especially if we want to study contemporary Indian writers whose tradition is this native America.

Even though the periodization is compatible with most survey manuals or text books, considerable attention has been paid to integrate, rather than simply add, the literature of women and minorities, so that the traditional view from the elite white male perspective can be revised. Examples are chapters such as: "The Rise of the Woman Author", "Women Writers Between the Wars", "Asian American Literature", "Afro-American Literature", and "Mexican American Literature".

In a recent conversation at Princeton, the general editor Prof. Elliot told me that the very title of the book is an attempt to create a consciousness of the necessity of arriving at precision in dealing with the national identity —the name used here is United States instead of America, which would refer to the whole continent. However, the publishers had to be convinced to revise the usual title. Mr Elliot was also worried about the length and expense of the book. Apparently he had in mind a shorter and more affordable edition which could consequently be more widely influential. Anyway this book has been well received and its spreading interest is proved by the fact that it will be soon translated into Spanish, French and Italian, which means that it will reach a broad spectrum of readers. After so many disastrous publications of American Literature surveys in the last year, the Spanish readers are anxious to amplify their information and will find this book worth to read.

The *Columbia Literary History of the United States* is indispensable as an introductory course for university students but will also interest the general reader who wants to expand his view of literature in the New World. It has no footnotes or bibliography, but this constitutes no detriment to its scope and only indicates the intention of the editor to reach a wide audience that would be deterred by and excess of distracting dates and facts.

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